



A Manosphere Brotherhood Against the Law: Masculinity Threat and Legal Consciousness in Online Networks for Buyers of Sex in Illinois

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Abstract

Introduction Discussions about commercial sex have historically overlooked sex purchasers. Previous research often focused on sex workers, limiting our understanding of the social relationships and forms of masculinity that characterize and reproduce the industry. This research adds to growing research on sex purchasers in the “manosphere” by examining which policies purchasers themselves may consider effective or ineffective at deterring the buying of sex, a question that elucidates how law matters to this and other stigmatized populations.

Methods This study focuses on the exchange of information among men who post on online “johns’ boards” that contain discussion forums for every type of commercial sex venue in Illinois (both indoor and outdoor, initiated in-person and online). I conducted a content analysis of 1,684 posts made in 2010, before, during, and after the passage of legislation in Illinois designed to curtail the demand for commercial sex.

Results Forum posts indicate that many posters, who band together as what they call a “brotherhood” under the banner of persecuted masculinity, pay close attention to changes in statewide legislation and local law enforcement policies regarding prostitution.

Conclusions I argue that when purchasers perceive policies as tangible, ongoing threats, their legal consciousness shifts, and law enforcement is no longer seen as a manageable risk within the manosphere brotherhood.

Policy Implications This reaffirms the importance of the internet in shaping commercial sex industries and has wider implications for our understanding of how men who share perceptions of masculinity threat react to new deterrence policies for sex purchasing.

Keywords Sex work · Prostitution · Masculinity · Prostitution policies · End demand · Regulation · Law

Introduction

Every five minutes, people are accessing information from over 2,000 forum pages¹ on the USA Sex Guide (USG), a popular website for men who buy sex (such sites are commonly referred to as “johns’ boards”²) throughout the USA. These men, often called “johns,” have historically been ignored when it comes to scholarly discussions about prostitution, the commercial sex industry, and trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation; until recently, most research had

focused on the “prostitute” or “sex worker” (Weitzer, 2005). Yet, the global commercial sex industry exists because of the predominately male demand for commercial sex (Sanders et al., 2020). Focusing primarily on the people who constitute the supply side of the commercial sex industry limits our understanding of the social relationships and forms of masculinity that characterize and reproduce the industry.

¹ This is an approximate estimate, since users and page loads vary throughout any given day, but this calculation is based on data provided by USG (n.d.) on their “Banner Advertising FAQ” page, boasting approximately 600,000 daily page loads to the site.

² Because sites such as USG are referred to ubiquitously by sex purchasers as “johns’ boards,” I will also use this term to refer to web forums run by and for buyers of sex. Such websites should not be confused with other commercial sex-related websites designed to connect sex purchasers with sex workers; “johns’ boards” are designed to be exclusively male, sex-purchaser online communities.

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To help fill this research gap in studies about sex purchasers, this project adds to growing research on sex purchasers (see, for example, Hammond & van Hooff, 2019; Pettinger, 2011; Sanders et al., 2020) by examining which policies sex purchasers themselves consider effective or ineffective at deterring the buying of sex, a question that contributes to literature on the legal consciousness of stigmatized populations and its relationship to specific forms of masculinity.

This study focuses on the exchange of information among men who post on the USG, one of the largest johns' boards, in the state of Illinois in regard to buying sex – what some refer to as their “great hobby.”³ Studying these online forums sheds light on a segment of the broader community of men who buy sex, particularly in response to significant changes in Illinois legislation and law enforcement response related to the commercial sex industry around 2010. It also sheds light on one of the diverse clusters of anti-feminist online communities of men who feel their masculinities are persecuted, known collectively as the “manosphere.” Empirically, I use this case to trace the conversations that take place online between sex purchasers, including how they grasp changes in Illinois laws related to their “hobby” and how they educate one another on how police carry out policies on the ground. By delving into how this community perceives policy and policing, I offer broader insight into the relationship between masculinities and the concept of “legal consciousness,” or how people make sense of police and law enforcement, thereby participating in the construction of legality (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Silbey, 2005). Further, analyzing these conversations helps me to address the theoretical puzzle of whether and how law matters, particularly with respect to the commercial sex industry and the actors in it, and how the concept of “legal consciousness” helps us frame these conversations about legality and masculinity. While several scholars have studied the impact of prostitution laws on female sex workers, less research has explored their impact on purchasers (Weitzer, 2005). Finally, researching online johns' boards also contributes to a better understanding of the increasingly important role of the internet in online sex communities (Chan & Ghose, 2014; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Cunningham et al., 2018; Jones, 2015).

The Politics of Regulating Commercial Sex: Policy Shifts in Illinois

In this article, I focus on communication patterns in online communities of sex purchasers throughout the state of Illinois, where both prostitution and solicitation of commercial sex are illegal and punishable by criminal penalties.

³ The quotation “great hobby” comes from one post in particular (see p. 12), but the term “hobby” is a ubiquitous synonym for sex purchasing on USG, as well as in other commercial sex forums (Horswill & Weitzer, 2018; Milrod & Monto, 2012).

Specifically, 720 ILCS 5/11–14 makes engaging in prostitution illegal in Illinois, and the penalties for this Class A misdemeanor include up to 364 days in jail, \$2500 in fines, and 24 months of probation. Meanwhile, 720 ILCS 511–14.1 prohibits engaging in solicitation for commercial sex in Illinois, and violations of this law are also deemed a Class A misdemeanor with the same penalties described above. If, however, a person solicits a sexual act from a minor under 18 years old, the crime escalates to a Class 4 felony, and the penalties associated include 12–36 months in jail, \$25000 in fines, and 30 months of probation.

My analysis focuses on a time period that captures posts made before, during, and after the passage of legislation in Illinois designed to curtail the demand for commercial sex, led by the End Demand Illinois coalition (a statewide coalition of service organizations, survivor-leaders, government agencies, and law enforcement agencies campaigning to hold traffickers, pimps, and people who buy commercial sex to stricter law enforcement). To better situate these changes, I will discuss how the Illinois End Demand campaign fits into broader, international debates over commercial sex policies.

Although other approaches have been taken, historically, policymakers in countries using a variety of different legal systems tended to take a prohibitionist approach to policing prostitution, in which people selling, buying, or facilitating the sale of sex were labeled immoral and criminal (Farrell & Cronin, 2015). However, across many legal jurisdictions throughout the world, policymakers have shifted their approaches to regulating the commercial sex industry. To begin, public concerns over human trafficking have grown in recent years, reframing prostitution through an abolitionist lens, in which sex workers are often redefined as victims. Simultaneously, with the rise of sex workers' groups advocating for their agency, not victimhood, regulationist approaches to commercial sex have expanded, most popularly in the Netherlands, where both buying and selling commercial sex were legalized in 2000. Internationally, just as in the USA, lawmakers debate the efficacy of taking regulationist versus prohibitionist approaches to regulating commercial sex in the digital age. Broadly, approaches range from legalizing and regulating commercial sex, as in the Netherlands, to what has come to be known as the Swedish model, in which sex work is decriminalized, but demand (i.e. sex purchasing) is criminalized, often more strongly than before (Hubbard et al., 2007).

In this vein, in 2009 a political movement in Illinois pushed a shift in law enforcement and policy approaches to prostitution away from the punishment of women and girls in prostitution and toward the punishment of men who buy and sell sex. The movement, spearheaded by members of the End Demand Illinois coalition, works to shift “law enforcement’s attention to sex traffickers and people who buy sex, while creating a network of support for survivors of the sex trade” (End Demand Illinois, 2011). At the time of my data collection,

the campaign boasted two legislative successes in Illinois: The Illinois Safe Children Act (Public Act 96–1464, known as “HB 6462”), which was the first law in the country to make minors immune from prosecution for prostitution; and the Justice for Victims of Sex Trafficking Crimes Act (PA 97–0267), which made Illinois the fourth state in the country to offer survivors of sex trafficking the opportunity to have prostitution convictions removed from their records (End Demand Illinois, 2011). These laws were meant to protect vulnerable classes from criminal prosecution, helping shift the focus to criminalizing solicitation, not prostitution.

Although a decade has passed since these laws were passed, these are still the prevailing laws regulating commercial sex in Illinois, so in that sense these data provide relevant information about responses to these specific legal changes. Notably, however, End Demand Illinois boasts three more legislative victories passed in 2012 and 2014 that deepen the trend in Illinois toward decriminalizing selling sex and strengthening the criminalization of buying sex, pointing to the continued relevance of the data from this research. First, in 2012, Public Act 98–538 eliminated the circumstances from the Criminal Code that could increase a prostitution criminal case from a misdemeanor to a felony, effectively ending felony prostitution in Illinois. Then in 2014, Public Act 99–190 was passed, allowing people charged with prostitution to use an affirmative defense, allowing them to prove they engaged in prostitution as a result of trafficking. In the same year, following the enactment of similar laws in other states, Illinois passed Public Act 98–1013, which creates financial incentives for enforcing prostitution laws against sex purchasers and traffickers over sellers.

Finally, in Chicago, the largest city in my data set, two important legal changes have been made since my data were collected. In 2015, the Office of the Cook County State’s Attorney created a Chicago Prostitution and Trafficking Intervention Court (CPTIC) as a deferred prosecution program focused on treatment and services over incarceration for people selling sex. Then, in 2018, the Chicago City Council passed Ordinance § 8–04–016, which allows police to designate areas of the city where sex workers can be ordered to disperse for a short period. This ordinance targets only sex sellers.

Research Questions

I examine whether sex purchasers’ narratives about policing changed as a result of the passage of the new laws passed around 2009 (and which have been primarily strengthened by legislation passed since then). I undertake this project to shed light on the broader question of how law matters, and to specifically examine how it matters to buyers of sex who post on online “johns’ boards” and who bond over feeling their masculinity is persecuted. I explore how the users who post on the Illinois forums of the USG leverage the internet

to create an exclusively male community and a culture of information sharing online amongst anonymous strangers who celebrate a masculinity rooted in illegal sex purchasing and evasion of the law, and what kind of legal consciousness is shaped within these circumstances. Invoking Sewell’s (1992) concept of “cultural schemas,” which Ewick and Silbey (1998) argue is central to the construction of legal consciousness, I look at what cultural schemas emerge as these purchasers make sense of the relationship between law and their “hobby,” and if their perceptions shift away from seeing the rewards of purchasing as greater than the risks of doing so. Specifically I ask: how are sex purchasers’ narratives about masculinity and policing impacted by shifts in policies and law enforcement in Illinois? Moreover, how do we understand their self-reported continued purchases in relationship to some policy enforcement but discontinued purchases in reaction to others?

