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A PICKUP IS NOT A HOOKUP: SEXUAL SCRIPTS OF PLAYERS OF THE 'GAME'

On many US college campuses, hooking up –casual sex without expectations of commitment– has become a prominent sexual script for intimate couplings among students. Much less is known, however, about the prevalence of this sexual script in other heterosexual erotic contact zones. In this chapter, I explore flirtatious encounters and enacted sexual scripts in an environment other than the college arena, the urban erotic contact zone, comprising bars, clubs, daytime cafes and high streets. My focus is on the actions of ‘pickup’ coaches and their clientele. These coaches are men who practice and study ‘seduction’, who have a great, –and at times professional– interest in casual sexual relations with women. I expected to find a strong hookup culture among these men.

In contrast to the vast body of work on college campus sexual cultures that emerged in the last decade, few researchers have looked at heterosexual intimate couplings in other arenas. Those who did generally found that conventional dating is the norm of heterosexual coupling among young Americans outside of the college environment. Bogle (2008) looked at the sexual scripts enacted by ex-students after their graduation, students for whom hooking up was the norm of sexual relations during college. She found that after college the young men and women in her study ‘largely abandoned the hookup script in favor of formal dating’ (Bogle, 2008:130). Other studies also suggest that hooking up in bars outside the college arena is rare, despite hard-pressed myths about the availability of casual sex in the urban nightlife (Grazian, 2007; Laumann et al. 1994:239). On the other hand, acceptance towards premarital sex and sex among adolescents continues to rise, and the younger generations are more accepting of these sexual behaviors than older cohorts (Wells and Twenge, 2005:5). Furthermore, increasingly more youth have sex outside of a relationship context (Wells and Twenge, 2005:6). The question is whether this applies predominantly to college students, or if youth outside the campus arena are also increasingly engaging in casual sex. To what extent is hooking up a norm of intimate coupling among young Americans in urban erotic contact zones?

'Pickup' practitioners are an extreme case that nonetheless offer a window onto dominant norms of intimate coupling outside of college. The 'game' is a highly competitive field in which players compete for status, honor and money. Hierarchies between players are made on the basis of the skills displayed within flirtatious and sexual interactions with women. One marker of skills within the 'game' is a very short interval between meeting and sex, corresponding to a hookup script. 'Pickup' practitioners and especially coaches thus have a professional interest in hooking up and actively pursue these sexual adventures. If they do not hookup frequently and if the rituals, techniques and tactics they advocate and commonly enact contrast with a college hookup script, then it is safe to say that dominant sexual norms outside of college differ from hookup culture. If, on the other hand, hooking up is a frequent occurrence, and the enacted rituals and tactics of the 'game' are similar to scripts of casual sex on campus, then this is evidence that hookup culture is transposing to domains of youth outside of college.

The data for this chapter comes from interviews with the six men that worked or had worked as 'pickup' coaches and the seven dedicated practitioners who had been involved in the 'game' between one and three years (see the method section in chapter three for a more detailed description of the background of these men). Ethnographic data supplements this chapter. This was collected during key informants' attempts to 'pickup' women in the urban erotic contact zone of San Francisco and during commercial boot camps led by the 'pickup' coaches I got to know. Names in this chapter have been anonymized.

In this chapter, I describe the 'pickup' practitioners' discourse on sexual scripts. The described rituals and strategies were enacted during observed 'pickup' attempts of key informants within the interaction order, but it critical to note that these narratives notoriously neglected women's agency. Within the 'game', practitioners discursively positioned themselves as *pickup artists*: the all-mighty puppeteers of the interaction order who strategically manipulated interactions towards their advantage. Within these discourses, women were often discursively positioned as the passive recipients of these interactional techniques or as resisting agents, who were not easily seduced. Seldom were women discursively positioned as strategizing subjects themselves, actively seeking a sexual encounter and playing the player. In this chapter, I describe the sexual scripts and the strategies and interactional techniques enacted within them as perceived by players of the 'game'.

HOOKING UP: A FREQUENT OCCURRENCE?

Nearly every Saturday afternoon during fieldwork I went to the food court of a downtown shopping mall in San Francisco to meet a group of men who had responded to a call on Meetup.com. It was called 'The SF Day Game Meetup'. This group welcomed any man who wanted to learn how to pick up young women on the streets of San Francisco. It invitingly claimed it was 'open to all skill levels'. That Saturday, a group of about ten seemingly nervous men sat around a table, surrounded by eating families and patrons who quickly consumed some fast food between their shopping sprees. I had seen a number of their faces on previous occasions, while others were new to me. By now, the ritual was familiar to me: the session would start with an introductory round in which the attendees introduced themselves, their experience in the 'game', their sticking points—reoccurring hurdles within a 'pickup', and their goals for the day's in-the field session. Then, we would divide into groups and roam the streets of downtown San Francisco to put words into practice. Isaak arrived, a man in his early thirties and a data-analyst by profession, who had recently taken an interest in 'pickup'. He shook hands with the other men in the group, most of whom he seemed to know.

'I had a crazy experience last night', he said, 'I picked up a hot Latina, crazy adventure'. 'NICE', one of the attendees responded. Others correspondingly applauded the announcement, and a few high-fived Isaak. Another man, who I had not seen before, in his early thirties, wearing a baseball cap, wanted to know more. 'Give us the breakdown', he said. Isaak took a seat and explained. He had gone to the 'Night Game Meetup', where he met five other men. First, they had gone to Ruby Sky, a downtown club, where he spotted her. She was dancing with another young woman.

'First I felt a little hesitant'. Isaak explained that he was not in the mood to 'game'. However, when the friend left and the young woman was dancing by herself, he worked himself up and approached her. 'What do you think about the music?' he asked. Reflecting on it, Isaak thought that the opening was rather 'weak', but he had 'no inspiration'. They talked for a short moment, until her friend re-appeared. Isaak introduced himself to her, but she was not up for a conversation. She disinterestedly said her name, Cecilia, and then asked her friend, whose name was Victoria, to go upstairs. Isaak returned to his wingmen, and they suggested going to another venue. Later that night, they returned to Ruby Sky. Victoria was standing outside the venue. 'How are you?' Isaak asked. She was not okay; her friend had gone home and had taken Victoria's phone with her. 'Can you imagine?' Isaak exclaimed, 'What a bitch!' Isaak gave her a hug, in order 'to create a little comfort'.

'Smart move', the man with the baseball cap commented. Isaak continued his story. 'You have beautiful eyes', he said while hugging her. She was allegedly flattered

and looked at him 'with big eyes'. Then, Isaak thought about his options. A coach had recently advised him to 'sexualize' the interaction through unambiguous sexual comments. 'You know what', Isaak said, 'when you were dancing in the club earlier, I couldn't help but notice your legs. You have very sexy legs'. She took the compliment well and reciprocated his hug. 'I thought it was time for a kiss'. He leaned in, and they kissed. Then, Isaak explained to us that he lived in the East Bay, which complicated things. He self-reportedly had two options: to go home with her, or to stay in a hotel. 'Shall I give you a ride home?' he asked. She objected, saying there was no need, and she could go home by herself. Isaak insisted, and she halfheartedly agreed. 'This was the first frame battle I had won', he reflected.

In the car, they kissed some more, and Isaak stared 'escalating', feeling her up, and petting her. 'I noticed she was a little reserved', then she 'froze', pushed him away and called him an 'asshole'.

'Did she really?' The man with the baseball cap interrupted.

'She was testing you,' another man said, seemingly confident about his diagnosis.

'That is what I thought', Isaak continued. What she allegedly meant was that she was 'feeling like a slut' for going home with him. Supposedly, she wanted Isaak to assure her that it was okay if she went with him, and he 'wouldn't judge her' for going home with him.

