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(Re)producing the 'natural man' in men's online advice media: achieving masculinity through embodied and mental mastery

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on analysis of one component of a larger study exploring men's online sex advice. The parent project examines the use of casual sex with multiple women as a mandatory obligation in accumulating social status and esteem in men's online Pick-Up Artist (PUA) advice outlets. While earlier analysis focused on the adoption of militaristic language and the sexual use of women's bodies to defend male privilege among PUA members, the present analysis attends to the reliance on essentialised, embodied constructions of a homogeneous authentic masculinity. Adopting a feminist poststructuralist framework and discourse analysis, we describe an interpretive repertoire – *uncovering the natural* – that comprises two themes: *embodying work*, wherein core masculinity is located within the male body and requires ritualistic practice to harness more proficient manhood, and *mental mastery*, wherein the path to success extends beyond bodily work and outward performance, necessitating subjective transformation to 'authentically become' a new kind of man. Masculinity in PUA texts is framed simultaneously as being in crisis and as an essentialised role ascribed to men as directors of (hetero)sex, with PUA authors frequently adopting an adversarial tone in relation to the preservation of masculinity.

Introduction

One-night-stands and casual sex are common pursuits among some young heterosexual males (Stinson, Levy, & Alt, 2014), and there are sub-cultural online networks designed specifically to share tactics for attaining sex from women, such as the Pick-Up Artist (PUA) community. Casual sex advice directed at women tends to advise balancing physical and emotional vulnerability costs with opportunities for temporary pleasures, while men are coded as sexually strategic and socially successful (Farvid & Braun, 2013a, 2013b). The PUA community seeks to capitalise on the 'heterosexual marketplace' (Fahs, 2011) by accumulating sex from 'quality' women, based on physical appearance ratings. Drawing on Irigaray's work on the tradition of commodifying women to sustain patriarchal socio-economic dominance, Fahs (2011) uses the term 'heterosexual marketplace' to refer to the continuing use of women's bodies as cultural symbols of value. Likewise, ratings of women (e.g. on a scale of 1-10) used to order men's skill position women as commodities in the sexual economy within which men vie for status (Fahs, 2011), with 'higher rated' women designated as those who are more difficult to seduce.

Once considered an underground community, this network has been valorised in mainstream television and men's magazines. PUA courses can be found online and in most major North

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American cities. For example, the company Venusian Arts has instructional DVDs and published books, offers phone coaching sessions, holds 'boot camps' across four continents and had a television show on VH1 titled *The Pickup Artist* (Von Markovik, 2014). A typical 'boot camp', usually costing $1000–$3000 USD (£740–£2218 GBP), consists of weekend seminar 'coaching' during the day, followed by 'real-life' nightclub practice with their coach's supervision (Love Systems, 2017; Von Markovik, 2014). Our analysis of PUA online materials explores how proficient masculine subjects are constructed in these forums. The present analysis draws attention to the activation of 'natural' masculinity through prescribed transformation of men's bodies and mental states.

Modern masculinity discourses

For this analysis, masculinity is understood through both normative and semiotic perspectives (Connell, 2005). Normative definitions of masculinity view masculinity as an ideal standard, which men can approach in multiple ways and to varying degrees, although most men do not fully achieve such standards (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). A semiotic perspective allows for masculinity to be viewed beyond norm construction to representing a cultural vehicle and symbolic practice through which identity is constructed and within which social life operates (Connell, 2005; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Masculinity – that quality of 'maleness' – is continually called into question, scrutinised and requires ongoing verification (Butler, 1990, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 2009).

Common elements of male identity have historically included: stigmatisation and rejection of the feminine; valuing of strength, confidence and independence; emphasis on aggression and propensity for violence; and the need for status and accomplishment (Brannon, 2011). Connell (2005) identified this assembly of archetypal characteristics as *hegemonic masculinity*, which functions to sustain patriarchy though prominent and valorised features that are culturally and historically contingent (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity operates axiomatically 'in opposition to women and subordinated men' (Gough, 2001, p. 169), leading to a compulsory devaluation and rejection of the feminine in order to assert a masculine identity (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; Solebello & Elliott, 2011). This is not to say that a masculine subjectivity can be wholly understood based on the subordination of others or that only specific men can 'possess' and wield hegemonic masculinity (see Moller, 2007). Rather, the continual process of gaining/sustaining hegemonically masculine membership and status is what both generates and maintains its subordinating function (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pfeffer, Rogalin, & Gee, 2016). It is in this way that hegemonic masculinity can be understood as both a gender 'accomplishment' (West & Zimmerman, 2009) and as a set of shifting and precarious rules which are contingent on other contextual elements with which gender intersects (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pfeffer et al., 2016).

