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NOT #METOO: THE SEDUCTION COMMUNITY'S NICE GUYS, BAD APPLES, FALSE ALLEGATIONS AND ANXIETY

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Abstract. This paper explores the Dutch seduction community in an effort to understand how its members' inter-subjective frameworks relate to wider issue of sexual violence. Part of the men's rights movement, the seduction community is a transnational, self-help community aiming at empowering men who are "deficient" at social skills and particularly at successfully "picking up" women. The embodiment of masculinity is central to this rule-based, essentialist framing of sexuality and attraction in which men aim at instrumentally influencing sexual interactions in a quest to regain control and felt lost power over intimate relations. Sexual success becomes a token of manhood that not only helps "socially awkward heterosexual men" climb up the social ladder of masculinities but also one that promises soothing of anxieties and mastering of emotions. Based on twelve qualitative interviews of the Dutch seduction community's members, this paper examines how its members frame their involvement with pickup in light of the anti-sexual harassment activism represented by MeToo. The paper argues that the community resorts to an intertwining of two complementary discursive frameworks: hegemonic masculinity *versus* victim power, emphasizing what scholars have called hybrid masculinity.

Keywords: pick-up art, masculinities, men's rights movement, sexual violence, MeToo.

Introduction

Sexual violence has been a long-standing issue for the feminist fight with a recent renewed and increased presence in light of technological allowances

(Bratich & Banet 2019; Gotell & Dutton 2016). With widespread issues such as a culture of victim blaming, stigmatization, low reporting and conviction rates for sexual assault and the endorsement of the "real rape" myth, the anti-sexual violence movement shows its perpetual relevance as well as the struggles it must still navigate (Temkin & Krahe 2008, 349).

With its exponential visibility, the MeToo movement has brought these issues into the spotlight. While only a recent part of the sexual violence activism and with specific criticism related to its centering of upper class, white, able-bodied voices and its insufficient structural criticism (Davis & Zarkov 2018; Chandra & Erlingsdóttir 2021), MeToo played the role of a magnifying glass on wider expressions of feminism (De Maricourt & Burrell 2022; Gill & Orgad 2018) and on what Connell named masculinity politics (2005), showcasing their complexities and evolution. Backlash to MeToo has not failed to appear as it was quickly followed by #NotAllMen as reaction to a perceived inflated critique to manhood (Emery 2017; Nicholas & Agius 2018). Initiatives like "La lettre des cent femmes" critiqued MeToo for puritanism, for "hatred of men and of sexuality" (Le Monde 2018). Similarly, the hashtag #HimToo, initially used by men sharing experiences of sexual assault victimisation, quickly turned into a narrative of MeToo's "witch hunts" of innocent men (Boyle & Rathnayake 2019). These reactions pertain to the wider "anti-anti-rape backlash" (Bevacqua 2000, 181) marking an ample territory of antifeminist countermovement focused on sexual violence, as advanced by the Men's Rights Movement (MRA). A complexified backlash named "affective masculinism", MRA's countermovement instrumentalizes feminist concepts by discursive subversion and reversal, in an effort "to render the status quo 'without origin'", all from a space of "aggrieved entitlement and a sense of ontological insecurity" (Nicholas & Agius 2018, 37-38). Claiming feminism has been hurting men and society, the reactionary MRA was listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, among other neo-Nazi, paramilitary or white supremacy groups, for its "virulent misogyny, spreading of false anti-woman propaganda and applauding and even encouraging acts of domestic terrorism and extreme violence against women and children, up to and including murder" (Kimmel 2013, 109).

If MeToo broadened the discussion on sexuality, consent and social change, it also stirred a lot of tensions and anxiety. Many men have felt triggered by the potential MeToo brought – will they be accused? Will their seduction practices be contested considering the reframing of consent and sexuality? How do men perceive these proposed reconfigurations that ultimately question what was deemed as neutral and universal (Nicholas & Agius 2018) for centuries: masculinity? Considering this, MeToo was used as a symbol capturing contemporary reconfigurations of masculinities (De Maricourt & Burrell 2022) which enabled tapping into men's perceptions on sexual violence in the context of their PUA identity.

Extensive sociological research showcases increased anxiety over changing social norms around sexuality, particularly for heterosexual men who feel a sense of lost power over social dynamics (Philaretou & Allen 2001; Cook 2006; Schuurmans & Monaghan 2015; Montemurro & Riehman-Murphy 2018). In this context, pick-up art (PUA), also known as the seduction community (SC) revives the ideal of traditional masculinity as key to both sexual success for men and to anxiety management for not achieving manhood. The SC is considered part of the MRA, movement intertwined with right-wing extremism and the "anti-gender ideology" movement with whom it shares discourse, anti-female and anti-feminist feeling and often membership (Kimmel 2013; Nicholas & Agius 2018).

Recent literature on the SC has focused strongly on a content analysis of the PUA rhetorics (Ging 2017; Denes 2011; Almog & Kaplan 2015; Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019); or on an ethnographic approach into members' lived experiences with PUA (O'Neill 2015; Schuurmans & Monaghan 2015). These have not addressed how cultural accounts are related to the reproduction of inequality and violence, nor the role emotions play in this. When they did address it (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019), it was from an analytical perspective that didn't include a closer, qualitative look at PUA member's worldviews and self-positioning. De Maricourt & Burrell's qualitative research (2022) addressed the expressions of backlash and masculinities within their framing of MeToo but were focused on a wider MRA identity that didn't address a clear intersection between MeToo and PUA membership.

In adding the dimension of male anxiety related to social change as an important component for the study of masculinities, I am stating that emotions are political, with a fundamental role in the unfolding of our social world. This paper aims at enriching current research by looking at PUA members' emotional landscape and moral positioning of their membership and addressing how it relates to the wider issue of sexual violence. My research interest was to understand the contradictions rising out of PUA membership and the ways in which masculinities reconfigure to maintain legitimacy. Mainly, I wanted to know how do members of the Dutch seduction community frame and justify their PUA membership, considering the MeToo movement.