'So, what makes you so attracted to assholes?' Isaak asked. Victoria said she was not. Then, Isaak changed his tactics. Victoria was allegedly 'framing' him as a persona she would not sleep with, so Isaak aimed to change her perception of him.

'Why am I an asshole?' he exclaimed. 'I only came up to talk to you and see if you were all right. But if you want I can leave again!' 'No, don't leave,' she said.

'Well done', one of the attentive listeners commented.

The story continued with Victoria and Isaak still in the car, but apparently there was a complication. She needed to pee. Again, Isaak thought about his options: if they went back to the club, she could change her mind and not go home with him, but if he drove her home, she would probably kiss him good night and leave. He suggested driving her to a hotel nearby, where he would stay for the night. She could use the bathroom, and then he would drive her home. Victoria agreed but added that she was not going to sleep with him. This was 'another frame battle', according to Isaak, and one he should play along with.

'I am not going to sleep with you', he said. At the hotel, Isaak got a room, and Victoria went upstairs with him to 'use the bathroom'. At this point, Isaak did not live up to his promise, saying he felt tired and asking her to stay. They could 'cuddle up' and 'go to sleep'. Victoria stayed the night, and they had sex, but Isaak stressed that 'It took a

lot of work' and some more 'frame battles', and the sex was ultimately 'mediocre'. Isaak eventually drove Victoria home the next morning. 'Then I made the only mistake', he said. He parked the car in front of her house and kissed her goodbye.

'So, you are not even going to ask my phone number?' she asked, feeling wronged. He apologized and said that he was tired and just 'hadn't thought about it'. Asking for her phone number would allegedly alleviate the unease she might feel about the encounter.

'WOHA', the man with the baseball cap yelled and applauded. He jumped from his seat and high-fived Isaak. The man sitting beside him, who up to now had quietly listened, joined in. 'Well done' another said. Others joined in the excited celebration. 'Thanks for sharing the story', the man with the baseball cap said, stating that it had been 'extremely insightful', and Isaak 'had led her skillfully through the whole process'. A rather timid man with bulky eyes admiringly commented, 'I would have ejected when she called you an asshole'.

Later that day, I asked Isaak if this was his first one-night-stand. He confirmed that it was and in retrospect, he questioned if it was something he would aim for in the future. It had been 'an awful lot of work' and was tremendously 'emotionally demanding', a 'constant frame pushing', and the sex had not been great either.

This fieldwork episode was noteworthy because it was rather atypical. Despite the hard-pressed myth that casual sex happens frequently within the urban nightlife, in reality, it does not happen often (Grazian, 20007; Laumann et al., 1994). Even men who explicitly went out with that goal, who studied and practiced heterosexual competences, seldom attained it. In the ten months of fieldwork, in which I on average accompanied 'game' practitioners in their nighttime *sarging* sessions twice a week, I never observed a casual sexual encounter in the making. I heard about a number of hookups from reports of others as, for instance, in the aforementioned vignette, but even accounting for these secondary tales, hookups seldom happened.

Even among the most competent players, hookups did not happen that often. 'Pickup' coach John, for instance, reflected on the frequency of sexual adventurism within 'seduction communities'.

There is definitely some tall tailing going on. But the other thing is that I've done a number of things, that when I talk to guys about it, they'll say it's impossible. Owen Cook [renowned 'pickup' coach] came up with this theory that he named the secret society, which is that only 1% of the population fucks 50% of the girls, and I think there's some truth in this. I mean I had at least 130 one-night-stands, and I can see other guys doing that as well (John).

The rate at which hookups effectively happened, set out against the time and effort invested in them, was not that high. John had been an active practitioner for five and a half years and in his most active period self-reportedly went out five nights a week to 'play the field'. Even if the overall frequency of him going out at night to 'pickup' was much lower, say twice a week, then he still only averaged about one hookup in four and a half nights out. This entailed a greater number of approaches a night, often around thirty. John was also an exception in that he was far more competent in the 'game' than other players I met. Similarly, 'pickup' coach Jared estimated that he had had about seventy hookups while playing the 'game' for seven years, and many of these encounters were not strictly hookups. A meeting at a bar or club, at which the couple exchanged numbers, was succeeded by a date, days or weeks after the initial encounter. In fact, like Jared, the 'game' practitioners in my research did not meet the lion's share of their partners in the urban nightlife, but instead during the daytime, in cafes, shopping malls and on high streets. These encounters abided to a contemporary dating script, rather than a hookup.

Matz had come out to meet me in my neighborhood. I suggested to come to his, but the prospect of 'playing the game' in an area he did not know well excited him. During our stroll, I asked him how he went about approaching women in the daytime. First, he narrated about a particular way of stopping walking women, which he demonstrated on me. Matz quickened his pace, past me, jumped around in front of me and blocked my way, holding both his hands in a stop sign. I stopped. 'See, you have to stop otherwise my hands are on your tits', Matz said. I concurred. Apparently nearly all women stopped after an approach like this. 'So, what's next?' I asked.

'I say excuse me'. Matz explained that it might not sound 'very alfa', but at least after these words, women knew that you were not going to harass them. It made the approach less threatening. Then, Matz followed up with: 'Can I just say something random? 'I couldn't help noticing that...'. After this standard introduction, it was time for 'assumption stacking', a form of cold reading in which he made a number of comments on the basis of her appearance about who she allegedly was, where she was from, and what she was about to do. This would prompt conversation. He gave an example: 'I couldn't help noticing that you have something Spanish about you, in the way you dress and your dark hair'. Matz elaborated on this example. The young woman might, for instance, respond that she was from Argentina. He continued on this conversational thread, saying that he had never been to Argentina, but that in his mind he depicted perfect beaches, hot weather, sunshine, and, said teasingly,

'people who want to be Italian'. At this stage, it was unclear to me if the example was a reminiscence of an event that had occurred, a script he had read, or a made-up example. The point was clear that in the introduction he made assumptions about her to get a conversation started, to trigger her curiosity and to make her laugh. He explained that she was hooked when she started asking questions or posed in a certain way, which Matz again demonstrated, standing with one leg tucked behind the other, head slightly tilted and hand supporting his chin, while the other arm folded in front of his chest. From then on there were two ways Matz went about the interaction: He would opt for an 'instant date', for instance inviting her for a cup of coffee or an ice cream, or he would ask for her phone number and if she was up for a date later that week.

A little later, I had the opportunity to see Matz putting this script into action. We were walking on Union Square and chatting when he all of sudden ran off. He sped down the stairs, ran across the road and jumped in front of a woman in a black dress. I went over to the top of the stairs to have a look. Matz faced the woman, but I was too far away to see their facial expressions. The conversation lasted for a few minutes at the most, and then he returned.

The interaction had allegedly gone 'extremely well', and she had been into him. I inquired about what they had spoken about. After Matz jumped in front of her, he had said: 'I really love that you are dressed completely in black. It really suits my style. Since I am all dressed in black I just had to talk to you'. Allegedly, it worked, she smiled, and Matz inquired if she was a native of San Francisco. She was, but at this moment she was unsure if she would stay in the city. She had just sold her condominium.

'Aha, you are homeless', Matz had said. 'You know, I usually don't date homeless people, but for you I might make an exception'. The woman had laughed about this and touched his arm.

According to Matz, these were signs that she was into him. In the following conversation, Matz had continued to tease her lightheartedly, and she had laughed. Reflecting upon this, Matz said that this showed she 'was really into me'. He had asked her number and suggested meeting for coffee any time soon. She apparently happily concurred.