Accordingly, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) highlight the precariousness of masculinity by identifying different forms of it, where different features of the hegemonic model become highlighted based on accessible social resources along various axes and statuses of marginalisation (i.e. athletic, violent, financial) (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Coston & Kimmel, 2012). For example, one man might signify his masculinity through his occupational status and financial power, while another might signify his masculinity through bodybuilding. Both examples would be further influenced by multiple marginalising/privileging power dynamics (e.g. race, sexuality, (dis)ability, class, culture) (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). As such, masculinity markers are also continually (re) configured and challenged by specific conditions of geography, current public attitudes, class, race and sexual identity (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Messerschmidt, 2012; Pfeffer et al., 2016).

Our study seeks to explore one contemporary Western version of the male gender role, which appears to have shifted emphasis towards accumulation and success characteristics, and has been crystalised within the sexual realm. This can be seen as an amplification of the broader Western culture wherein male (hetero)sexual mastery is increasingly regarded as a marker of authenticity

(Rogers, 2005), with hegemonic male sexuality viewed as propelled by biological drives (Cortese & Ling, 2011). Therefore, rather than focusing on men's subjective experiences of their masculinity, which are manifold and diverse, this analysis examines prescriptive online advice outlining expectations for how maleness *should* be demonstrated and experienced. This constitutes a central concern and function of the PUA network. Trainees are reassured that if PUA techniques are followed, men who were initially stifled, emasculated and undesirable to women – thus not living up to their 'true potential' – can transform themselves, through successful seduction, into confident subjects equipped to play on a 'levelled playing field' (Sparks, 2011) with women. Proper 'training' for successful sexual conquests requires the male subject to not only learn specific scripts to approach female 'targets' but also chiefly centres on the development, rediscovery, or honing of a 'natural' masculine self.

Men tend to exaggerate the number of sexual experiences they have and report wanting greater numbers of sexual partners compared to women (Currier, 2013; Hyde, 2014). Such social science research often couches observed differences as sociocultural manifestations of static, biological differences between sexes (Garcia et al., 2012), excluding from consideration perspectives that elucidate masculinity standards and membership as mediated by systems of neoliberalism and capitalist commodification (Butler, 2004; Connell, 2005; Fahs, 2011). As a consequence, such positivist literature works to preserve dichotomous male/female gender categories as deadlocked constants, regardless of the social backdrop. At the same time, emerging research on the 'hookup culture' of college students reports the frequency of sexual activity occurring outside of a romantic relationship to be more similar than different between men and women (Currier, 2013; Garcia et al., 2012). These findings are positioned as evidence for a 'convergence of gender roles' (Garcia et al., 2012, p.168). Congruent with the 'gender difference' hypothesis (Hyde, 2014), such reports overlook specific elements of dominant masculinity dictates, such as mastery, productivity and conquest, which shape relational and subjective meanings in modern sexual selfhood (Rogers, 2005; Tyler, 2004).

Such dominant scientific 'truth' findings and popular narratives about gender role stability (Potts, 2002) re-emerge in advice texts for men. This recapitulation, conveyed as advice, retells and repackages the male/female role and power dichotomy while also outlining the requirements for being a sufficient, ever-authenticating masculine subject. Interrogating such positivist models, some critical feminist researchers attend to the relational and subjective cultural relativity within consumer-based media and within research inquiries. Rogers (2005) and Tyler (2004) have both highlighted that the domain of sexuality is nested within managerial imperatives which call for individuals to have planned and efficiently performed sex lives. In an analysis of men's magazines, Rogers (2005) identifies a Fordist operationalisation (i.e. emphasising consumption and production) of sex in men's lives, which calls for continual effortful improvement, while promising success based on mastery of the rules of efficient sex. PUA's tenets, similarly, dovetail closely with neoliberal preoccupations with displaying identity proficiency through aspirational acquisitive practices (Gill, 2008; Harvey, 2005).