The paper will first offer an overview of existing literature on PUA and the MRA and of the theoretical framework used. I will then address the qualitative methodology used before moving on to the findings and conclusion: the SC resorts to two ambivalent frameworks revealing of strategic hybrid masculinity: a neoliberal, hegemonic masculinity framework versus an emotional, "victim power" one.

Theoretical framework

Pickup art

The pickup art or seduction community is a transnational, commercial community whose main aim is to increase sexual choice and control for heterosexual men through specific knowledge acquisition, skill training and practice (O'Neill 2015; Schuurmans & Monaghan 2015). The SC professes self-help goals in helping men increase their heterosexual skills and success with women, all within a re-enactment of hegemonic masculinity markers like dominance, perseverance, virility and control (Almog & Kaplan 2015; Schuurmans & Monaghan 2015). The embodiment of this "Alpha male" ideal is professed as not only key to seduction but also to mastering emotions and feelings of inadequacy (Schuurmans & Monaghan 2015). Meticulous practice of its rule-based, procedural scheme of attraction is framed as an "ascetic labour" towards wellbeing and even spirituality (Schuurmans 2017, 69), in a paradoxical

mixture of hedonistic goals and ascetic means (Hendricks 2012). Originating from the US, the SC has spread into a global phenomenon transcending its cyber dimension: from online classes, forums to offline seduction workshops, expensive bootcamps or "in-field" practice trainings, PUA has gained many followers worldwide. While its origins are traced back to the 70s to names such as Erik Weber's "How to Pickup Girls" (Almog & Kaplan 2015), the SC reached worldwide recognition and commercial prowess with its bestselling book "The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists". This strong commercial dimension makes the PUA subculture try to set itself apart from other masculinist factions it otherwise shares strong ideological and praxis bonds with (Ging 2017; O'Neill 2015).

Attraction under PUA is constructed through essentialist claims grounding gender and sexuality in the natural order of things; in short, "biology is sexual destiny" and traditional gender roles are biologically set (Philaretou & Allen 2001, 302). One of its main ideas "alpha fux beta bux" claims men are sexually drawn to physically attractive women, while women look for social status markers like dominance (Ging 2017). The embodiment of the ideal "Alpha" is central: men are natural hunters while women are sexual gatekeepers, responsible for hyper-vigilance, transgressions and for enabling sexual encounters through signs (Seal & Ehrhardt 2003; Denes 2011; Gotell & Dutton 2016). Attraction can be produced on will by men through a procedural approach which ultimately eludes mutuality and female agency (Denes 2011; Almog & Kaplan 2015). This promised fix is a laborious one building up to both anxiety and motivation (Schuurmans 2017).

According to Schuurmans (2017) PUA ideology frames sexuality as a market system in which women's role as sexual "gatekeepers" leads to an overly inflated sexual competition between men and to an implicit imbalance of power favouring women. Sexual confidence is framed as a scarce resource that women possess at the expense of men, in a zero-sum game in which women become "threats to the supply and are thus themselves turned into resources" (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019, 5012). Controlling women thus becomes a necessity. Reconciling their ambivalent views of women as both repugnant and desirable is done by commodifying women into currency required for their masculinity

building project (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016, 8). No recognition of social factors is done outside a partial concern with cultural restrictions on female sexuality. Rather than true disinterest, rejection is framed as either a test of real masculinity ("shit testing") or as fear of stigma and slut-shaming ("last minute resistance", "anti-slut defence"). To this, perseverance is key (Denes 2011, 416; Schuurmans & Monaghan 2015). Women are seen as "bitchy", manipulative and irrational. Their bodies are positioned against themselves as truth in what was problematized as "biology as consent" (Denes 2011): signs of attraction are defined as strictly physical while women's verbal expressions are dismissed (e.g., women smiling, touching their hair, acceptance/non reactivity to physical escalation or even not leaving the premises).

Previous research on the SC community revealed the entrepreneurial, self-governance logic and "highly rationalised form of eroticism" constructed through the reinforcement of traditional masculinity markers (O'Neill 2015, 8). Following research came to complicate this perspective. Schuurmans & Monaghan (2015) extend O'Neill's framing by emphasizing the added, ambivalent dimension of emotions behind PUA. According to them, social changes related to sexuality have brought specific challenges and anxiety to heterosexual men. Playing up on these, the SC promises relief from the emotional discomfort of not living up to the ideal male sexuality, while also setting "an overly rationalised performative standard" of the same masculinity ideals (Idem, 2). This creates a paradoxical twist: the SC reinforces the same anxieties it claims to alleviate, in a "double-edged sword" of the Alpha male embodiment (Ibid.). Bratich & Banet-Weiser (2019) showcases how the theorized neoliberal, entrepreneurial logic of PUA can cross into the more openly violent ideology of MRA's incels (involuntary celibate) as undisclosed resolution for PUA's failure to deliver its promises to some men: access to female bodies and recovery of male status. Rage over the pressure and disillusion of PUA combined with its misogynist framework serve as recipe for radicalization. Since PUA "depends on the instrumentalization and objectification of women, it is easy to slide into vilification of those objectified" (Bratich & Banet 2009, 5014). PUA's failure ultimately becomes women's fault for not "playing the game

fairly (that is, they are not acting as proper object/tool). So the game is destroyed by abolishing women" (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019, 5017-5018).

Men's rights movement

The transnational PUA community is part of the wider men's rights movement or activism (MRA). MRA's core idea is its famous "Red Pill Philosophy" claiming that men, particularly white heterosexual men are the victims of "reverse discrimination" and need to be liberated from misandry and the "feminist delusion" (Ging 2017, 1; De Maricourt & Burrell 2022). Also called "masculinism", the MRA developed in the 1970s as an anti-feminist faction of the men's liberation movement (Messner 1998; Coston & Kimmel 2013; Nicholas & Agius 2018). Its main claim is that men are hurt by the "feminization of society" (Blais & Dupuis-Deri 2012, 21), for which masculinity must be restored as main marker of self-identity (Coston & Kimmel 2013; Gotell & Dutton 2016; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016).

