

STRATEGIES AND SCRIPTS: AN INVESTIGATION OF MASCULINE IDENTITY AND  
CASUAL SEX

by

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### Dedication

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## Abstract

Strategies and Scripts: An Investigation of Masculine Identity and Casual Sex

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This study analyzed men's lifestyle websites within the Pick-Up Artist (PUA) community. Employing a feminist post-structural framework, this analysis investigates how heterosexual masculinity is constructed online and aims to examine how sexual activity with multiple women is positioned as valuable to men. Four interpretive repertoires emerged: *uncovering the natural* —mental and physical work were required to access an authentic, natural maleness; *militarization* — men were rallied to defend male privilege; *feminine commodities for building masculinity* — women's bodies were situated as commodities used to demonstrate achievement of masculinity; and *pressured pursuit* — men were urged to be the directors of sex and to overcome the obstacle of female consent. PUA authors disavowed the importance of women, though sex from women operated as a central requisite for convincingly achieving masculinity. Key tenets of neoliberalism were regularly present, where male readers were urged to decide to improve and cultivate their outward appearance, behaviours, and subjectivity.

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## Strategies and Scripts: An Investigation of Masculine Identity and Casual Sex

The growing popularity of reference and self-help books for men on pickup artistry reflects the increasing social worth of successful sexual conquests in great quantity for single men. Among the most notable are: *The Game* by Neil Strauss, which has become a New York Times best seller, *The Mystery Method: How to Get Beautiful Women Into Bed*, *The Pickup Artist: The New and Improved Art of Seduction*, and *The Layguide*. These instructional texts are all authored by self-proclaimed “experts” at getting women to sleep with them, and are all members of what is known as the Pick-Up Artist (PUA) community, otherwise known as the Seduction community. The PUA community has a pervasive online presence, and primarily markets training for men to develop themselves into sexually proficient, “authentic” masculine subjects. Over the past 10 years, this community has exploded into an international industry that now permeates throughout men’s lifestyle media. These instructional texts encourage a form of hegemonic masculinity which equates the number of sexual partners with power and conquest. The appeal of the PUA method, self-help books, and vast online community for men can be considered a reflection of modern heterosexual male foci and concerns when it comes to sex in mainstream culture.

This project seeks to understand how men in the PUA community author and construct their masculinity and selfhood through casual sex with women and through their relationships with their peers. It will also aim to examine how this particular form of identity, sexuality, and masculinity is situated within the broader neoliberal social context. Neoliberal discourses view the individual as mainly responsible for their lives and self-image, irrespective of other influences that could impact a personal narrative (Giddens, 1991; Gill, 2008). With this predominate discourse, there is an expectation that each individual is responsible for the

consistent upkeep, improvement, surveillance and regulation of their self (Richardson, 2004). The neoliberal tenets, specifically self-governance and its emphasis on continual self-improvement (Giddens, 1991), contribute to the formulation of what is valued as masculine, and what marks its achievement (Plummer, 1995). For the male that aspires towards the achievement of masculinity— that is to be capable of, skilled at, and perpetually getting sex and sexual attention from women— sex becomes a marker for psychological and social success (Tyler, 2004).

### **Casual Sex Today**

The existing literature on casual sex has focused on gender differences in perceptions of sex outside of a relationship, rather than the meaning behind these differences (Campbell, 2008; Birnbaum & Laser-Brandt, 2002; Dilatush & Murray, 2011; Stephenson, Ahrold & Meston 2011; Stewart, Stinnett & Rosenfeld, 2000; Hyde & Oliver, 2000). In comparison to women, research reports that heterosexual men experience more positive and favourable “morning after” feelings (Campbell, 2008), have more affirmative perspectives of sex outside of a relationship (Hyde & Oliver, 2000), are more likely than women to pursue casual sex (Shackelford, Goetz, LaMunyon, Quintus, & Weekes-Shackelford, 2004), and desire greater numbers of sexual partners (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Other studies have focused on the ritualistic, collective performance of “picking up” women as a form of male bonding (Grazian, 2007). However, this literature does not connect this to the ultimate focus of the group or the individual: the goal of sex, and what value such achievements represent.

In the qualitative section of a mixed research study, which used a questionnaire with a free-response section, Regan and Dreyer (1999) found that college-age men highlighted environmental and social factors such as “status enhancement” and “normative peer group



behavior” as important grounds for engaging in casual sex. The authors noted that casual sex appeared to increase men’s reputation and social status, and proved their sexual expertise and aptitude to their social group. This finding is also supported by Campbell (2008), who, in another mixed design, found that men reportedly hoped their friends would hear about them having a one-night stand, suggesting that one-night stands can boost men’s reputation. Both of these findings were only small sections of each study, which focused more generally on motives for sexual behavior, and subsequently lack detailed analysis and consideration of the implications of these findings which should be further explored.

### **The Pick-Up Artist (PUA) Community**

While casual sex and the pursuit of one-night-stands is a common practice among heterosexual males (Grello et al., 2006; Stinson, Levy, & Alt, 2014), there are also sub-cultural communities that have formed with the main purpose of attaining sex from women. This group refers to themselves as the Pick-Up Artist (PUA) community or the Seduction community.

The PUA community seeks to understand and capitalize on the sexual marketplace by accumulating sex from “quality” women — which is suggested to be based on physical appearance, usually rated on a scale of 1-10. It appears that applying a “rating” to women is used to demonstrate and rank skill amount PUAs, because presumably, “higher rated” (judged by the PUAs as more attractive) women are assumed to be more difficult to sleep with. Fundamentally, the seduction community focuses on breaking down heterosexual social interaction into a methodical science in order to successfully increase the amount of sexual attention a man occupies from women. The reasoning follows that if the stratagem derived from this technique is followed closely and correctly, men who were once considered to be socially awkward and

undesirable to women can transform themselves into confident men that can now play on a “leveled playing field” (Sparks, 2011) with women, and succeed in seducing them.

Once considered an underground community, this group has been valorized in mainstream media television shows and men’s magazines. PUA courses and boot camps can be found in most major North American cities, and are also offered online. For example, the company Venusian Arts have a series of instructional DVDs and published books, offer online phone coaching sessions and interactive workshops, hold live boot camps across four continents and had a television show with VH1 titled *The Pickup Artist* (Von Markovik, 2014). A typical “boot camp,” which usually costs between \$1000 and \$4000, consists of a full weekend where men are “coached” in seminars during the day on technique, and then have an opportunity to get “real life” practice in a nightclub with their coach’s supervision (Von Markovik, 2014). The mere formation and existence of this community can be interpreted as a product of the neoliberal sociocultural climate, characterized by the cultural preoccupation with displaying proficiency in order to maintain an identity and the corresponding imperative to work to become a better version of oneself in order to be considered an acceptable individual (Giddens, 1991; Gill, 2008). Likewise, its popularity, and the interest it elicits in other heterosexual male consumers of media shows that it is simultaneously fueling North American youth culture as well.

The focus on the PUA community in this thesis is directed at discussions about casual sex, which constitute a central concern of this group. This can be seen as an amplification of a broader cultural climate within which male sexual prowess is highly prized (Rogers 2005; Tyler, 2004).

## **Gender: To Be Performed and Monitored**

In this thesis, gender can be understood as organizing social power that is experienced at the individual level and is preformative in nature. Gender, according to Judith Butler (1990, 2004), is not simply something that one “has.” Instead, gender is something that must be continually “done” as a requirement of valid personhood within society. Further, qualities that form and define a gender are outside of the individual, and not authored by any specific person, but by forces that have shaped social culture and history instead. Thus, gender is not born out of our “authentic” or “innate” self, but instead indoctrinated from childhood (Butler, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Here, gender is not just performative, but is a historical and cultural object—which helps explain why gender and sexuality are represented differently across cultures and historical periods. This further complicates the notion of individual and innate selfhood, as these concepts too hinge on social norms and power processes, suggesting that this structure is not clearly hierarchical or top-down (Butler, 2004).

This doing of gender is then present in interactions and rituals, and in these interactions and moments, our gender is attributed and assessed by others—making individuals objects of a gender-attribution process (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Taken together, the individual is found to be always accountable for her/his gender to him/herself and to others (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These learned notions of masculinity and femininity become so internalized that the individual becomes one’s own self-regulator—doing gender without even noticing or without needing an audience or observer (Butler 2004; Foucault, 1978; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this sense, we never are a gender, we just do it, and we are in the process of doing it over and over so it only seems and feels natural, when gender is instead a set of precisely and seamlessly learned and executed actions of labour and discipline (Butler, 1990; 2004; Foucault, 1978). This

illusion of naturalness is only broken when one fails to proficiently enact one's gender—and the consequences of such a failure quickly rise to the surface (Butler 2004).

The binaries of gender— masculinity and femininity— are linked with gender's fundamental nature of performativity and interaction. Masculinity is often associated with male sex, while femininity is associated with the female sex. A common misconception is that they are mutually exclusive —when they can indeed occur in many combinations. By stating what is, for example, masculine (one side of the binary), one is also designating what is not masculine through its exclusion, making a characteristic feminine as a result (Butler, 2004). In this sense, not only is gender done and self-monitored, but one's gender can be further demarcated through the interaction with the “opposing” gender as well (West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is this type of interaction where one might really “feel” like a (masculine) man—in the action of doing gender with an opposing gender, to highlight the differences in the constructs of the masculine and feminine. This idea is important to keep in mind when considering the sexual scripts, dynamics, and power (im)balances involved in pick-up artistry and its fundamental purposes and motivations.

### **Doing Masculinity**

**Being a “Man.”** In the context of this analysis, gender is considered as a set of cultural practices that construct the category “men” as dissimilar from and privileged over the other category, “women” (Fahs, 2011; Lorber 1994, Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; West & Zimmerman 1987). To be a “man” here is qualitatively different from being “male” (i.e. possessing XY chromosomes), although having a male body (although not necessary) is a common signifier that could be considered to symbolize manliness (Edwards, 2004; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). The question of concern, then, is what constitutes the category of “men” and what qualifies one to be

a part of it? Mainly, to claim membership in a masculine gender, one must present oneself socially, in other words perform, as a man, and must construct and maintain a masculine identity (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

This project will define masculinity through what Connell (2005) terms *normative* and *semiotic* approaches. *Normative* definitions of masculinity view masculinity as a standard, what men are ultimately expected to be. In this interpretation, men can approach the idealized cultural standard of masculinity in varying way and degrees; although most men do not achieve such standards. The *semiotic* approach focuses on symbolic differences, where masculinity is positioned as counter to the feminine—the masculine is assumed and positioned as superior (Connell, 2005). This semiotic approach is important to incorporate in this project's analysis, because it allows for masculinity to be viewed beyond norm construction as also representing a cultural channel and practice through which identity is constructed and social life is operated (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell, 2005; Shrock & Schwable 2009)

**Predominant Perspectives on Masculinity.** Pleck (1987, 1981) and Connell (2005, Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) both contend that the male gender role identity has been formed within historically-specific social climates. Previously, common elements of the male identity included: a stigma and rejection of the feminine; strength, confidence, and independence; aggression and propensity for violence; and finally, the need for status and accomplishment (Brannon, 2011; Brannon & David, 1976; David & Brannon, 1976). During initial gender socialization, beginning from infancy, males learn what signifies the masculine and feminine, and are punished for incorrectly aligning with the feminine, leading to a compulsory devaluation and rejection of the feminine in order to assert a masculine identity (Kane, 2006; Shrock & Schwable 2009; Solebello & Elliot, 2011)

This predominant conceptualization of masculinity has been further explored through Connell's writing on *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell takes up a normative and semiotic approach when describing hegemonic masculinity, defining it as the constructed practice of gender that successfully props up the operation and domination of patriarchy in society. Connell suggests that while there is often a hegemonic masculinity, it is not permanent in its form and can be re-constructed, challenged and changed across space and time.