Diminished masculinity discourses

Farvid and Braun (2013a, 2013b) further explore the social construction of 'casual' sex, outlining different imperatives for both men and women. Women in casual sex advice outlets are framed as being guided by emotional security motives, while men's subject positions are performance and strategy based, with men gaining status through tactical attainment of maximal levels of casual sex (Farvid & Braun, 2013b). For instance, the PUA community has been observed to position the quest and acquisition of casual sex as a way for men who do not feel adequately masculine to affiliate more strongly with a hegemonic maleness that holds more power, respect and sexual potency (Almog & Kaplan, 2017). Direct interviews with PUA network members also show that valorising characteristics of bravery, conquest and objectification of women generates anxiety about one's

masculinity, despite the PUA's intent of allowing masculine subjects to feel more (hegemonically) empowered (Schuurmans & Monaghan, 2015).

Feminist researchers have also begun to turn their attention to the growing presence of misogynistic organisations online. In an analysis of Australian Men's Rights/Health Activism (MRA), another predominantly online-based group, Salter (2016) argues that male power and violence has often been justified by men needing to 'spread civilisation' and control his home and economic surroundings, which were framed as painful responsibilities to bear for the good of humanity. Salter (2016) observes that masculine aggression and violence is often positioned as a defensive reaction to both the presumed suffering based on such responsibilities and their loss. Presently, the subject position of the burdened, threatened, and victimised man under siege, and his subsequent defence/violence is still invoked as a response to feminism and its associated cultural economic shifts, which are characterised as threatening and harmful (Salter, 2016). The utility of women's bodies in training developed by PUAs functions along similar lines: as a rationalisation for the defence, preservation and enrichment of masculinity and to implicitly counteract feminist discourses. Specifically, the insistence of a core, natural, 'real' masculinity is positioned as a justification or evidence of entitlement to women's bodies and the social status associated with its successful enactment.

Theoretical and analytic approach

Using qualitative methodology, we examine how reported managerial, tactical and performance-based imperatives for bolstering Western, heterosexual masculinity extend from the sexual realm to the project of physical and subjective transformation (Rogers, 2005; Tyler, 2004). We view these self-modification projects as 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988), given their focus on self-surveillance and disciplining of bodies and minds in the service of reconfiguring masculine identity.

This work resides within feminist poststructuralism (Weedon, 1987), which is concerned with exposing and contesting dominant meaning systems that shape, (mis)represent, and produce knowledge about gender that then become instantiated as 'truth' claims (Potts, 2002). Online content was examined using discourse analysis, which has a long tradition of scholarship on masculinity norms and practices, wherein language is viewed as central to identity production (Wetherell & Edley, 2014). Accordingly, masculinities are viewed and treated as ways of 'doing' gender, as 'practical accomplishments' negotiated within specific cultural contexts (West & Zimmerman, 2009; Wetherell & Edley, 2014). This gender 'accomplishment' (West & Zimmerman, 2009) is achieved in numerous ways – from talking about the meanings of manhood, to body transformation practices that reinforce idealised masculinity norms (Wetherell & Edley, 2014).

Discourse analysis treats language as 'action oriented' and constructive; it is used to build narratives, create identities and legitimatise or disallow social interactions (Burr, 2003; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Discourses, as meanings systems and regimes of knowledge, shape how ideas and identities can be talked about or acted upon (Foucault, 1978). Relatedly, ideas about sexuality are constructed through prevailing ideologies that frame specific acts and relationships as normative and permissible or deviant and illegitimate. For example, sex in a Western context has historically functioned as an issue of public interest, an issue of medical interest, and an issue of morality, all of which organise social relations (Foucault, 1978).

Current study focus and method

Material analysed was limited to publicly accessible online content, which is increasingly popular for accessing distinct user communities (e.g. Powell, 2010; Regan et al., 2014). Content produced without researcher requests can provide integral information that may not be revealed in interviews carried out by investigators outside of the PUA community. The British Psychological Society's (2013) ethical guidelines suggest that using public online content which does not require

a username or password does not necessitate formal consent, especially if content can reasonably be expected to be viewed by strangers.

Text excerpts were extracted from online pages including PUA interviews, web logs and lifestyle websites. Online Google searches were conducted using phrases such as: *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*. Data collection involved tracking the first two pages of search results for each term, as well as relevant sidebar and menu links within the located PUA websites. Criteria for data selection from the search results included single-authored texts written by self-identified PUAs. Pertinent excerpts and corresponding URLs were copied and pasted into an MS Word document. As this study seeks to analyse only the authoritative advice presented to men, comments made by readers were not considered or collected for this study.