Increased technological affordances have enabled the rise of the MRA as a powerful transnational, online presence (Gotell & Dutton 2016; Ging 2017; Massanari 2017; Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019). Widely known as "the manosphere", it is composed of various seemingly different yet superposing online subcultures, such as incels, father's rights grous, MGTOW (Men Going their Own Way), PUAs and others (Nicholas & Agius 2018). The manosphere is what Bratich & Banet-Weiser (2019, 5008) named "a mediated network of misogynistic discourses and practices" that support and complement each other despite their apparent differences. From an explicitly violent "lad culture" to "Virtual Victims in Search of Equality", the manosphere uniquely gathers different discursive strategies of a same ideological core: calling for men's reclamation of societal power lost to women and feminism (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016).

The MRA and SC share the same self-legitimizing evolutionary psychology and biological determinism ideology: gender roles inscribe women as irrational and submissive and men as dominant; rape culture is a feminist created "moral panic" supported by widespread false

allegations and non-scientific claims and statistics; feminism is a "war on men" and on the natural order of things (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016, 10; De Maricourt & Burrell 2022, 64) and rapists and ordinary men must be clearly distinguished while sexual violence must be redefined as gender neutral (Gotell & Dutton 2016, 65-66; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016; Nicholas &Agius 2018).

Related to the increase of postfeminist discourse and to an overall rhetorical "decline of males" (Messner 2016, 12), but also to wider socio-economical processes such as neoliberalism and consumerism (Ging 2017; O'Neill 2015), the manosphere showcases "a truly remarkable gallery of antifeminist content" (Menzies 2007, 65). Using an emotionally filled "reverse discrimination" discourse intertwined with a hetero-paternalistic, essentialist narrative of a "burden of privilege" that men must carry by nature (Nicholas & Agius 2018, 40), feminism is seen as having "'gone too far' and harmed men in profound and fundamental ways'' (Maddison 1999, 40). This fuels up and overlaps with right-wing extremism, inciting to gender violence as political statement and restorative strategy for traditional masculinity (Kimmel 2013, 228; Nicholas & Agius 2018, 36). While mass attacks are typically related to the incel community, Bratich & Banet-Weiser (2019) show the connections between incel and PUA, where the failure to achieve the promise of masculinity via PUA (access to female bodies) can lead to an emotional cross over into an incel identity. In 2009, a former PUA, George Sodini, killed 3 women and wounded 9 others in an LA gym shortly after posting about his hatred for women who only saw him as a "nice guy" (*ABC News* 2009). In 2018, 22-year-old self-proclaimed "frustrated pick-up artist" turned incel, Elliot Rodger, killed 6 people and wounded 14 others in California. He justified his attack in his 140-pages manifesto as retaliation against women for refusing him the sex he felt he was owed, or in his words: "If I can't have you, girls, I will destroy you" (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019, 5015). Access to women providing affective resources such as validating male identity via "sexual availability, gratifying needs, and ensuring feelings of control", in short, social reproduction work (Idem, 5009), is defined within the wider MRA as a masculine right under attack, demanding restoration.

Emotions thus play a central part in the manosphere's creation of homosocial bonds – even within PUA's highly rationalized paradigm where true masculinity must be above all stoic and not prone to emotions (but anger or pride). Deep seated misogyny is formed not only around the ideology of traditional masculinity but also around its collective "aggrieved entitlements" to women. In lack of other resolutions, emotions such as anxiety over performing masculinity and anger over its failures are frequently channelled into active hatred of those seen as responsible for the unjust denial of their rightful validation, women: "The anger born of feeling robbed is not managed; there is no 'art of consolation'" (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019, 5013).

The emotional turn is also showcased in MRA's double discursive shift. Firstly, MRA's discursive tone shifts towards an emotional and symmetrical language of male individualist hurt, e.g., men are equally if not more harmed by violence (Messner 1998). Alongside the restoration of traditional masculinity and the discrediting of feminist empirical research (Gotell & Dutton 2016), a "victim power" discourse legitimized through biology is constructed to emotionally argue against feminist advances (Allan 2016). Schmitz & Kazyak's (2016) analysis of MRA's websites highlights two main themes: an openly violent "cyber lads in search of masculinity" and a more ambivalent "Virtual Victims in Search of Equality" framing the narrative of a "war on men" through a neutralizing discourse of "equality" centring male hurt and delegitimating women's issues. As reaction to the MeToo movement, the MRA has instrumentalized a discourse of war and victimhood saying feminism is distorting the real victims – men, attacked by the framing of benign flirting as harassment (De Maricourt & Burrell 2022). This serves as a highly effective counterbalancing strategy to legitimize complementary violent attitudes. These "affectively charged" narratives (Papacharissi 2014, 2) or "affective utterances" (Allan 2016, 22) are considered to have enabled the rise of the MRA's and right-wing extremism's new discursive strategy as a "beta uprising" (Ging 2017, 3) of "aggrieved masculinities" (Kimmel 2013). Using Demertzis' (2020) concept of affective anti-politics to frame the MRA we can consider its "aggrieved entitlements" as far from simple individual emotional spaces but as actual mobilizers into political action: masculinity turned into a political program (Kaiser 2022).

But while such emotions are highly relevant and real, nevertheless, "real, here, is not to be confused with true. These men do feel a lot, but their analysis of the cause of those feelings is decidedly off." (Coston & Kimmel 2013, 373). Without addressing the impact that compulsory masculinity has on men, these spaces will only serve as accelerators of already existing frustrations at performing the very same masculinity, in what De Maricourt & Burrell (2022, 21) named "a 'downward spiral' of radicalization".

Secondly, MRA's discourse strongly shifts towards a reactionary focus on sexual violence within the antifeminist, "anti-anti-rape backlash" (Bevacqua 2000, 181). Scholars view this affective turn of the MRA as a strategic manufacturing of male victimhood in response to increased anti-harassment activism (Allan 2016, 37), aiming to use "the issue of rape to mobilize young men and to exploit their anxieties about shifting consent standards and changing gender norms" (Gotell & Dutton 2016, 65). As stated by Blais & Dupuis-Déri (2012, 29), this backlash intensified with a perceived increased loss or threat to male privilege. Yet it shouldn't be disregarded as "extreme" or fringe. The MRA legitimizes its claims along the lines of a wider normative neoliberal, postfeminist discourse thus having the potential of broadening its support (Menzies 2007, 71; Ging 2017; Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019).

