

# Securing sex: Embattled masculinity and the pressured pursuit of women's bodies in men's online sex advice

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*Feminism & Psychology*

2020, Vol. 30(1) 42–62

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DOI: 10.1177/0959353519857754

journals.sagepub.com/home/fap



## Abstract

This article describes findings from a study examining men's sex advice centered on cultivating masculinity markers by obtaining sex from multiple women. Employing a feminist poststructuralist framework, discourse analysis is used to investigate how casual sex with multiple women is positioned as a crucial requirement in accruing social status and esteem in men's online Pick-Up Artist (PUA) advice media. Three interpretive repertoires emerged: (a) Embattled Masculinity – defensive and combative themes are invoked to defend male privilege through the concealed pursuit and sexual command of women; (b) Feminine Commodities – women's bodies are framed as commodities to signify masculinity achievement; and (c) Pressured Pursuit and Consent as Control – men are positioned as authorities in sex, presumed to hold both the responsibility and power to overcome the obstacle of female consent. Obtaining sex from women is the primary objective of PUA advice – an accumulation resource used to bolster an “authentic” masculinity. While securing sex from women is promoted as the main goal, and a fundamental requirement for masculine subjects, references to the value of the women themselves are conspicuously absent or disclaimed.

## Keywords

masculinities, heterosexuality, sex advice, casual sex, Pick-Up Artist (PUA), manosphere

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The popularity of reference and self-help books for men on pick-up artistry reflects how valued successful (and numerous) sexual conquests are for single men. Among the most notable are: *The Game* by Neil Strauss, which became a *New York Times* bestseller; *The Mystery Method: How to Get Beautiful Women into Bed* by Mystery (a.k.a. Erik von Markovik); and *The Layguide: How to Seduce Women More Beautiful Than You Ever Dreamed Possible No Matter What You Look Like or How Much You Make* by Tony Clink. These instructional texts are authored by self-proclaimed experts on obtaining sex from women and are members of the Pick-Up Artist (PUA) community. Fundamentally, the PUA community focuses on breaking down heterosexual social interactions into a methodical, entrepreneurial science aimed at maximizing the amount of sexual attention a man receives from women. This network has a pervasive online presence, and primarily markets training for men to develop themselves as sexually proficient, “authentic” masculine subjects. This community has developed into an international industry that now permeates men’s advice media and “hook-up” culture more broadly (Almog & Kaplan, 2017; Hendriks, 2012). These instructional texts encourage a form of hegemonic masculinity that equates the number of sexual partners with power and conquest. The appeal of the PUA method and its vast online male community can be considered as an instance of a modern (heterosexual) masculinity icon (Cortese & Ling, 2011) circulated by mainstream culture, which prizes male sexual mastery (Tyler, 2004). This masculinity combines traditional male scripts centered on power and domination with newer cultural dictates about female empowerment, such that sexual conquests rely on enthusiastic female consent rather than male control (Gill, 2009).

Ging (2017) describes the PUA network as a key subsection of the “manosphere,” a broader internet-based collective (also comprised of Men’s Rights Activists, gamer/geek culture, “men going their own way”, and traditional Christian conservative groups) based on antifeminist ideologies aimed “to awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing” (Ging, 2017, p. 3). Within the manosphere, diminished masculinity discourses – the framing of masculinity as under attack and in need of defense – have been identified as a means through which both a position of victimization by feminism and entitlement to women’s bodies get taken up to justify aggression and violence towards any opposition that is perceived to be threatening and disruptive (see Cosma & Gurevich, 2018; Ging, 2017; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Salter, 2016).

The following analysis seeks to understand how men in the PUA community express their masculinity through casual sex with women and through their relationships with peers.