Overview of Argument

My research indicates that not only is law a central concern to sex purchasers generally, as an ongoing risk or threat to be managed, avoided, or contested, but also that changes in laws and their enforcement create appreciable anxiety and discussion about threats to both their “brotherhood” and “hobby,” as they term them. Board posts about the End Demand Illinois campaign and its subsequent enforcement show that such efforts have created energetic discussions among purchasers about whether or not to continue buying sex. Some of the men on the forums state that they will not take the risk of buying any more sex due to the increased perceived risk of legal punishment. They report to one another on whether these perceptions seem to match with “business as usual” (i.e., law is viewed as a manageable threat) or whether they make purchasing “too risky” in a particular area or altogether.

After discussing the theoretical underpinnings of this research project, as well as my methods, I will discuss the major themes that arose from discussions among posters. In my findings, after discussing the rules and rituals of the USG, I will review the two major perceptions of the law adopted by forum members: on the hand, “with the law” perceptions of the law and its implementation, characterized by the “business as usual” attitude that sex purchasers can continue their purchasing in the face of seemingly manageable risks from law enforcement; and on the other hand, “against the law” perceptions of policy implementation, typified by the opinion that purchasing sex has become “too risky” and must therefore be discontinued.

I contend that these perceptions mark a shift in legal consciousness that can help us better understand how law

matters to a stigmatized population that bonds through particular performances of masculinity and how it may act as a deterrent from criminal activity. I show that, while the legal consciousness articulated on the USG can be characterized broadly as “oppositional” to the law, shifting perceptions of sex purchasing from “business as usual” to “too risky” align with a shift on the forums from a “with the law” legal consciousness to an “against the law” one, and this shift occurs in direct relationship to policy changes in Illinois and their perceived enforcement, when sex purchasers believe they themselves may be at risk for arrest and/or being “outed” publicly for their purchasing, thereby weakening the online brotherhood.

The variations in articulations of legal consciousness found on the forums show that law only becomes a potential deterrence tool in certain circumstances, depending primarily on how the law’s *enforcement* is perceived by different men. Overall, my analysis of USG may point to the ineffectiveness, in terms of deterring purchasers, of the traditional legal approach to prostitution in the USA, in which sex workers are disproportionately criminalized (Johnson, 2014). Those forum users who perceive few consequences to buying sex will reportedly continue to do so, maintaining a “with the law” legal consciousness in which law enforcement is an easily manageable risk, with the help of the online brotherhood. However, the more their “hobby” ceases to be seen as a game they can manipulate, the more effective laws may be at deterring sex purchasing, it would seem, as their legal consciousness shifts away from the hybrid, “oppositional consciousness” engendered on the forums of the USG (mostly “with the law,” but “against the law” in that they also seek to avoid legal contact altogether) toward a more thoroughly “against the law” consciousness, in which law enforcement is no longer a manageable threat and is to be avoided at all costs. Such a finding could have wider implications for our understanding of law, masculinity, and social change.

Theoretical Framework

This project is rooted in scholarship on the sociology of law, legal consciousness, and masculinity. In particular, I build on discussions about how law matters, particularly as it relates to commercial sex and an online brotherhood of men who buy it. Some previous research has raised questions about modern law’s role in regulating commercial sex, with some arguing that law is mostly symbolic in its influence (mainly Agustín, 2008, but see also Bernstein, 2007; Hubbard et al., 2007; Johansson & Persson, 2004). Specifically, some argue that the distinction drawn between apparently diametrically opposed regulatory approaches to prostitution, such as prohibitionism and legalization, is less significant than is frequently assumed and may actually be illusory (Scoular,

2010). They point out that the classifications of prohibitionist, regulationist, and abolitionist regulatory approaches are problematic, especially in light of the “considerable gaps” that exist between the objectives of each approach and the interventions that take place to implement them (Scoular, 2010, p. 13; see also Bernstein, 2007; Hubbard et al., 2007; Johansson & Persson, 2004).

Scholars including Agustín (2008); Bernstein (2007); Hubbard et al., (2008), (2007) explain that apparently contrasting legal approaches can yield similar on-the-ground results, leading some to question the relevance of the law in the field of commercial sex. Scoular (2010), for her part, recognizes these outcome similarities between approaches but argues that they arise precisely because law *does* matter, alongside other variables. Critical sociolegal work is not adequately developed in prostitution studies, according to Scoular (2010, p. 26), with research tending to focus on “legal rules and their shortcomings, yet failing to elucidate properly the ways in which law operates in modern societies.” In line with Scoular’s (2010) call for research showing how the law operates in commercial sex, I was drawn to examine sociolegal theories in the course of immersing myself in the johns’ boards for over a year because so many purchasers were talking about the law on USG, and in direct relationship to the notion of persecuted masculinity. To explore this salience of the law to sex purchasers, I turn to the sociolegal literature on law and legal consciousness.

How Law Matters

The question of how law matters is central to scholarship on the relationship between law and society. The story of law and society, explains Silbey (2005), is one that has been told many times, with different foci that can be broadly grouped into two categories: instrumental and constitutive approaches. Some scholars have focused mainly on the *instrumental* effects of formal law, exploring whether formal rules encourage or deter certain behavior. The instrumental approach focuses on whether a gap exists between law on the books and law in action.

More recent law and society research has focused on the *constitutive* aspects of law (Levine & Mellema, 2001). Scholars taking a constitutive approach toward law presume the gap between law on the books and law in action and explore factors that enlarge or reduce the size of this gap and that explain how law indirectly impacts social behavior (ibid.). Law’s influence on society is seen as pervasive, and scholars taking this approach shift from studying law *and* society to studying law *in* society, from looking at “the effectiveness of laws to law’s effects” (Silbey, 2005, p. 328). Working within this tradition of scholars who see the law as

a socially constructed system of action operating within and through daily interactions and cognitive experience (Silbey, 1985), I hope to contribute to research that goes beyond a positivist view of law as unified and carried out by specialized institutions and examine instead “what law is doing” (Rose & Valverde, 1998; Scoular, 2010; Silbey, 2005).

Legal Consciousness

During the 1980s, while constitutive approaches to law were emerging, some law and society scholars began to focus on how law is experienced and understood by ordinary citizens, which they termed “7.” Coined to explain the tolerance for the gap between law on the books and law in action and to trace the hegemonic power of law, an underlying assumption of theories of legal consciousness is a mutual relationship between thought and behavior. Central to Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) hallmark analysis is an understanding of legal consciousness as active construction of legality. To these scholars, “legality” refers to “the meanings, sources of authority, and cultural practices that are commonly recognized as legal, regardless of who employs them or for what purposes” (Silbey, 2005, p. 347). Legality refers to much more than formal law itself; it is invoked, deployed, and remade on a daily basis (Levine & Mellema, 2001). Consciousness, then, involves thinking and doing, telling stories, complaining, articulating grievances, and more. The study of legal consciousness, then, centers on understanding how ordinary people experience and understand legality as they avoid, resist, or engage the law and legal meaning (Ewick & Silbey, 1998).

To better understand the “common place of law” in the daily lives of individuals they interviewed, Ewick and Silbey (1998) developed a typology of legal consciousness. They argue that legal consciousness manifests itself in three predominant types, each of which invokes “a particular cluster of cultural schemas and resources that position the law and the individual in relation to one another” (p. 47). These types of relationships—which Ewick and Silbey explain are fluid, shifting, and often overlapping—are labeled “before the law,” “with the law,” and “against the law.”

A “before the law” legal consciousness is typified by an understanding of the law as authoritative, impartial, rational, reified, and removed from normal, everyday affairs (Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 47). According to this understanding, faith in the law is not challenged, and law is assumed to follow its own rules and to reach a legally correct, unbiased decision (Levine & Mellema, 2001). A “with the law” consciousness, on the other hand, describes a perception of law as partial, biased, and as “a game with rules that can be manipulated” (ibid., p. 177). The legal process is understood as a contest to be won through skill and resources, and people are able

to “flow in and out of legal language and legal maneuvers without disrupting their everyday lives” (ibid.).

By sharp contrast, resistance and avoidance constitute the defining characteristics of an “against the law” legal consciousness. Actors are understood not as participants in a legal game in which success is possible, but rather as being in conflict with the law. Law is seen as inherently arbitrary, legality as a “net to trap the less powerful” and law’s hegemony is “openly challenged by subtle acts of rebellion ranging from dilatory tactics to institutional disruption” (ibid., p. 178). Consciously undermining the constraint of the law in their daily lives becomes a way for people to assert autonomy.

Ewick and Silbey developed these three types of legal consciousness to describe how law is understood across multiple landscapes, not to develop case- or person-specific concepts with predictive power (Levine & Mellema, 2001). Rather, the goal of scholars like Silbey (2005) is to explain how diverse experiences of the law become mobilized into sets of schemas and habits. To this end, I attempt to understand the overall legal consciousness of sex purchasers on the USG through the lens of cultural schemas and habits that circulate on the forums of the USG.

The structure and organization of johns’ boards help forge cultural meaning and legal consciousness amongst sex purchasers, who show themselves to be keenly aware of – and concerned about – their relationship to the law. I thus theorize law’s importance in this research using the lens of masculinity and legal consciousness, in addition to a broader examination of instrumental and constitutive aspects of law on the forums of the USG. It is precisely the “everyday experiences, choices, and perceptions of reality” mentioned by Levine and Mellema (2001) that I study amongst male sex purchasers on the USG, in order to understand how law matters to them.