Further, Connell (2005) suggests that there are different kinds of masculinities and simultaneous relations between them (some more valued than others), because men adaptively signify their masculinity in contextually suitable ways. Different features of the hegemonic model are highlighted in these different forms of masculinity—depending on what tools (social, monetary, symbolic) are available (Connell, 2005; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). For example, one man might signify his masculinity through his occupational status and financial power, while another might mainly signify his masculinity through bodybuilding. In the proposed project, I will explore a contemporary version of the male gender role, which appears to have a shifted emphasis on the accumulation and success characteristic, and has been focused within the sexual realm in order to enforce a sort of dominance and authority over women in the sexual sphere.

**Manhood Acts.** Taking into account the different presentations of what masculinity might look like, Schrock and Schwalbe's concept of *manhood acts* will be utilized in this project as a theoretical basis for exploring masculine cultural practices. For Schrock and Schwalbe (2009), manhood acts are anything a person does to be recognized or reified as a man, and are directed as establishing an advantage and difference over women. Upholding a masculine identity, and membership to a dominant group, therefore necessitates a (conscious or

unconscious) proficient performance of various manhood acts by the individual, as well as a collective culture and amongst subcultures (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Taken together, the individual is always accountable for her/his gender to him/herself and to others, and being able to do so seamlessly is a large component of appearing “socially competent” (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In line with Connell’s concept of different approaches and forms of masculinity, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) suggest that different manhood acts are performed in different contexts, depending on what resources of power, individual ability, context, and present culture are available to the performers. For example, a male can exert economic or institutional control, instead of physical control, if he has easier access to money and job status. Due to the socio-historical imbalance created between genders (Fahs, 2011), the act of signifying masculinity through a manhood act has the potential to perpetuate the oppression of the feminine gender, whether this is the intention or not (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). It is not surprising then, that the authors note that manhood acts usually involve the sexualisation, and therefore the commodification (Fahs, 2011) of women, though not as the direct intention of a manhood act. The primary goal of a manhood act is to prove or reinforce qualities of masculinity while devaluing and distancing the self from what is regarded to be feminine (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). This is especially present when the manhood acts involve exerting some form of control (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009), or, additionally in the case of PUAs, exhibiting the ability to exert control.

Throughout my analysis, I will be framing the pursuit and online reporting of sex acts by PUAs as a specific type of manhood act that is used to prop up a particular version of the “competent masculine man” that perpetuates the subordination of women. The motivation and

ability to obtain sex from women is considered a key manhood act required to assert heterosexuality and bolster what is considered “genuine” masculinity by the young men involved in the PUA community.

### **Social/Sexual Capital**

Baumeister and Vohs (2004) attempt to explain heterosexual relations through an economic model where men value sex from women more than women value sex from men (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). In this explanation, sex from women has been framed as a commodity, suggesting the existence of a social exchange surrounding sex (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). This economic perspective taken up by psychologists consequently establishes that there is a unique value attached to female sexuality sought-after by men and operates on the idea that behaviors of individuals are driven by the social marketplace (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). However, this theory falls short as it does not explain the nature or significance of this value, and the benefits that accrue from its acquisition.

Taking this approach further, Fahs (2011), drawing on the work of Luce Irigaray, situates this marketplace within a socio-cultural context. Irigaray posits that women are “entangled in a web of commodification” (Fahs, 2011, p 180) that constructs and regulates cultural expectations of feminine sexuality (Fahs, 2011). This marketplace, for Irigaray, is based on the trading of women “by and between men” (Fahs, 2011 p. 180). The commodification of women and this sexual marketplace stems from a patriarchal economy that has been present throughout most of history. The experience of female sexuality and its representation has been shaped by centuries of women being bought, sold, and given as gifts between men (Fahs, 2011) and continues to be present today in the context of interactions; and more broadly in female representations, interpersonal relationships, and within subjectivity. It is in this way that women’s bodies are



cultural symbols of value (FaHS, 2011), whereas men's bodies are not constructed in this way. In relation to the feminine body, there is not a masculine equivalent, but instead a male transactor—one that takes, accumulates and trades. This is a driving force of the power imbalance between men and women (FaHS, 2011), especially in the sexual sphere where the body is a particular point of focus. In this sense, women represent a type of “worth” between men for Irigaray (FaHS, 2011).

This commodification of female sexuality impacts the way women are sexually viewed and treated today (FaHS, 2011). If gender is done through interaction, it is then reasonable to suggest that masculine sexuality and identity too must operate in this commodity-driven marketplace. Both heterosexual men and women must meet with each other in this marketplace and both experience selfhood in the process of interaction.

This proposed research then must draw on concepts from Farvid and Braun (2013) that observe the concept of casual sex as a set of norms that are socially and culturally created, which in turn, build meaning around its practice. Through discourse analysis of self-help books and online articles, this study analyzed how heterosexual casual sex gets framed differently for men and women. They found several different subject positions primarily used to construct identity which were exclusively available to either women (the “sassy woman” and the “vulnerable woman”) or men (the “strategic man” or the “performing man”) (Farvid & Braun, 2013). The gendered subject position of the “strategic man,” highlighted by Farvid and Braun (2013), constructs a man as interested in obtaining casual sex through tactical, directed methods—the success of which provides the man a standing of esteemed status (through the demonstration of a masculine identity) amongst his peers.

The perpetuation of discourses such as the “strategic man” reflects the emphasis on successful sexual conquests for young men which encourages a form of hegemonic masculinity that equates the amount of sexual partners obtained in the marketplace with power and conquest. It is in this way that sex is framed as a female resource for men to attain and accumulate. Here we can see how our capitalistic political and economic ideologies have bled into our social structures and interactions—each domain is a marketplace of exchange— a sober reminder that the personal is inescapably political and vice versa. Irigaray suggests that “cultural phenomena about sexuality and the market can be analyzed and understood... through women’s narratives” (Fahs, 2011, p.180); but men’s narratives surely play a role in the structure and maintenance of this sexual marketplace as well, and should then too be a focus of analysis.

## Method

This Master's thesis analyzes content from online web pages associated with PUA and masculinity-related websites, online interviews with PUA "experts" and blog entries from PUA members. A face-to face interview context might not be optimal for maximal candour about this kind of community, which operates mostly under the radar. This likelihood provides good reason to conduct an analysis on online material in lieu of traditional face-to face interviews. In the case of pre-existing online forums, accessing data that has organically formed, without request by the investigator, could provide integral pieces of information that might not be elicited or revealed in an interview setting with an investigator from outside of the PUA community. The benefits afforded by analyzing pre-existing online content has made this approach an increasingly popular method of analysis among qualitative psychologists (e.g. Cheng, 2002; Giles, 2006; Hurley, Sullivan, & McCarthy 2007; Lopez, 2009; Powell, 2010a; Regan et al., 2014).

Data was retrieved from pre-existing online sources such as online magazines, weblogs, video interviews, and reader comment sections of the corresponding page. Website-generated sidebar links of these sources were followed for data retrieval. Obtaining initial data involved browsing for the first two pages of key-word search results from Google's search engine. The following phrases were used in the search: *PUA*; *PUA interview*; *PUA experience*; *PUA community*; *pick up artists*; *my experience as a pick up artist*; *picking up women*; *using game to pick up women*; *how to pick up women*.

All data used in the analysis is publicly accessible, and the URLs for all data were recorded. Ethics protocols regarding the use of internet-based material are still in the formative stages, however, some guidelines have been suggested. According to widely used internet-mediated research guidelines, it is acceptable to obtain data without consent if the text or speech is accessible to the public, does not require a password to view, does not prohibit its use in the

website policy, and is not highly sensitive (British Psychological Society, 2013; Bruckman, 2002; Hurley et al., 2007). The British Psychological Society (2013) further suggests that it is acceptable for online data to be used if the content was generated in a condition where it is likely to be observed, and where there is a reasonable expectation for the text to be viewed by strangers. Given the nature of the target content, in that it is intentionally created and posted to attract public attention and ultimately public (male) consumption of the material, it is reasonable to use this pre-existing material without explicit written consent as there is clearly no attempt or expectation of privacy (British Psychological Society, 2013; Eysenbach, & Till, 2001).

### **Theoretical Lens and Analysis**

Keeping in mind the objective to question how sex with women can prop up the masculine identity of young men, a critical discourse analysis using a post-structural feminist framework employed. Since the aim is to examine how and why sexual activity with multiple women, is positioned as status/approval-attaining among males and their peer groups, this approach is ideal for its focus on cultural productions of dialogue, practices, authority, and power (Thompson, 2010).

Critical discursive psychology is concerned with how language is formative, in that it influences both thought and action and is thus used to construct meaning and experience (Burr, 2003; Gavey, 1989). Critical psychology takes into account surrounding forces and relations at work in the production of knowledge and what we consider to be objective “truth,” and seeks to examine how this can impact individuals on a personal, subjective level as well as the broader environment (Hook, 2004). Language is considered “action-oriented” and constructive, in that it is used to build narratives, create identities, legitimize or disallow, and impact interactions (Burr, 2003; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In other words, discursive psychology does not consider

language as a blank mode of transporting communication, not is it dormant in the production of widely accepted “truths,” identities and subjectivities; instead, language plays a key, generative role in their formation (Elliott, Jones, Benfield, & Barlow, 1995; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Such “truths” refer to knowledge that is not assumed to be based on unbiased observations of the world (Gavey, 1989), but are instead products of collective interests of the time that differ across history and cultures, and are created, altered, and sustained by social processes (Burr, 2003). A present example of a conventional “truth” is the widely accepted notion that men have larger, intensified, and uncontrollable sexual urges compared to women (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gilbert, Walker, McKinney, & Snell, 1999). In this way, critical psychology differs from other forms of psychology in that it works to question and challenge the knowledge upon which psychological research is based, and often focuses more on socio-historical contexts (Hook, 2004).

Foucault’s (1978) concept of discourse refers to a set of meanings (in the form of stories, images, statements etc.) that create a particular version of an event, although there is always more than one (Burr, 2003). Discourses construct what knowledge is, what ideas, topics, and identities exist, and how they can be talked about or acted upon (Foucault, 1978). In this manner, each personal narrative is intrinsically wrapped up in, and thus reflective of, the culture (Burr, 2003). In other words, discourse influences how identity, meaning, and power gets formed and can be considered what cyclically forms the ways in which we think, talk, value, and act (Gavey, 1989; Gillen & Peterson, 2005; Foucault, 1978). In this way, Foucault sees that ideas about sexuality are constructed through prevailing ideologies that frame specific acts and relationships in particular ways that result in certain meanings ascribed onto individuals. As a result, sex in a Western context has historically been framed to function as an issue of public

interest, an issue of medical interest, and an issue of morality as a means to organize social relations along racial and gendered lines (Foucault, 1978).