## **Studying heterosexual casual sex**

Predominant models in research on heterosexual relations often adhere to an economic framework based on the axiom that men are biologically constituted to value sex from women more than women value sex from men (Baumeister, Reynolds, Winegard, & Vohs, 2017; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Garcia, Reiber,

Massey, & Merriwether, 2012; Meyers-Levy & Loken, 2015; Oesch & Miklousic, 2012; Puts, 2010). Considered to be evolutionary in its origins, this model is used to rationalize how sex from women is framed as a commodity today, resulting in a social exchange surrounding sex where women give sex to men in exchange for resources (Baumeister et al., 2017; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Puts, 2010). This economic/evolutionary perspective presumes that there is a unique value attached to female sexuality sought after by men – and that behaviors of individuals are driven by an essentialized disparity (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Accordingly, gender differences in casual sex have been studied through both social and evolutionary frameworks, where biological/evolutionary literature is often considered to identify and describe “evolved sex-specific mating strategies” as the *why* for casual sex and gendered economic discrepancy (Garcia et al., 2012, p. 165). Sociocultural studies in this area are often positioned as research that only observes *how* stable biological patterns are playing out (see Garcia et al., 2012). It has been found that, compared to women, men tend to exaggerate the number of sexual partners they have had (Currier, 2013; Hyde, 2014), report more positive attitudes towards casual sex (Hyde, 2014), and desire greater numbers of sexual partners (Schmitt et al., 2012). Men’s sex strategies are framed as opportunistic and undiscerning, whereas women’s are deemed to be selective (Schmitt et al., 2012). “Hooking up” – which refers to a broader range of uncommitted sexual acts – has been found to be a common practice among college students, with men and women engaging at similar rates (Currier, 2013; Garcia et al., 2012). Such observations are used to suggest a “convergence of gender roles” in this newly emerging “hook-up culture” (Garcia et al., 2012, p. 168; Hyde, 2014); however, in examining attitudes around hook-ups, men are positioned as “the winners” of a hook-up, whereas the women involved are not (Almog & Kaplan, 2017).

Much of this positivist literature has tended to be gender-norm reinforcing, relying on and perpetuating the widely accepted male/female dichotomy as a natural, stable and unchangeable given. Such research frameworks do not question: the value of sex from women; the benefits that accrue from its acquisition; or what is perpetuating this disparity beyond assumed essentialized gender differences. These assumptions are recapitulated in PUA advice as evidence and justification for the development of this network and the tactics and ideologies it (re)produces. In this sense, bio-evolutionary and sociocultural models do not necessarily interrogate each other, whereas feminist writings on casual sex work to critically examine taken-for-granted assumptions of sex and gender roles (Farvid & Braun, 2013a, 2013b).

Critical feminist scholarship calls into question assumptions underlying evolutionary and positivist models. The PUA culture is an appropriate object of analysis in this respect, where dominant scientific, popular and political “truth” discourses coalesce in the production of advice, written for men and by men on how to “be” a sexually proficient masculine subject. A specific focus for these critical feminist scholars is how messages from popular research are recapitulated in advice media, perpetuating gendered normative expectations about sex drive and sexual behavior differences. This body of literature, to which our study contributes, calls

attention to historically-specific cultural imperatives that work to form social and biological scripts based on the male/female dichotomy in both media and research questions. Hendriks (2012) suggests that hedonistic objectives and concealed principles of asceticism converge in self-help media, positioned by PUA authors as creating potential empowerment for men. Similarly, Almog and Kaplan (2017) describe the PUA approach as being constructed as a “game” in order to create a sense of empowerment among self-identified “geeky” males, aligning “nerd” masculinity with a more sexually exalted, hegemonic masculinity. Hambling-Jones and Merrison (2012) conducted a conversation analysis on PUA recordings with targeted women, elucidating that many PUA techniques involve building inequality into the conversation as a method of expediting a sense of exchange and intimacy in the target, based on an economic high-risk, high-reward premise (e.g. implying that she owes him, or making underhanded compliments that draw attention to characteristics that may make her feel insecure). Denes (2011) performed a thematic analysis on the 2007 advice book – *The Mystery Method* – to trace how scientific and essentialist discourses are taken up by the author to position men as seducers and to privilege female sexual arousal as a sign of consent over verbal expressions of protest or uncertainty. Finally, Schuurmans and Monaghan (2015) interviewed PUAs to explore how the “Casanova Myth” of a courageous, womanizing man is invoked by participants, which paradoxically produces anxiety around masculinity that the myth is presumed to resolve.