Masculinity Threat and the Manosphere Brotherhood

This research may offer particular insight to the study of the legal consciousness of stigmatized populations and in relationship to specific forms of masculinity. Ewick and Silbey (1998) note that powerless individuals are more likely to exhibit an “against the law” dimension of legal consciousness, and other research (see for example Boittin, 2013; Nielsen, 2004) predicts that when stigmatized individuals are victims of injustice, they are unlikely to engage in the process labeled by Felstiner et al. (1980–81) as “naming, blaming, and claiming,” that is, to perceive the experience as unjust, place blame on responsible parties, or make claims for restoration. Previous studies that examine law and commercial sex focus mainly on the legal consciousness of one of society’s most marginalized groups: sex workers (e.g.

Boittin, 2013; Klambauer, 2019; Levine & Mellema, 2001). This study builds on their work by adding another piece to the puzzle of how law matters in regulating commercial sex: a study of the legal consciousness of male sex purchasers who bond over their shared, persecuted masculinity.

Scholarship on masculinity politics shows how struggles over meanings of masculinity and “men’s position in gender relations” (Connell, 2005, p. 205) have developed alongside a men’s movement that emerged in the twentieth century in relationship to the women’s movement and feminism. The men’s movement, which since the 1980s has broadly blamed men’s problems on feminism and which provides primarily heterosexual white men space to vent over feeling they have lost the power that historically accompanied their race and gender, has now separated into a variety of movements engaging with politicized masculinities (de Maricourt & Burrell, 2021). With the internet, a variety of men’s rights groups have created online communities dedicated to the ideal of “brotherhood” and presenting men as “subjugated scapegoats and silenced victims of ‘politically correct’ coalitions and coercions” (Menzies, 2007, p. 68). Such communities form part of what scholars term the “manosphere,” a heterogeneous group of online websites, blogs, and forums that promote masculinity and misogyny and can include Men’s Rights Advocates (MRAs), “incel” discourses, Pick Up Artists (PUAs) who inculcate one another in the “game” of seducing women, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) by disengaging from women, and johns’ boards (de Maricourt & Burrell, 2021).

The forums of the USG definitively form part of the manosphere. More specifically, although they feature elements from a number of manosphere communities, the USG forums can be considered a partially involuntary celibate or “incel” subculture online, which features “tropes of victimhood” and “aggrieved manhood” (Ging, 2019, p. 1) and in which men reaffirm their virility with respect to negative experiences with women by purchasing sex. As O’Malley et al. (2020) explain, online incel communities are grounded in men’s feelings of alienation and lack of agency in seeking and succeeding in sexual relationships, leading to rhetorics of victimhood and targeting women for subjugating men today (Dragiewicz, 2008; Gotell & Dutton, 2016). Such men can find solace in online communities focused on these perceptions, as well as strategies for coping and empowering themselves (Van Valkenburgh, 2021), even to the extent of generating “violent masculinist fantasies of invulnerability and the sexual will-to-power,” according to Kelly and Aunspach (2020, p. 145).

The concept of brotherhood, referenced fondly and frequently on the USG, is critical not just to USG but also to a number of masculinist, men’s spaces. In his study of the ideal of brotherhood and its relationship to homosociality, totality, and military subjectivity, Wadham (2013) shows how the ideal of brotherhood helps naturalize “practices and forms of fraternal bonding [...] implicated in the desire to

generate and sustain a totalizing masculinist economy” that naturalizes the “inherently violent disposition of the military” (p. 1). Although discussing the boasting of explicitly violent acts against women on the USG, including rape and battery, is outside the scope of this paper, it was a prevalent theme in the dataset analyzed (see Janson, 2013).

Thus, unlike other stigmatized groups of individuals who may be unlikely to perceive their experiences as unjust, the sex purchasers who post on the Illinois forums of the USG share a discourse rooted in incel-discourse claims of both victimhood and empowerment through brotherhood. Thus their legal consciousness could be viewed as both “against the law” and “within the law” at various points. This hybrid, oppositional consciousness reveals a shared victim mind-set amongst purchasers, in response to which they have formed what they call a “brotherhood” or “old boys’ club” on the USG that empowers them against mutual perceived threats, the chief amongst them being law enforcement (LE) and law enforcement officers (LEO), referenced notoriously by users on the forums as “Uncle Leo,” or “Leo.”

Linking the Manosphere to the Law

As a distinct community within the manosphere, sex purchasers on johns’ boards often make sense of the law through the lens of avoidance (“against the law” consciousness), but buying sex is simultaneously framed on the forums as a game or hunt (much like PUAs), and in line with a “with the law” mind-set, the law is viewed as a biased game with rules they can manipulate, by sharing information with one another on their perceptions of how to avoid detection by law enforcement or subsequent prosecution if they are detected. In this respect, the legal process is understood as a contest to be won through skill and resources—and johns’ boards offer these readily to sex purchasers, across geographic and temporal borders. This research, then, affirms the overlapping nature of Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) typology, and the complexity of how law matters to a stigmatized population such as male sex purchasers.

In line with scholars like Scoular, my empirical case study of johns’ boards in Illinois contributes to a body of literature that probes how law operates in modern society and explores ways in which it is not merely symbolic in its influence. This article contributes to a better understanding of how law does matter in shaping masculinities and contemporary commercial sex industries. My analysis of sex purchasers’ narratives about policy and policing directly contradicts the argument that “law has little bearing on the ways in which the sex industry functions” (Scoular, 2010: 23). Sex purchasers’ posts indicate that perceptions of the law and its implementation play an important role in the perceived strength of the brotherhood and considerations of where, when, how, and whether they buy sex.

Data and Methods

Data Collection

This research builds on the limited but growing body of work that has been published on sex purchasers and johns' boards in the U.S. and abroad (for example, Carnes, 2003; Holt & Blevins, 2007). This project was designed after working for sex workers' rights service organizations in the Midwest, in Latin America, and on the east coast for over eight years. That work involved frequent interactions and conversations with diverse actors across commercial sex industries—including sex purchasers, sex workers, and pimps, at both in-person sites and through online commercial sex communities—which informed this project, in particular the perspectives of sex workers in Illinois.

I examine posts made by sex purchasers on the Illinois sections of the USG, one of the largest online forums for men who buy sex in the USA.⁴ A subsidiary of the largest global johns' board, World Sex Guide, USG boasted 710132 members as of April 2022, but unregistered “guests” to the site tend to outnumber members by over two to one on any given day. One reason why USG outnumbers other johns' boards is that it is a comprehensive johns' board: it offers forum categories that mirror the full spectrum of places men go to buy sex throughout Illinois, not only street prostitution or any single type of commercial sex venue. A typical city board contains forums for categories for reports on different aspects of the sex industry, such as strip clubs, massage parlors, streetwalkers, and escort agencies.

I selected this forum because it was publicly accessible and contained far more reports and daily activity than any of the other dozen forums I examined as possible candidates, the majority of which are private and/or dedicated to only one type of commercial sex venue (e.g., so-called “massage parlors”). As an indication of its popularity, the USG boasted to potential advertisers the following statistics back in 2011: 200,000+ registered forum members; 60,000± unique visitors per day; 230000± daily page loads; and average time on site “an impressive 19 min” (USG, “Banner advertising FAQ” 2011, citing statistics from www.statcounter.com). The statistics boasted by USG may or may not be accurate. Other website trackers state that on any given day, the USG had at the time an average of anywhere from 2276 to 4410 unique visitors (USG, “About usasexguide.info” 2011 and “Usasexguide.Info” 2011). Since registering its

current domain in 2003, the USG had grown by 2011 to an estimated worth of up to \$71497, through advertisements (USG, “About usasexguide.info” 2011). According to one website traffic engine, Alexa, in 2011 the USG was ranked 26549 of all websites on the internet and 4803 within the USA (USG, “Statistics summary” 2011). Ninety-one percent of unique visits to the USG were from within the USA. The Chicago forums of the USG received approximately 7100 unique visitors per month, and the website was the 1,951st most popular website among Chicagoans. In Rockford, the USG forums were popular; the USG was more popular in Rockford, Illinois than in any other city in the USA, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and other major cities; the USG ranked #217 in popularity among all websites for residents of Rockford (USG, “Usasexguide.Info” 2011). If the USG's own reported usage data are to be believed, it is definitely the largest johns' board in Illinois, and Illinois sex purchasers with whom I had previously spoken (before this research project) widely regarded it as the largest johns' board in the state.

Because this study involves only a historical content analysis of anonymous forum posts made over a decade ago, it does not involve human subjects and so did not require IRB review from my academic institution. I conducted no questionnaires, surveys, or interviews with any of the users of this forum; rather than make direct contact with the users, this project analyzes just users' posts to one another. These posts are entirely public; USG is not a closed forum, and thus there is no reasonable expectation of privacy in these public posts (indeed, on its “General Rules” page USG prohibits users from sharing any personal information and to use private, direct messaging for sharing any such information). Even though the posts are already anonymized, with only fictional user names provided alongside each post, this article anonymizes all posts by eliminating the user names, as well. No contributions were made by me to the forums in order to focus entirely on the observation/analysis of the postings on these websites from June to August, 2010. Thus, the data analyzed reveals how men on these johns' boards present themselves to their virtual community, not how they represent themselves to researchers. The drawback to this approach is the inability to collect demographic data from the users or to ask them specific questions. However, I believe the posts can provide rich insight into how johns see each other, the commercial sex industry, their communities, their significant others (if they have them), and anyone who threatens their “hobby.”

I compiled my dataset from posts made during a three-month period in the summer of 2010: June 1–August 31, 2010. While the commercial sex industry is active at all times, activity on the boards seemed to be maximized in a broad range of sex venues during the summer season (e.g., reports on streetwalker activity can be diminished in the

⁴ Other online commercial sex forums are larger, such as the Erotic Review, with over one million members, but these are mixed forums for *both* sex purchasers and sex sellers; as such, they are not only a “johns' board” strictly for purchasers (and indeed banning suspected sex sellers).