In discourse analysis, data analysis focuses on language interpretation regardless of the medium, where each production of speech is considered to be influenced by the speaker's past experiences of the world and the discourses in which they are entrenched (Gillen & Peterson, 2005). In critical discourse analysis, the text is considered to have a structure, which therein fits into broader cultural texts and contextual interactions (Eisenhart & Johnstone, 2008). A common set of principles used for understanding the nature of discourses and their formation is outlined by Johnstone (Eisenhart & Johnstone, 2008, Gillen & Peterson, 2005):

1. Discourse is shaped by the world, and discourse shapes the world
2. Discourse is shaped by language, and discourse shapes language.
3. Discourse is shaped by participants, and discourse shapes participants.
4. Discourse is shaped by prior discourse, and discourse shapes the possibilities for future discourse.
5. Discourse is shaped by its medium, and discourse shapes the possibilities of its medium.
6. Discourse is shaped by purpose, and discourse shapes possible purposes. (p. 11)

Within an analysis, the investigator can choose to focus on one or all of these principles. By paying attention to exchanges of speech and the details of speech, this method is concerned with what is being done with language, and with what this doing achieves (Gillen & Peterson, 2005; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). For a discursive analysis that is critical in nature, discourses constitute the focus and the units of analysis. Interpretation of text is mainly centered on the construction of ideologies and identity (Gillen & Peterson, 2005). Ideologies are simultaneously

constructed in and reflected by discourse (Gillen & Peterson, 2005; Stevenson, 2004). According to Foucault (1978), discourses involve more than words, and can be understood as social practices and bodies of knowledge, in addition to language alone. Items of analysis are therefore not intended to be the individual speaker himself, but are part of a broader web of discourses located during interpretation. For this project the concern is with the way language is being used by speakers to situate themselves in certain positions of masculinity.

This particular discourse analysis takes a feminist post-structuralist perspective, as this standpoint directly involves the observation and attention to power, politics and gender (Gavey, 1989; Potts, 2002). Feminist post-structuralism aims to expose and challenge prevailing structures of power and meaning systems— such as the social concept of gender (Butler, 1990)— which create and influence systems of knowledge that determine what is considered truth (Burr, 2003; Davies & Gannon, 2005; Gavey, 1989; Potts, 2002). The combination of a post-structural lens with the analytic approach of critical discourse analysis will allow for the location of broader discourses through the online production of individual speech and writing (Gillen & Peterson, 2005).

This project will use *interpretative repertoires* (Wetherell, 1998) to explore discourses surrounding masculine identity through texts of individuals that are a part of the PUA community. An interpretative repertoire is comprised of themes that attempt to organize discourses detected in individuals' ways of sense-making, in order to evaluate positions taken up through speech acts to form an identity (Wetherell, 1998). These “subject positions” that assemble the individual are thus constructed in and by discourse (Wetherell, 1998; Foucault, 1978), and their interpretation allows for the reading of the interactions between social forces, power, and identity (Wetherell, 1998). Consequently, a masculine identity, or an identity as a

pick up artist can be considered to have been made possible from, and in reference to, pre-existing social and cultural discourses (Foucault, 1978).

Questions that will guide the analysis will be: According to PUA advice websites, what does it look like, and what is required to be an adequate and masculine subject?; How is language used by PUA authors to construct and perpetuate a particular form of hegemonic masculinity? How are women appraised by the PUA participants?; How do men navigate successfully this exchange marketplace? What does the accumulation of women's commoditized value do achieve for the male? Exploring these questions will allow for a closer perspective on how masculine identity is constructed, how men signify their masculinity, and how this may impact how gender relations operate.



## **Results**

### **Interpretive Repertoire 1: Uncovering the Natural and the (Re)Production of the “Natural Man” in a Neoliberal Sexual Marketplace**

Men’s pursuit of casual sex is often framed as something that is inherently natural and necessary in order to fulfill a “male” role (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Symons, 1979). This framing, in tandem with neoliberal discourses that promote an imperative for individuals to be accountable for self-improvement, self-governance, and self-surveillance (Foucault, 1978; Giddens, 1991; Richardson, 2004), contributes to the formulation of what is revered as masculine and what marks the achievement of proper masculinity (Plummer, 1995). These naturalizing and neoliberal discourses converge in the production of heterosexual male subjects. This convergence can be observed in how emerging online masculinity “experts” from men’s lifestyle websites, as authoritative (neoliberal) voices on specialized self-improvement technologies, (Gill, 2008, Tyler, 2004) construct a particular understanding and experience of masculinity. Specifically, notions of an essential, latent masculinity were often invoked as a required (neoliberal) effort to work on the self and hone its inner, “true” aspects. This work of uncovering the natural masculine man that lies somewhere within the body necessitates both a physical, outer practice and performance, as well as an internal, subjective transformation. These two types of work are interlinked, where physical actions are considered to be transformative of inner subjectivity, and where work to alter the inner self will, consequently, physically emanate from the body and signal the subject’s authentic masculinity to others.

**Embodying work: Masculinity uncovered through the body.** The idea that there is a latent, “true,” potent masculinity that must be accessed in order to reach an immaculate and optimal achievement of being an authentic man is linked to the necessity for attaining a fulfilling

life. Latent masculinity is often talked about as if it already lies dormant within every male body, and as something that is repressed in society. In line with this, the following excerpt from a PUA advice and lifestyle blog entitled “Are You a Caged Animal?” likens the concept of a latent masculinity to that of a natural instinct and essentiality of a ferocious tiger held captive by domesticators.

**Excerpt 1:**

*"The tiger was born in captivity, but deep down there is a gaping hole inside of him. He knows something very big is missing.*

*The man was born in this life, but deep down there is a gaping hole inside of him. He knows something very big is missing.*

*The tiger gets extremely frustrated when he is discouraged by the zookeepers to act like a tiger should act. Being fierce, wild and sexually dominant are things that will make the zookeepers lives more difficult.*

*The man gets extremely frustrated when he is discouraged by everybody around him to act like a man should act. Being fierce, wild and sexually dominant are things that will make the lives of the people around him much more difficult... If you feel at all like “the man” from this article, then it’s time to break free... I have found one way to do that and it’s something that I am living right now... I travel the world and my sexuality is not bridled. I live and see new things every day. I have new experiences and get as much pussy as kings of the past. I have broken the shackles of the typical life in America and now spend my time with exotic women in exotic countries. All day... every day. I do what I want, when I want to.”*

<http://swooptheworld.com/caged-animal-man-vs-tiger/>

Such writings portray men as repressed. Their pure gender cannot be acceptably expressed under confinement conditions, or in this case, within the parameters of societal expectations. This premise is used to explain frustration and emptiness commonly experienced by men—because their current lifestyle and ways of “being men” do not sufficiently allow for them to genuinely experience themselves “as men.” This implies that such feelings of frustration and emptiness are routed in what is an inauthentic yet “socially acceptable” way of being a man. The custodians (e.g. society, women, rules, etc.) are positioned as the problem for the tiger, but on the “man’s” side of the comparison, the role of the “zookeeper” is not specified. Nonetheless, there is an assumed oppressive civilizer in the human portion of the comparison: “*he is discouraged by everybody around him to act like a man should act.*” Who is the “everybody”/zookeeper that is trying to tame and control the man? Are women the silent oppressors/zookeepers here?

A typical cultural narrative is that men are considered wild until they are civilized by women. Within this narrative, and as it is being used in excerpt 1, women are paired with society (structure, rules/laws, organization), and men are paired with nature (raw, untouched, innocent in their own animality). The invocation of this dichotomy within this excerpt positions women as the organizers and the ringmasters of where men can exist, and as the group which attempts to control and bring order to nature for their own use (entertainment? safety?). By referencing this popular “women civilize men” narrative, the author is able to refer to women as a group without explicitly acknowledging them or their significance; while still providing arguments as to why men need to break free from their oppressors. This omission appears to be a way of excluding the (unnamed) group of “women” by not speaking of them; making them invisible while still being able to assert their perceived effects on the status (and crisis) of male identity. Accordingly, this speech act has managed to denounce the category “women” and the feminine, while

simultaneously rendering it invisible. Men are described as being prevented from “*being fierce, wild and sexually dominant,*” and instead have been “damaged” and “restrained” in modernity—the source of male dissatisfaction and sexual frustration. This image of the repressed male subject as flawed and out of touch with who he really is, before PUA training, is commonly referred to as an AFC (Average Frustrated Chump) among PUAs (Strauss, 2006).

One solution for the AFC is to get in touch with the animal within, to escape the cage by pursuing sex with multiple women. This attainment of casual sex with multiple women is framed as rebellious, working against societal expectations, yet in line with what is essential to being a “biological male.” That true animalistic masculinity is stifled in civilized society, and AFCs are unsuccessful in getting women to sleep with them because they are out of touch with this essentiality. For successful experiences and mastery of masculinity and the self, average/repressed men are instructed to get in touch with their core inner animal, as the author and expert testifies (“*I have broken the shackles of the typical life in America and now spend my time with exotic women in exotic countries. All day... every day. I do what I want, when I want to*”). Interestingly, the author’s insertion of the qualifier “exotic” operates to paint a sexualized picture of his accomplishments. If the author had only written that he “now spends his time with women,” the insinuation that he was having sex with them would not have been successfully relayed to the reader. By incorporating a racialized qualifier in his description of his female companions, the author successfully distinguishes the women as commodities (i.e. diversified brands, akin to owning a foreign car) which he is using to present his expertise at being an authentic and sexually skilled man. The self-actualized expert clearly delineates what freedom from manacles of civility looks like; he is now genuinely in touch with his masculinity and is able

to exert control over his life and others, meaningfully using that control to attain sex with women.

This inherent and dormant masculinity is framed as a powerful substance that can be accessed through effort and continual (ideally diversified) practice. Honed carefully, it can emanate freely and act as a key ingredient to attract and acquiring women. Activating this inner, unexplored aspect of the male body/self requires both physical and psychic work.

**Excerpt 2:**

*“ANIMAL RELEASE: Warrior Pound*

*You will raise your arms above your head, then you will bounce on your whole feet [sic.], letting every tissue in your body sink in and release – you will do this like a warrior after the battle – say “Ha Ha Ha” loudly to release chest muscles and the diaphragm.”*

<http://www.thepuablog.com/animal-release-fix-game-part-3/>

**Excerpt 3:**

*“That’s going to resonate deep within your ‘sex center’... up throughout your entire body... After performing this warm up, you are going to be energized oriented and focused, to go ahead and attack your day like a BEAST... I know this will help you”*

<http://www.thepuablog.com/realize-women-sexual-beings/>

In these excerpts, a potent masculine ingredient is located within the body. The subject must go within his body to access, activate, and assert control of this substance that is physically and figuratively at his core (“deep within (his) sex center”). The male reader is instructed to let “every tissue in (his) body sink in,” as if to go deeper into the body in order to grasp and extract something. The reader is then instructed to discharge this entity, but it is not clear when or what to release (perhaps there are several layered meanings in these instructions). It could be implied

that once the bodily “tissues” have sunken deep enough to the core, they can extract and deploy the inner masculinity. Perhaps this happens along with the stimulation of the tissues, externalizing the substance—bringing it forward from its subterranean, undetectable, dormant place and activating it from its previously latent state so it can be accessible to harness, enhance (to shape up), and be more detectable to other men and women. Activating this latent masculinity within the body also promises to immediately improve a man, so that he will be better equipped to go out and take what he wants; to use the “beast” from inside to better succeed in his male performance. This performance and the resultant activated masculine core of the self/body, is likened to “a warrior after battle” and “a beast,” invoking powerful images of something predatory and violent. This expert is implying that this will somehow activate the “sex center,” and therefore tap into the “true warrior” indicating that his male body (and/or implied penis) holds the key to his confidence and his propensity to pursue and attack.