Relatedly, our analysis draws on and is modelled after work by Farvid and Braun (2013a, 2013b), who observe that the concept of “casual sex” is made up of a set of (often contradictory) norms and meanings that are culturally created. Through discourse analysis of self-help books and online articles, their studies analyzed how heterosexual casual sex is framed differently for men and women (2013b). They found several subject positions (i.e. differentially legitimized ways of understanding and enacting selfhood [Gavey, 1989]) that were exclusively available to either women (the “sassy woman” and the “vulnerable woman”) or men (the “strategic man” or the “performing man”) (Farvid & Braun, 2013b). The gendered subject position of the “strategic man” constructs men as interested in obtaining casual sex through tactical methods – its successful attainment provides the man esteemed status. The perpetuation of discourses such as the “strategic man” reflects the emphasis on successful sexual conquests for young men, which encourage a form of hegemonic masculinity that equates the number of sexual partners obtained in the marketplace with dominant power (Farvid & Braun, 2013b). Our study addresses cited limitations of previous research, which recommend analyzing multiple texts from publicly accessible advice websites using a feminist, theory-grounded analytic lens (Denes, 2011; Hambling-Jones & Merrison, 2012).

This analysis also centers on Fahs’s (2011) writings on Luce Irigaray, examining the assumptive foundations of the sexual capital framework that positions sex from women as valuable to men within a sociocultural context rather than an evolutionary one. Irigaray posits that women are “entangled in a web of commodification” (Fahs, 2011, p. 180) that regulates cultural expectations of feminine sexuality. The commodification of women and the sexual marketplace stem from a history

of a patriarchal economy (Fahs, 2011). The experience of female sexuality and its representation have 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, female representations, and relationships – both socially and subjectively. It is in this way that women’s bodies are cultural symbols of value (Fahs, 2011). 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, according to 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 (Fahs, 2011).

### **Gender: To be performed and monitored**

Gender can be understood as an organizing social power experienced at the individual level (Wetherell & Edley, 2014). Gender is not simply something that one “has”; it is performative in nature, necessitating continuous “doing” (Butler, 1999). 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; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 2009). To claim membership in a masculine gender, one must cultivate, present and maintain a masculine identity (Butler, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 2009). Masculinities, in this sense, can be considered “practical accomplishments” navigated under specific cultural conditions (Wetherell & Edley, 2014, p. 355). These situated gender practices (West & Zimmerman, 2009) are accomplished in various ways, from conversational definitions of manhood, to bodily gestures and alterations, to psychological self-regulation aimed at achieving ideal masculinity (Wetherell & Edley, 2014).

Predominant conceptualizations of masculinity have been explored through Connell’s (2005) writing on *hegemonic masculinity*, defining it as the constructed practice of gender that successfully props up the operation and domination of patriarchy. Connell suggests that while there is a hegemonic masculinity, it is not permanent in its form and can be reconstructed, challenged, and changed across space and time. Different masculinities and relations between them (some more valued than others) are produced, as men adaptively signify their masculinity through contextually suitable manhood acts which demonstrate masculinity depending on what tools (social, monetary, symbolic) are available (Connell, 2005; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). 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 as feminine (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). One prominent contemporary version of the heterosexual male role emphasizes sexual success as a sign of dominance over women (Fahs, 2011). The explicit pursuit of and online reporting of sex acts by PUAs can be considered a specific type of manhood act that is used to prop up this particular version of the “competent masculine man.”

## Method

### Data

Data were initially collected for a larger project examining online sex advice for men (Cosma & Gurevich, 2018). Online forums were chosen as naturalistic material provides access to content that may not be revealed in an interview setting with the imposition of the investigator (Jowett, 2015; Wiggins & Potter, 2017). Pre-existing online content is a particularly helpful source for collecting data on topics more difficult to acquire, such as those pertaining to how sexuality and gender norms are constructed in popular discourse (Jowett, 2015; Powell, 2010). Webpages were first found by reviewing the first 40 hits from the Google Canada search engine and webpage-generated sidebar links within sources were followed for data retrieval. Keyword phrases used to find websites connected to the PUA network included: *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*. The internet searches were carried out in Toronto, Canada. Excerpts were retrieved from webpages associated with PUA and masculinity-related websites, online interviews with PUA “experts,” and blog entries from PUA members. The types of websites from which excerpts were drawn were self-help and lifestyle companies, which typically included a free-to-view blog or advice section and a section for readers to pay for additional information or training. Websites were either a broader lifestyle company for men, a self-help/seduction community company with multiple Pick-Up Artists, or a website promoting a singular PUA. Sample links include [www.rooshv.com](http://www.rooshv.com), [lovesystems.com](http://lovesystems.com), and [www.krauserpua.com](http://www.krauserpua.com). Five separate authors and websites from the collection are used in this analysis.