Table 1 Distinct user posts from Illinois forums of USA Sex Guide, June 1–August 31, 2010

Forum Name (Geographic Area)	Posts Analyzed	Number of Unique Users Who Posted	Avg Posts/ User	# Users who made 10+ posts	# Users who made 20+ posts
Chicago	829	281	3	13	2
Rockford	172	65	3	2	0
IL-Other Areas	84	39	2	1	0
Melrose Park	71	36	2	1	0
Washington Park	69	37	2	0	0
Lombard	60	34	2	0	0
Bloomington	58	21	3	1	0
Waukegan/Gurnee	48	27	2	0	0
Belvidere	46	26	2	0	0
Mt. Prospect	44	31	1	0	0
Evanston/Skokie	38	26	1	0	0
Joliet	38	18	2	0	0
Brooklyn	34	26	1	0	0
Roselle	32	28	2	0	0
Peoria	19	9	2	0	0
Decatur	18	10	2	0	0
Aurora	13	11	1	0	0
Springfield	5	5	1	0	0
General Topics	2	2	1	0	0
Danville	2	2	1	0	0
Norridge	1	6	2	0	0
Champaign	1	1	1	0	0
Total Across All Users	1684	741	3	18	2

winter in Illinois). Forum members on the USG made 2466 entries from June 2010 to August 2010. Using computer-generated random numbers, I selected and analyzed 1684 posts (68.2%). For city forums containing fewer than 50 entries for the three-month period, 100% of the posts were analyzed. For forums containing 50–100 posts, at least 75% of the posts were analyzed. For the cities of Rockford and Chicago,⁵ which contained 286 and 1368 posts respectively, at least 60% of the entries were analyzed. Within each geographical cluster of forums, the posts reflected a variety of distinct user contributions, not merely exchanges between a few dominant users. For example, the 829 posts analyzed from all of the Chicago forums (the most dominant cluster in the data set) were made by 280 distinct users (see

Table 1 below for complete user distribution information). I reproduce all posts verbatim, including misspellings. I also choose to refer to posters as “he,” as that is how they present themselves online.

I supplemented these data in two ways. First, I collected an additional dataset of purchasers’ posted entries from September 2009 to July 2011, in order to capture their responses to recent policy and law enforcement developments at the time, specifically changes to Illinois law around the commercial sex industry. These entries were not coded comprehensively, as was done for the main dataset; rather, they were coded specifically for their relevance to discussions of law enforcement. Second, I collected ethnographic, observational data at commercial sex venues and prostitution “tracks” (areas where street prostitution takes place) in the Chicago area. During a six-month period (August 2010–January 2011), and then weekly follow-ups April–June 2010 and February–April 2014), I collected data weekly from the USG forums for the Chicago area related to active prostitution “tracks,” as well as stings the users reported. I checked police and news reports to corroborate information about stings and arrests, and I went out once a week to check in-person if the “tracks” reported by purchasers were indeed active venues. In

⁵ The forum indicates that men buy sex throughout the state of Illinois, not just in Chicago, and that these men exhibit a high degree of mobility between various local commercial sex industries. For that reason, I analyzed men’s posts about commercial sex throughout the state of Illinois, rather than focusing primarily on the commercial sex industry in Chicago/Cook County, as previous research has done (see, for example, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2002, 2004; Raphael & Ashley, 2008).

all cases, I confirmed that posters were reporting tracks and stings accurately.

Data Analysis

This research relies on the analysis of both the tangible surface content and the underlying meaning behind this data, or the latent content, in order to describe and understand the network of relations on the Illinois forums of the USG, as well as the role that the forum seems to play in the lives of many men who buy sex in Illinois. Users establish their presence in these forums through their regular participation in the conversational topics on the sub-forums (e.g., “Streetwalker Reports,” “Massage Parlor Reports,” etc.), including greetings, questions and answers, complaints and apologies, responses and replies, and justifications to one another. When possible, I compiled informational statistics on posts, such as race, age, body/appearance, price, location, and law enforcement presence. However, the project relies primarily on a qualitative analysis of the content of the posts because the discourse on the forum requires a nuanced understanding of the commercial sex industry that cannot be fully articulated through a quantitative analysis.

Content analysis is an effective analytic strategy for these data, as it enabled me to answer the questions: “Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?” (Babbie, 2013). I could tease out how the forum operates (its rules, rites, and rituals), trace prominent patterns on the forum and the flow of information on it, focus on the diverse relationships and exchanges involving the men on this forum, and, most importantly, examine the central question of how they articulate a legal consciousness on the forums. Following an inductive approach, I generated open questions to guide the research and inform the data that were gathered (White & Marsh, 2006). The two primary questions described in the introduction were undergirded by broader questions such as the following: For what purposes do men who purchase sex in Illinois use the USG? How do the men who post on it frame their entries? What social relationships do the forums help create and sustain? What forms of masculinity characterize and reproduce the commercial sex industry, as seen through the lens of johns’ boards? How does the law matter to sex purchasers on these forums, who view themselves as members of a stigmatized group?

To code the data, my research assistants⁶ and I relied on inductive category development. Immersing ourselves in the data for a year allowed new insights to emerge about how to categorize the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In the early

months of the project, a sampling of the data was coded in an exploratory analysis. We used an “emergent,” as opposed to “a priori” coding strategy (Stemler, 2001, p. 3); that is, categories were established following some preliminary examination of the data, rather than establishing categories prior to analysis, based on a theory. At the same time, the approach was semi-directed; we drew on common attitudes about law expressed in a series of in-depth interviews conducted by Durchslag and Goswami (2008) with men who buy sex in Illinois to inform the categories developed. These initial categories were then refined based on codes that emerged from the sample. The final codes discussed in this paper are listed in Table 2 below.

The early stages of the research project involved a 6-month period of weekly inter-rater reliability checks with a research assistant and me. We had a consistent agreement rate for quantitative categories of 90–96% and 72–88% for qualitative categories. Credibility for the project was increased through prolonged engagement with the material, persistent observation, and frequent peer debriefing about how data was interpreted (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Findings

Keeping It Legal: USA Sex Guide Brotherhood’s Rules and Rituals

Before discussing the results of my analysis of the legal consciousness constructed by sex purchasers through the content of their posts, it is important to assay ways in which the very *structure* of the posts—the rules and rituals to which users adhere when posting—underscores the importance of the law to users’ masculine identities and sense of community on the USG. Media and communication scholars have established a variety of forum communication models for explaining the semiotics and norms of communication in online forum spaces, but most acknowledge that communications are patterns by sets of forum rules, which in turn impact social relations on the forums (Bylieva et al., 2019). Whether purchasers on USG are writing about buying sex in Rockford or sex in Chicago, their posts generally adhere to what some media and computational scholars term the lexical features of “interactional stancetaking” in online conversations (Kiesling et al., 2018). These specific features on the Illinois forums of the USG reinforce its perception as a special, heteronormative male community in which members empower one another against the perceived threat of law enforcement, share common values, and communicate with one another using a shared language. As a “one-stop shop” for men who buy sex, this forum act as Yellow Pages directory, support group, and travel advisor (Malarek, 2009, p. 9). As these sites are publicly accessible, users adopt a coded

⁶ Heather Mann, Rachel Marro, and Allyson Matvey. Rachel Durchslag also provided invaluable assistance and guidance with the larger project that undergirded this particular study.

Table 2 Content analysis themes from Illinois forums of USA Sex Guide, June 1–August 31, 2010

A Virtual Brotherhood Against Masculinity Threat	Legal Consciousness of Sex Purchasers: “Oppositional” Perceptions of the Law and its Enforcement	
	<i>Business as Usual: “With the Law” Perceptions</i>	<i>“Too Risky”: “Against the Law” Perceptions</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment Against External Threats • Share & Reinforce Common <u>Heteronormative</u> Values • Develop Shared/Coded Language • Senior vs. Novice User Dynamic of Inculcation & Rule Enforcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial Stages: Confusion/Speculation about Details of New Law, its Potential Enforcement, and its Significance to Sex Purchasers • Folk Theories about Why Police/New Laws Not a Concern to Purchasers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception that Enforcement of Laws is Racially Biased • Perception that Law Poses Manageable Threat due to LE Emphasis on Arresting Women • Perception that New Laws Play Only Symbolic Function During Election Cycles • Law as Biased Game: Sex Purchasers Advising One Another on Tactics for LE Evasion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical Shifts Only <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of LE as Temporal/Isolated • Result: Shift to Purchasing in Nearby Communities • “A Wake Up Call”: Abandoning Search for Commercial Sex Altogether <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term • Long-term

language that not only functions as a shorthand designed to save users time, but also is designed to help users avoid any perceived criminal liability that could result from law enforcement reading the forums.

As a self-proclaimed brotherhood of “men who are looking for [buying] sex with women” (USG, n.d.), the Illinois forums of the USG evoke images of a camp, a training ground with sets of rules that are actively taught and reinforced, and an “old boys’ club,” as one user puts it, where buyers of sex refer to themselves and one another as “mongers,” “hobbyists,” and “hunters.” As Sanders et al. (2020) explain, online communities are linked to offline sex purchasing dynamics; this “club” inculcates men throughout Illinois in the real-life sexual etiquette and social organization of the commercial sex industry in their communities. The website helps men share various types of information with one another, including: identifying, describing, and rating sexual services and locations; identifying, describing, and rating women in prostitution (by race, age, appearance, attitude, etc.); describing and rating costs of commercial sex services; and finally, how to manage detection (by law enforcement, significant others, and others).

A significant amount of the information that is shared between “senior” level and “novice” level users on the forums relates to the law and its perceived enforcement. The fact that so many of

the rules and rituals of the forum relate to conserving users’ anonymity affirms the importance of the law to these sex purchasers. The founder of USG makes it clear that, while posting information about law enforcement stings is acceptable, reprinting the names of men arrested in prostitution stings is unacceptable, as it violates the principle of protecting fellow men who buy sex from possible detection. To a user who copied an article in his post about five men arrested in a prostitution sting in an Illinois suburb, the founder edits the report to remove the names of those arrested and explains:

I want to say this carefully so no one gets the wrong idea here, but if you think about it, posting the names of people who have been arrested is...just helping the police in their efforts to embarrass these people...we don’t want to add to the problems of the unfortunate people who have been arrested by publishing their names and/or photographs.