After this meeting, they had texted back and forth, and she welcomed his date suggestions. Matz proposed going for a drink in the Lower Haight, a neighborhood close to his house, which he suggested on purpose. It would make it easier to end the night at his apartment. She did not know the area at all and asked whether she could park her car. Matz suggested a spot very close to his apartment, again so the logistics at the end of the evening would be in his favor.

He met her on a Wednesday evening on the pavement outside his home and suggested going for a coffee at a place nearby. Again, Matz mentioned that he had thought about the specifics of this location. It was a bright and busy café, with lots of windows, creating an atmosphere that would not feel threatening to her. They got a cup of tea and sat down. Matz prided himself on his 'game' that evening, and everything he did allegedly 'worked'. He was keen on establishing physical contact from the start. He, for instance, complimented her earrings and nonchalantly ran a hand through her hair. Later, when he needed the restroom, he got up and moved his hand over her hip. She did not react, which apparently was a good sign. Her fingernails were painted artistically with thermochromic polish, and they said 'yes' when warm 'no' when cold. 'It was great for kino', Matz said, referring in the argot of the 'game', referring to the inviting proclivity to touch, warm and sooth such hands. Matz reckoned that she did her nails for that purpose.

At this stage, they also played the question game, a routine that he enjoys. The game is very simple. You both take turns asking and answering questions that should be a little edgy. Answers need to be truthful, and the buildup is such that questions become progressively more sexual.

'What do you consider to be your best feature?' he asked. Later she asked him what his favorite part of the female body was. According to Matz, this was an excellent opportunity to complement her on her physique, by describing characteristics that could be applicable to her. She was a very slim woman.

'My favorite part is the waist', Matz said. He explained why he had said this: many women are allegedly insecure about their waists, so such a compliment could uplift her spirits. She asked him about his most embarrassing moment.

'An excellent question', Matz said. It prompted them to share vulnerable experiences through which they would connect emotionally.

After the tea, Matz suggested going to another venue, a swanky cocktail bar a few blocks away.

They went outside and walked a few blocks, and she crouched and was obviously cold. 'An invitation', Matz said, to put his arm around her and cuddle up. They got a drink at the bar, and the conversation at this stage 'flowed naturally', and the couple kissed. 'I am getting drunk', she said, 'I am a lightweight.' For Matz, this was a reason not to buy her another drink. He did not want her to be drunk; he wanted her to 'be with him'. Matz suggested going to his apartment.

'I am not going to have sex with you', she said.

'Of course not, I never sleep with girls on the first date', Matz responded, 'I can't believe you would even think that'. Using an understatement was considered a good strategy to take away reservations. She asked him if he was a serial killer.

'I kill randomly, not quite serial', he responded. Upon entering his apartment, Matz purposely gave her some space. It gave her the opportunity to check out the apartment and to become at ease. She looked around, had a look at the bookshelf and the drink-cabinet, then the fridge and asked whether he wanted a drink. This was supposedly a 'good sign', as it seemed that she felt at ease. Matz switched on the TV and played a series he often plays when taking dates home. They sat on the couch together, cuddled and watched the show. They made out, and at a certain stage he lifted her up and carried her to the bed. She seemed to close up, her body stiffening. Matz advanced nonetheless. He undressed her and went down on her. At a certain stage, Matz looked up.

'Do you want me to stop?' he asked. She did not, but it did not go further than that. Matz reckoned that not going all the way would win her trust and make her curious about another date.

These markedly different vignettes show the wide range of sexual scripts enacted among 'game' practitioners in the Bay Area. Some of these encounters were, at first glance, similar to a typical hookup script on college campus, for instance Isaak's tale. Others adhered more to a modern-day dating script, such as Matz' experience, and those were by far the most common among my informants. Many sexual scripts dithered between these two examples. A nighttime meeting could be followed up by one or multiple dates, or a daytime meeting evolved into sex that same day. However, even the one-day-stands were not all that casual. Many rites, techniques and tactics of the 'game' accomplished something not quite like casual sex.

RATING AND DATING

The dating and hookup scripts have specific rituals. A number of the rituals of the hookup script were described in the previous chapter, including the 'audience games', the excessive drinking, the public enactment of sexual acts, and especially the rites to curb emotional intimacy. The sexual scripts of practitioners of the 'game' also had specific rituals, which will be delineated in the following sections.

Both the hookup and dating scripts have a 'screening protocol' in which interlocutors gauge the others' desirability and their potential as a viable match. However, the nature of these protocols differs between the two scripts. Within hookup culture, erotic prestige is determined by appearance, group membership and one's performance in the 'audience games'. A number of scholars, for instance, note that especially male athletes and men of high-ranking fraternities have high status

in the sexual economy on college (Bogle, 2008:61; Wade, 2017:36). As a young female student in Wade's (2017) research states: 'Frat stars and athletes – those are the only ones that matter. I mean, honestly' (2017:36). Relative to hooking up, contemporary dating entails a different evaluation of attractiveness. A broader set of social, physical and psychological criteria beckon attractiveness within contemporary dating; emotional and communicative qualities become more important, as well as character traits, socio-economic status, ambition, and one's worldview. The script of contemporary dating comprises a screening protocol, where interlocutors flag and gauge social status markers, personality traits, and tastes and preferences. Many of the rituals that players of the 'game' enacted were primed towards this screening protocol of status and attractiveness within contemporary dating.

Within the ethos of the 'game', attraction is something that can be gained and lost within interactions. Attraction can be won by men through performances that signal hyper-masculine character traits, such as dominance, stoicism, confidence, persistence, straightforwardness; this can also be achieved with softer qualities, such as discreteness, humor and emotional expressiveness; additionally, attraction forms through signaling socio-economic status. Performances that contrast these markers result in a loss of desirability. Within the 'game', such male performances that heighten attractiveness are *demonstrations of higher value*, or *DHVs*. There is an overwhelmingly large agreement among 'game' practitioners about these qualities; unsurprisingly, playing the 'game' often entails performing these qualities within interactions.

The most important element for generating attraction within interactions with women in the 'game' was the ability to make her laugh. Banter and lighthearted horseplay were emphasized as means for establishing attraction. Players often responded playfully to typical screening questions that are customary within interactions between strangers in urban erotic contact zones.

For typical questions, [like] age? What you do? Where [do] you live? I just give stupid bullshit. Where do you work? Well I'm a ninja, so we meet on secret undisclosed locations and if you're late they will kill you, you know what I mean? Yeah, I'm a pirate, but on vacation right know. We look for gold, it's pretty awesome. [I would ask her] What do you do? Wait, you are a garbage man, aren't you? I could smell it (John).

'Game' practitioners emphasized the need to break away from the typical interactions that patrons usually have in their nightlife to distinguish themselves from the majority who are predictable and dull. Humor is what could set one apart from other men in the sexual arena of the urban nightlife.

I often went to the financial district and there I competed with wealthy men. And these guys would talk about how much money they were making and I would tease them a little in a conversation with a girl. They would be like 'what do you do for a living?' And I was like 'Well I'm homeless, I dumpster dive for a living and then sell that stuff. You want to come to my dumpster in a little?' And I was wearing a good suit, it was more about making fun of them, where these guys just wanted to use their money to get in her pants, I would rub it in and use it against them (John).

The 'game' was a competition that was not only played between players, but also between insiders and outsiders, in which sexual relations with women were at stake. Within the 'game', status distinctions were made on the basis of an ostentatious display of heterosexual prowess, and the ability to banter flirtatiously with interlocutors was a defining skill that set players apart from unskilled in- and outsiders. A man's ability to 'make her laugh' in the 'game' made him more attractive to women than his socio-economic status or appearance.