We included accounts that were written by English-speaking self-identified male pick-up artists about their participation in pick-up techniques, casual sex with women, and being a man. These criteria were used to guide excerpt selection, as the purpose of this investigation was not to be representative of all sex-advice content online for or about men, but rather to select content that was rhetorically dense enough to provide rich discursive data pertaining to the cultivation and maintenance of a masculine identity as it relates to casual sex with women (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). Text selection and interpretation from each webpage was informed by several governing questions: How are representations of masculinity promoted and utilized by PUA advice authors to (re)produce imperatives directed at becoming an adequate, authentic and actualized man? Which discourses are adopted and which are excluded in the PUA narrative of masculine identity and the related role of women’s bodies? And how do PUA community members establish and express their masculinity through casual sex with multiple women and in relation to their PUA peers?

### Ethical considerations

According to widely used internet 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; and material is not highly sensitive (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2013). All data used in the analysis were publicly accessible. Given that PUA content is intentionally posted to attract public attention and public (male) consumption, it is reasonable to use this pre-existing material without explicit written consent; there is no expectation of privacy (BPS, 2013).

It is customary for many PUAs to adopt an alias so they cannot be identified as members of the PUA network in other life domains (Strauss, 2006). While some professional PUAs choose to reveal their real name, due to this specific sub-cultural group norm, authors in this network who do not wish to be identified self-anonymize their publicly accessible work. While this norm provides an added layer of privacy to PUA authors, it impedes the collection of basic demographic information in terms of age, ethnicity, nationality, level of education, and geographic location.

In keeping with an ethic of transparency (Levitt et al., 2018), it should be highlighted that the selected analytical method does not assume an invisible, objective researcher that can be separated from their questions and data. Rather, the investigator role and influence over text selection and its interpretation is openly acknowledged, as the generation of research is considered a reflexive process (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Levitt et al., 2018). Accordingly, this investigation was performed by a graduate student and supervisor from a critical sexuality and feminist theory lab within a clinical psychology program at a Canadian university.

### *Analysis and theoretical lens*

The first author selected data based on criteria outlined above, then thematically coded and reviewed selected texts multiple times. Preliminarily selected texts and themes were shared and discussed with the second author. Subsequently, interpretive repertoires and more specific analysis of selected excerpts were discussed by both authors at later stages of the study. A critical discourse analysis using a feminist poststructuralist framework is employed as the analytical theory and approach to inquiry (Levitt et al., 2018), with attention to power, politics, and gender at the center of analysis (Gavey, 1989; Potts, 2002). Feminist poststructuralism aims to expose and challenge prevailing structures of power and meaning – such as the social concept of gender (Butler, 1999) – which create systems of knowledge that determine what is considered “truth” (Burr, 2003; Gavey, 1989; Potts, 2002). Likewise, critical discursive psychology is concerned with the formative aspects of language and its role in shaping thought, action, and experience (Burr, 2003; Gavey, 1989). Foucault’s (1972) concept of discourse refers to a set of meanings (in the form of stories, symbols, statements, etc.) that create particular versions of knowledge and experience (Burr, 2003). Discursive psychology views language as recursively intertwined with systems of power – producing and legitimizing “truths,” identities, and subjectivities (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Such “truths” refer to knowledge produced by collective interests that differ across history and cultures, and are created and altered by social processes (Burr, 2003).

Discourse analysis is concerned with *what* is being done with language, and with what this *doing* achieves (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Items of analysis are not intended to be individual speakers or texts, but are part of a broader web of discourses, located during interpretation and thematically aggregated into interpretive repertoires (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Interpretive repertoires describe patterns of referenced discourses (which are multiple and often conflicting) which produce ways of understanding the world (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Consequently, the assemblage of a masculine identity can be considered to have been made possible from, and in reference to, pre-existing cultural discourses. In a textual account of masculinity, the individual references certain cultural meanings and takes up a position in relation to them (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In this way, the interpretation of positions taken up in an individual account allows for the reading of broader interactions between social forces, power, and identity (i.e. the interpretive repertoire) (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 2014). As the study's aim was to examine how sexual activity with multiple women is positioned as a means of accomplishing masculinity, this approach is ideal for examining how masculinity and a feminine other is (re)constructed through gendered cultural productions of dialogue, practices, authority, and power (Wetherell & Edley, 2014).