Researching into how these men position their involvement with PUA thus proves very relevant, as the SC is explicitly concerned with the restoration of traditional masculinity within an overall emotionally charged social landscape of shifting sexuality norms.

Emotions and emotional landscapes

Social sciences concern itself with the study of social phenomenon. For decades this meant a strict cartesian approach, however the field's "affective turn" emphasized the necessity to address emotion as key component of social and political life alongside cognitive dimensions like attitudes or ideologies. As Hochschild (1990, 117) argued, what we feel is as impactful socially as what we think or do. In their study of collective action and social movements, Emirbayer & Goldberg (2005) also support the idea that incorporating emotions in sociological

thinking is fundamental and that one must break past these three erroneous postulates: (1) the historical body-mind mutually exclusive binary, (2) emotions as strictly individual phenomenon, (3) collective emotions as lacking analytical autonomy. In her quest to understand why power configurations are so enduring, Sara Ahmed pleads for the exploration of how emotions interlink with social processes by looking "not at what emotions are, but what they do" (Ahmed 2004, 4). Basic social structures and processes are theorized to create specific emotional cultures and climates which condition feelings of the population; and in turn, "what humans feel has a part to play in producing the world, from the progression of a conversation to the shaping of global politics and economics" (Fox 2015, 301). Thus, addressing the emotional structure and dynamics of social life is essential to our understanding of the processes and structures of the social world.

The global presence of "affective anti-politics" (Demertzis 2020) renders the field of the political sociology of emotions increasingly relevant. Understanding the political implications of MRA's members emotional landscapes requires acknowledging the links between access to power/status, social norms and the implicit expectations related to meeting them. Power and status characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or age shape different expectation states and "people's expectations for holding, gaining, or losing power have large effects on their emotions" (Turner 2009, 348). For example, anger and aggressiveness is related to blaming others for a perceived unfair loss of status. Emotions are considered a resource as any other (e.g., power, prestige, education) and similarly unequally distributed across social classes and identities (Turner 2009, 350). As De Maricourt & Burrell (2022, 72) argued, "these "radicalized" communities express an antifeminist masculinity politics rooted in deep-seated pain and anger".

Such anger over shifting social norms can be framed through Barbalet's stratification theory: emotional landscapes are formed based on a resource comparison process that uses social norms (differentiated along the lines of power/status) as evaluation of justice (Barbalet 1998). If power is gained by specific social groups in violation with social norms and cultural beliefs on justice, then resentment and anger is collectively felt (Turner 2009; Stets & Turner 2006). With men feeling a sense of lost

power, feminism is seen as moral infringement on the claimed natural hierarchy of gender. Anger is thus justified in the face of the unjust violation of natural law. This is based on the transmutation of fear into anger: when "another subpopulation is viewed as responsible for a subpopulation's lack of power, the fear is transmuted into anger, aggression, and fight responses—thus creating tension within and across social classes" (Turner 2009, 350). Righteous collective anger departs from a perceived unjust loss of power at the hands of others and is escalated by building up fear around the figure of the offender alongside with framing the violation as such. As Schieman (2006) theorizes, people with higher social power are granted more access to anger thus contributing to a specific social distribution of anger. In our case, the MRA backlash is built around the emotional narratives of feminism's "war on men", playing up on and building men's anxieties of social change and then framing it as infringement. Here the gendered construction of emotions also plays a role as an accelerator towards anger: anger is one of the few emotions gendered as masculine (alongside pride), thus intermediary, "unmasculine" emotions such as shame or anxiety are both bypassed and used as build-up gear towards anger (Bericat 2016, 503; Shields et al. 2006).

Emotions alongside framings of power/justice are fundamental to evolutions of social dynamics. Looking at men's emotional landscape related to felt lost power within MeToo's redefinition of social norms can provide valuable insights of possible evolutions of antifeminist backlash as well as an insight into potential reconfigurations of masculinities. To address the dimension of anxiety and the ambivalence it raises within PUA's construction of traditional masculinity, this paper will rely on Pugh's theory of "emotional landscape" as encompassing term that underlies cultural incoherence and allows the understanding of "a broader, social dimension to individual motivation" (Pugh 2013, 43). According to them, cultural incoherence consists of two layers of consciousness, the "visceral" and the "honourable" self, which coexist and pierce through a person's "contradictory cultural accounts" (Idem, 42). In-depth, interpretive interviewing can tap into cultural incoherence by integrating both layers: the deep seated, emotional motivation as well as the honourable, discursive justification. In this sense, "contradictions

and paradoxes are powerful tools for highlighting the emotionally charged – what is emotionally difficult to claim, where anxiety lies, and what sort of cultural problems people face for which they need to reach for such contradictory explanations" (Idem, 48). Here, I address the participants' emotional landscape as both motivational and justificatory, reflecting Sara Ahmed's (2004) portraying of emotions as circular movement between the individual and the social level, a within-without movement in constant exchange and reshaping of "boundaries" between the two. Bridging this into methodology is also done through narrative analysis of not only emotional language but also of figurative language such as metaphors, metonymy, sarcasm, contradictions and emotional appeals – windows into emotional landscapes (Ahmed 2004; Kleres 2010; Pugh 2013).

Hybrid masculinities

The MRA's project of restoring hegemonic masculinity through an ambivalent discursive emotional strategy requires a broader understanding of masculinities. An important theoretical reformulation of masculinities is provided by Connell & Messerschmidt (2005)'s hybrid masculinities. According to them, hegemonic masculinity can no longer be addressed as a mere cultural schema composed of stereotypical patterns of domination. But rather it becomes a way through which men position themselves alongside a spectrum of multiple meanings (Wetherell & Edley 1999) as strategic alignment with whatever practices might ultimately grant external hegemony (Demetriou 2001; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Traditional hegemonic masculinity morphs from a fix set of characteristics into more fluid, strategically chosen practices, ambivalence visible within the MRA and SC and their alternate uses of beta vs. alpha identities (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016; Ging 2017; Nicholas & Agius 2018). The "beta uprising" of young white males (Coston & Kimmel 2013; Kimmel 2013) and Connell & Messerschmidt's (2005) hybrid masculinity come to profoundly complicate the long line of research on masculinities. It is within such "dialectical pragmatism" (Demetriou 2001, 345) that masculinities are hybrid, constantly reconfiguring in an intricate, "interwoven pattern"

striving for external hegemony and "work[ing] to conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways" (Bridges & Pascoe 2014, 246).