Jokes and banter were especially enacted in the initial stages of a 'pickup'. In the logic of the 'game', a 'pickup' developed through stages. In the initial phase, mutual physical attraction emerged, and in a later stage, there was a buildup of emotional and physical intimacy. Since humor generated attraction, it was especially relevant in the introductory phase of a flirtatious interaction, but this did not mean that humorous performances were confined to the initial stages. Throughout the encounter, these gambits were enacted, but they were slightly more pronounced in the introductory phase.

Flirtatious banter, storytelling, jokes, games and dances could all be performed to 'make her laugh'. John explained, 'I dance like a complete idiot and have an awesome time dancing like an idiot. I'll do the running man, the sprinkler, the shopping cart'. Smartphone messages were another potentially effective tool for introducing levity into the interaction. Jared exemplifies this with an example that he accompanies with the image below:

Here is a really common one I sent. I say 'Hey, I was catching up on Disney films with my nephews, but I am not so sure about Disney anymore' [laughing]. And the funny thing was [...] and the girls would always respond in the same way. They would just say 'Oh, my god, like hahaha' and they would either say, 'Look, he's reaching in the bag for more'. [...] Either they or I would say it. And the funny thing is that I would always ask them, 'What do you think he's reaching in the bag for?' And they always responded in the exact same way. 'A big black dildo' [laughs].



Figure 1: Still used by Jared in smartphone communication. The source of the original still is unknown.

Banter often took the form of flirtatious play, remarks with a ‘double entendre’, expressions and performances with ambiguous meaning that insinuated a potential future enactment of a sexual script without immediately acting upon it. Tavory (2009) conceptualizes flirtation as the liminal phase between two interactional frames, that of the established relationship –with acquaintances or colleagues- and that of lovers. Flirtation is about enacting behavioral cues of both interactional frames somewhat simultaneously, while never fully actualizing the transition to lovers.

[...] Flirtation can be seen as a dual interaction occurring at the same time: one which is past-present orientated, and the other future-present orientated, where practices from the potential future are incorporated into the present’ (Tavory, 2009:67).

This, however, misses the essence of flirtatious banter within the ‘game’. It is not about momentarily enacting cues of a ‘lovers frame’ but is an effort to awaken desires through simultaneously suggesting and denying a potential enactment of a sexual script. This can be elucidated by a distinction between romantic and sexual

flirtation. Tavory (2009) analyzes romantic flirtation. This hints at a potential future relationship as lovers by momentarily enacting cues of a lover's frame; in contrast, sexual flirtation is the suggestion of a potential sexual encounter. Flirtatious banter within the 'game' is sexual and resembles what Simmel calls the 'alternation or simultaneity of accommodation and denial' (1985[1911]:134). Within the argot of the 'game', this double entendre of flirtation is described as *push-pull* or *dual direction*, implying the insinuation of a potential future sexual relationship, alongside the rejection of this future scenario.

The double entendre within the 'game' took two distinct forms. The first entailed an ambiguous expression of sexual interest, while simultaneously overtly denying this. The second was an explicit insinuation of a forthcoming sexual encounter, while at the same time expressing doubts about the likelihood of such a scenario. The first form had the structure of 'I might want and I don't want', which could be expressed through words, gestures and gazes and often entailed a rather complex performance of behavioral cues. This complexity revealed itself in experiences of 'game' practitioners with *negs*, teasing remarks, such as comments like: 'Nice nails, are they real?' or 'Those are like really great shoes, that's something my mom would wear' (John). *Negs* have a negative connotation, mainly because, in the logic of the 'game' these interactional gambits work by momentarily lowering a woman's self-esteem and setting the player apart from all other men who compliment her looks. As a result, women become interested because for once a man is not talking to her because of her appearance. Most neophytes of the 'game' started from this theory and began interactions by insulting a female interlocutor. Competent players, however, did not insult their flirt. Their *negs* were accompanied by subtle expressions of sexual interest, through gazes, body language and gestures. Through this double entendre, *negs* could be a form of flirting; however, most players of the 'game' lacked the cultural competences to make this effective.

A far more common mode of flirtation was the second form. This entailed an explicit insinuation of a forthcoming sexual script and a simultaneous expression of doubt about its future enactment. These expressions often had a structure of 'I want, but you don't'.

I'll try to kiss her right then and when she turns her cheek, I'll be like 'Oh, no you rejected me. Now I'm sad', said with irony.

'I don't kiss boys on the first date' (a woman's voice).

'No, it's okay I'm understanding it. You are rejecting me. It hurts my feelings. I'll go to the bathroom and cry for a bit', again said with irony (John).

This form of flirting was less often misunderstood by interlocutors. It also entailed a simultaneous duality of interest and denial, but the latter was framed within self-effacing statements that questioned one's potential, ability or interest to enact a sexual script.

A variation of the second form of flirtation, were statements structured as 'You want, but I don't'. Here, the duality of interest and denial was expressed through insinuating that she wanted to enact a sexual script, while he withheld it. This form of flirtatious banter was often enacted as a role-play, in which the woman was discursively positioned as the desiring subject and the man as the desired object.

When I go to a bar and talk to a girl, she's the prize, and I want to get in her pants. When I frame switch, I'll be the prize, and she needs to flirt with me. And how I do that is, when she's laughing at my jokes, I say: 'You think I'm funny, you're already thinking about taking me home, aren't you?' And she'll be like, 'No', and then I accuse her of lying [...] And then I [...] say 'Oh my God, you are totally thinking about fucking me right now'. And she'll be like 'No, no', and I'll be like 'Yeah, the damage is done (said teasingly). You're thinking of me as a sausage with feet'. And I'll turn to her friend and say, 'You are thinking about it as well, aren't you? You're about to shove your hands in my pants'. And then we've initiated this super-sexual conversation, and I can give her little hugs, and say 'You're thinking about it, but I'm not gonna give it to you, yet' (John).

As Simmel (1984)[1911] argues, flirtation can awaken powerful desires, through insinuating an enactment of a sexual script while at the same time denying it as a potential future scenario. Such is the structure of the imposed role-play. It entailed a constant framing of the female target as the sexual aggressor and desiring subject, while the man is presented as the prey of her yearning. When enacted successfully, this fueled a highly sexual stimulus between interlocutors.

Besides humor and the ability to banter flirtatiously, a man's sexual appeal was allegedly also determined by his *body language*, the way in which he held his body to display an ideal of *alphaness*. *Alpha* were bodies that took up space, walked wide, chest up, stood up straight, sat with legs apart and talked with a deep and loud voice. Coaches often tried to teach neophytes the 'techniques of the body' (Mauss, 1973[1935]) of the *alpha* ideal. This resulted in rather comical situations of men instructing other men how to hold their bodies in order to be *alpha*. I made the following observations during a commercial 'pickup' instruction:

Verron asked the attentive audience of neophytes for a volunteer. A man, black hair, leather jacket, rose his hand. Verron would play, in his words, 'a bitchy girl', and the volunteer was asked to make a move. The volunteer stepped from the picket line of onlookers. 'Relax', Verron said. The guinea pig indeed looked rather cramped. He held his arms besides his body, but not loosely. It looked as if his muscles were all tensed up, his arms, his back and his neck all looked cramped and tightened. The volunteer's voice sounded similarly restricted and very nasal. Verron told him to relax and to 'look sexy'. The man readjusted his posture.

'Does that look sexy?' Verron asked rhetorically. The audience laughed. Then Verron illustrated a sexy posturing of the body. He held his head up straight and looked over his shoulder suggestively and relaxed his torso. That was the sexy look. The volunteer imitated the posture but could not completely match it. It remained a rather cramped copy of the Verron's posture. He said a few lines, and then Verron cut him short and suggested that we all would practice our 'body language'.

Being *alpha* not only resonated in the posturing of the body, but also within the timbre of voices. Players tried to talk in deep voices, speaking loudly and clearly and pacing their words.