Excerpts were initially coded and analysed by the first author and subsequently reviewed by the second author. Language used by PUA members was examined to understand how male subjects (re)construct this particular form of contemporary masculinity via speech acts about gender (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 2014). Data selection, analysis and consensus were guided by the following research questions: What does it mean to 'be' a man by PUA standards? What norms do PUA members rely on and/or resist to activate optimal masculinity? How is masculinity expected to be achieved in this form of men's advice media? Interpretative repertoires were generated to organise themes detected in data that reflect predominant cultural discourses (Wetherell, 1998). Interpretative repertoires and their corresponding analyses were initially developed by the first author, reviewed and enhanced by the second author, and subsequently discussed and agreed upon between both authors.

Analysis and discussion

The following analysis is one component of a larger study exploring men's online sex advice (Cosma & Gurevich, 2018). While other portions of the analysis focused on the adoption of militaristic language and the sexual use of women's bodies to defend male privilege, the present analysis attends to the PUA authors' reliance on essentialised, embodied constructions of masculinity within their advice. We describe an interpretive repertoire – *uncovering the natural* – that comprises two themes: *embodying work*, wherein core masculinity is located within the male body and requires ritualistic practice to harness a more potent manhood, and *mental mastery*, wherein the path to success extends beyond bodily work and outward performance, necessitating subjective transformation to 'authentically become' a new kind of man.

Embodying work: activating dormant masculinity through the body

Latent masculinity, coded as 'authentically' potent but repressed by society, is described as residing dormant within every male body. The following excerpt from a PUA advice and lifestyle blog entitled 'Are You a Caged Animal?' likens the concept of latent masculinity to the natural instincts and primal core 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/

Ordinary (read as non-PUA-practicing) men are portrayed as repressed. Their 'pure' gender cannot be expressed under confinement conditions, or in this case, within the parameters of societal expectations. Referenced feelings of desolation and frustration are framed as being routed in what is an inauthentic yet 'socially acceptable' way of performing manhood – because their current lifestyles and ways of 'being men' do not permit sufficient genuine experience of themselves 'as authentic men.' The custodians (e.g. society, women, rules) are positioned as the problem for the tiger, but on the 'man's' side of the comparison, the oppressive civiliser (designated ambiguously as 'everybody') who is trying to tame and control men is left unspecified, but implied (i.e. women/society as silent oppressors): 'he is discouraged by **everybody** around him to act like a man should act'.

A common cultural discourse is that women serve as a civilising force for (naturally) wild men (Marwah, 2013; Richards, 2003). As this discourse is invoked in excerpt 1, women are paired with society (structure, rules, laws), and men are paired with nature (raw, untouched, innocent in their animality). Notably, the 'women civilise men' narrative is used without explicitly acknowledging women or their significance, while still arguing for men's need to break free from their oppression. This pointed omission renders women invisible – denouncing the category of 'women' (and relatedly, femininity) – while still retaining the claim of perceived effects on the status (and crisis) of male identity. 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 Average Frustrated Chump (AFC) among PUAs (Strauss, 2006).

The solution for the AFC is to become attuned to the animal within, escaping 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'. AFCs are unsuccessful in getting women to sleep with them because they are stifled by society and out of touch with this essentiality. For successful experiences and masculine self-mastery, average (i.e. repressed) men are instructed to (re)discover their core animal, as the author testifies. Incorporating a racialised qualifier ('exotic') successfully distinguishes the women as sexual commodities (i.e. diversified brands, akin to owning a foreign car) which are used to present his expertise as a sexually skilled man. The self-actualised expert clearly delineates what freedom from the manacles of civility looks like; he is now authetically attuned to his masculinity, able to exert control over his life and others, using this control to attain sex with women.

This intrinsic, dormant masculinity is framed as a powerful tool that can be accessed through continual practice. Honed carefully, it can emanate freely and act as vital kindling in attracting 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 compound is located within the body. The subject accesses, activates and asserts 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', in order to discharge and deploy this essentially masculine vitality. Externalising this dynamic substance – retrieving it from its subterranean, undetectable, dormant place – renders it more demonstrable to other men and women. Activating this latent masculinity within the body also promises to immediately improve a man's capacity for taking what he wants; to use the 'beast' from inside to better succeed in his (male) performance. The resultant resuscitated masculine core of the self/body is likened to 'a warrior after battle' and 'a beast', invoking predatory and aggressive images. Engaging the 'sex center' by tapping into the 'true warrior' positions his male body (and/or implied penis) as key to his confidence and propensity to pursue and attack. Pop-science is also used to assert that bodily events such as posture and muscle appearance can impact a person's emotional experiences (Sampson, 1996), which gives instructions a credible expert tone (Gill, 2009).