The strategic ambivalence behind hybrid masculinities enables a broader understanding of the SC. If "challenges to hegemony are common, and so are adjustments in the face of these challenges", which may "stabilize patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions" (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 853), then how is the SC reacting to feminist efforts contesting their practices? Is a resort to male victimization in issues of sexual violence and consent (Gotell & Dutton 2016; Ging 2017) a strategic counterbalance of the SC to its self-entrepreneurial alpha masculinity logic, all to justify membership, motivate controversial sexual practices and maintain external hegemony (Demetriou 2001; Ging 2017)? In alignment with previous findings on the SC members' struggle with anxiety (Schuurmans & Monaghan 2015) this paper addresses their emotional landscape as motivational, reality defining as well as discursive, while simultaneously addressing how it relates to the reproduction of inequality.

Methodological approach

Between March and May 2018, as part of my master thesis research at the University of Amsterdam, I conducted 12 semi-structured, in-depth interviews of approximately 75 minutes each with members of the national Dutch seduction community. Participants were aged between 21 to 39 years old, mainly students or having just recently finished university, with one participant non-white (**Table 1**). Two of them identified as PUA teachers (or "gurus") to the local community. One participant had a PhD. Most of them started pickup during high school or right after at the suggestion of friends or through online searches and only two started PUA after 27 years old. Involvement in the community ranged from 3 to 9 years. Recruitment of participants was done by snowballing through gatekeepers (Palmer & Thompson 2010). This enabled me to reach into a national network of pickup art members, with respondents from Amsterdam (5), Den Bosch (2), Tilburg (1), Groningen (1) and Eindhoven (3).

Table 1

Sample information

Age	Years of PUA involvement	Codified name	Employment status	Education	City	Nationality
23	9	Alvin	Student	Tertiary	Eindhoven	Dutch
33	6	Guus	Employee	Tertiary	Amsterdam	Romanian
26	9	Derek	Employee	Tertiary	Amsterdam	Dutch
24	8	Joris	Student	Tertiary	Den Bosch	Dutch
24	8	Klaus	Student	Tertiary	Amsterdam	Dutch
26	5	Roger	Employee	Tertiary	Amsterdam	Dutch
24	3	Piet	Employee	Tertiary	Eindhoven	Dutch
21	5	Matthias	Student	Tertiary	Den Bosch	Dutch
25	6	Sven	Student	Tertiary	Groningen	Dutch
25	3	Willem	Employee	Tertiary	Amsterdam	Dutch
25	6	Roel	Employee	Tertiary	Tilburg	Dutch
39	8	Jan	Employee	Tertiary	Eindhoven	Dutch

Considering the significant controversy around terms such as "pick-up artist" (Ging 2017), the main sampling criteria of participants has been self-identification with "pick-up" or "game" as ideology and/or practices of seduction (Hambling-Jones & Merrison 2012) – whether self-taught or not, online or offline, as "practicians" of PUA techniques or as active members in a local/national PU community. Specifically, snowballing implied asking Dutch students for friends who "are into pickup art". Aware of situational risks (Palmer & Thompson 2010) caused by my being a female researcher interviewing men on sexuality, the interviews were designed to ensure smooth, unbiased field research in neutral and secure public locations and a few on Skype. Following Sturges & Hanrahan (2004), the two interview modes – offline and online - offered little differences in the quality of interview data and in the depth of content, due to the topic. Its sensitive nature enabled some respondents to feel a sense of anonymity and disclosure via Skype (Sturges & Hanrahan 2004; Fenig et al. 1993) and help navigate what might be a reluctance to participate. Rapport building, eliciting stories and neutral probing (Spradley 1979) were

prioritized. Participants were encouraged to emphasize the subjects important to them thus allowing topics to come up on their "own", as mean to enable stronger validity. This enabled an interpretive approach to both interviewing and later analysis (Pugh 2013). All participants gave their informed consent. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and destroyed. For strict confidentiality purposes, personal information about the respondents such as name, occupation or any other identifiers have been removed or pseudonymized. An inductive-deductive methodological approach to data analysis was chosen to achieve "a situational fit between observed facts and rules" (Timmermans & Tavory 2012, 171). Interpretive analysis implied careful consideration for the discursive choices of participants and their usage of rich language such as metaphors, logical contradictions, non-verbal cues or emotional references (Pugh 2013; Ahmed 2004). Data analysis was done through the qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti.

My "being-in-the-world" (Timmermans & Tavory 2012, 172) as a woman and a researcher has required special consideration. My positionality imposed itself as a constant salient dimension. While particular attention was given to building and maintaining rapport, some respondents brought to the forefront my "womanhood" as contrast to their identity and experiences. Reflexivity on my being a flesh-and-bones woman and researcher emphasized how researching such topics can be "hard to digest and capable of evoking all manner of visceral reactions." (Menzies 2007, 87). Nevertheless, this can only reify the importance of researching otherwise complex subjects (Palmer & Thompson 2010). While challenging, I argue that it is this same positionality that enabled the collecting of valuable, rich data and insights. My presence as a woman interviewer, as figure reflecting participants' ambivalence on femininity as both object of desire and source of anxiety, has enabled tapping into their honourable/visceral selves and hybrid masculinities.