Do you know Dexter, the television series? He speaks in the right tonality, it's almost always if he's yelling. What we teach is that you want an emphasis on the first part of the speech act. Most guys raise their voice in the end of the sentence. We teach guys to do that at the beginning of every sentence (Dylan).

Alpha not only meant a particular bodily disposition, but it also entailed assertiveness, straightforwardness and dominance within interactions. It involved explicitly stating what one thought and what one wanted and directing the interaction towards that goal. Much of the acts while playing the field were informed by this imperative. *Alpha*, within the 'game', entailed expressing a clear sexual interest in flirts, '[...] being *alpha* enough to say "you're fucking hot"' (Dylan). And *alphaness* meant that one was 'the harbinger of the interaction' (John), that one initiated the flirtatious interaction and directed the interactions towards a sexual scenario.

It's also leading to a direction that I want it to go into. It doesn't mean that I have a disregard for what she desires, it's just like, I'm not asking her for much input on stuff. Like, what you wanna do? [...] I'm in a very leading role, very physical, very forward, especially in 'pickup' you have to be leading (Jared).

Alpha also meant displaying dominance over other men and women. When bystanders, intentionally or unintentionally, interfered with the 'pickup' attempt, players tried to establish dominance over the situation. This was achieved, for instance, by outcompeting them with wit, by persisting the 'pickup' attempt despite interruptions, or by physically moving the interaction and the interlocutors to another place in the venue.

Performing *alphaness* also entailed a form of stoicism, meaning that one should not be disturbed when a woman rejected one's advances, or when unforeseen forces interrupted with one's 'pickup' goals. In the wordings of practitioners, *alpha* entailed an unshakable upbeat emotional state. 'Well, he (competent player) should be completely rooted and unshakable in his presence, so the girl can throw things at him and he doesn't really flinch much' (Jared). *Neediness*, in the argot of the 'game', was the antonym of the cherished centered stoicism of players. *Neediness* entailed an emotional investment within interactions and relations, suggesting that one's mood and confidence depended on the reactions of flirts.

It's hard for me to say when behavior is needy. It depends on their motives and their minds for action in a way. When a guy has neediness over a date [...], when a woman ends up texting: [...] 'Hey, I have a really bad day at work and it's this and this and this, so I might need to reschedule for tomorrow'. But when his day is completely shocked from that point, I would say that that guy is in a state where he lives a pretty needy life. Where his happiness doesn't depend on himself, but on other people's reaction to him. But also in the opposite way, when he gets really stocked on validation from a female, like he weighs everything on this one date and when he gets it, he gets shot out (Jared).

Playing the 'game' for most practitioners entailed an effort to overcome *neediness* within their interactions with women and reach a state of unshaken emotional centeredness. This was seen as a quality that raised one's attractiveness to women in the sexual arena. 'When that neediness drops away women want to be around you so much more' (Jared).

Being *alpha* also meant performing an upbeat, energetic, social and charismatic persona within the interaction order. According to the 'game', spaces and their patrons, for instance bars and clubs, were stratified on the basis of erotic prestige. This was not solely determined by appearance, but primarily, at least for men, on social qualities, for instance, the ability to animate people, to captivate them through stories and convivial conversations, to make them laugh and think and to entertain them. The erotic elites were the 'sociability stars' of the venue, the centers of attention, the popular bunch (Collins, 2004:252-254).

We passed a bar on Geary. It seemed reasonably crowded inside. Matz suggested doing some 'warm-up approaches'. We went inside and I scanned the room for potential people to talk too. Matz called my attention. 'You shouldn't be looking around that obvious', he said. He explained, a man of value would enjoy himself and be little concerned with who is in the bar and who is not. We should instead behave as if we were engaged in lively interaction and were having fun and never look around silently at how other people interact.

Playing the 'game' was about performing this charismatic and social role within the interaction order. When one or a group of players entered a venue, they would often pump themselves up and transition from a low-key mundane interaction to an ostentatious, purposefully enacted energetic engagement. They would walk through the crowd and high five each other and perform enthusiastic greetings, dance animatedly, and always playact their engagement in sparkling interactions, even when this was a facade. 'Game' practitioners often pretended to be the 'sociability stars' of the venue, often with success, even if minutes before their vibe was low-key and their interactions dull.

Besides humor, banter and *alpha*, popularity, or *social proof* in the argot of players, within the sexual arena was an important determinant of attraction within the 'game'. *Social proof* was embodied by popular conversationalists with many friends and acquaintances, especially people of high erotic prestige. This explained why many players went out in groups. Furthermore, even when they went out alone, practitioners tried to foster the impression that they were always engaged in animated and exciting conversation and that they knew many patrons in the venue. In a meetup of players, one man called Greg explained how he demonstrated *social proof* when playing the 'game' solo.

'Going to bars alone is weird, people find it creepy,' Joshua said. Greg mentioned that he had done this a lot in the past. In France, where Greg was born and raised, they had an expression that translated as 'going out with your balls and your knife'. This meant that one went out alone to 'pickup' women. According to Greg, it was all about 'confidence building' in the venue. Greg would enter the bar and immediately talk with some people near the entrance, men and women alike. Then, he would slowly work his way through the bar, meeting and talking to others. When he felt he had built his confidence and established a 'safe base' of social contacts in the bar, people he could return to, he would 'game' the women in the venue that he wanted to 'pickup'.

When going out solo, ‘game’ practitioners would never tell other patrons that they were alone. When asked about it, they were always out with ‘friends’. When interlocutors asked where these friends were, a player could point to people that he had previously befriended in the bar, or he could say that the friends had just gone to another venue.

It also mattered with whom one socialized in the public arena. Popular individuals or people of high social status were preferred. This meant that players of the ‘game’ tried to associate with people with erotic prestige, often the group of pretty and seemingly successful people that seemed to have the most fun. A common strategy was to befriend this group and use this as a ‘safe base’ from where one would venture to flirt with targeted women. Being in the presence of people with high socio-economic status could also be utilized as a form of *social proof*. During fieldwork, some players introduced me as the ‘professor in social-psychology’. Initially, I corrected them saying that I was a PhD-student in sociology, but this was not appreciated. Being out in the field with a ‘professor’ whose field was akin to a supposed interest of women offered much more *social proof*. When people of high socio-economic standing or of high popularity were not in one’s immediate presence, one could always tacitly mention that these individuals were friends or acquaintances. ‘I could tell a cool a story that involves Tom Cruise. You do these displays through secondary means [...] I would have a bunch a photo’s in my phone where one would be of Tom Cruise’ (John).

On dates, ‘game’ practitioners also aimed to foster the impression that they were extremely social men who had many friends. A common tactic was to plan dates in locations where one was sure to run into people that one knew and liked, who would be able to give the player some *social proof*. Jared, for instance, explained how he demonstrated *social proof* on a date.

My dates are really casual. I would just have them come over and then we do this or do that. I would go to a grocery store, or I would go to a coffee shop and the point of going to a place [like this] was to make her feel comfortable around me and also, I would just be extremely social. So, I would talk to any single cashier. I would just be flirty and fun with people, just to set the parameters of this is how it’s going to be with me.’ [...] and then I would take them to a lot of different venues and different places, and the girl would see that a lot of people are excited to see me. So, I would always take them to a place where I knew I would be running into people. I just know that if I go to certain clubs or go to certain restaurants, I would run into people I know (Jared).

Other players would plan their dates in venues where they knew the staff and held friendly relations with them. Being warmly greeted by waitresses, bar staff and club managers was of course a *demonstration of higher value*.