The user who had copied the news report immediately apologizes and says, “you are absolutely correct. I will be more careful in the future.”

In another effort to avoid legal ramifications, users often couch their descriptions of buying sex in the language of “dreams,” which constitutes part of the unique argot shared by users on the USG. One user describes his first experience

buying sex in this way: “My first report. It all happened in a dream last night and man was it a good one!” Another user writes about “dreaming about a trip” in which he bought FS [full sex] with a Latina for “0.5” (\$50). He then reports seeing an “attractive BSW [Black streetwalker] sitting on park bench” but “was spent so didn’t follow up.” This dreaming language reveals the degree to which law matters to users who post on the forums and the way in which their perceptions of the law shape their discourse. Framing men’s stories of buying sex in the language of dreams is sometimes explained as a “style” choice by some users, but it is primarily recognized as an attempt to protect sex purchasers from law enforcement officers who may read the website.

Prices also are rarely reported overtly on the forum. Usually users code them to avoid incrimination by law enforcement by using dollar signs, decimal points, or even terms like “50 rainbow and 100 flowers” and “20 rocks.” Generally, one dollar sign denotes \$100, and decimal points are decoded by moving the decimal to the right two places. Thus, “0.5” = \$50, “\$\$” = \$200, and “\$0.2” = \$120. However, this language is not always universally understood by users on the Illinois forums, so frequent discussions occur to clarify the price coding system. Buyers of sex describe women, sex acts, and prices to one another in a shorthand comprised of broadly understood acronyms (as in SW for streetwalker). In this way, understandings of the law and its relationship to buying sex are honed and clarified on a continual basis. Often designed to evade, confuse, or exclude law enforcement, the coding reflects a particular legal consciousness that can be defined as both “with” and “against” the law.

As I show, these forum discussions produce for users a brotherhood comprised of a common language, shared values, and a series of informal rules and rituals that include expectations for the sharing of “credible” information. As an “old boys’ club” of men who normalize buying sex, the forum appears to be a source of strong bonding among the purchasers, who often use the forums to help buttress one another against perceived critics or threats, namely law enforcement and those who advocate legislation that targets sex purchasers. I understand this “brotherhood” to be a configuration of practices and discourses that comprise cultural schemas (Sewell, 1992) about how law matters to the sex purchasers who use the website; these schemas reflect a legal consciousness that offers insight into how purchasers perceive their hobby and efforts to curtail it, through a particular lens of persecuted masculinity. Their posts reveal descriptions not necessarily of how the world is, but the

world as they make sense of it. And, as I show next, perceptions of the law were central to their worldview.

Perceptions of the Law and Its Enforcement

Forum members adopted two major perceptions of the law. In the first section, I describe “with the law” perceptions of the law and its implementation, characterized by the “business as usual” attitude that sex purchasers can continue their purchasing in the face of seemingly manageable risks from law enforcement. In the second, I examine “against the law” perceptions of policy implementation, typified by the opinion that purchasing sex has become “too risky” and must therefore be discontinued. Though I characterize broadly the legal consciousness on the USG as “oppositional” (arguably both “with the law” and “against the law”), I contend that these perceptions of purchasing as “business as usual” vs. “too risky” align with a shift on the forums from a “with the law” legal consciousness toward an “against the law” one.

Business as Usual: “With the Law” Perceptions of Policy and Law

Responses from sex purchasers about the new Illinois legislation described earlier provide insight into their perception of efforts to curtail and punish their “hobby.” The posts reveal that many men who buy sex in Illinois are well-informed about how new legislation may impact them, and that buyers assist fellow members of the brotherhood in understanding the “ins and outs” of the laws.

Forum conversations following the passage of this new legislation went through a first stage of initial speculations about details of the law, its potential enforcement (whether it will threaten “business as usual”), and its broader significance to sex purchasers. Some buyers on the Illinois boards make references to how they perceive new legislation as negatively impacting their “mongering” activities, as they call it, in some cases almost immediately following the signing of new laws. For example, a user who posts on a Roselle, IL forum after the Illinois Safe Children Act (HB 6462) was signed by Governor Quinn complains that, according to “new rules” at a local massage parlor, his “favorite Ukrainian” there informed him that now she “could not take anything off,” though “[g]roping was allowed.” He ends the post by saying, “Welcome to the new laws.”

Another man posting on the Chicago Streetwalker Reports forum in late September 2009 warns other users about the

nascent End Demand campaign and warns them to “[w]atch out,” as they “are out to get the monger and let the SW [sex workers] go”:

Tom Dart [Cook County, IL Sheriff] is trying again to make a name for himself by pioneering a get rid of demand campaign. They believe instead of taking in the SWers and trying to get them off the street and get them a different line of work if they get rid of the demand the SWers will go away. Can anyone say Delusional? They have the backing of some Woman's group and they gave them \$500k in funding. It is some program that the whole nation is looking at the viability of it working in other areas.

Another “john” posting after the passage of HB 6462 wonders if the new law will only impact men who buy sex in the Chicago area, or if other cities in Illinois are as “enthusiastic” about implementing the law. A “john” who posts about a week before HB 6462 was signed into law asks other forum members if an escort agency that closed did so because of the new law, and he discusses how the law might impact people in the commercial sex industry. In a post titled, “Hb 6462,” another member responds to the above user, “Good Lord. That may explain it. Looks like all they can do is focus on punishment instead of legalizing this great hobby of ours. Sheesh.”

Some sex purchasers post on the Illinois Sex Guide boards about End Demand and the Illinois Safe Children Act in order to clarify details of the bill, i.e., the legal consequences for various “mongering” activities. In mid-August 2010, just before HB 6462 was signed, a conversation arises between users on the Chicago Escort Reports forum about whether the bill “deals exclusively with minors” or not. The user who begins the conversation seems to applaud the bill, if it criminalizes men who have sex with minors, whom he describes as “disease[d]” and in need of “help.” Another user responds that the first post is “Not True,” as the “Bill deals with Adults too.” He explains:

The original bill was for minor but they added more language to it for Adults too. Basically making it Class4 Felony from a misdemeanor for Adults. Thats how the Bill got passed. This is a very serious stuff if become the Law on August 24. I think we all need to say good by to this Hobby or get ready for Felony charges which also means loss of Job for professionals. LE will pursue it hard due to the Felony Charges. See this link from End Demand organization who are behind this Bill. This explains the penalties and its just not for Minors.

He provides a link to a summary of the bill posted on the End Demand Illinois website. The first user responds, “Looks like things might be drying up in Chicago.” Another user posting on the Rockford General Reports forum in September

2009 writes a similar report, however with a more optimistic idea that the new crackdown is a temporary political device:

Be thankful they are trying to clean up the streets the old fashioned way by getting the SWers off. The Cook County Sheriff's police headed by Tom Dart is piloting a program they hope brings them national notoriety. It is called get rid of demand and is focusing on putting away the mongers. The simple fact is they make more money by impounding a monger's vehicle then sending a SW to court that will be out the next day. They are also getting some funding from some woman's group, which thinks that it's going to help the SW which is B. S it will stop the demand for awhile and then when things blow over in a few months it will be business as usual again.

Two years later in January 2011, however, a user posting on the Chicago Massage Parlor Reports forum indicates that things have not exactly “blown over.” He shares, “I'm not in Chicago for the moment, so I haven't posted, but I read the forum every few days, and I can't believe all the busts. I thought this would calm down after the November elections, but it has not. Stay safe.”

Many other posters express concern and confusion regarding the new law, particularly about the difference between felony and misdemeanor charges for men buying sex. In an exchange between several buyers that takes place after the Illinois Safe Children Act was signed, one user responds to details about the bill, “So, this is it? We're screwed now or are the AMP [Asian massage parlor]/Escort providers screwed now? Both of us? What is the best way to go about mongering now that this new bill is in the fold?” In a post titled, “We're all screwed,” another user responds, “Very carefully.” In contrast, a senior member on the USG displays a confident, nuanced understanding of the laws that impact buyers of sex in a long post from May 2010 in which he describes the purpose of different laws, their status in the legislature, concrete ways in which they might impact purchasers, and how fellow “mongers” may go about better informing themselves or lobbying against the laws.

Some posters advocate taking action against the creation of new laws in Illinois aimed at punishing men who buy sex. One forum member posting on the Chicago Escort Reports forum four days before HB 6462 was signed into law lists the names of sponsors of the law in the House and the Senate and advises fellow buyers to “[t]ake a look at the names of the sponsors and remember them when election time comes around.” He posts the list of names, five of which belong to women, in part to correct another user who had remarked, “Stupid politicians. Half of them are mongers anyway, this is just another way to soak people for money to prop up the bankrupt state.” After HB 6462 was signed into law, however, a “john” posting on the Chicago Escort Reports

writes that efforts to dissuade Governor Quinn from signing the Illinois Safe Children Act were unsuccessful, and he attributes this in part to the strength and effectiveness of the End Demand Illinois campaign:

Lots of people try by sending emails, calls, letters and even met Governor staff on this but they were unable to convince him to veto at least part of the bill dealing with Adults penalties. The bill was sponsored by Cook county the so its hard for him to object it. Plus End Demand organization was behind it and they are very strong in getting things done. Currently they pushing Cook County sheriff office to start the crack down and no plea bargains for Felony charges for first few cases to send the message loud and clear. Look for some high profile stings in coming weeks and months.

The new penalties associated with the changes to the law received much discussion. Some posters focus on new impoundment and towing fees for various crimes, including prostitution or solicitation of a prostitute, as well as an increased possibility of arrest. One user on Chicago Street-walker Reports warns, “Safety first and remember if you get caught they can take you car too.” These discussions often center on calls for clarification over what exact actions will get sex purchase “caught.” Posters discuss the perceived role that offers, agreements, acts, and intent play in deciding whether a man can be charged for soliciting sex, sometimes debating one another as to the facts of the law. For example, after one “john” claims that police “still have to prove she [the “provider”] went through with the acts at the times and places specified,” another user on the Chicago News and Media Reports forum responds:

Nope. In Illinois the crime of prostitution is made out by 1) an offer. 2) an agreement, or 3) an act. Proving an act of prostitution is almost a rarity. The case is nearly always made out by an offer or agreement, whether it's the arrest of an alleged prostitute or an alleged john.