### *Analysis and discussion*

Three interpretive repertoires emerged: *embattled masculinity* – combative language galvanizes men to defend male privilege through the pursuit and sexual command of women; *feminine commodities for building masculinity* – women's bodies are used as commodities in supporting masculinity achievement; and *pressured pursuit and consent as control* – men are urged to be prime directors of sex, using techniques to maximize female consent. The motivation and ability to obtain sex from women can be considered a key manhood act (Connell, 2005; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) required to assert heterosexuality and bolster “genuine” masculinity by PUAs, and sex is framed as a resource for men to accumulate (Fahs, 2011).

#### *Embattled masculinity: Combative defence of male identity*

Authors positioned masculinity as embattled to frame how men should relate to women and to provide a rationale for obtaining sex with multiple women. Embattlement is exemplified by excerpts 1 and 2, where the pursuit of sex is portrayed as a battle, and fighting in the war is the way to sustain masculinity. The language employed metaphorically centers on themes of warring, such as tactical defense (excerpt 1) and advancement (excerpt 2). Male readers are incited to take action to assert and preserve their masculinity:

##### **Excerpt 1:**

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 allows . . . 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 . . . it’s those who don’t pick up arms and foolishly appease the enemy and believe in its benevolence that will suffer most. (Roosh, 2013)

### Excerpt 2:

I’ve gotten a lot of interest about my latest Siege, considering I’ve been pretty much off the radar the last fortnight. . . . I’m up to 77 countries (including Palestine), meaning my goal towards global conquest is now 39% complete. (Naughty Nomad, 2012)

Akin to how a battle exhortation is constructed to instigate “a fighting spirit” (Yellin, 2008, p. 30), the author in excerpt 1 unifies a group by constructing an enemy and establishing rivalry, so he can then provide the male reader with what is presented as a seemingly obvious choice (fight in the defense or “*suffer most*”). Heterosexual men are framed as being embattled and running the risk of suffering longterm consequences for having a masculine identity. Notably, the feminine “enemy” is entirely unaware of this combat mission. A woman in contemporary society threatens the maintenance of a specific idealized version of masculinity and, therefore, she must be conquered to ensure stability. Her attitude is separated here from her body – the process that Irigaray identified as female commoditization (Fahs, 2011). The participation in sex for women is framed as a concession, an admittance of defeat – if a woman has sex, she has not gained anything; he wins and she has lost, since she gives up something of value.

In both excerpts, the male body is referred to as a weapon of war. The penis (in excerpt 1) is explicitly described as a means of inflicting damage (“wounds”) and conquering women through their bodies. The penis is not only framed here as a signifier of competent male sexuality – a prominent feature of phallic power (Potts, 2002) – but, more importantly, as the key means of achieving it. The achievement of competent maleness is precisely linked with female failure and injury. The time-honored discourse of antagonistic heterosexual sex, where both male and female parties are not set up to mutually benefit by engaging in sexual interactions (Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002), is consequently upheld.

The tone of the above excerpts suggests that men must relentlessly pursue women in order to maintain their masculinity – a right for which men must fight, as it can be easily usurped. This anxiety and the militaristic approach of PUA culture highlights the construction of masculine identity as continually at risk and requiring repeated (re)establishment; maleness is a privileged position, yet one that demands unremitting fortification. Masculinity is framed as requiring

battle for preservation, necessitating the male subject to rally and fight for what is his. Victory is rooted in the symbolic defeat of women via attained sex.

### *Feminine commodities for building masculinity: Regulatory ranking and conquered accrual*

According to these lifestyle websites, men need to regain and demonstrate control. Mastery must be exercised not only over themselves, as discussed in a related paper (Cosma & Gurevich, 2018), but also over women. To gain more control over outcomes with women, PUA websites promote the use of pick-up techniques for the pursuit of casual sex with many women. This commanding, amassing and commodification of women is positioned as a means of regaining control and demonstrating an authentic masculinity to women, the subject himself, and his peers.