The body here is constructed as a container for the self, where various elements can be discovered and uncovered through the physical interaction with one’s body. These quotes suggest that characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (strength, confidence, aggression, propensity for violence) inherently exist somewhere within the male body, and therefore the male self. They suggest that some sort of biological and essential core of a man is somewhere at the center of one’s being and needs to be brought out; however, despite the “core naturalness” of this masculinity, it appears that quite a lot of work needs to be done to elicit and make it useful. This way of understanding the body as a gateway to and container for the self— and also simultaneously fused with the self— is a predominant cultural discourse that pervades thinking about the body/self and how we become our gendered bodies/selves, particularity in our gendered subjectivities. In this sense, the self is constructed through embodiment, a first-person

felt sense and awareness of one's body, while bodies are also ideologically and discursively shaped, carrying messages of class and other signifying information to be read (Sampson, 1996). To this effect, physical movements and gestures can give information of someone's experience of the self, and also tell one's history (Sampson, 1996), and the PUA's goal with such exercises then is to alter the subject's embodiment to paint a different subjective picture—a more powerful body/self.

Pop-science is also used in this advice, specifically the ideas that bodily events such as posture and muscle appearance can impact a person's emotional experiences (Sampson, 1996), which gives instructions a credible and expert tone (Gill, 2009). The (expert) author is trying to guide the reader in forming his masculinity, by modeling it after a warrior. Through enacting something that invokes an archetypal image of masculinity, there is an assumption in that these prescribed exercises of physically acting out such a representation will tune/turn the person into a man (a stronger, more desirable man that gets what he wants).

The “expert discourse” (Gill, 2009) continues to be summoned by the author's reiteration that “he knows this will help.” The author positions himself as a credible expert, such that his instructions are viewed as convincing and are taken seriously. The implied necessity for authoritative guidance in the endeavor to uncover something that the male reader was supposedly born with and already contains within himself is a curious condition set up by the author and other PUA proponents. Accordingly, the need for a specialist or coach suggests that this self-work cannot be done exclusively on one's own, and that external intervention is required. Expert involvement brings into question how this presumed natural, latent masculinity really does happen to exist within the self. Instead, it appears that certain discourses of masculinity outlining what a sufficient man looks like—sexual competency, the ability to attract women, power over

self and others— are ascribed to male bodies, setting the grounds for what a successful performance should entail rather than these characteristics being innately male (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005; Foucault, 1978; Schrock & Schwalbe; 2009).

One's work is not complete once this inner, potent ingredient has been accessed by the subject; it must be refined for appropriate use. Similar to the training of zoo animals, this training process is framed as crucial because this masculine essence is so powerful, if not honed properly, it could get out of control and even cause damage:

**Excerpt 4:**

*“The way I see it, it’s like this: Training someone on how to talk to women is like training someone to fire a gun properly — nothing you’re teaching them makes them inherently dangerous, but you can never know someone’s intentions. I think for most guys looking to succeed with women, it’s exactly as Strauss put it — we’re just trying to improve our chances. Recalling what he mentioned about men being “shamed” into avoiding women, I think that resonates with a lot of men. Indeed, far from intending to do anything inappropriate, most men want to be able to approach women without seeming creepy”*  
<http://ca.askmen.com/entertainment/austin/the-future-of-the-pua-2.html>

Here, the idea of natural masculinity persists. It is spoken about as if it is a weapon—both the gun and the ammunition. This metaphor of a firearm is rich with cultural references to masculine symbolism (power, control, force, strength, violence, potential, entitlement, defense), aligning the practice of attracting women with the same meaning accorded to a man with a gun (or as a gun) (going in “guns blazing,” being a good shot, etc.). This firearm image is relatedly invoked in discussions of honing an essential potent masculinity – it is so powerful that you need to be careful and learn how to use it properly. This is linked not just to ammunition to get what one



wants, but also to the teaching of responsibility. Such a powerful tool ought to be used correctly, which directly ties into neoliberal tenants of accountability, monitoring, and perpetual maintenance of the self. What is being said is that “every man has a gun, this powerful thing inside of him,” and so these men require training so as not to harm anyone. This is similarly tied to the old-fashioned idea of needing to “tame the beast” and civilize men, especially in their interactions with women. Men, in this way, are positioned as in need of training in order to be less dangerous, but simultaneously so they can more easily attain sex from women—to put her at ease and not seem so “creepy”—which potentially could harm the chances of having sex with her. There appears to be an interest here in making the target (the woman) less fearful, because it is a barrier for the man if she is afraid. The discourse here is not around creating respect or working to understand why a woman might be uncomfortable. Rather, the focus is on learning and practicing a particular masculine presentation that does not trigger fear or discomfort, making the target less guarded and more malleable, so no social rules of consent need to be violated in order for the male subject to attain what he is pursuing.

As part of this honing of inner masculinity, men are encouraged by PUA advice columnists to really preform and show off this inner “essence,” once the reader learns to properly “fire his gun”:

#### **Excerpt 5**

*“YOU are a sexual being! Women know we want them and love sex, so don’t hide your libido completely or make apologies for your desires as a man. Women never apologize or act ashamed for wanting love or emotional fulfilment”*

<http://www.braindirector.com/what-you-should-know-before-practicing-your-dating-skills/>

This excerpt highlights how the popular notion of an uncontrollable male sexuality that is inherent in men (Potts, 2003) is being propped up through online men's advice and lifestyle websites. This is a common discourse that arises when talking about male sexuality: that a man's "natural sex drive" cannot be contained and cannot be hidden, because that would interfere with his expression of masculinity and true self. This masculine desire for sex is likened to a parallel feminine version— desire for emotional fulfillment. In creating these distinctions, the author sets up a polarized abstraction of masculinity and femininity—never shall the two meet or overlap, they are instead the inverse of each other. This sets up a very limited way in which desire *is allowed* to be conceptualized for the male reader and for the targeted women. Such polarization, this gendering of desire, is central to the foundation of Pickup Artistry— the fundamental presumption that many PUA techniques are founded on is that men want "man things" (penetrative sex) and women want "women things" (not sex specifically, but emotional fulfillment, comfort, attention, etc.). If you can make her feel like she is getting what she wants, you will disarm her and not come off as "creepy," so you can get what you want. This success can only be achieved if he can tap into his inner maleness and learn to properly administer it to women.

**Mental mastery: Beyond practicing masculinity.** PUA instructions not only call for outward, physical practice to access the masculinity inside; they also promote an internal, mental transformation of how the subject conceptualizes himself in order to achieve authenticity and the presumed sexual success that comes along with it. It is not sufficient to simply "act" and "perform" "like a man" in the ways described above. There is additionally an imperative to internally and psychically become the ideal, sexually-confident and in-control man, rather than

merely projecting this image to others. In other words, there is a call for a reinvention of the inner self, of one's very subjectivity, in order to achieve fully realized manhood.

#### **Excerpt 6**

*“What you believe about yourself, your IDENTITY, will determine your success from the inside out.... Decide who you want to become. And don't “become” that person. BE that person...Speak, feel, act like a man who's successful with women NOW! ...So, be actively aware of any deep-seated beliefs about yourself that might be holding you back. So many of us are unconscious of the beliefs that don't help us. Then ask who you really are at your deepest level. What is that spark in you, that divine flame, that's been smothered? That's who you really are.”*

<http://whetyourwoman.com/tag/inner-game/>

#### **Excerpt 7**

*“Choose strength. Choose authenticity. Choose courage. Choose to take responsibility for your life. Choose to become the Man of your dreams.*

*And then, when that moment is over, make that decision again.*

*And then, when that moment is over, make that decision again.*

*And then, when that moment is over, make that decision again.*

*And then, when that moment is over, make that decision again.*

*Because that is the ONLY way to EVER be a Man.”* <http://attractioninstitute.com/why-you-will-never-become-a-man/>

“Becoming” something and “being something” is an interesting distinction, as the author invoked an embodied sense of authenticity. Here we see that men are encouraged not only to outwardly perform this “natural” masculinity as we saw in the previous example. It is not simply

enough to “play the part” in order to uncover one’s “natural masculinity.” There needs to be an inward, subjective commitment to obtaining and stabilizing this identity for oneself. In excerpt 7, the author instructs the male subject to choose every moment he is “being” to take control of who he is, so he can continually monitor himself in an effort to improve. The reiteration of this sentence creates a rhythmic flow and visual uniformity, which mimics how the enactment of becoming/being is expected to look and feel with enough practice. The directive order to maintain commitment to authenticity, once rehearsed enough, becomes habituated, part of the background as a staple of everyday, proper maleness.

This repetitive taking up of this uncovered masculine potency, and the work required to achieve it, must appear to be seamless to outsiders; but to be truly successful, it must appear seamless *to the individual* attempting to achieve this identity as well. This seamlessness highlights the concern with authenticity and the assumption that achieving authenticity will result in success and happiness—the good life—interpersonally, subjectively and in various economic marketplaces (Gill, 2009). It is no longer enough to play the part; now one must choose oneself who and how one “wants” to “be.” While this continual practice and surveillance is discussed as a “choice,” the author of excerpt 7 juxtaposes this at the end by describing this practice as the exclusive process the subject must go through in order to become a legitimate man. The commitment required for this specific masculine identity is presented as a pursuit of not only sexual mastery, but also as mental mastery that is necessary for identity authenticity and a fulfilling life. This entails a lot of work, and the male reader is warned that he must be constantly vigilant and “*actively aware of any deep-seated beliefs about yourself that might be holding you back.*” Such instructions align with common Western neoliberal ideologies that promote the expectation that we should be constantly improving ourselves through considerable effort in

order to become the ideal version of ourselves— that we will somehow be better off if we change who we are right now (Giddens, 1991; Gill, 2008, 2009). In other words, we can only become our “true selves” if we decidedly commit to self-monitoring and putting work and effort into our enhancement and presentation at all times. In this case, if men change who they are, they can sleep with more women, which is presumably a path to some elevated, more desirable and respectable life-state compared to other men.

#### **Excerpt 8**

*“Become “genuinely attractive.” Work hard, dedicate a year of your life and transform you diet, exercise routine, sleep schedule, hobbies, work, and career. I promise you that women are attracted to men who are rich, in shape and confident about their achievements. You know this, you’ve always known this. Stop looking for shortcuts and start working towards it... Be a better version of yourself, and all good things will follow”*  
<http://www.thesocialsecrets.com/2014/05/a-new-chance-with-women-and-at-life/>

#### **Excerpt 9**

*“If a guy’s not good with girls he can’t—it’s quite difficult to move on to the next thing. This is a vital area. We need to learn how to do this... You need to be satisfied in your love life. Until you sort that out, it’s going to be really hard to move on to actually exploring the depths of the universe and you know, your true masculine potential. So get this shit sorted.”* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICwHzsvXdRw>

In this *uncovering the natural* discourse, what is most prominent is the aspect of “mental mastery” where men are encouraged to manage the masculine aspect of their identity through the previously mentioned embodied and practiced manhood acts in order to achieve specific ends (sex with women). However, the ability to achieve sex with women/female sexual attention is

also considered a necessary component to master, so they can subsequently be successful in other aspects of their life (“*until you sort that out, it’s going to be really hard to move on to actually exploring the depths of the universe*”). For example, in excerpt 8, the outlined goals to achieve are framed as a means to an end; all of the efforts towards self-enhancement must need to be completed first and foremost in order to become capable of attracting women. In excerpt 9, the author reasons that true enjoyment or worth will not be gleaned from any other form of self-enhancement (i.e. hobbies, the depths of the universe) until mastery in the sexual domain of the male subject’s life is solidified. These excerpts highlight the complex interconnections between what is regarded as a good, fulfilling life and requirements needed to be met in order to be regarded by peers as an authentic heterosexual man. Sex with women, for PUAs, is framed here as something that needs to be gotten “out of the system,” something to get through so deeper, more important things in life can be explored. The proficient attainment of sex from women appears to grant admittance into a phase of life where things can be enjoyed without the distracting goal of sex (or women) as a motivator. Successful engagement with women for sex is positioned here in the broader neoliberal context of what is perceived to be a pathway towards a worthwhile and fulfilling life, where mastery of women will allow the subject to focus and improve in other areas of his life.