In the logic of the 'game', one's popularity as a hookup or dating partner determines one's attractiveness to women, especially if one's prior partners were also popular. This parallels the dating and rating dynamic described by Waller (1937) in which one's status among peers is determined by one's popularity as a date. Within the 'game', practitioners aimed to show the women of their liking that they have been sought after partners in the sexual economy. Within the argot of the 'game', this is referred to as *preselection*. This could be signaled through implicit references to popular women that wanted to date them. Alternatively, it could be communicated through images, for example on social media, which is why many players had carefully crafted Facebook profiles that depicted them with a variety of attractive women. Smartphones and the images stored on these could be other tools to communicate one's popularity within the sexual economy, hence a favorite 'pickup' ritual was to show a collection of photos to a targeted woman, of which some depicted him together with women perceived as beautiful. The principle of *preselection* was also the reason why some players carefully drew a lipstick mark on their cheek or neck, insinuating that they had recently been kissed. Additionally, *preselection* informed 'pickup' strategies within the nightlife. A common tactic to enhance one's erotic status in a bar or a club was to befriend women perceived as beautiful, then, together with these individuals, *pawns* in the argot of the 'game', maneuver towards a targeted woman to flirt with. *Wing-women*, women that assisted players in the 'game', were especially valued, because they communicated *preselection*. One of my informants, Mahesh, one time hired a female model to play the *wingwoman* role.

High socio-economic status was also seen as a *demonstration of higher value*, although explicitly flaunting this was not. 'Game' practitioners tried to communicate this tacitly, for instance through casually referring to the neighborhood one lived in or the company one worked for. A number of players that lived in expensive apartments within the city would ask a woman to meet them there for their date, from where they would go to different venues. This way she could see for herself that he was a man of high socio-economic status, without him referring to this in conversations. I met one player who had a large stash of dollar bills in his wallet. He was not rich, but this gave the impression that he had a considerable amount of spending money, which was precisely the impression he hoped to foster. Another player of the 'game' showed me his profile on a dating website. In his profile picture, he nonchalantly sat in his car, the BMW logo clearly visible on

the wheel, which, according to him, *demonstrated higher value*.

Additionally, performances that communicated a spontaneous, exciting and hedonistic lifestyle would allegedly foster female interest. The banalities of one's daily existence were downplayed within male-female interactions. A practitioner who worked as a software engineer told women that he professionally 'solved problems'. Both their artistic and entrepreneurial activities were *demonstrations of higher value*. Stories about 'risky' leisure activities, such as skydiving, racing and surfing were often told within the 'game'. Likewise, players often spoke about traveling and exciting and daring experiences upon these trips.

An example of a story I used to tell in 'pickup' was about our bus in Tibet getting hit by a truck full of pigs. The bus driver started fighting with the other chauffeur, then the bus driver hit the guy with a rock, took his wallet and went off. Things you can integrate in your conversation is that you have access to wealth, that you're well-traveled, that you have famous friends, that you're involved in sports that are cool. It's the idea that through storytelling you show different aspects of your personality (John).

Within the 'game', storytelling was a means for showing certain aspect of your identity. In particular, it was used to emphasize the aesthetic qualities of life, such as spontaneity, excitement, thrills, intellectual stimulation, arts, travel, food and other expressions of easily relatable passions. One could also emphasize these qualities through activities on a date or a 'pickup', for instance through visiting certain bars, gourmet ice-cream parlors, coffee shops, restaurants, galleries or architectural sights. Or, like Jared, one could create unexpected and memorable experiences that would foster a long-lasting impression on a significant other.

I would take her to a high place, for instance, climb on a roof. There are always some roofs that you can access via climbing a street pole. Or it was the railroad crossing. You can actually climb up them really easy, sometimes it was trees, sometimes it was my roof, and I would make it an adventure. Where other guys would approach it and say 'Are you up for this?' or 'Are you not up for this? Nothing bad is going to happen.' I actually did the exact opposite. I would say, 'You are adventurous. This is something you would do. If you are not adventurous [then] this is a moment to become adventurous. This is you and we put it to the test now'. And the girl would be like 'Okay'. And I would be walking with her, and I would already have it in my mind to where we were going to climb up to. So, I wouldn't tell her that we were usually right next to it. So, I would take her for a walk, down the railroad tracks and then I

would be [...] ‘Seriously, you are like that, like living adventures, like living wild, that is you’. And she would be ‘Yes’, and I say ‘You can always do more, you always want to live up to more’. And, she said ‘That is me’, and I say ‘Awesome’. Sometimes I would actually lift the girl up to my shoulder, and I would say, ‘Keep your eyes closed’. And I would tell them before I put them down, ‘Listen this is our moment, this is one of the moments I’ve been talking about’. I am a cheesy romantic guy too, I sat them down and keep their eyes closed and check it out. ‘You are on an adventure’ [...] and the girl would be ‘Okay’ and I say, ‘When you open your eyes, just follow me’. And most girls would, and they would open their eyes and start climbing up whatever it was, and I would say, ‘Go, go, go’, and most girls would. They would climb right up [...]. So, when they get up there they always say the same thing. ‘This is amazing. I have never come up here. I have never been up here before. I never thought about it, that is one of the things that is amazing’ (Jared).

Not only did ‘game’ practitioners try to express a broad range of character traits within their flirtatious interactions with women, they also tried to foster the impression that they were sincerely interested in their personalities. At times, this might have actually been the case, but at other times, it was predominantly instrumental. While these valuations of character and tastes and preferences might not be important in truly casual sex, it was central to the enacted scripts of players. In the argot of the ‘game’, *screening* entailed fishing for personal interests, tastes and character traits of one’s interlocutor. Questions, such as, ‘If you win the lottery what would you do?’ or, ‘Look, I got my private jet outside. We’re gonna go on a holiday for the next month and you can decide where we’re gonna go’ (John) offered an opportunity for interlocutors to express some of their personal interests, tastes and preferences. *Cold reads* were another interactional technique to prompt the interlocutor to talk about herself. These were assumptions about women that were based on her appearance and behavioral cues. From these cues, players attempted to gauge a woman’s interests, tastes, passions, apprehensions, or any single aspect of her identity one could think of. In the following interaction, one would disclose these and elaborate on which behavioral cues led to these assumptions. The ‘game’ emphasized a performance of a seemingly unrestrained curiosity within flirtatious interactions.

I’ve a way to get myself in that state of this extreme curiosity. And from there I would ask myself kind of, where I was curious about the girl, and then I usually go over and say what is most on my mind about her. And I would make a statement. It could be like, ‘You have a lightness about you that seems that you’ve had an awesome day’ (Jared).

Such statements would often prompt conversation about topics related to her interests and reveal aspects of her personality. Practitioners often followed up on such information with *qualification*, a communication strategy in which they explicitly acknowledged the traits and tastes they appreciated in their flirts. 'I'm gonna pull three things out of the girl that I really like and say that I enjoy those things about her' (John). Through *qualification*, players of the 'game' tried to foster the impression that 'you don't just want to be with her just to get your dick in' (John).

Within the 'screening protocol' of a contemporary dating script, interlocutors fish for and ostentatiously communicate a broad range of identity markers. Examples are: character traits, tastes, lifestyle preferences and socio-economic status. On the basis of these criteria, flirts decide whether they make a good match and whether they will date. The performances of players of the 'game' described within this section are tailored towards the screening protocol of contemporary dating. Why would practitioners go to such lengths to show all these identity markers to their flirts, if both parties expected just a hookup?

RITUALS OF EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

A number of scholars emphasize that the hookup script is largely devoid of emotional intimacy, and quite a few rituals enacted within the script aim to curb the development of this experiential proximity (Bogle, 2008:165; Kalish and Kimmel, 2011:144; Wade, 2017:41-43). In chapter two, I discussed a number of these strategies to restrict emotional intimacy within a hookup encounter. Very few players enacted rites to curb the development of experiential proximity with a flirt. On the contrary, many of the rituals enacted in the 'game' were intended to aid the development of emotional intimacy within the flirtatious interaction. This is another indicator that sexual encounters in the 'game' often did not abide to a hookup script.