Another purchaser similarly responds, “Not true! You do not have to actually commit a sex act to be charged with a prostitution offense.” He offers advice to fellow purchasers on how to buy sex without getting “nailed”:

The way that you make an appointment that avoids getting yourself nailed is to avoid being explicit about the purpose of the appointment. Since you were apparently suspicious when you discussed the appointments, it would seem unlikely that you would have said anything that have given LE valid cause to arrest you.

As this discussion shows, though misinformation circulates on the forums, usually it is corrected by fellow forum members. Sex purchasers explain complicated laws and statutes to one another and give each other concrete examples

of what the laws “mean” for buyers. Such interactions show both the real-life usefulness of the johns’ boards to men who buy sex and their concern over changes to the law regarding commercial sex.

While forum member expresses a great deal of concern and knowledge about the laws regarding commercial sex in Illinois, they also offer their own folk theories as to why the police do not pose a major threat to most of the brotherhood of men who buy sex, further reinforcing a “with the law” consciousness. Posters often ask or respond to questions about the habits and on-the-ground practices of police officers, particularly when it comes to conducting arrests, stings, and other undercover operations designed to target men who buy sex. Throughout most of the posts, law enforcement (LE) and law enforcement officers (LEO) are referred to as “Uncle LEO,” or “Leo.” “Uncle Leo” becomes personified on the forum as the common enemy against whom sex purchasers bond and strategize. As I show, when forum members discuss how police implement laws about prostitution ‘on the ground,’ three major themes emerge: 1) the perceived existence of racial profiling, 2) a perception of prostituted women as being more vulnerable to arrest than sex purchasers, and 3) the opinion that laws are used by politicians to bolster their own public image. Such posts are in keeping with a “with the law” legal consciousness, in which law enforcement is viewed as a manageable threat if purchasers educate one another on typical procedures.

First, several buyers of sex raise the idea that the policing of commercial sex is racially biased. A forum member posting on the Chicago General Reports board notes, “I just was on the Chicago Police department website [Clearpath] which shows the pictures of all the ‘johns’ arrested in Chicago... I set it for the last 30 days.... there is ONE white guy..... what are the odds?”⁷ A “john” who self-identifies as white says that he believes police in Chicago engage in racial profiling when arresting purchasers, and he tells about an incident in which he claims that the police seemed “reluctant” to arrest him because he was white:

I think they do racial profiling when busting us johns. When I got popped 2 years ago at Cicero and 50th St, I was the only white guy out of about 15 arrested. The sting decoy seemed reluctant to come over to my car [...] She finally approached me on my third attempt. [...] I do think she was trying to let me pass by not coming to my car the first 2 times.

⁷ Frequent checks I conducted of the Clearpath website—the Chicago Police Department’s website for posting arrests—during a two-year period of data collection support this idea, as arrested men of color far outnumber Euro-American men. The site has since been renamed and arrests linked to a “Prostitution Arrest Search” tab on home.chicagopolice.org.

Another user says he was let go by the police who pulled him over, but that the police referenced the fact that he (the “john”) was most likely white in a predominately African American neighborhood and had thus given away that he was in the area only to purchase sex:

Yep, same thing happened to me on 13th and Kostner. Leo [law enforcement officer] went ALL through my van and threw everything on the ground. they let me go but told me I was the wrong color at the wrong time to be in that neighborhood. go figure.

A “john” posting in May 2010 writes about an area where police stings of men who buy sex are frequent, but he says most of the men arrested are black or Hispanic:

As far as the busts go, LE does stings there ALL THE TIME. The vast majority of those busted are black or Hispanic. Sorry, but it’s true. The reason a lot of Hispanic guys get busted is because they don’t take the time to make sure it’s a decoy. They just pull right up and make the offer.

Although this post offers one explanation for the disproportionate arrest of Latino purchasers, taken together, most posts share a consensus that the police do not go after all men who buy sex with equal vigor because they engage in racist profiling when arresting purchasers.

It is impossible to tell what proportion of posters on USG forums in Illinois are men of color or white men, since posters disclose their ethnicities so sporadically. What is clear from the posts, however, is that the existence reported by some posters of racism in purchaser arrests and stops seems to make some white posters feel safer in their sex purchasing. In particular, posters seem to believe that racist policing targets Latino and black men the most, and white, non-immigrant men seem to feel the “safest” from law enforcement.

Second, the perception of many forum users that the law poses little, or at most a manageable, threat to their own purchasing, is fed by sex purchasers’ awareness that many current approaches to prostitution and the commercial sex industry throughout the state still disproportionately target women for arrest and prosecution. When making routine reports on the “activity” on streets where prostitution occurs, some purchasers posting on forums throughout Illinois support this data anecdotally, as they report seeing women being arrested by police. Describing one such “hooker arrest,” as they are often called on the forums, a user posting on a Melrose Park, IL forum in February 2011 notes, “[Street intersection] marked LE on the prowl on Mannheim for the past three weeks Melrose plainclothes had a blonde (most likely SW) captured. Did not see any cuffs on her but they had her cornered.” A man posting on a Rockford, IL forum in June 2011 reports being out on a known “track” (area where street prostitution occurs) at night to “pick up a friend.” He states

that when he passed by a particular street, he noticed three “SW’s,” and when he returned to the same street five minutes later, “there were 2 squad cars and 3 ladies in handcuffs.” In a post on the Peoria General Reports forum in August 2010, a “john” reports that a “regular” of his told him that “the cops are trying to bust girls from online now here in ptown.” He advises fellow purchasers to be “careful guys won’t be long before they try to lure us guys into a internet trap,” as his “regular” informed him that “she knows of 2 girls already who have been nabbed from web adds.” These perceptions are supported empirically. Around this time period, three fourths of the approximately 5,000 prostitution-related arrests each year were of sex workers (who are most likely to be women and girls), a quarter were of purchasers, and less than one percent were of pimps (Stroger, 2007, p. 10).

Many users report that police can be more lax, meanwhile, when it comes to arresting men who buy sex. In contrast to the numerous reports on the USG forums in Illinois about the arrest of women for prostitution-related charges, many sex purchasers express a “peace of mind” exemplified in a post by a user in Belvidere, IL who claims that local law enforcement does not interfere with commercial sex being sold in massage parlors. In 2010 another user writes, “In over 30 years of doin this, I have never been arrested, and only hassled once (In Cicero, no less) by the cops.” Other users who report being pulled over or questioned are subsequently “let go” or even given “valuable info” about the specifics of when and why sex purchasers are arrested, as well as the consequences for being arrested on prostitution-related charges. One user posting in June 2010 describes police officers who reportedly act leniently towards buyers:

Made one too many passes [in my car] and pissed off the wrong cop, I guess. In Rockford an officer told me he could arrest me for being a nuisance on a public street. I had trouble keeping a straight face, but chose not to PO him anymore. He told me to “get the hell out of Dodge” so to speak. I moved to a different part of town and kept looking.

Similarly, another user on the same forum reports in July 2010 that “[n]ight shift cops from 1 am–5 am are a lot more forgiving of what happens in Vegas [referring to prostitution in Chicago] because few people are around to complain.” Thus, in contrast to the experiences they witness of women who sell sex, sex purchasers posting on the USG forums for Illinois report being “released” by police officers who pull them over while they are purchasing sex, or, if they are arrested, find it relatively easy to expunge their records – a legal process they also advise one another on how to do on the forum boards.

Finally, some buyers of sex express a lack of concern over police enforcement of commercial sex laws because they believe these laws to play only a symbolic function for politi-

cians during an election cycle. They suggest that politicians and the police do not really want to “win the war” on prostitution but rather want to look effective and “tough on crime” to the voting public. A user posting in September 2009 jeers, “God forbid prostitution should end. What would Dart have to build his political career on?” Another user writing in October 2010 questions whether the election year or Daley’s exit as mayor might explain the disappearance of so-called “massage parlors” from the Chicago area. He writes, “Another one [massage parlor] gone. What’s going on? Leo seems to be going after them all like crazy. Is it because it’s an election year? Because Daley’s stepping down?” The prevalence of these types of posts, in which users portray the police as biased and corrupt, provides evidence that Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) “with the law” consciousness accurately describes that of many purchasers on the Illinois forums of the USG, who view the law as a game with rules they can manipulate and the legal process as a contest to be won through knowledge and resources.

In addition to sharing perceptions with one another about law enforcement procedures, perceived risks, and advice on how to deal with encounters with law enforcement, many sex purchasers on the forum participate in constructing a more overtly “against the law” legal consciousness by advising each other on how to evade the law. As such avoidance tactics are designed for dealing with the law, I include them in my analysis of “with the law” legal consciousness. The ways in which forum users teach one another to evade the law reveals their assumption that law is viewed as a biased game, and that sex purchasers can intentionally resist and break the law by becoming more informed about law enforcement procedures and tactics.

One buyer seeking advice on how to purchase sex while remaining under the radar of the law writes that he is “looking for tips on spotting /avoiding LE [law enforcement].... How do you look without looking like you’re looking?” This question appears in various incarnations throughout many of the USG forums throughout Illinois, and many purchasers are willing to oblige their fellow brothers with tips on where to go, where not to go, how to act, what to say, and what to do. A user posting on the Chicago Streetwalker Reports forum in August 2010 gives a “Music Man” brand of advice about avoiding law enforcement, i.e., “You gotta know the territory.” He writes:

Regarding LE, its really a matter of knowing the area ahead of time like others have suggested. I would learn the area and also just cruise the area before picking someone up you’ve never been with [...] Know where the LE Base is in the area, the last thing you want to do is think you found a good spot a couple blocks away from the station LOL.

In the following post from August 2010, another user advises another forum member on how to spot and avoid law enforcement while cruising Chicago streets for sex. While the user provides concrete tips on avoiding law enforcement, he also advises to “go with your gut” and reveals that for him, “the thrill in not getting caught is sometimes the motivating factor for a night stroll.”