A notable tension here is that the PUA community and its advice are formed on the basis of developing strategies to seduce women, yet the importance of the sex— precisely what women are valued for in this domain— is disavowed and devalued simultaneously while it is sustained as the main focus of achievement. Instead, sex with women is framed as an obstacle one must “work through” to become the true, ideal self. Once he has gained mastery over women by gaining mastery over himself, only then will he be able to explore the depths of his “*true*

*masculine potential*” and work on other goals for self-actualization. Women are not recognized as a main component of this promoted heterosexual hegemonic masculinity, despite all of the content that has been generated which is specifically focused on attaining sex from women.

### **Interpretive Repertoire 2: Militarization of Masculinity— Navigating Identity as a Man**

Across PUA community websites’ advice and instructions, a militarization theme emerges in the way the groups are organized, the use of exclusive vocabulary, and the way that language is employed regarding relations with women. Male readers are incited to take action to preserve their male identity:

#### **Excerpt 1:**

*“It’s time in enjoy the spoils of the information revolution. In this wired global village, there is a new breed of man. The Digital Nomad, guys who harness the power of the internet to become location-less. Men who have the freedom to do what they want, when they want.*

*Among this group are a tribe of alpha males, who have accumulated a skill-set powerful at attracting women. Many of them have spent hours learning, practising [sic.]and refining their techniques. These “players” or “pick-up artists” have hit the road and become Lifestyle artists.*

*These are men who sculpt their destiny, refuse to accept convention and choose to live free on their own terms. Their’s is [sic.] a life of exotic lands and foreign beauties.*

*The resources are available.*

*The girls are waiting.*

*It’s time you took control.”*

<http://naughtynomad.com/2010/12/19/the-lifestyle-artist/>

This excerpt is an advertisement to entice the reader to pay for access to a particular PUA training network. The author appeals to the reader through the use of militaristic language, encouraging him to take advantage of the “spoils” of the internet, which has given way to “digital nomads” who have used the online community to extend their subjective space and improve themselves as men. The term “nomad” used to qualify men who are in search of PUA advice is employed to suggest a primal driving attribute of the men who search for PUA lifestyle information and training (potential students), who wonder from place to place in search of resources to better survive as men. The author then directs this nomad to a successful “tribe” of nomads, “alpha males,” which are considered the most accomplished of the PUA students, and have earned the status of expert through the successful implementation and development of PUA techniques. They have adopted the PUA method and have become self-actualized through accessing and honing their core masculinity. Through this process they not only have become artists in pickup, they have seamlessly achieved a pure masculine identity in all aspects of their lives and psyches, granting them the status of expert in living/lifestyle as a whole. Accordingly, this excerpt further demonstrates the militaristic theme of the PUA community as it outlines how its members are organized based on their skill level. These alpha males are there to lead an army of new students, so they too can be able to “*sculpt their destiny*” involving “*foreign beauties*”—all the male subject needs to do is take up arms, or take control, join the movement, begin training, and climb the ranks amongst their peers.

This militarized structure of the PUA community is further established in its effort to remain exclusive and secret in order to remain under the radar and undetectable by the targets (women). The under-cover element of the PUA community can be demonstrated in the development of “lairs,” the preserved anonymity of many PUA students and teachers, and the



extensive vocabulary created by PUA networks. “Lairs” are city-based PUA groups that hold meetings to discuss pick up artistry and for PUAs to network with other men with whom they form teams to go out and meet women. Within the network, both online and in-person, male subjects are expected to adopt nicknames to avoid identification as pick up artists by those who do not belong to the group. Additionally there is an enforced rank-order to the members’ social standings, where they are instructed to form comradery and “brotherhood” amongst each other, while still fighting for the respect of men. However, one of the most notable efforts to establish the PUA community (and the corresponding aspects of their promoted masculine identity) as an underground military is in the developed language that is used exclusively amongst the militia:

**Excerpt 2:**

*“Then I IMMEDIATELY start pummeling her with game, right in front of her guy. She’s touching me, giving IOIs, and I’m pushing her onto him...The moral here is that you need to OWN THE SET. Have DHVs ready that GUYS will like, so that you can own them, the second that they arrive. Anyway, this struck me as funny, and a good isolated example of something that almost every night that I go out. It’s subtle subcommunication, that girls respond to immediately. In fact, it’s a great way to convey value fast. Owning the men in a group.” <http://www.dallaspua.com/lairs.htm>*

The author of this report uses key vocabulary that would be unfamiliar to an outsider, such as game (strategized efforts towards obtaining sex), IOIs (indicator of interest), set (group of people to approach), DHVs (demonstration of higher value). This exclusive jargon serves to create a privileged space and status for the men that belong to this community, while also working to conceal (or at least obscure) the intentions and tactics that are the foci of PUA content.

In this author's recount of the event, a combative approach is assumed towards both the target female and the man she was with. By "pummeling," or barraging the target with his arsenal of learned techniques, he saw himself as being able to successfully take possession of, or own, the group. This execution was done so proficiently and covertly that he was able to win over even his male opponent within the group, because he was able to demonstrate his "value" in an unthreatening way. The author attributes his success of appealing to the target woman to his ability to "own the men" in the group, and not simply on his interaction with her alone. The author positions himself as a stealth commando that is able to imperceptibly seize control over other males, establishing that he is of a higher rank, a more accomplished and legitimate man. Here, adopting a combat role and "attacking" like a warrior is regarded as an element in his approach that presents him as powerful and reified as an authentic masculine man, since he was able to go into unknown territory and use his skills to take control of what he wanted. To remain covert and undetectable, he recounts this event using abbreviations and terms specific to the PUA community in order to preserve the privilege that is maintained within PUA and masculine lifestyle networks. Such effort towards preserving and protecting the male-only exclusivity of the PUA community gives way to a continual shifting and camouflaging of these men's efforts towards the pursuit of sex and authentic masculinity:

**Excerpt 3:**

*To Strauss, the term "pickup artist" is outdated. Though he's primarily a writer, Strauss runs Stylelife Academy, an online program that's less about the canned routines and tactics of the early days and instead promises a customized approach to improving dating performance. According to Strauss, "[It] provides a non-emasculating way for guys to improve themselves. Guys who come to me get it. These are guys who really want to*

*improve, and total improvement (not just limited to success with women) is a real possibility... I've read interviews with other "coaches," and a lot of those guys claim that the trend now is that guys are moving away from trying to just sleep with women and are more interested in learning how to cultivate relationships... He also adds, "If it [men looking for coaching in more traditional relationship] is a trend, it's because it feels like there's definitely an element of our society that shames men out of wanting to meet women." Again, it's hard to argue with him. Regardless of what other social trends are on the rise, I have a hard time believing that guys in their teens and 20s have given up on the idea of sowing their wild oats. When guys stop being motivated by the prospect of sex, our species has a problem.*

<http://ca.askmen.com/entertainment/austin/the-future-of-the-pua.html>

The above excerpt is an interview with Neil Strauss (who goes by the code name "Styles"), a renowned PUA expert to promote his PUA training services. What is emphasized in the interview is that the style of the PUA businesses are changing—they have grown to offer more than just success with women, but a total lifestyle alteration. Restriction and exclusivity of PUA information is immediately established as something that is protected, as the type of person the information is intended for is outlined. Only really worthy men, men who want badly enough to be "guys who really want to improve," and who will put in the work will be successful. In line with the changing face of pick-up artistry, now customized training that is tailored to the individual is required so the male subject can work towards uncovering his true masculine self, the warrior within, where "lifestyle," not casual sex with women, is the focus. However, later in the interview there is a concession that the changing face of PUA, such as more of a focus on cultivating relationships, is more so a camouflage because our culture "shames men out of

wanting to meet women; thus, a re-branding is necessary in order to conceal the “game” and its techniques. The same messages are re-packaged to appear more sophisticated and individualized in order to remain modern and also undiscoverable. The “outdating” of PUA by its very proponents serves to keep camouflaging it, preserving the exclusive male army and keeping targets unaware and outside.

Such efforts towards concealed motives and protecting exclusivity of the group, and militaristic fashion of the community that works to rally men together raises several questions. To form secret groups of warriors that strategically attack their opponents, targeting what they want and “sculpt(ing) their own identity,” suggests there is some external threat. The formation of an army implies that there is something that is being fought against, something that should be feared or defended. Here, masculinity (and sex with women) is positioned as something that must be fought for and defended. The use of obscure jargon and efforts to remain an underground male-only network works to create a “united front” which distinctly socially separates male subjects from women. Women are only used in the above excerpts for the singular purpose of reifying and “sculpting” a masculine identity. The important question to ask is what is the fear and what is attempted to be achieved through maintaining a privileged, secret and combative mode identity performance. What are they working for and against, and what is being preserved or forestalled? Strauss gives a glimpse into this anxiety (“when guys stop being motivated by the prospect of sex, our species has a problem”) that is prevalent across many PUA lifestyle websites:

**Excerpt 4:**

*Make no mistake that this is a war against heterosexual men. This is the war of our generation... You are the enemy and you will be denounced in the form of “misogynist,”*

*“creep,” and “sexist,” and this denouncement will stay with you and affect your livelihood in ways that modern technology allow...The young woman who doesn’t even think she’s a feminist is nonetheless waging war on you, her attitude and denouncements the weapon, her vagina the booty that is yours if you defeat her with your sword to choke and gag her ... Every time you thrust into a feminist who doesn’t think she’s a feminist and forgo a relationship with her, you inflict a wound. Every time you ignore her existence, you inflict a wound...This is a defensive war. We have been attacked, shamed, and taxed by them and now there is not much of our blood left. They demand more and more yet give us less and less ...it’s those who don’t pick up arms and foolishly appease the enemy and believe in its benevolence that will suffer most.*

<http://www.rooshv.com/the-war-against-men>

Heterosexual men are framed as under attack and at war, who run the risk of being denounced and even suffering long term consequences for having a masculine identity. An interesting paradox, however, is that the feminine “enemy” is entirely unaware of this war. Simply being a woman in contemporary society -- even if she “doesn’t even think she’s a feminist is nonetheless waging war” against men—something about her compromises the possibility of maintaining a specific idealized version of masculinity through power and conquest. She is the target because she is viewed as being threatened (and is threatening), and therefore must be conquered to ensure stability. Her attitude is separated here from her body—what Irigaray (1980) also identifies as what makes her a valuable commodity in the sexual marketplace. Specifically, “her” vagina is considered “the booty” that he can take ownership of if he successfully conquers her. The participation of sex for women is framed only as a concession, an admittance of defeat—if they

have sex, she is not considered to have gained anything; he wins and she has lost, since she gives up something of value.