One strategy enacted in nearly every 'pickup', during both the day and night, was to visit a number of different places in a relatively short period with a flirt, which players call *bouncing*. These places could be bars or nightclubs, or a restaurant or tourist site. If she was with friends, then the whole group was invited to come too, at least during the first location changes. On dates, practitioners used the same tactic; dates would ideally spread out over multiple sites that were carefully chosen. The first location should have a non-threatening atmosphere, a busy spot, light and open. 'I would go to a grocery store, or I would go to a coffee shop, and the point of going to a place [like this] was to make her feel comfortable around me' (Jared). Consecutive locations could be venues with games, like pool or foosball, or

shops, cafes or restaurants. At some stage, they would transition to a more intimate location, such as a bar with dimmed lighting and private seating, and eventually one's home. Dates would seldom happen at one location. 'Even if she would be just coming over, I would be like "Hey, I am hungry. Do you want to get a bite to eat?" [...] Always something else would come up' (Jared). *Bouncing* purportedly created a sense of comfort between partners, by visiting numerous places in a relatively short time period and undertaking different activities. This could lead to the impression that both had experienced quite a few things together, and they got to know each other quite well in such a small amount of time. *Bouncing* stretched the subjective experience of time.

Within flirtatious interactions, both on dates and on nighttime 'pickups', players of the 'game' tried to *build comfort*, meaning to win the trust of their special other and to make her feel at ease. One way to do this was by talking and sharing stories about things that related to her interests.

The main thing is that it's not about me but about her. What I try to do is elicit values from her, like if she likes rock climbing I say I love rock climbing. I talk about the stuff that she's really enthusiastic about, and then I want to connect to that specifically (John).

Likewise, practitioners often shared details of their life stories, especially those that *demonstrated higher value*. They encouraged their flirt to inquire about life episodes, convictions, tastes and preferences that she wanted to know more about. 'I want you to ask me anything that you like, there is no walking out of here with a wish you would have asked something you didn't' (Jared).

Seeding was another ritual that fostered emotional intimacy within interactions. This involved discussing the prospects of future activities that could be undertaken together. *To seed* was to invitingly describe splendid itineraries, alluring activities and marvelous places. By talking about these things, interlocutors would allegedly become interested and enthusiastic about visiting and undertaking these things together.

So, what you can do is [say] 'Hey, have you ever been to this bar in the Castro? It is so much fun. Have you been? Oh my God, the staff there is fucking amazing. They make this super awesome drink. We should totally go there. I love the place, it has a cool vibe. Gay guys always buy me drinks and hit on me, it's awesome'. Oversell the shit out of it, make it the most amazing thing she has ever seen in her whole life. If you go to a coffee place, tell her it's the best. They make like the best hot chocolate, and then you take her to Starbucks, it doesn't matter. You just want to oversell the shit out of whatever you want her to do (John).

Seeding was a prelude to a date-proposition. After finding an activity of mutual interest and creating enthusiasm for undertaking this together, a date could be proposed and contact details exchanged.

Games were other interactional gambits that could aid an intimate connection between interlocutors. Two games that were often played were the role-play game and the questions game. In the former, practitioners formulated an imaginary scenario, including roles and a synopsis, and encouraged the other to play into it. A clear example is what Jared called ‘the travelers’ game’.

And in that wine bar we were playing the ‘travelers’ game’. So, let’s act as if we were not from here, let’s act as if we have never been here before, this is a different place. We are in Richmond, but we are not from here. So, we pretended to be a couple from LA. [...] So we ran into this wine bar and a woman said, ‘You guys are not from here. Where are you from? That’s when we decided LA, and she said, ‘Oh yeah, which part? And we said, ‘The West” and she said, ‘oh, that is cool’. [...] And she said, ‘How did you guys meet? I said, ‘We met at this great little restaurant called The Shoulder. I think it is because of the shoulder cut or something they specialize in. And Elena [current girlfriend] was laughing and I said, ‘It was an interesting time us meeting there’. And the woman asked ‘What is the story?’ And I said, ‘You know what? I can’t tell it well. [...] I mean I can tell it, but I think she [Elena] can even tell it better’. I just throw it on her [laughs]. I say, ‘Tell the story, and then the girls always look at me like ‘What am I going to say?’ [laughs] Elena did a really good job and they bought it all. [...] I have had a girl resisting. She said ‘No, he will tell it better’. And then I make the story worse [...] if you make the story even worse, like ‘We were sitting there and this girl came up to talk to her and we both thought that this chick was a lesbian. And I am not sure if she has a problem with lesbians, or if she has a problem with gay people, but it was how she came across in that moment’. You can say anything. It’s just about making the situation worse, where the girl is like ‘Shut the fuck up.’ [...] and then you can say ‘Okay, I think you can tell it better’ [laughs] (Jared).

In line with Huizinga’s classic formulation, games like these established a short-lived suspension of everyday reality. The usual norms and roles were momentarily discarded. These games had their own rules and regulations to which players abided and which were temporary and often location specific (Huizinga, 1977[1938]:29). Games allowed for a space in which actors could transgress formalities and reduce social and emotional distance.

Another game frequently enacted by practitioners was the ‘questions game’.

This game entailed taking turns in asking and answering questions and offered an opportunity to explore details of each other's biographies and decisive traits of their personalities.

In this game, I would ask a lot of questions that are very revealing to the girl's personality. So, I would ask questions like: 'If I was to talk to your family, what would they say is, say if the girls name is Jessica, what would they say is so Jessica? When I would be sitting with your family members and they would trust me, what would they continuously say? This story that was so her, that is just who she is' (Jared).

Additionally, the 'questions game' allowed for a rupture of social conventions. It was an opportunity to sexualize the interaction, to talk about sexual experiences, about fantasies and desires. As the game progressed, more explicitly sexual and intimate questions were asked. Conversations about defining life experiences were followed up with questions like: What 'is the naughtiest thing you have ever done?' and 'What do you consider to be your most outstanding feature?' (Matz), and 'What is a sexual fantasy of yours?' (Mahesh). These probes would establish a highly sexual 'definition of the situation'. By talking about these topics, interlocutors would allegedly galvanize their sexual fantasies and desires and viscerally experience these sensations.

RITUALS OF SEXUALIZATION

A sensuous and physical initiation of contact leaves little room for ambiguity. A practice like grinding from the get-go establishes a clear 'definition of the situation'; this encounter will be flirtatious and sexual. Within the college hookup scene, grinding is an often-enacted initiation ritual (Ronen, 2010; Wade, 2017:31-38). Not all college hookups start like this, but a high degree of physical intimacy is often present from the start. The sexual encounters of players of the 'game' often did not start with much bodily contact, but instead had a gradual intensification of physical intimacy. Numerous rites were intended to facilitate this gradual buildup of touch. The fact that these rituals of sexual escalation were common within the 'game' indicates that sexual norms in the urban erotic contact zone precluded a quick escalation of physical intimacy. Outside of the campus arena, the most common sexual script had a gradual buildup of physical intimacy that coincided with a progressive intensification of emotional intimacy.

Most of the sexual encounters of 'game' practitioners did not start with an unambiguous sexual 'definition of the situation'. Most started as seemingly conviv-

ial conversations, and the double entendre enacted within it left much room for uncertainty about the intentions of their interlocutors and the likelihood that the interaction would evolve into a sexual encounter. This uncertainty combined with the discourse of the 'game', which naturalized men's desire for casual sex but not women's, resulted in practices through which players aimed to influence their flirts' desires for and compliance with a sexual encounter. *Framing* was this kind of interactional technique. This was a speech act in which practitioners hypothesized about personality traits of their flirt, traits attributed to sexual adventurism, while simultaneously encouraging her to accept these suggested characteristics.