Within these techniques, women's bodies are described as commoditized tools for goal attainment, where social life is facilitated through the "use, consumption, and circulation" (Fahs, 2011, p. 181) of women's bodies. This is made possible by the atomized and compartmentalized nature of meanings bestowed upon the female body, which center only on women's qualities that are considered essential: those capable of performing/producing (Fahs, 2011). These corporeal qualities are valued to the extent that female bodies "confirm and excite the male subjectivity" (Fahs, 2011, p. 186). The mechanism by which male subjectivity is established is in keeping with the way the predominant, binarized conceptualization of gender operates, where the performance of the male gender is exclusionary – an identity "founded on the instituting of the 'Other' or a set of Others through exclusion and domination" (Butler, 1999, p. 170). In this way, the female body becomes a key signifier of the feminine and reifier of the masculine, while – at the same time – being othered and made object (Butler, 1999).

As commodities, women's bodies in the PUA system are appraised and ranked. Sexual attention from different women is not equally valued, as it is mostly based on a woman's appearance "rating," prizing certain female bodies over others.

#### **Excerpt 3:**

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 in 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. (TdotPickup, 2015)

In order to gain confidence to access maximally-prized women it is recommended that less attractive women be used as target practice for optimal conditioning when

a more impressive conquest presents itself. Lower-ranked women's bodies are positioned as instruments to properly train and prepare for the successful attainment of more valuable women. In the above excerpt, is it recommended that men "practice" on lesser-valued women, ones that do not meet his standards, so they can be properly "warmed up" before moving on to women deemed more valuable. The ability to gain sex from more attractive women signifies a more exacting skill. The demonstration of this skill with women whose bodies are perceived to be higher ranked lends credibility to one's masculine prowess, suggesting that the man in question is more capable of unlocking life-fulfilling achievements (see Cosma & Gurevich, 2018).

Men, as active consumers of women's bodies, must endeavor to build up their masculinity and demonstrate their capabilities. Therefore, reporting accumulation success becomes central to establishing and reinforcing a masculine identity to one's peers and to oneself:

**Excerpt 4:**

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 1 was a "9". (Torero, 2014)

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

While the caliber of the target is based solely on how physically attractive she is perceived to be, there is often little to no specification of what qualifies a woman for

being deemed physically attractive. Especially lacking are expressions of the authors' individual preferences. Instead, there is an assumed universal rating system, implying that each male subject holds the same conceptions about what makes a woman more or less valuable. This 10-point ranking scale removes any need for a personal description of what he specifically found attractive, as this would reveal the content of the subject's individual erotic desire to his peers and potentially differentiate him from the group. Discussion of characteristics that would highlight any individuality in the male subject is absent (e.g. "what makes a 10 for me is"). This is a notable missing element of the PUA community, given that much of the advice centers on one's work to discover one's "true, authentic self." Similar to currency, this appraisal system sets up a seemingly homogenous language to evaluate women while bypassing sexual desire and maintaining continuity in the symbolic value of women between men (Fahs, 2011). Relying on this process, men are able to accrue "wealth" and value through their successful capacities for possessing female assets (Fahs, 2011). Relatedly, there is an assumption that the attractive "10" targets are harder to acquire, and therefore worth more, which positions women who may engage in sex more readily as less appealing. These female commodities vary in "quality," the highest of which needs to be worked towards through experience with and accumulation of less valuable commodities, to be appropriately primed for successfully earning the higher-valued product.

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. Notably, the author is intent on providing additional support for the accuracy of his high-rated accomplishments, referring to the consensus of other PUAs who observed the conquests, though it is not specified on what specific grounds a consensus was reached. This "proof" inserted by the author highlights how important it is that the individual accomplishment is 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 success.

Country of origin is another characteristic by which women are described, which is used to demonstrate diverse applicability of the male subject's skills. Having sex with a woman of a particular country of origin is referred to as "captur[ing]" a "flag" from that country, and PUAs often report a list of which flags they have, and which flags they aspire to obtain. In this way, the country of origin or ethnicity is used as a generalizable, non-subjective characteristic with which to describe women as 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 is directed at achieving his ambitions, "push[ing] himself" to take what he sets his desire on (to *capture* it), and demonstrating the diversity of his sexuo-economic portfolio. This notion of flag collecting is reminiscent of colonialist

practices (Sanger, 2009), where reverberations of past iterations of patriarchy can be clearly delineated in this modern version of masculine identity. The preoccupation with obtaining higher sexual statistics highlights how capitalist economic ideologies are blended into our social structures, interactions, and ways of experiencing individual subjectivity (Fahs, 2011; Tyler, 2004). Further, the repetitive accumulation of encounters signals a requirement to continually re-affirm one's adopted identity to oneself and to outside observers.