The penis is explicitly referred to as a weapon that must be used by the male subject to inflict damage (“wounds”) or fully conquer women through their bodies. In this PUA’s formulation, men have the ability “defeat” women with their “sword” and thus establish and preserve their masculine identity, which is in line with Potts’ (2002) view of the centrality of the erect penis in hegemonic male sexuality, and therefore male identity. The penis is not only framed here as a signifier for competent male sexuality, but more importantly as the key means of achieving it. The achievement of competent maleness is thus precisely linked with female failure, loss and damage. A time-honored discourse for heterosexual sex, where both male and female parities are not set up to mutually or equally benefit in engaging in sexual interactions, is consequently upheld. As sex is often used “to tell us our truth” (Foucault, 1978), a man’s ability to obtain sex is considered the container of ‘self’-identity, his “true self,” and also as a political tool that can be used to defend against what is perceived to be an increasingly adversarial sexual marketplace. A “real man” only exists, and can only survive, as long as he can conquer a woman’s body with his sword.

The tone of the above excerpts suggests that men must work hard and have no shame in wanting to pursue women, which is a right for which one must fight, as if it can be taken away. This anxiety and militaristic approach of PUA culture highlights how the masculine identity is continually held in contention and must be repeatedly established. Because maleness is a privileged position to have, it can be taken away. The militarization of masculinity acts to establish a hierarchy amongst men, and to simultaneously maintain male privilege where women

are excluded altogether. Such militarizing discourse also functions as a screen for larger anxieties around what is perceived to be an increasingly hostile and unfair sexual marketplace.

### **Interpretive Repertoire 3: Feminine Commodities for Building Masculinity**

What is purported in these lifestyle websites is that in order to achieve prosperity and “the good life,” men need to regain and demonstrate control. Mastery needs to be exercised not only over themselves, as in the previous interpretive repertoire, but also over women. To gain more control over one’s interaction and outcomes with women, PUA websites promote the use of pick-up techniques for the pursuit of casual sex with many women. This commanding and amassing of women is positioned as a means to regain control and demonstrate an authentic masculinity to women, the subject himself, and his peers. Similar to the notions of a latent and natural, inner masculinity, the rationale for these techniques continue to be grounded in evolutionary and scientific discourses in order to play with social scripts around gender roles, dating, sex and consent.

Within these techniques, women’s bodies are established as commoditized tools for attainment, where social life is made structured and made feasible through the “use, consumption, and circulation” (Fahs, 2011 p. 181) of women’s bodies. Specifically, this is made possible through the reduced and compartmentalized nature of the meanings that get bestowed upon the female body, which only center on women’s qualities which are considered to be and valuable and essential (Fahs, 2011). These characteristics are associated primarily with the female body and what is capable of and expected to perform and/or produce (i.e. childbearing, house cleaning, orgasm). Such body-focused elements are positioned as valued in that the female body “confirms and excites the male subjectivity” (Fahs, 2011, p.186). The very process through which male subjectivity is established is congruent with how the

predominant, binarized conceptualization of gender (masculine vs. feminine) operates, where the performance of the male gender is not done solitarily, rather the identity can be “founded on the instituting of the ‘other’ or as a set of others through exclusion” (Butler, 1999, p.170). By this manner, defining one half of the binary delineates by default what the other half is not (Butler, 1999). Thus a masculine gender can be established by interacting with (and therefore highlighting) the feminine—all things that the masculine is not (Butler, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This highlighting of difference can be understood as points where one may experience or witness a polarized position on the gender binary. In this way, the female body becomes a key signifier of the feminine (which is commoditized), and at the same time, othered, quantifiable, and made abject (Butler, 1999; Paasonen, 2006).

**Regulatory ranking.** As such a commodity, women’s bodies in the PUA system are appraised and ranked, where the attainment of one body may add more to the male subject’s demonstration of sexual prowess and skill over another body. Sexual attention from different women is not all equally valued as it is mostly based on a woman’s appearance “rating,” prizing certain female bodies over others.

### **Excerpt 1**

*There is a debate that lots of guys have with themselves. Should I talk to everyone or just the hot girls? I personally find you are more "warmed up" and "in state" when you talk to everyone and not just the "hot girls". I remember once I finished work at 6pm and went out to approach girls to a shopping and food area. I finally saw a "worthy" girl that met my rare standards... I wasn't warmed up and wasn't ready for this circumstance. It's like trying to accelerate your car without even warming it up.*



<http://tdotpickup.com/community/index.php?threads/20-lessons-from-years-as-torontos-l-dating-coach.11/>

Likening the male subject to machine, in order to gain confidence to access “better,” prized women, it is recommended that less attractive women be used as practice to equip and condition himself so he can be ready to launch when a more impressive conquest presents itself. Women’s bodies that are ranked lower are positioned as instruments to properly train and prepare for the successful attainment of more valuable women. In the PUA community, the ability to gain consent/sex from more attractive women signifies a more exacting skill. The demonstration of this skill, and achieving desired outcomes with women whose bodies are perceived to be more valuable, lends a certain credibility to one’s masculine prowess, suggesting that the man in question is more capable of unlocking life-fulfilling achievements.

#### **Excerpt 2**

*“Yes, I’ve banged a lot of hot women, but I’ve also had my fair share of ...let’s call them “not so hot” women. I’m sure many of you can relate to that, even if you wouldn’t publicly admit it. In time, I developed my own “standards,” which I later began to live by. These days, I know exactly what I like, what I want, what I can and will sleep with, what I would date and what I would possibly even marry. I’ve only managed to reach this “educated” point in preferences because I’ve been there.”*

<http://elitedaily.com/dating/gentlemen/why-every-guy-should-sleep-with-at-least-one-not-so-hot-woman-in-his-life/>

The techniques offered to men frame women’s bodies as tools for attainment, as stepping stones towards successful masculinity. In the above excerpt, is it recommended that men “practice” on less “valuable” women so they can be properly “warmed up” before moving on to

women that are considered more valuable. This is a critical process for the male subject to participate in, as this practice is established as the pathway to developing a sophisticated, mature, and standardized taste in sexual partners. The expert author in excerpt 2 described his experiences of “*not so hot women*” as an obstacle to overcome, a challenge that he had to voluntarily put himself through in order to learn about himself and to become a better man “with standards.” The process is described as particularly embarrassing, something that most men would not even admit to going through. Here the author positions himself as above the women he slept with in order to elevate his standards— now that he has accumulated so much symbolic sexual wealth, the lesser-valued women he used to build up his current masculine status are no longer worthy of him. It is through the accumulation and use as stepping stones of feminine commodities that he was able to develop and refine aspects of himself. This amassing of less-valuable women is positioned as the process that eventually prepared him to formulate and “live by” newly heightened “standards” of attractiveness (commoditized value).

The caliber of the target, and the derived male “standards,” are solely based on how physically attractive she is perceived to be. However, there is often little to no specification around what qualifies a woman as physically attractive. What is especially lacking is any expression of the authors’ individual preferences of what is found to be attractive. Instead there is an assumed universal rating system, implying that each male subject shares the same conceptions about what makes a woman’s body/presentation more or less valuable. For example, there is no space for discussion around preference or characteristics that would highlight any individuality in the male subject (i.e. “what makes a 10 for me is...”). This is an interesting element of the PUA community given that much of the advice centers around one’s work on discovering his “true, authentic self.” This framework for the appraisal of women sets up a

homogenous framework for masculine desire, which maintains continuity in the symbolic value of women between men (Fahs, 2011). In line with Irigaray's work on men's use of female bodies, here the symbolic value associated with the female body allows men to participate in a network of symbolic exchange between each other and based on the trading and valuating of women's bodies. Based on this process, men are then able to accrue a type of value and "wealth" through demonstrating their capability and success in symbolically possessing the female body/commodity (Irigaray, 1977). Relatedly there is an assumption that the attractive "10" targets are harder to get, and therefore worth more; setting up women who may engage in sex more quickly to be regarded as less attractive, and ultimately less valuable. These female commodities vary in "quality," the highest of which needs to be worked towards through experience with less valuable commodities— or through the accumulation of less valuable commodities first—in order to have been appropriately "warmed up" so the higher-valued commodity can be successfully earned.

**Continually conquering and amassing.** Men, as consumers of women's bodies, are positioned within an active role, where they are in pursuit of women in order to build up their own masculine identity and demonstrate their capabilities. Therefore, reporting success of accumulation becomes central in establishing and reinforcing a masculine identity to one's peers and to oneself:

### **Excerpt 3**

*"New flags captured were: Iran, Portugal, Egypt, Serbia and South Korea.*

*New lays with flags I'd already got were: Great Britain, Russia, Germany, Italy, USA,*

*Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Poland, Turkey, Brazil, Spain, Sweden and*

*Finland.*

*The dating breakdown of the lays was: SDLs: 8, D2 lays: 10, D3+ lays: 12.*

*I'm 34 years old. The oldest girl I slept with this year was a 34 year old MILF in London.*

*The youngest was an 18 year old university student in New York.*

*Number of girls under 25: 18*

*Number of girls over 25: 12*

*The quality of the girls (as testified by my wings) was above average as I pushed myself through a self-imposed ceiling. 2 of the girls were "6s", 17 were "7s", 10 were "8s" and I was a "9.""*

<http://krauserpua.com/2014/01/02/guest-post-tom-toreros-2013-daygame-stats/>

The above excerpt is a common form of blog post written by PUAs known as a "lay report." The content of the report illustrates the preoccupation with amassing diverse and high numbers of women. This process of accumulation is designated as a means to develop and improve the individual, ("*I pushed myself through a self-imposed ceiling*"). Furthermore, the very practice of such statistic-reporting also serves as a method to prove to other PUA peers that they are sexually capable, which is integral to being a proficient, adequate man in this community.

Such intricate concern with building this type of sexual capital shows how important sex from women is in constructing this version of masculinity. Women's market value is appraised by their attractiveness and age, while the ethnicity of the woman and the amount of time spent from first meeting to engaging in sex are also factored into how much masculine capital can be gained from each conquest. In the quote above, there is a clearly delineated cut-off at age 25, establishing that there is a difference in worth between the two age groups within this community. Women's attractiveness is quantified in lieu of any personalizing description, where instead they are rated on a scale of from 1-10; the higher on the scale, the more attractive,

valuable, and difficult to attain the target is considered to be. In this excerpt, the author is notably intent on providing additional support for the accuracy of his high-rated accomplishments in parentheses by referring to a consensus of other PUAs that observed the conquests: “*as testified by my wings.*” “Wings” in this context are shorthand for “wingmen,” which refer to other PUAs that are a part of a team that go out together to pursue sex with women. This term was adopted by the PUA community from the aviation term that describes co-pilots in a separate planes that assist another plane in manoeuvring through a dangerous environment. This “proof” inserted by the author, in addition to again likening the male subject to a machine, highlights how important the accomplishment of the conquest is to the author not only as an individual experience, but as one that needs to be observed and ratified by his male peers. The “proof” of his achievements is distinctly offered in witness form, demonstrating the centrality of male approval and peer consensus to what is considered success. The seeking out of peer-sanctioning for his accomplishments is perpetuated as his reported manhood acts are presented again for a second evaluative male audience—the readers of the blog.