Members also try to advise one another on how to recognize a law enforcement sting. Some posters warn to avoid “trios of faux ho’s” that include a “rainbow cone selection” of one white, one black, and one Hispanic woman. As one user writes in December 2010:

This sounds like a classic LEO sting. The top brass seem to be fixated on using trios of faux ho’s. Often they are one white, one black, one Hispanic. That rainbow cone selection of flavors is also a dead tip off that it’s a trap. Another tip: The faux ho’s usually have much thicker legs and more butt and body weight than a true working girl who is constantly on her feet walking (when she is not on her knees or on her back.)

Many men on the forums convey a belief that if a woman they see on the street is especially attractive, she is probably “TGTBT,” or “too good to be true” and therefore a “decoy” in a sting. When giving physical descriptions and evaluations of women they see on the street, it is common for mongers to reinforce that idea among each other with comments such as, “Remember, if it looks too good to be true, it usually is.” One “john” explains that if a girl “looks too hot,” “has good muscle tone” and “doesn’t have the stroll,” she is “suspect” to him, and he recommends that sex purchasers “avoid her.”

Another buyer posting on the Chicago Streetwalker Reports forum informs fellow mongers that undercover officers (“decoys”) on the street can arrest a man for pulling over and talking to the “decoy,” even if the man does not discuss sex acts and money:

The way it works now, if you pull over and talk to the decoy in code and then decide you fucked up and try and pull away, they are busting you anyway. They know what you’re there for and they don’t give a shit if you didn’t actually say the magic words that form the crime (ie: BJ [blow job] and \$ amt).

In May 2011, a user posted a “heads up” to fellow buyers advising them to watch a YouTube video created by a Chicago police officer, in which the officer explains how he conducted a prostitution sting. The user says the video contains “[I]ots of good information” for “mongers” and reminds other purchasers to be careful because “Uncle LEO” (law enforcement) is “watching.”

A user writing in late June 2011 gives other purchasers a host of advice about avoidance tactics, including instructing them to drive carefully and calmly in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves; to avoid picking up women who are with potential pimps; to “[a]lways be on the lookout for LEO!”; to avoid women who seem too good to be true; and to use what sex purchasers call the “cop check” or “LE check,” which involves groping women to ensure they are not undercover officers:

If a girl seems kinda TGTBT [too good to be true], or something feels wrong, I'd say drive away. If you still decide to go through with it, maybe you just want to stay vague with what you say. Don't discuss \$. Drive a little and string her along, feel up her boobs, ass and sn*tch [vagina]. An undercover is not likely to go through with all that. You can always decline service and kick her out- LOL. This last one is tricky, but whatever you have to do to avoid having to explain to your wife and kids that you're banging street h*es.

Other users advise one another to Google for information about online sex ads that may seem “fishy.” One “john” explains, “[I]f the pics are clothed and no bare anything than that's an immediate sign of a no no. Even if there's a nip slip [exposed nipple] in a leo posted ad, it's grounds for entrapment so leo always makes sure to cover up the good parts in there ads even if the face is blurred.” The buyers ends his post by saying, “Most of this stuff we already know but for you new guys it's always a good idea to remember the basics.” Posts such as this one highlight how the information exchanged about law enforcement on the forums both confirm and reinforce “common wisdom” among purchasers, as well as inculcate “novices” into the best ways to purchase sex without getting caught.

Too Risky: “Against the Law” Perceptions of Policy and Law

The previous section explored sex purchasers' awareness of changes in laws that could impact their “hobby,” and the process of learning and information-sharing that takes place on the forums as users find new ways around the law and its enforcement. I suggest that when sex purchasing continues to be seen as a manageable threat by forum users, they are demonstrating a predominately “with the law” legal consciousness. For some buyers of sex, however, policies aimed at purchasers or a perceived increase in law enforcement presence may make them shift the geographic location of their search for commercial sex, or end their “cruise” for sex for an evening if their usual spot seems to be “too hot.” For others, it may end their purchasing permanently. These users articulate a legal consciousness that shifts toward a more concretely “against the law” mind-set, characterized

by the perception that certain law enforcement policies and practices have made the purchase of sex “too risky.”

My analysis shows that when users perceive law enforcement policies aimed at buyers of sex as temporal or isolated, they shift to other nearby communities where they believe local law enforcement agencies have not targeted purchasers. For example, one user writes on the Rockford, IL General Reports forum in April 2010 that he will switch commercial sex venues in response to the practice of publishing photos of those arrested for purchasing sex in local newspapers. He says, “With all the arrests in stings, I am staying away from the street and am going to try to find regulars or go to lingerie shops. I don't want my picture in the *Rockford Star*.” Another user reports in August 2010 that he may shift his purchasing to a new city in order to avoid law enforcement: “This is ridiculous. I'll be keeping an eye on this as all mongers in the chicagoland area should, this is serious stuff. This may end my mongering here and make me take more trips to Detroit (strip clubs), and Toronto (amp's).” This post indicates that the user takes law enforcement changes seriously and seems to be waiting to see if the changes are permanent or temporary before deciding whether to end his purchasing in the area.

Though some sex purchasers report that they will shift their buying to other areas, others report abandoning their search for commercial sex, whether for a particular night or for an extended period of time. Many echo the sentiment of one user posting in Chicago on the Streetwalker Reports forum in May 2011, who reports that, “tempted as [he] was,” he was starting to get “very paranoid” after hearing fellow buyers' reports about law enforcement increasingly targeting “johns” and “decided [he] better not try [his] luck.” Two users posting in Aurora two months apart report staying away because of stings. The first, posting on the Aurora, IL Massage Parlor Reports forum in March 11, writes, “There are so many stings in Aurora that I decided to stay away.” The other, posting in May 2011 in the Aurora, IL General Reports forum, reports, “WSW [White streetwalker] on La Salle in the daytime. Slender and not bad looking. It is just that Aurora is heavy with stings, did want to chance it.” A user on the Chicago Streetwalker Reports forum reports to the community in July 2011 that he witnessed firsthand another “john” get arrested, and that it was a “wake up call”:

Was out Friday night. Just in the area and not looking to make an actual pick up (thank god) because I saw first hand the last guy on the police offenders list get arrested. Leo was out heavy that night. This poor guy made a stop, a BSW approached his window, just then Leo went in for the kill. It was really a wake up call fellas. They came out of nowhere.

Part of the “wake-up call” referenced by this user results from sex purchasers hearing from one another about increased penalties targeting buyers of sex. As one explains

on the Chicago Streetwalker Reports forum in September 2009:

The push is on though to get the mongerers. I have two friends who got nailed and it cost them plenty, including having to spend a day at some program called Amends at Madison & California AND having to pay for it on top of the towed vehicle and bond.

Likewise, another user also posting in September 2009 reports being deterred from purchasing, explaining that “[w]ith all the LEO out she would need to be top shelf for me to risk it since I am not interested in getting my car impounded and paying some lawyer to get me out of a solicitation charge. So I decided to cut my loses and call it a night.” Another user warns other buyers in March 2011 about the long-term consequences of getting arrested:

I think the beat cop who arrests you will suggest you “tell it to the judge”. Meanwhile, your picture shows up in the mugshot section of Chicago Breaking News. Where it gets picked up around the country. How easy do you think it will be to get that info out of Google once it gets in there? So. You can tell everyone you meet about how innocent you are. Meanwhile, enjoy losing out on every job you ever apply for going forward. All for \$40.

Such stories reinforce the construction of a collective “against the law” legal consciousness on the forums, stemming from sex purchasers’ feelings of alienation from and persecution by the law, as well as their desire to avoid feelings of shame/embarrassment associated with having others—community members, significant others, and/or employers—know about an arrest for sex purchasing.

Some posters write that they are quitting their “hobby” altogether, or at least reconsidering their level of involvement, due to their anxieties about being arrested and having their pictures circulated online and in local newspapers. For example, a user posting on the Chicago BackPage Advertiser Reviews forum in July 2011 says he has been “too lucky for too long” but that “it’s time for [him] to reconsider [his] level of involvement in the hobby” after a narrow escape from arrest that left him feeling like he “really dodged a bullet that day.” Another user posting on the Evanston/Skokie, IL General Reports forum in June 2011 advises a fellow “john” who narrowly avoided a suspicious so-called massage parlor to “just get out of the hobby.” On the Mount Prospect, IL General Reports forum, a user posting in November 2010 considers stopping purchasing because the arrests are getting “too close to home”:

Be careful out there LEO and all his uncles are out in the streets doing some serious cleaning. Naperville is the latest to be attacked by LEO with 20 individuals

arrested. Be safe out there! I think I might quit this hobby soon, the busts are just getting too close to home!

One user posting on a Chicago forum tells fellow purchasers that he is ending his “hobby” of purchasing sex after being “busted.” He asks other buyers on the forum for help cleaning his record and thanks members of the “usasexguide community” for their “years of help”:

Well boys after 20+ years being in this hobby it has finally came to an end. I WAS BUSTED in Chicago. Thats all I will say for now regarding the bust. I will say I am OUT! But I need help to keep my record cleaned. Can you please pass on to me any attorneys that can get me expunged (is that the word?) from this? I talked to 1 already but he said it will be in the Thousands of dollars to clear me! Damn if I had that kind of money I would be with escorts. Please help. Also if you were busted can you txt me back and tell me what happened? I can swap stories with ya. Thanks usasexguide community for all these years of help!

Other sex purchasers on the forum express sympathy for the one who was “busted” and provide him with information about how to expunge his record and what to do at the courthouse. One forum member says that he “feels for” the busted buyer, and he expresses anger at “Uncle Leo” for forcing a fellow “monger” out of the hobby. He self-identifies as a “bargain hunter” who “like[s] to look for a good deal” and complains, “[S]o why is it a crime that I like to have the company of women[?] Are there not better things out there for Leo to do then to bother us hobbyist and the girls?” He relates to the busted purchaser by recounting several instances in which he claims he “called it a night” after being “scared” by the presence of law enforcement. He ends the post by saying he might be “getting too old” for the “hobby” and should save his money.