Several points must be made on the limitations of my research and its implications for further research on the topic. While qualitative, in-depth interviews enable higher internal validity, a few limitations on validity arise, namely the potential impact of cultural and gender differences of the interviewer/interviewee (Tang 2002). First, a

communication barrier was given by the imposed fluency in English, as I am not speaking Dutch. Participants having to be fluent in English brought numeric restrictions to the sampling and possibly contributed to my respondents having to consciously "reach" for their words during interviews. Second, the interviewee-interviewer interaction was marked by the salience of my being both a woman and a "stranger" to PUA. Further limitations were given by the snowball sampling which enabled me to navigate a sensitive, time restricted access to the field and an easier rapport with the participants, but also possibly gave access to a particular "profile" of respondents, thus influencing the nature of the data collected and its generalisability. The sensitive nature of the topic could have moved respondents into participating or recommending friends on the criteria of being "fit" or open to such context. Also, the sensitive topic and the respondents' emotionally charged experiences have conditioned and restricted the spectrum of phrasing choices in addressing sensitive questions; specifically, sensitive topics related to controversy or to MeToo had to be addressed in rather few references, to avoid producing emotional discomfort, which possibly left thoughts or ideas unspoken. In this sense, stronger consideration for the sensitive topic would require investing more time into building rapport, e.g., via ethnographic research accompanying participants in their seduction quests. As this research aimed at understanding how my participants' emotional landscapes and moral positioning speak of wider structural issues of inequality, a future broadening of this study could address PUA's transnational dimension through comparative research that would also address local influences on the construction of masculinities.

Findings

Hard labour, self-growth and hegemonic masculinity

In line with the framework of a self-entrepreneurial, hard labour logic, most respondents have framed their PUA journey as an overwhelmingly positive one, by using a language of self-help or even spirituality. Most emphasized they started PUA very young, from a space of inadequacy,

lack of sexual success or confidence. PUA was mostly defined as a life-changing experience empowering men to conquer insecurities, build social skills and regain self-confidence and control over their sexual life. Only two have expressed a relative distancing from PUA compared to their initial years, mainly in terms of time investment, felt return value, priority shifts and not ideological per se. One expressed he no longer picks-up girls because he is in a monogamous relationship but he still wings for his friends (i.e. PUA practice of picking up women with the assistance of a "wingman"). For Piet, who always struggled with mental health issues, PUA has been "one of the best decisions of my life actually." Similarly, for Jan, starting PUA "was a really tough decision but it's probably one of the best I ever made in my life". He describes it as a life-changing, spiritual decision to not only meet more interesting women but "to learn, like the ancient Greek said, (to) know thyself".

Most participants affirmed the supreme value of practice and hard labour as key to sexual success and self-growth. Alvin says: "If you never practice it's never gonna happen [...] yeah, you have to get rejected a million times - unless you're something called a natural [...] I always envy those guys. I'm not one at all." While talking about practice and perseverance, Alvin's account is ambivalent. His feelings of envy of the "naturals" and the "million" rejections one must go through reveal a visceral layer. Pain must be managed through practice. Similarly, Sven says he knew PUA work "was going to be a lot of pain" but that he had to go for it. Piet also shares that "I've been getting a little less desperate, but it's still not enough". Pickup becomes the route to conquering negative emotions and stoicism, the key to real manhood. Yet the laborious embodiment of masculinity is not without emotional hurdles.

Sexuality as a market

Sexuality was framed through evolutionary psychology and biological determinism ideas: men are natural sexual hunters and women, sexual gatekeepers. In this sense, most respondents affirmed the imperative of men initiating seduction or nothing would happen, serving as both sense-making and motivating force for their pickup quest. Many

respondents affirmed that men are disadvantaged in sexual interactions as these are controlled by women, the "gatekeepers". Female beauty is seen as another unjust advantage women have over men, playing a big part in validating masculinity (among other markers like high number of sexual partners). The bigger the role it plays the more anxiety provoking.

Guus claims that women have it "easy", they only have to be beautiful while "the guy has to pull out all the stops, to please her, to get her attraction [...] If you're a guy, you have to make a triple twist, transform yourself in Prince Charming". His metaphoric language reveals a visceral sense of injustice over women's perceived imbalance. He continues to say that women are attracted to markers of dominance, reinforcing the "alpha fux beta bux" concept and the nice vs. bad guys binary: "if you treat the woman as you would treat any other human, you won't be able to get anything out of it. If you treat the woman as a friend, as a buddy or as a neighbour, or if you care too much about her ideas, you won't get anything from her. [..] For her to sleep with you, to fall in love with you, you have to have a certain attitude, [...] generally be a bit more dominant [...] if you do this too much, you dehumanize the woman a bit. So you kind of have to get what the proper balance is [...] The problem is that what women say they want and what they really want doesn't really match a lot of the times. If the woman says I want a sensitive guy but then she goes and sleep with a guy who's not, [...] her saying she wants a nice guy is unreliable. Because that's not what she reacts to." Not only are woman unjustly privileged in the dating scene but also irrational and untrustworthy, which reinforces the need for men to dominate and "dehumanize" them "a bit". Attraction is also defined through a strict "biology as consent" view, placing women's bodies against their words.

When describing the laborious push-pull dynamic necessary to pick up attractive women, Alvin adds: "young, pretty women usually do well with guys. You probably have experience with that, it's not really hard probably."

The "poor nice guy", anxiety and rejection

Most respondents recalled an old self ridden with insecurity and "approach anxiety", building up a common identity of the poor nice guy. Alvin explains

how he felt moved to get into PU: "it's gonna be a sad substory, but I was very shy boy, and I was always duded into a friendzone[...] I was fed up with that". "Friendzone" describes the ultimate sad fate of the "nice guys" who never get women because they are drawn to "Alpha" males. Escaping this fate requires embodying manhood. Many instances are framed as initial sad stories turned around by PUA.

Anxiety over rejection and being unjustly misunderstood or "manipulated" by women came up often, reinforcing the idea of women's exaggerated power. Matthias thinks that dating today in the Netherlands is harder for men: "it's not easy these days, because there's girls (who) make fun and say I have a boyfriend when you talk to them, and then it's not true". Similarly, Sven emphasizes the struggles men have in "trying to get laid" due to being "played" by deceitful women who are

> "all acting like angels and fairytales [...] if they think they can walk over you and mess with you, they are going to do it […] they play with you, 'yeah but i'm not gonna kiss you', or like you walk home with her, and (they) say 'well it's really nice you set me off here, but I really have to work tomorrow so you know, you cannot come in here', like I literally spent 2 hours talking with her and then cause she knows like, what you want, then she's 'yeah now you can go your way, byee!'".