The need for a specialist or coach suggests that this 'technology of the self' (i.e. self-transformation projects, targeting bodies and minds, used to constitute selves) (Foucault, 1988) cannot be accomplished solely on one's own; external intervention is required. Expert involvement calls into question how this presumed natural, latent masculinity exists within the self. Specific discourses of masculinity are invoked to describe what a sufficient manhood looks like – sexual competency, the ability to attract women, power over self and others – and are ascribed to male bodies, setting the grounds for what a successful masculine performance entails (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005; Foucault, 1978; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

One's work is not complete once this inner, potent ingredient has been accessed; it must be refined for appropriate use. Similar to the training of zoo animals, this preparation is framed as crucial because this masculine essence is so powerful that, if honed improperly, it can misfire and 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

Natural masculinity is depicted as a weapon – both the gun and the ammunition. This metaphor of a firearm is rife with cultural symbols of masculine power (control, force, strength, violence, potential, entitlement, defence), aligning the practice of attracting women with the same meaning accorded to a man with a gun (or as a gun) (e.g. going in 'guns blazing', being a good shot) (Connell, 2005; Myrttinen, 2004). This firearm image is also invoked in discussions of honing an essential potent masculinity with a sense of responsibility; 'every man has a gun, this powerful thing inside of him' which requires training to avoid harm. Linked to the cultural trope of men requiring civilising, especially in their interactions with women (Marwah, 2013; Richards, 2003), men are positioned here as needing training to diminish their capacity for danger, and are rendered as seemingly less threatening and thus able to easily attain sex from women. Making the target (the woman) less fearful is critical to defusing her fear as a barrier to his sexual conquest. The goal is not to create respect or work to understand why a woman might be uncomfortable. Rather, the focus is

on practicing masculine presentation that does not trigger fear and flight, making the target less guarded and more malleable; rules of consent are obviated in attaining his pursuit.

As part of this honing of inner masculinity, men are encouraged by PUA advice columnists to deploy 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 cites a common discourse of uncontrollable male sexuality (Potts, 2002): a man's 'natural (hetero)sex drive' cannot be contained or hidden, because that would interfere with his expression of true masculinity. This masculine desire for sex is likened to a parallel feminine version – desire for emotional fulfilment. In creating these distinctions, the author sets up a polarised abstraction of masculinity and femininity, installed as the inverse of each other. Such polarised gendering of desire is central to the foundation of Pickup-Artistry – many PUA techniques are founded on the presumption that men want 'man things' (sexual conquests, gratification) and women want 'women things' (emotional fulfilment, comfort, attention). Making women feel like they can get what they want will disarm them by deploying inner male conquest competency.

Mental mastery: actualising masculinity through psychic transformation

PUA instructions not only call for outward, physical practice to access interior masculinity but they also promote a mental transformation, involving shifts in self-concept to achieve masculine authenticity and the presumed sexual success that ensues. It is not sufficient to simply 'act' like a man. The additional key imperative dictates psychic alteration to reinvent one's subjectivity to become the ideal, sexually confident, in-control man. This 'technology of the self" (Foucault, 1988) is positioned as both a programmatic approach to fix floundering masculinity and as a way to retrieve dormant (sacred) masculinity from the crucible of masculine destiny.

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' are distinguished, as the author invokes an embodied sense of authenticity. Here we see that men are encouraged to move beyond outward

performances of this 'natural' masculinity; it is not enough to 'play the part'. A subjective commitment to obtaining and stabilising this identity is required. 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 his improvement. The reiteration of this sentence creates rhythmic flow and visual uniformity, mimicking the expected enactment of becoming/being with sufficient practice. The directive to maintain commitment to (rehearsed) authenticity becomes part of the quotidian background staple of proper maleness.

This ritualistic taking up of uncovered masculine potency, and the work required to achieve it, must appear seamless to outsiders; but to be truly successful, it must also appear seamless *to the individual* attempting to achieve this identity. While this continual practice and surveillance is discussed as a 'choice', the commitment required for this specific masculine identity is presented as a pursuit of not only sexual mastery but of global success and happiness – the good life – interpersonally and subjectively and in various economic marketplaces (Gill, 2009). This mental mastery 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'. This exhortation to engage in 'sexual subjectification' (i.e. treating sexuality as the core of self-conception) (Harvey & Gill, 2011) is congruent with neoliberal inflections of modern masculinity discourses that yoke successful masculinity with effortful improvement to 'construct and materialise' an idealised masculine subjectivity (Gill, 2003). In this case, diligent self-modification across myriad domains (psychological, physical, financial and occupational) is the direct route to all aspirational achievements, with sexual conquests as the prize centre.