In July 2011, a sex purchaser reports getting “the scare of [his] life that pretty much ended [his] hobbying.” In a long post, he narrates experiencing reported police abuse when he is arrested in Rockford while arriving for an in-call appointment (where the “john” comes to the location where the woman is) with a woman who was advertised on backpage.com. He expresses relief that in the end, he was reportedly not arrested and the police did not discover drugs that he had on his person and in his car. He ends the post by saying he decided at that point that he had gotten “the biggest break of [his] life” and that he was going to stop purchasing sex.

While some law enforcement approaches to men who buy sex appear to shift their perceptions of the threat posed by law and its enforcement, it is also evident from many of the posts that law enforcement presence may not effectively shift sex purchasers’ overall perceptions in the long

run, as buyers may return to commercial sex locations after law enforcement presence has reportedly subsided, or they may shift their purchasing activities to nearby communities with little law enforcement presence in commercial sex locations. It is impossible to know from this data whether buyers who report stopping purchasing or going elsewhere to purchase are in fact actually deterred or, if they are, for how long. As my analysis examines online discourse, however, I can demonstrate that some posters present a shift in their legal consciousness.

I suggest that the difference between men who *report* that they stopped purchasing sex or moved their purchasing outside their regular geographic area/s and those who either do not stop or who only end their purchasing for an evening is an issue of legal consciousness—whether they take on a “with the law” or an “against the law” orientation. A shift toward an “against the law” orientation seems to occur when law enforcement practices are seen by users as a *tangible threat* to them personally purchasing (e.g. they almost were caught, they had a friend who was arrested, etc.) and/or are seen as *sustained* or *ongoing*. In these circumstances that seem to hit close to home for purchasers because of the local risk for embarrassment and shame—for example, when users report being arrested, react to a fellow purchaser’s arrest, or discusses their professional jobs or families being at stake—sex purchasing no longer constitutes a game purchasers can manipulate, avoiding law enforcement, and the risks to their “hobby” seem to suddenly outweigh the benefits.

Discussion & Conclusion

One difficulty in doing research on buyers of sex is the clandestine nature of the industry. It is unclear what percentage of Illinois men who buy sex access johns’ boards like the USG, and the number of men who actively post comments on the forum is distinct from the number of men who access the site in order to read posts made by others. Little data is available on the men who do use the website, other than what users themselves post. Therefore, the aim in this project was to draw a picture of how sex purchasers interact that is embedded in the particular context of the johns’ boards, rather than to create a representative sample of purchasers in Illinois. Further, I conducted no questionnaires, surveys, or interviews with any of the users of this forum. The data my research assistants and I analyzed reflects how men on these johns’ boards present themselves to their virtual community, not how they represent themselves to researchers. The drawback to this approach is the inability to collect demographic data from the users or to ask them specific questions. However, the posts can provide rich insight into how the individuals in this hidden population see themselves, see

each other, and see those whom they believe threaten their “hobby,” namely the law and those who enforce it.

In the data collected, I examined the key role played by the Illinois johns’ boards in shaping the legal consciousness of buyers of sex, helping to connect and educate them about perceived efforts to restrict, punish, or end their “hobby.” As a brotherhood of self-identified “mongers” who share the belief that they have the right to purchase sex with women, the Illinois forums of the USG appear to help buyers of sex bond together and empower one another against their perceived common enemy, “Uncle Leo,” along with other perceived threats, including feminists, politicians, and activists who attempt to draw the focus away from women in prostitution and toward the men who buy sex. My findings indicate that many men who post on these forums pay close attention to changes in statewide legislation, as well as local law enforcement policies regarding prostitution. Posts indicate that many purchasers make a concerted effort to inform themselves and one another about various legal matters: how to evade the law, how to react in arrests, and how new legislation promoted by the End Demand Illinois campaign may impact their sex purchasing activities.

My argument is that these posts demonstrate a shift in legal consciousness in users that takes place in response not only to the passage of new laws aimed at curbing sex purchasing, but also, more importantly, to the perceived *enforcement* and target populations of such laws, including racist policing practices. Posts by forum users of this online brotherhood suggest that they are highly adaptable to changing laws and circumstances (changes in the “rules” of their “game”), evidenced by their hybrid, “with the law/against the law” legal consciousness. However, as more sex purchasers on the johns’ boards perceive law enforcement as targeting sex purchasers across ethnicities and throughout their “go-to” purchasing areas, their legal consciousness shifts away from the hybrid, “oppositional consciousness” engendered on the online brotherhood of the USG forums toward a more thoroughly “against the law” consciousness; law enforcement is no longer a manageable threat and is to be avoided at all costs, because buyers perceive it as being aimed at *them* in particular (their ethnicity or their purchasing areas). Their avoidance may take many forms, including buying sex elsewhere (away from an area perceived to be targeting purchasers) or quitting the “hobby” altogether.

My findings are significant for studies of sociology of law, masculinity studies, and legal consciousness theory. First, it affirms a body of sociolegal scholarship that explores how law matters in the everyday lives of people, in this case, a stigmatized population of men in the manosphere who bond through an incel-based discourse rooted in a shared sense of persecution and victimhood, on the one hand, and empowerment through a masculinist online brotherhood, on the other. Posts made by sex purchasers indicate that perceptions of the

law and its implementation play an important role in their own performances of masculinity and considerations of buying sex. Such findings contribute to sociolegal scholarship, masculinity studies, and research on commercial sex alike.

Second, my data affirm the consideration of johns' boards as an important part of the manosphere, a diverse collection of online communities of men who feel victimized by the gains of feminism and other social movements that have resulted in shifts in masculinity politics. As in other communities in the manosphere, in the USG forums the ideal of brotherhood helps naturalize sex purchasing as a practice and form of "fratriarchal bonding," in the words of Wadham (2013, p. 1). The masculinities affirmed on USG coalesce around shared understandings of the law as a masculinity to be managed, alongside others.

Finally, my data contribute to a deeper understanding of the concept of legal consciousness and how theorized types of legal consciousness may shift and be linked, possibly, with deterrence—in this case, deterrence from purchasing sex. The shift in legal consciousness on the forums in response to the passage and especially the perceived implementation of new laws hopefully will contribute to literature on law and social change (e.g., Chunn et al., 2011; Gessner, 2001). Based on my findings, it seems that social reform may be achieved even in the absence of a "before the law" legal consciousness (described by Ewick and Silbey (1998) as characterizing the attitude of law-abiding citizens who view the law as authoritative and do not challenge it), and when the players (the sex buyers) articulate a mind-set rooted in a "with the law"/"against the law" legal consciousness.

Indeed, it is when purchasers on the forums shift toward a more concretely "against the law" legal consciousness that they seem to reconsider their "hobby" and the threat it may pose. If this is true, then not only does law matter to sex purchasers, but it can also be used potentially as a tool for sex purchasing deterrence. Further research is needed to explore whether these purchasers actually do change their purchasing behavior, as they report doing on the forums, but my findings are in keeping with other research with sex purchasers who report that the potential consequence of having their names and/or photos posted online or having their cars impounded would adequately deter them from purchasing sex (Durchslag & Goswami, 2008; see also Neville, 2014; Persons, 1996; Sanders, 1997–98).

Yet even when laws and their enforcement—and the associated shame and financial cost—are perceived as making the purchase of sex "too risky," this assessment is bound by geography. The legal consciousness articulated by users on the Illinois forums of the USG transcends geographic boundaries and legal jurisdictions. Many buyers of sex indicate a willingness on the forums to travel across such boundaries if they perceive the legal risk of purchasing to be less in a particular area or jurisdiction. Men who write that the "business

will boom" in nearby Indiana and Wisconsin as a result of legislation that targets men who buy sex in Illinois, who share their plans to make "more trips to Detroit...and Toronto" to purchase their sex, and who argue that the "crusade" against buyers is limited to Cook County demonstrate the lack of coordination sex purchasers perceive between what they view as isolated efforts to shift the focus of law enforcement away from sex workers and to men who buy sex.

Related to this point of geography, the impact of the internet on prostitution and the sex industry has been revolutionary, reshaping, expanding, and repackaging the availability of every kind of sexual service (Sanders et al., 2020). In addition to offering men who buy sex a new degree of control, anonymity, and freedom from law enforcement (Farley et al., 2013; Sanders et al., 2020), the internet created a remarkable shift in the lives of these men, because it has enabled sex purchasers to realize that they are not alone. As a distinct social space created exclusively for men who buy sex, the forums offer a unique glimpse into the world of self-identified "johns" and "mongers." The commercial sex industry and the internet are continually evolving, and the ways in which men communicate with one another on the johns' boards appear to reflect that mutability. This research provides support for the notion that the internet plays an increasingly important role in efforts to buy and sell sex with women.

As this article shows, it is not just that taking commercial sex online has made purchase easier; forums such as the USA Sex Guide also provide formats for purchasers to construct cultural schemas about the law and how to avoid law enforcement while buying sex. More research is needed on how men use johns' boards like the USG to facilitate their sex purchasing activities and to construct a legal consciousness about their "great hobby." Specifically, new research is needed into how the passing in 2018 of a set of laws⁸ known together as FOSTA-SESTA has impacted online communities of sex purchasers. Signed by President Trump on April 11, 2018, the controversial laws permit state and federal authorities to pursue websites that host sex trafficking ads. Although USG has not been strongly impacted by FOSTA-SESTA, since it is for purchasers only and does not feature any ads by sex sellers, a number of users on USG have mentioned the impact they have seen FOSTA-SESTA have on women selling sex through number of other websites, affirming the impact reported elsewhere on sites such as Reddit, Craigslist, and Google (for example, Romano, 2018) and on communities of sex workers (see, for example, Tung, 2020). In the meantime, the internet-savvy sex purchasers on these forums continue "hunting" for sex in communities where they believe they can still avoid arrest with relative ease,

⁸ The Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act.

as they watch law enforcement continue the disproportionate and all-too-familiar targeting and arrest of women in prostitution.

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