Country of origin is the final characteristic women are described by, which is used to demonstrate diverse applicability of the male subject’s skills and to highlight his wide-ranging repertoire. Having sex with a woman of a particular country of origin is referred to as “capturing” a “flag” from that country, and PUAs often report a list of which flags they have, and which flags they aspire to obtain in their future endeavors. In this way, the female target’s country of origin or ethnicity is used as a generalizable, non-individual-specific characteristic with which to describe women. Country of origin and ethnicity are common descriptors and also a goal-oriented properties used to justify why a specific target was chosen. Accordingly, the focus in this “lay report” does not include any discussion about the author’s individual sexual

desire, pleasure, or satisfaction. Instead the focus of his pursuits are on setting and achieving his ambitions, “to push himself” to take what he sets his desire on (to *capture* it), and to demonstrate the diversity of his sexuo-economic portfolio. This notion of flag collecting is very reminiscent of colonialist practices, and it is in such instances where reverberations of past iterations of patriarchy and male dominance can be clearly delineated in this new, modern version of masculine identity that is being promoted.

Demonstrating ability to have sex with a large number of women is linked here to establishing proficiency at being a more successful, skilled, and accomplished man. The perpetuation of the expectancy for men to be continually amassing large quantities of sexual encounters with women encourages a form of hegemonic masculinity that equates the volume, quality, and diversity of sexual partners obtained in the marketplace with power and conquest. This resembles Irigaray’s concepts women’s commoditization and use as symbols of value between men, and the way in which sex is framed as a resource for men to attain and accumulate. The preoccupation with obtaining higher sexual statistics highlights how late capitalist economic ideologies are blended into our social structures, interactions, and ways of experiencing individual subjectivity—each domain is a marketplace of exchange. Further, the repetitive quality of increasing the total sum of encounters signals a (neoliberal) need and requirement to be constantly re-affirming and confirming one’s taken up identity to oneself and other outside observers.

#### **Interpretive Repertoire 4: Pressured Pursuit and Precarious (Non)Consent**

Pursuit of control over women is notably emphasised in PUA and masculinity websites, which is conveyed through pressuring messages that assert men’s obligation to pursue and demonstrate control over women by obtaining their (consent for) sex. Within these texts, men are

appointed as active and powerful directors of heterosexual scripts—an image which is often buttressed by pop-psychological and evolutionary discourses. In addition to the promotion of the “natural” pursuit of sex through PUA methods, the implementation of such techniques must be done in a very specific way, where the cultural image of consent can be kept intact within a recounting narrative. Obtaining consent is additionally often framed as gaining control, and PUA messages, techniques, and language work around and use the notion of consent to their own advantage.

**Duty of pursuit.** To form and support their methods, PUA experts position women as sexually selective and men as the party that must initiate and pursue sex by referring to popular scientific discourses that prop up binary gender roles. For example, the PUA “seven hour rule” (Von Markovik, 2007; Strauss, 2006) is a popular guideline which suggests that a man usually needs to spend seven hours, on average, with a woman in order to provide her with adequate feelings of security and connection to him in order for her to consent to sexual activity (Von Markovik, 2007; Strauss, 2006). This PUA guideline is supported by popularised evolutionary psychological studies, which suggest that smaller “increments” of intimacy produce greater feelings of passion for men in comparison to women, such that women require larger amounts of intimacy to feel an adequate amount of passion/desire for sex (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Oesch & Miklousic, 2012). This interpretation of male and female desire results in the idea that a man typically must work on developing a woman’s feelings of intimacy and connectedness to bring her up to his level of sexual desire in order for him to have permissible sex with her:

#### **Excerpt 1**

*“Mystery pointed out that the game is played in the "Comfort" stage of the interaction, and that it usually takes 7 hours from meet to close (ie: sex). That's an average...*

*He went on to break down his method like this: Attraction + Comfort = Seduction*

*Each phase has three smaller stages.*

#### *Attraction*

- 1. Open*
- 2. Female to Male Attract (Make the woman attracted to us first)*
- 3. Male to Female Attract (Find out what qualities she possesses and then use those to tell her you're attracted to her)*

#### *Comfort*

- 4. Comfort 1 (Build Rapport)*
- 5. Comfort 2 (Go for phone number, build intimacy, hand holding, kino, etc)*
- 6. Comfort 3 (Heavy intimacy, kissing, making out)*

#### *Seduction*

- 7. Arousal*
- 8. Last Minute Resistance*
- 9. Sex*

[http://www.seductionbase.com/seduction/cat/Before\\_PU/basic/346.html](http://www.seductionbase.com/seduction/cat/Before_PU/basic/346.html)

The above excerpt illustrates how the pursuit of casual sex is broken down according to PUA instructions. The male subject is again positioned as the active pursuer and manager within the sexual marketplace. The very first step under the initial “Attraction” phase “1. Open” presumes that the male subject has already carefully selected a target. The instructions thus start at getting and maintaining the target’s attention long enough for him to employ his efforts



towards creating a circumstance where the female target feels comfortable enough to engage in casual sex.

Central to this linear theory is the assumption that women must form an emotional bond in order to desire sex, and that forming such an emotional bond requires more effort and resources to sufficiently be produced within women compared to men. This bolsters the presumption that women require more emotional comfort for having sex than men, and that it is solely the man's responsibility to generate such an environment/feeling within her. Women here are positioned as submissive, naive recipients of men's expertise and sex, whereas men are situated as directors and experts of sex (Potts, 2002). These very techniques contribute to shaping of and continuation of the heterosexual context where men are granted the privilege and duty of controlling the social interactions they have with women. Men are presumed to hold the power to control women's feelings by conducting certain types of conversation and by initiating any physical contact (often referred to on PUA websites as "kino," presumably a play on the term kinesthetic). The male role is granted the position of the "sexpert," consumer/transactor, the agentic decision-maker, and the active pursuer (Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002; Trivers, 1972). He is situated as exclusively responsible for leading the conversation in a manner so that a physical exchange will take place later on—he must "set it up" and the target is expected to follow along—if the technique is executed properly.

The "7 hour rule" and other similar techniques exemplify how PUA theories and discourses contain underpinnings of familiar naturalizing and evolutionary discourses that are used to explain why the PUA approach is so effective. Pick-up tactics are often touted as being scientifically supported through reference to evolutionary theory and psychology, and PUA

experts suggest that their methods work because they appeals to men and women's instinctual drives:

### **Excerpt 2**

*"In the Language of Lust System, you will learn the various techniques that works on women and the psychology that arouses a woman to make her want to have you...*

*The Pavlov's Panty Drencher Technique: If you are tired of being in the friend zone or being in a relationship where the cookies [sic.] is out of reach then this technique is what you need. Use this technique to condition a woman to become unreasonably turned on and quiver with desire for you every time you whisper a seemingly innocent phrase of your choice in her ear."*

<http://www.languageofdesires.com/tag/the-pavlovs-panty-drencher-technique/>

### **Excerpt 3**

*"When guys stop being motivated by the prospect of sex, our species has a problem."*

<http://ca.askmen.com/entertainment/austin/the-future-of-the-pua.html>

The above excerpts demonstrate PUA advice authors' appeal for their readers through the credible weight that the label of "scientific research" carries and through already pre-established "truths" that positivist science is said to have discovered. By folding scientific and evolutionary discourses into their writings, PUA authors propel the idea that men have a natural duty to pursue women for sex and to manage women's compliance. For example, the author of excerpt 2 makes use of Pavlov's popular theory of conditioning to sell an educational program that contains techniques for seducing women. Choice keywords such as "system," "psychology," "Pavlov," and "condition" are injected into the advertisement to invoke scientific authority and validity. The author first sets up a frustration, in this case being in the "friend zone," and then

presents science to solve the problem. In this passage, the male subject is urged to employ psychological methods based on Pavlov's model to facilitate sexual obedience with just one word, suggesting that science-based techniques are far more powerful and effective than conventional conversation. The main objective and use of this technique is to render the female target sexually helpless and amenable. Such an outcome is framed as simple to create (if armed with the right evidence-based training) and can be arbitrarily employed with even a "*seemingly innocent phrase*" that is entirely up to the male director.

Excerpt 3 continues to pressurize the pursuit of sex by men by invoking an evolutionary imperative—the entire species is at risk if men do not perform their biological duties. If men stop being driven to pursue sex the "species" must be deemed deficient and ill-fated. It is not clear how the author references "our species"—he could be referring to the group of men for whom he is writing (i.e. "real men" have a problem if they lose their motivation for sex); he could be referring to the continuation of humanity (i.e. there will be no sex and thus no children if men lose their motivation towards sex with women); or perhaps both meanings could be simultaneously implied. In either case, the author surmises that the pursuit of sex is vital to a "natural order," suggesting that there is a duty for it to be upheld. Through citing pop-culture psychology and evolutionary discourse, these PUA texts operate in a way that props up and reinforces conventional discourses containing assumptions about (hetero)sex. Pick-Up-Artist techniques and evolutionary-based explanations of sexual behaviour share similar assumptions which recapitulate and solidify gender, its differences and inequality, as well as the "stableness" of how heterosexual dating and relationships are presumed to operate. Under the guise of "science," these discourses promote essentialized truth-claims about how gender is presumed to be fixed and preformed. The consistent reference to popular evolutionary and psychological

research that constructs men as the natural pursuers of sex works to confirm men's assertiveness and women's docility as normal and essential facts (Hollway, 1984; Potts, 2002). The male subject's role and the "natural order" of the human species' survival are both based on men's active pursuit of sex. One can deduce that not participating in this pursuit would be tremendously "unnatural" for a real man and would yield devastating repercussions for humankind.

In this way, PUA and masculinity lifestyle websites are taking part in a (re)production of knowledge (in the form of definitions, meanings, etc.) (Foucault, 1978). This particular form of knowledge production carries common truth-claims and corresponding discourses of science that are generally regarded as fact, or considered in some way true about how individuals inherently "are" and how they are "supposed" to live their life. Excerpts 2 and 3 specifically buttress these predominant assumptions, such as men necessarily holding the position of the sexual director and authority (Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002) and women as typically being unaware of their own minds/bodies, requiring a man to show her the way (Potts, 2002). The perpetual (re)production of these truth-claims consistently sends a pressured message to the male subject that acquiring sex from women is essentially imperative to one's male identity.