### *Pressured pursuit and consent as control*

Pursuit of control over women is conveyed through pressuring messages that assert men's obligation to demonstrate dominance over women. Within these texts, men are appointed as active and powerful directors of heterosexual scripts. Such techniques are implemented so that the cultural image of consent could be kept intact within a recounting narrative. Obtaining consent is likened to gaining control, and PUA messages, techniques, and language work around and use the notion of consent to their own advantage. Consent is framed as: an obstacle to overcome; completely within the PUA's control and ability to attain; something required for the male subject's effort to yield any benefit or praise; and tacitly presumed until met with explicit resistance. Consent is only viewed as an impediment when resistance or noncompliance occurs. The pressurized imperative for men to achieve sex and the positioning of consent as a hurdle to overcome is particularly illustrated by the PUA term LMR (Last Minute Resistance), demonstrating that resistance and noncompliance are routinely expected to arise rather than read as a signal to stop:

#### **Excerpt 5:**

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 . . . 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 . . . Never engage in a verbal discussion about her LMR. NEVER!!! If she tells you "no went [sic] can't do this" just tell her "schhhh" [sic] 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 . . . 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 [sic] 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. (Boy Toy, 2013)

#### **Excerpt 6:**

**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. (Rennaisan, 2014)

Men are scripted as the drivers of women’s desires and responsible for eliciting their compliance. While trepidation or dissent might have been present prior to this pick-up 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 advances. This conceptualization of consent strategically maps on to how female consent to men is often considered a feminist achievement: for a woman to consent to sex, it means that she has full authority to prevent non-consensual sexual experiences (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Thomas, Stelzl, & Lafrance, 2017; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011). The assumption that women are now entirely agentic in these contexts, based on an imparted authority to give or withhold consent, problematically situates women as solely in charge of the sexual situations and outcomes they experience (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Burns, 2015; Powell, 2010; Thomas et al., 2017). In other words, consent in post-feminist discourse is framed as something that can be given to men by women, and as something that is up to women to properly award (Gill, 2009). PUA principles use this notion of consent in presuming the target has given consent if the pursuer is able to defuse her demonstrations of refusal.

This type of resistance right before sex is considered an inevitable problem – if the routine is executed properly, this final hurdle is expected before the goal is accomplished. Relatedly, the persistent pursuit of sex is simultaneously positioned as an attractive quality that demonstrates “good character” in a man, contributing to these lifestyle websites’ promotion of men as perpetually in search of sex (Potts, 2002). Breaking the target’s LMR is described as an opportunity for the male subject to establish control and display his resolve – confirming his authenticity as a man who is not weak or willing to change his mind (categorized here as characteristically female).

Aligning the target’s cognitions with what “she really wants” is key to breaking her resistance. It is presumed that the target is unaware of her own desires until the proper techniques have been executed by the male subject to elicit the presumed and unarticulated cognition so her (assumed) desire becomes known to her.

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 (sex with her pursuer). Underneath the expectation of encountering LMR is a common presumption that women do not know their own bodies or desires, and it is up to men as “sexperts” to make them realize what they really want (Potts, 2002).

The presumption of consent, which is confirmed by the defeat of LMR, is equated with control, while also implying that the male subject did not need to explicitly coerce the target. If coercion enters the process of attaining sex, a battle is assumed to have taken place, suggesting that the male director did not have as much authority as he should have. This highlights one of the cornerstones of the PUA “game” – men must maneuver the situation with the target such that she “freely” gives sex, or at least adequately appears to. This is marked as key to maintaining a proficient heterosexual masculinity: if a psychological component of control is not established (i.e. if drugs had to be used instead), then the target does not willingly submit. 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 – to the advantage of the male subject. Consequently, there is a clear erasure of female autonomy in the advice in excerpts 5 and 6. The male subject ensures that the target decides to have sex, which positions women as highly impressionable, especially when exposed to learned, properly-executed PUA scripts.