The emotional landscape of rejection, as related to perceived unjust and even evil responses from the women they interact with is vivid, reinforcing the idea of women's manipulative ("bitchy") pleasure in misleading "poor nice guys".

Approaching women as innocent and misunderstood was a common framing, leading to feelings of injustice when rejected. Asked if he feels affected by recent incidents in the community, Matthias says he's more mindful of not being banned from public spaces and that "most of the guys are really nice and just want to have a conversation (with you)". Sven shares a similar story: "if you're treating me unfair, unrespectful whatever, you're out, you know? I was nice and polite and I approached you in a good way, and if you're gonna ignore me or reject me or in any type of ways [...] no harsh feelings but like, you're out." While he tries to

reference a cool, detached self ("no harsh feelings"), strong words such as "you're out" and the contrasting, emphasized dimension of being treated "unfair, unrespectful" while he was "nice and polite" show a visceral feeling of injustice over rejection. A sense of entitlement to being reciprocated when approaching women "nicely" was common.

Willem shares his story of having always felt behind other teenagers and describes rejections as "gorilla punches in my face". The strong metaphor taps into a visceral struggle that also makes him unable to contain his anger over unfair rejections: "after I was nice and first made a good approach, and she rejects me in a very shitty way, I always became very verbally aggressive towards her." Violence as restorative of felt injustice over an invalidated masculinity is reminiscent of MRA spaces.

Sexual violence and anxiety

By building up the emotionally filled binary nice vs. bad guy, most respondents safeguarded a safe distance from the image of a possible perpetrator, in an effort to maintain an honourable self. Support for MeToo and the anti-sexual violence movement was mainly ambivalent, either by distancing themselves from the figure of an abuser or by expressing fear of false accusations.

Asked about recent scandals caused by pickup coaches inciting to sexual harassment, Alvin distances them from regular members of the SC who are "the sweetest guys, they were always the underdog, right? And I find it mainly sad for them because they're the real community [...] But it's the douchebags that draw the attention." Whether called "douchebags", "pricks" or "assholes", most respondents have emphasized disagreement with and distancing from controversial PUA figures, while reinforcing they are not representative for the SC. Only the few "bad apples in the basket", like Klaus said, should be included in the sexual harassment debate, while the "nice guys" shouldn't. Referencing famous PUA figure Julien Blanc's violent comments on Asian women, Joris said these gurus "wanna help people, but they use hard marketing tools to get them do that."

Alvin ambivalently frames the MeToo debate by first expressing support and then reverting it through gender neutralization: "I love

MeToo. I think it's a great campaign. I don't know about you, but I've been violated myself. Gays are always on that bootie! It's not just a female thing, man".

A strong concern with the power that women have in destroying "good men" was expressed. Built on the previous distancing from MeToo and its inherent nice guy – bad guy binary, this narrative reproduces the myth of false allegations and paints the anti-harassment movement as disproportionate and abusive. Anxiety over false allegations was expressed outwardly by half of the participants. Piet, self-declared member of "an elite PU group", is afraid that an innocent misreading of a woman's "signs" can easily lead to a false allegation:

> "let's say you're at a bar and you try to kiss a girl, and the girl doesn't really like it, but you don't see it immediately, you're a bit slow and you don't see the signs, and you push through, and that could be a very, very bad situation for everyone, very fucked up, but it's just a mistake. And she would post a thing like that and MeToo and your name behind it, or even falsely, just lie, that could happen as well, and the whole world just believes it immediately. And I think that gives a lot of power to women [...] It's...kind of scary."

His fear over false allegations started several years ago, when after a high school party, a girl accused him of sexual abuse: "some friends of mine said that I grabbed her tits, which she didn't really have, because she was flat chested. So I was like why would do that, she has nothing to grab (laughs)." His derogatory, mocking comment taps into a visceral layer of sexism as justification for abuse. The incident was solved to his favour: the girl was excluded from their social group.

Another ambivalent, emotionally filled framing of MeToo is that of Joris, who shifts from an honourable portrayal of self to a visceral one. He firstly distances himself by saying "MeToo is not for me [...] because [...] (I know) when I go too far". He then mentions heartbreak over Kevin Spacey being accused, as "a lot of people have the power to break down one of the world's greatest actors within days and they like to do that [...] it's just like a witch hunt". The "witch hunt" metaphor is a strong insight into Joris's emotional landscape, filled with anxiety over

innocent men being persecuted. The fear over the perceived power that feminism grants women to destroy "nice guys" is obvious. Women's not only having this power to destroy men but enjoying it also paints them as maleficent, reinforcing the anxiety build-up. Roel, the only one in a monogamous relationship but still "winging" for friends, reveals his strong fear of false accusations by describing a scene from the Silver Linings Playbook movie, in which the female lead: "started screaming at the street 'he's harassing me!' […] that's like, [...] a little child who wants to get her way". By painting women as "children", he dismisses them as hysterical and overwhelmed by emotions and desire to hurt men: MeToo becomes a dangerous weapon in the hands of the irrational.

Derek, youth worker, expressed support for MeToo and for the La Manada sexual abuse case (Alvarez 2018), to later express strong feelings of fear of being falsely accused: "for us, good men, it's also very difficult. Because then, if we touch a girl, we don't do it with those intentions. In the sense, of you know what i mean? But they can very quickly regard it as that [...] a man who gets charged for molesting a woman, even if he didn't do it, that's still something that can harm him for the rest of his life". Once again, the binary good versus bad men is instrumentalized to emphasize the injustice behind MeToo.

Consent as centred in men's (good) intentions instead of actual given consent was central to respondents' identity of the "nice, misunderstood guy", emphasizing a framework of miscommunication, an otherwise popular defending practice for defendants with sexual assault charges.