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, female sexual attention is also considered a necessary component to success in other aspects of 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 are framed as a means to an end; all of the efforts towards self-enhancement must 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 (hetero)sexual domain is solidified. It is notable that the author positions the pursuit and mastery of sex with women as something that is *essentially necessary* for the experience and possession of a masculine identity. This positioning effectively works to disregard and erase the many diverse formulations and enactments of a masculinity that do not consider (hetero)sexual mastery a central component, or include it at all (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Moller, 2007).

These excerpts highlight the complex interconnections between what is regarded as a good, fulfilling life and requirements for being regarded as an authentic heterosexual man. Sex with women is framed as something that needs to be gotten 'out of the system', so more important

achievements can be explored. Successful engagement with women for sex is positioned here in the broader neoliberal context (Harvey, 2005) of what is perceived as a pathway towards an aspirational life.

Conclusions

Masculinity experts from men's lifestyle websites situate themselves as authoritative neoliberal voices on specialised self-improvement technologies promoting idealised masculinity (Cortese & Ling, 2011; Rogers, 2005). PUA sites represent one significant instance of such advice directed at enhancing masculinity via its purported central pillar – sexual maximisation. While there are a variety of contemporary masculinities, the PUA authors oppose diverse and alternate formulations and instead endorse a restricted view of what constitutes acceptably accomplished masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 2009). Our analysis of PUA content reveals a repository of strategic advice that can be usefully conceptualised as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1988), with a dual preoccupation with transforming corporeal and internalised masculinity. The presented interpretive repertoire, *uncovering the natural*, entails two interrelated components: (a) *embodying work*, where a core masculinity residing in the body can be retrieved and harnessed, and (b) *mental mastery*, where subjective transformation is also mandated to attain masculine authenticity. Symbiotically, physical actions are said to transform subjectivity and, consequently, the enhanced core self physically emanates from the body and signals the subject's authentic masculinity to others. This transformative project is situated against a neoliberal backdrop that confers successful masculinity through consumption, self-management and aesthetic retooling (Cortese & Ling, 2011; Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005).

Throughout, the body is constructed as a container for hegemonic masculinity (strength, confidence, aggression, propensity for violence), which resides naturally within all men and requires mere activation. At the same time, despite the 'core essentialness' of this masculinity, considerable work is needed to elicit and render it useful. This way of understanding the body as a gateway to and container for the self – while simultaneously as fused with the self – is a predominant cultural discourse that pervades how gendered subjectivities are constructed (Butler, 1993). In this sense, the self is constituted through embodiment, a first-person felt sense and awareness of one's body, while bodies are also ideologically and discursively shaped, carrying signifying information to be read (Butler, 1993; Sampson, 1996).

This authentic, natural, core maleness – always construed as heterosexual – is a more sexually driven, animalistic version of modern man. These characteristics are presented as essential and biological, reinforcing predominant ontological claims about gender as something genetic, robust, fixed and residing within an individual. Once excavated from the male body, this core maleness is framed as a potent 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 underscores the dubious and precarious status of 'truth rooted in the body', or the body as a primary site of identity. Masculinity (and its privileges) in PUA texts is framed simultaneously as being in crisis and as an essentialised role ascribed to men as directors of (hetero)sex, with authors frequently adopting an adversarial tone in relation to the preservation of masculinity.

A notable tension 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 that for which women are valued in this domain – is devalued while it is simultaneously sustained as the chief achievement focus. Instead, sex with women is framed as an obstacle one must 'work through' to become the true, ideal self. Once the PUA subject has gained mastery over women by gaining mastery over himself, only then will he be able to achieve full self-actualisation. Despite all of the content specifically focused on attaining sex, and the work that goes into (re)fashioning male

subjectivity to increase success with women, the group 'women' is not recognised by PUAs as a crucial component of this promoted heterosexual hegemonic masculinity.

PUA advice articles are often written under aliases with no way to verify who produced the content. Given the authors' anonymity, this analysis was limited in its consideration of contextual and intersecting variables that may impact how masculinities can be constructed, performed and experienced (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Pfeffer et al., 2016). Another limitation was the use of pre-existing data. Though there are benefits to analysing accounts that emerge without investigative prompting, the lack of interaction between PUA authors and the researchers precluded discussion or follow-up questions. Interviews would allow for analysis of how such advice gets taken up by male readers, and what the consequences of these discourses may be.

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