## Conclusions

In order to explore how heterosexual masculine identity is constructed within the sexual marketplace (Fahs, 2011), this project investigated men’s Pick-Up Artist websites directed at ritualistically achieving frequent sex. Overall, a consistent discursive path which presents one homogenous version of masculinity was taken. Part of what is especially striking about this is that Pick-Up Artistry is a contemporary movement, and yet these men are not attending to or drawing on a diverse multitude of available representations of masculinity (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Lomas, 2013). Three interpretive repertoires emerged: *embattled masculinity* – combative language is deployed to exhort men to defend male privilege using the vehicle of sexual pursuit; *feminine commodities for building masculinity* – women’s bodies are situated as commodities for appraising and confirming a subject’s successful achievement of masculinity; and *pressured pursuit and consent as control* – men are urged to be the sole initiators of sex, using techniques for maneuvering around the obstacle of female consent. Attained sex from women functions as central to achieving a convincing masculine performance, while at the same time PUA authors repudiate the importance of women.

Throughout the examined online content, gender was positioned as a key stabilizing determinant of identity, although the construction of gender and its maintenance is well acknowledged as being unstable among critical gender scholars (West & Zimmerman, 2009; Wetherell & Edley, 2014). Masculinity and its

associated privileges were also 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 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 the political terrain, especially if the change affords greater advantage to women, with the equality scale becoming more balanced (Connell, 2009; Novikova, 2000). This model of gender equality is commonly regarded as emasculating (Connell, 2009; Novikova, 2000); 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 fundamental to the construction of 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) points 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 to preserve, reassert, and reinvigorate classic 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 oppressors and as a threatening group against which to rally, yet are still commodified as tools and stepping stones towards achieving legitimate masculinity.

The PUA directive to pursue sex and silence resistance while conflating compliance with consent can be contextualized within the broader discursive backdrop of “normative heterosex [which] provides the cultural scaffolding for rape” (Gavey, 2005, p. 231). That is, dominant heterosex discourses prescribe narrowly defined sexual scripts for men and women, as well as governing the role of sex in relationships. Two dominant discourses operate here: the male sex-drive discourse positions men as always needing sex, and the have-hold discourse (Hollway, 1984) dictates that women are obligated “to give men sex in order to retain the relationship” (Gavey, 2005, p. 139). Collectively, these discursive constructions of heterosex lead to an “absence of a reliable language in which to say no” to unwanted sex (Gavey, 2005, p. 157). The additional contemporary cultural context that valorizes maximal sexual exploration and presumes gender parity in sexual entitlement and choices (Gill, 2009) – the postfeminist “new sexual contract” (McRobbie, 2004) – can obscure the fact that the “other set of cultural norms that direct refusals may well contravene the norms of femininity” (Gavey, 2005, p. 145).

Such discourses (i.e. presumed achieved liberation and parity) (McRobbie, 2004) emerge in PUA writings in relation to the topic of female consent and the utility of women to men. For PUAs, postfeminist discourses of pure female agency permit



a “free for all” and an “even playing field” for male subjects, where under these ostensibly new conditions of equality, free choice and consent for women, opportunistic tactics are to be rightfully deployed by men. This assumption is adopted, while still maintaining that men must also preserve their role as directors of sexual scripts, belying the presumption of a “level playing field.” Women are thus considered accountable for the circumstances in which they find themselves with a PUA, and for articulating their revocation of consent (Burns, 2015; Powell, 2010) “by virtue of it being her choice to engage . . . in the first place” (Burns, 2015, p. 94). Employing postfeminist and neoliberal ideas of pure individual agency and presumed parity disregards other forces that produce inequality within the heterosexual marketplace, and shows that the “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, for whom less regard is required since they are “choosing” to participate in their own commodification via their assumed compliance.

In summary, PUA advice authors position the attainment of sex from multiple women as central to confirming authentic maleness, while simultaneously rendering women invisible and unimportant. Sex with women is described as a rite of passage and a required hurdle to overcome in order to maintain masculinity. The group “women,” particularly the use/accumulation of women’s bodies, is used to prove masculine status. Women are used to prop up masculinity, yet are not acknowledged as significant in these texts, although they are a central commodity for building masculine markers, and operate as cultural symbols of accomplishment.


### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by both the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Doctoral Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and by the Ontario Graduate Scholarship awarded to the first author.

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