A few respondents went beyond this to affirm PU as a tool against harassment, a way to better sexual interactions through "signs reading" skills. Jan, a dedicated student of PUA and an informal PUA teacher, boldly states: "There are two creepy things: a lot of people say it's creepy to learn PU, huh? Because of this negative thing 'yeah you manipulate women'. But [...] there's one thing that's even creepier than learning PU and that is…not learning PU!". In a reversed framing, he first goes on to affirm support for MeToo and thinks PU "should be mandatory in schools, and then a lot of MeToo things won't happen." He then shifts to an emotionally filled mention that women "destroy reputations and careers or family lives of people, just to get some attention."

Guus emphasizes a similar point on the value of pickup as key to lower levels of sexual harassment: "Women would be harassed less...if you're not sexually frustrated then you don't need to harass women. If you can pickup every woman, if you have big chances to pick-up the women you want [...] you can accept rejection". Rejection becoming easier to handle once men can pick-up the women they want sounds like a painful contradiction. Both Jan and Guus spoke of the Incel movement as representative of sexual frustration improperly managed (i.e., men who don't learn pickup become dangerous), thus inscribing as nature both the male impetus to sleep with as many women and the violence that can result out of lack of access to sexual gratification.

Conclusion

In a quest to navigate PU membership ambivalence, the findings of this paper reveal an alternate use of a self-entrepreneurial, hegemonic framework and an emotionally stirring, "victim power" one. This proves the SC's inner contradictions despite its compulsive focus on alpha embodiment, in congruence with the wider MRA rhetoric (Coston & Kimmel 2013; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016; Ging 2017) and with Connell & Messerschmidt (2005)'s theory of hybrid masculinity. Self-positioning themselves as "nice guys" and potential victims of feminism and women's perceived disproportionate power enables PUA members to strategically distance themselves from the topic of sexual violence, while reinforcing traditional gender norms and existing power structures (Bridges & Pascoe 2014). This "both repudiates and reifies elements of hegemonic masculinity" (Massanari 2017, 332).

The intertwining of these two frameworks is relevant to their ambivalent positioning on MeToo as well. Most respondents have kept a safe distance from MeToo by stating it is a matter of concern only to actual abusers while also reinforcing emotional "witch hunts" narratives, in line with previous findings (De Maricourt & Burrell 2022). This builds to the myth of the grotesque, extreme figure of the rapist by contrast with their "nice guy" identity, a strategy documented to be used by sexual offenders in court as well as by the wider MRA to

discredit the systemic nature of sexual violence and the changes needed to end it (Chandra & Erlingsdóttir 2021, 186). Half of them expressed strong fear over the perceived threat of sexual allegations and overinflated power of #MeToo. Support for the cause against sexual harassment was rather modest or ambiguous and no personal accountability in terms of #MeToo having inspired them to reflect on their seduction practices. Overall, men's framings on sexuality and #MeToo reflected MRA's wider anti-feminist rhetoric in which: sexual harassers and ordinary men must be clearly distinguished; sexual violence must be addressed as gender neutral; rape culture is a feminist created "moral panic" supported by widespread false allegations (Gotell & Dutton 2016, 66). Portraying #MeToo as conflated feminist "moral panic" giving women punitive power towards innocent men is just an addition to the wider anxiety they already feel over embodying hegemonic masculinity, as shown by Schuurmans (2017).

This complicates and extends previous research on the SC. My findings reflected Schuurman & Monaghan's (2015), Schuurmans' (2017) argument of the emotionally filled cultural incoherence of the SC but also extended their research by relating these emotional landscapes to wider, structural violence as highlighted by MeToo. The resort to male victimization on issues of sexuality (Gotell & Dutton 2016; Ging 2017; De Maricourt & Burrell 2022) counterbalances the self-entrepreneurial, hegemonic masculinity logic that my respondents used to "filter" the world around (women) and within them (their emotions) - in order to justify controversial sexual practices, to safeguard membership identity and their ethical personas (Hanna 2014) and to maintain external hegemony (Demetriou 2001; Ging 2017). We argue that it is the very nature of their alignment with PUA as both motivation and sense-making frame that raises an imperative for them to project the management of negative emotions on women all the while personal accountability is set aside. The closed, methodological design of the SC's essentialist script leaves no room for subjectivities (Denes 2011; Almog & Kaplan 2015) while concomitantly fuelling anxieties over its self-imposed "unrealistically high standard of male sexual performance" (Philaretou &Allen 2001, 303). PUA's procedural seduction schemata doesn't only elude female agency (Denes 2011; Almog & Kaplan 2015)

but also effective means for emotional management, as negative emotions are to be solved with the very means that fuel it, thus accelerating them. Stoicism is central to the embodiment of manhood as "alpha creates an unshakable upbeat emotional state" (Schuurmans 2017, 100), yet the compulsive labour to embody masculinity is full of emotional hurdles that can't be addressed within this gendered emotional framework.

In line with Bratich & Banet-Weiser (2019) and De Maricourt & Burrell (2022), participants used the language of a "war on women" to emotionally argue against the injustice of MeToo. Participants also held strong adherence to sexist frameworks on gender and sexuality, resulting in feeling injustice over the perceived power women held over men. Restoring masculinity is framed as only mean to address such injustice granted by feminism, in a rhetoric similar to MRA's right-wing discourse and aligned with Barbalet's stratification theory (Barbalet 1985; Barbalet 1998) relating the political implications of emotions as related to access to power/status and their implied norms and expections. Sexual success with women is reinforced as marker of hegemonic masculinity, as "means to do gender, to signal a successful masculine identity" (Schuurmans 2017, 82) and the self-growth narrative enables alignment to higher morality and escapism from controversial identities. Practice as key to both embodying the Alpha ideal and to managing rejection and failure to access female bodies (Hendricks 2012) and their reproductive work creates PUA's anxiety conundrum (Schuurmans 2017): failure to achieve manhood leaves members having to deal with and make sense of negative emotions by projecting them onto women, building up to a potential restorative violence strategy. Without addressing the impact that compulsory hegemonic masculinity has on men, MRA spaces serve as accelerators of already existing frustrations at performing the very same masculinity, in what De Maricourt & Burrell (2022, 21) named "a 'downward spiral' of radicalization". It is within this stirring, emotional landscape where the imperative of PUA essentialism comes to reinforce inequality (Philaretou & Allen 2001, 301).

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