**Creating consent: What is enough and what does it mean?** Female consent was often framed as an obstacle to maneuver around and overcome on PUA advice websites. Excerpt 1 outlines how the PUA approach is geared towards creating a sense of attraction and ease for the target so she can be convinced to willingly have sex. Consent was framed as: something that was required for the male subjects' effort to yield any benefit or praise; completely within the PUA's control to attain; and also silently/invisibly assumed until met with explicit resistance. The obstacle of consent was only viewed as an impediment when any resistance or noncompliance occurred. The positioning of consent as a hurdle to defeat is particularly illustrated by the PUA

term LMR (Last Minute Resistance), demonstrating that resistance and noncompliance is normal and routinely expected to arise according to PUA advice:

**Excerpt 4:**

*Last minute resistance (LMR) is the resistance girls put up right before you have sex. She might say “No I can’t do this” or “No it’s too early”. She might take your hand away when you go for her pussy, or she might not let you take her pants off. Everyone who hits on girls and wants to get laid will experience last minute resistance.*

*Breaking LMR is important*

*Personally, I think a big part of my success in dating and my high lay count is due to the fact that I’m really good at breaking LMR and making girls having sex with me even though they put up some resistance.*

*Sealing the deal ...is the most important step in seduction. You can open her the right way, text her the right way, talk to her the right way, escalate the right way... But if you can’t CLOSE THE DEAL when you’re in bed with her... Does all the prior work matter? I mean... Let’s just be honest. The sex is something we all want.... If you would rather talk to her than have sex with her, you need to stop masturbating so much and find a hotter girl... Never engage in a verbal discussion about her LMR. NEVER!!! If she tells you “no went can’t do this” just tell her “schhhh” and continue your physical escalation... The most important thing is to PHYSICALLY ESCALATE and TURN HER ON, because the more turned on she is... the more her primal desires will take over. The goal is to get her over the point of no return, where her brain thinks “It really feels so good...I can’t resist my desires anymore”.*

*Don't let yourself down and give up just because you get a little resistance. Keep trying. If she stops you or takes your hand away, just pause the physical escalation for 4-5 seconds, and then continue... Girls are also putting up last minute resistance just to see how you handle it, and girls are actually turned on by men that are persistent and fight for what they want and doesn't give up easily. If you give up after experiencing just a little adversity, it tells the girl a lot about you as a person. It tells that you're a fucking weak ass pussy, and girls don't like weak ass pussies.*

<http://www.boytoystory.com/break-lmr-last-minute-resistance/>

**Excerpt 5:**

*"IT'S YOUR FAULT: If something goes wrong, it's not her fault. She's not a bitch or mean or uptight. YOU did something."*

<http://www.3secondrule.co.uk/seven-secrets-to-styles-success/>

The idea that resistance only occurs "last minute" is implied, as if there is none that may exist preceding the point right before a sex act. While trepidation or dissent might have been present prior to this pickup stage, the concern with consent is expected to be addressed only when the idea of stopping before intercourse is explicitly brought up, or when the target physically tries to prevent physical advances. This conceptualization of consent strategically maps onto how female consent to male sex is often considered a feminist achievement: for a woman to consent to sex, it means that she has power and agency (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). However, the assumption that women are now entirely agentic in sexual contexts, based on their ability to give or withhold consent, problematically situates women as solely responsible for the sexual situations and outcomes they experience (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Burns, 2015; Powell, 2010b). Consent in postfeminist discourse is framed as something that can be given to

men by women, and as something that is up to women to properly award. PUA principles use this notion of consent in presuming the target has given consent if he is able to allay her demonstrations of refusal.

This type of resistance right before sex is considered a common and routine problem to encounter—if you are doing the routine properly, you will likely run into this one last snag before you can successfully achieve what is important and get/take what you are motivated to attain. Relatedly, the persistent pursuit of sex is simultaneously positioned as an attractive quality that demonstrates “good character” in a man for women, contributing to the pressure generated by these lifestyle websites for men to be always looking for and wanting sex (Potts, 2002). Breaking the target’s PMR is described as an opportunity for the male subject to confirm his genuineness as a man who is not weak or willing to change his mind (which is categorized here as characteristically female).

Aligning the target’s cognitions with what “she really wants” is key to breaking her resistance. This is achieved through lack of acknowledgement of any verbal opposition and through “overriding” her mental/emotional system with physical pleasure so she eventually gives in. It is fundamentally presumed that the target is unaware of her own desires. To highlight this “gap” within the feminine subject, the author establishes a separation between what the target initially says or thinks, and her true “primal” desire (which is that she truly does desire sex with her pursuer). In other words, underneath the expectation of encountering LMR is a common presumption that women do not know their own bodies or what they desire, and it is up to men as “sexperts” to make them realize what they really want, which is typically what men want them to do (Potts, 2002).

In gaining the target's willingness by breaking down her LMR, there is an additional element of achieving something beneficial for the male subject. The presumption of consent, which is confirmed by the defeat of LMR, is equated with control. Consent implies that the male subject did not need to coerce. If coercion enters into the narrative/process of attaining sex, an adversarial battle then is implied to have taken place. The presence of this type of struggle would suggest that the male director did not have as much authority and control as he should have been able to wield. This highlights one of the cornerstones of the PUA "game"— what is important is that men maneuver the situation with the target in a way that she "freely" gives sex, or at least adequately appears to. This is marked as key to establishing and maintaining a competent and proficient heterosexual masculinity: if a psychological component of control is not established (i.e. if drugs had to be used instead), then the target would not willingly submit. The pursuit would not be a conquest if there was no resistance to work against and overcome. Possessing the ability to impel compliant submission in women is the kind of power and control that makes an authentic man because it shifts the balance of power—not just physically, but also relationally—in the advantage of the male subject. Consequently, there is a clear erasure of female autonomy in the advice given in excerpts 4 and 5. As it is left entirely up to the pressed male subject to ensure that the target makes the decision to have sex, which positions women as fully impressionable, especially when exposed to learned, properly-executed PUA scripts.



## Discussion

In order to explore how heterosexual masculine identity is constructed within the sexual marketplace (Fahs, 2011), this project investigated men's advice and lifestyle websites directed at methods for achieving frequent sex. Four interpretive repertoires emerged: *uncovering the natural* — men need to work physically and psychologically in order to access their “true” and essential male self in order to proficiently perform masculinity; *militarization of masculinity*— a militaristic organization and deployment of language is adopted wherein men are rallied to defend male privilege through the pursuit and sexual dominance of women; *feminine commodities for building masculinity* — women's bodies are situated as commodities used to appraise and confirm a subject's successful achievement of masculinity; and *pressured pursuit* — men are urged to be the sole initiators and directors of sex and are offered techniques to maneuver around the obstacle of female consent. Attained sex from women functioned as a central requisite for the achievement of a convincing masculine performance, though at the same time, PUA authors repudiated the importance of women in their texts. Key tenets of neoliberalism permeated each interpretive repertoire, where male readers were urged to decide to improve and cultivate their outward appearance, behaviours and subjectivity to gain access and confirm membership to hegemonic manhood.

Throughout the examined online content, gender was positioned and imagined as a key stabilizing determinant of identity, although the construction of gender and its maintenance is well acknowledged as being unstable among feminist scholars (Butler, 2004, 2011; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Men are pressured to achieve “authenticity” by working to connect with their “true masculine” selves, which was described as physically residing within the male body. This authentic, natural, core maleness was always construed as heterosexual only, and as a more sexually-driven, animalistic version of the modern man. These characteristics were presented as

essential and biological, as what men really are, which served to reinforce predominant ontological claims about gender as something genetic, robust, fixed, and residing within an individual. Once excavated from the male body, this core maleness was framed as a potent (and possibly dangerous) key ingredient to achieving sex with women and subsequent credibility amongst other male peers. Paradoxically, all the advice, practice and maintenance required to access and hone this “inherent” true man points to the dubiousness of the claim that there is truth based on/in the body, or that the body is somehow a primary and original indicator of identity.

Authors frequently adopted an adversarial tone in relation to the preservation of masculinity and the essentialized role ascribed to men as directors of (hetero)sex. Masculinity and its associated privileges were framed as being in crisis within PUA texts. The *patriarchal dividend*, what Connell (2009) refers to as the surplus of advantages that men as a group retain under unequal and solidified gender orders (not just financially, but also in domains of respect, safety, institutional power, entitlement), appears to be what PUA authors are rallying to protect. Historically, similar efforts of a “reassertion of masculine privilege” (Connell, 2009, p.25) have typically occurred during shifts in political terrain, especially if the shift affords more advantage to women, when the scale of equality appears to become more balanced (Connell, 2009; Novikova, 2000). This model of gender equality is commonly regarded as emasculating (Connell, 2009; Novikova, 2000), since men’s one-up advantage is perceived to be diminished, specifically when more opportunities open up for women to operate outside of the commodity-transactor relationship, which is the foundation of building the male identity (Fahs, 2011).

Such equality shifts have also been the target of blame for the debasement of other emblematic markers of masculinity. For example, McDowell (2003) pointed out that several archetypal characteristics which have operated to differentiate men from women are increasingly

regarded as no longer necessary in modern society, such as “fighting, warfare, sexual predation, physical sport and game, journeys of exploration, handling large animals, (and) feats of endurance” (Bradley, 2013, p.50). Taking into consideration these accounts of political climate change and the preservation of masculine markers, the PUA movement’s approach to casual sex can be understood as an attempt at preserving, reasserting, and rejuvenating classic cultural markers of masculine identification in order to sustain a patriarchal divide (Bradley, 2013; Connell, 2009; McDowell, 2003). In the wake of this perceived crisis of masculinity, women are consequently positioned as male captors and oppressors and as a threatening group to rally against, yet are still commodified as tools and stepping stones towards achieving and continually reinforcing legitimate masculinity.

Discourses of neoliberalism (choice, options, autonomous regulation, and continual practice) and postfeminist discourses (achieved liberation and parity) that suggest gender equality has been achieved (McRobbie, 2004) converge in PUA writings around the topic of female consent and around the utility of women to men. Postfeminist discourses of pure female agency permit a “free for all” and “even playing field” for male subjects, where PUA tactics are suggested by experts to be rightfully deployed by men, especially due to this new, presumed equality and free choice/consent of women. This assumption is adopted by PUAs, while still holding that men must also maintain the role as the initiators and directors of sexual scripts, which belies the presumption of a “level playing field.” Women are thus considered accountable for the circumstances they find themselves in with a PUA, and for articulating their revocation of consent (Burns, 2015; Powell, 2010b) “by virtue of it being her choice to engage... in the first place” (Burns, 2015, p.94). The employment of these postfeminist and neoliberal ideas of pure individual agency and presumed parity disregards other forces that produce inequality within the

heterosexual marketplace, and “shows how that postfeminist rhetoric of ‘choice’ and ‘consent’ is utilized in distinctly un-feminist ways” (Burns, 2015, p.94). As a result, PUA advice presents the assemblage of “women” as disposable and interchangeable commodities, as less commitment or regard is required since they are choosing to participate in their own commodification via their assumed consent, choice, and compliance.

PUA advice authors positioned the attainment of sex from multiple women as central to confirming authentic maleness, while simultaneously rendering women invisible and unimportant. Sex with women was described as a rite of passage, as something that needs to be completed, gotten out of the system and proven, before moving on to other more significant manhood milestones. The group “women,” particularly the use/accumulation of women’s bodies, was used to build and prove a masculine title. Women were not acknowledged as significant in these texts, even though they are a central commodity required to build the masculine self and operate as cultural symbols of accomplishment within men’s lifestyle websites.

As this study was limited to online content, a limitation was the anonymity of PUA authors. Most PUA advice articles are written under aliases, and there was no way to verify who produced the analyzed content. Given the authors’ anonymity, this analysis was limited in its consideration of intersecting variables that may impact how masculinity can be performed and experienced, such as socioeconomic status and national or ethnic identity of the author (Connell, 2009). Another limitation was that the data pre-existed prior to analysis. Though there are benefits to analyzing text that emerged without the prompting of an investigator, the lack of interaction between authors and the researcher prevented clarification and did not allow for follow-up questions. Further analyses on this topic should be conducted with participant

interviews and/or focus groups in order to explore how this advice is implemented by male consumers of this information, and what these principles look like in practice. Interviews would also allow the researcher to gain further perspective on how this training is deployed within sexual relationships in less causal contexts.

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