And one of the ways you set this up is that you always make them set the frame. [...] If I would introduce you to somebody and I would say 'This guy is the funniest guy in the world', a lot of people would respond with 'I am really not that funny'. The reason being is 'I don't think I'll be able to live up to this'. [...] You have to get them to agree with it and let them step into it. [...] I always give them an opportunity of not believing it, but then I always encourage them to believe it. So, it's basically like, 'You seem like a risk-taker and that is why I talk to you. You are a cool chick'. And [...] after I set the frame, I would say, 'I can be totally wrong, but I just think this about you'. And, the girls would typically move into the direction of convincing you that that is true. Or she would say, 'I don't know this is really true'. [...] I just want that trait to get out of them. So, I would encourage them to believe it. So, I would say, 'You are a spontaneous person, I feel that about you'. And if they say either 'No, I'm really not that spontaneous', [...] I would say, 'You are not spontaneous. You are talking to me now; to me that is spontaneous, most people are seriously frightened to talk to strangers'. And the girl would then usually say, 'That is true'. And as a last resort, I would be like, 'You know what? I think that everybody could be spontaneous. Maybe they are not, but everybody wants to be more spontaneous'. So, sooner or later, the girl would be like, 'Yes, that is totally me' (Jared).

Invoked frames nearly always dealt with 'rebellious' personality traits, qualities of people that were willing to break social conventions. 'I used "risk taker", another one is "spontaneous"' (Jared). Other frames used were 'open-minded' and 'adventurism'. Invoking these frames and encouraging a flirt to accept these as adequate descriptions of her personality would allegedly result in behavior in the subsequent interaction in correspondence with these traits. 'Game' practitioners associated a casual sexual encounter with rebellious women, who were willing to break social conventions. They learned from experience that many of their flirts did not evolve into sex and hence saw casual sexual encounters, and the women engaging in these, as norm breaking.

Most of the sexual scenarios enacted within the 'game' had a relatively slow progression of physical intimacy, despite the aim to quickly become sexual. The dogma within the 'game' was to push until one could push no further, withhold, reverse and try again. 'In a general interaction, I can continuously escalate till she feels very uncomfortable. If she pulls away, it is time to tune it down. I was fan of guys trying to push that envelope as much as they can' (John). This was the common strategy from the moment of first contact. The traffic light was a prevalent metaphor used to describe the progression of sexualized touching.

Matz narrated about a technique he used for establishing physical contact with a woman. If she was wearing a ring, like many of his dates did, he made a trivial comment about it. He would take her hand and look at the thing carefully. She could allegedly give you three different types of signals. Pulling her hand back vehemently was a 'red light', in which case he had to wait, 'build some more comfort' and try again. Holding her hand in his, but not giving him any signs of approval was a 'yellow light'. This meant that he could progress with care. Leaving her hand in his, while she would show him other rings was a 'green light'. In that case, he could 'physically escalate' faster. When she did not have jewelry on her hands, but in her ears, he would use a similar technique. He would look at her earrings and use his hand to soothe them. Her reactions could be classified similarly. When she was not wearing any jewelry, he would do a similar thing to her hair.

This intensification, withdrawing and reengagement of physical contact happened throughout the interaction, from first contact until sex. However, despite the constant efforts to quickly progress sexually, most sexual encounters did not. This was especially the case in the progression from sensuous touching to sexual activities, whether these included manual or oral stimulation or penetration, which women often resisted. 'Game' practitioners even had an expression for such contested advances, *LMR* or *last-minute resistance*. Again, the common tactic was to push, holdback, and reinitiate. Most players had little regard for sexual consent and frowned upon recent affirmative consent laws in California, which demand that partners unambiguously agree upon engaging in sexual practices. In their view, playful female resistance was part of the most commonly enacted sexual script.

Within the party and hookup scene on campus, light sexual activity enacted in public appears to be relatively common. While at the student parties I visited the number of couples that hooked up and the sexual activity they engaged in publically was rather light, at other campuses, student parties seem to be a lot more sexual. A college student in Wade (2017) mentioned that at college parties, one can look

'any random direction and see people hooking up' (2017:31). Furthermore, it is 'a common thing' for students at parties to engage in light sexual activities, such as manual stimulation (Wade, 2017:38). Within the urban erotic contact zone 'game' practitioners operated in, this was not the norm. Sexual activity, on occasion, happened in bars, cafes, restaurant and clubs, but this was the exception rather than the rule. Etiquettes precluded the public displays of heavier sexual behaviors in such settings. Within flirtatious and sexualized interactions, practitioners often opted for *isolation*, players' argot for moving to a secluded spot within a public setting, like a comfortable bench in a dimly lit spot or a secluded corner in or outside a venue. When they met at night in a bar or club, *isolation* often entailed moving away from their friend groups. Outside of the scrutinizing gazes of companions, women allegedly felt less inhibited to become physical and sexual. On dates, *isolation* often implied moving to a secluded spot where other patrons paid little attention to the couple. Such practices were common in the 'game' because within urban erotic contact zones, public sexual activity is not the norm.

A sexual encounter nearly always entailed a transition from a public to a private location. 'Logistics' were key within the 'game'. The transfer from public to private needed to be smooth and swift. In contrast, a transition with many interruptions and moments of deliberation about where to go next, would allegedly rupture the sexual tension between a couple and increase the likelihood of second thoughts. 'Game' practitioners often lived close to the urban nightlife, so that transfers, by taxi or foot, would not take long. On many instances, the degree of sexual activity enacted in a public setting was rather light. It might have included a mere kiss or a sensuous dance, and the 'definition of the situation' might be such that sex at home was not a self-evident progression from the meeting. In such instances, a common enacted ritual was to formulate an alibi, by talking about objects and activities at home that did not relate to sex and that one was passionate about and desperately needed to show one's flirt.

The best way to do this is [to] tell the girl that she must see/do/play with your... fill in the blank. Doesn't matter what it is, it is THE COOLEST FUCKING THING ON THE PLANET!!! They have to see that thing...IT SO AWESOME. Talk like it's the second coming of Jesus and they'll want to roll (John).

During the transfer, it was common for players to discuss topics unrelated to sex and without innuendo. Within the discourse of the 'game', women would often need to be seduced, presuming that women did not want casual sex as much as men. Incessant talking aimed to 'occupy' her mind and thwart the development

of 'second thoughts'. At home, a prevalent ritual was to momentarily release the pressure, to turn the television on, to ask her to play some music, or to make her a drink, giving her time to acclimatize and feel at ease there. From that point, the physical escalation loop would again be reinitiated, pushing, until one could push no further, reverting, reinstating until she finally gave in.

CONCLUSION

The 'game' entailed a methodical pursuit of sexual adventures within urban erotic contact zones, such as bars, clubs, cafes, shopping malls and high streets. Players approached many women in rapid succession and tried to direct these interactions towards sexual encounters. Despite these adamant efforts of young men to find sexual adventures in urban erotic contact zones, they rarely succeeded. The vast majority of men that flocked towards 'seduction communities' did not find sex there, but amongst other things, primarily rejections. Even competent players did not have that many sexual partners, relative to the time and effort invested in the 'game'. Most 'played the field' numerous days a week, instigating a large number of flirtatious interactions in rapid succession, incomparable to most other sojourners in urban erotic contact zones. Sexual adventures with relative strangers within these zones of the city were a rarity. Outside of the college campus, casual sex did not happen that often.

Furthermore, the sexual encounters of 'game' practitioners in the Bay Area often abided by a contemporary dating script rather than a hookup. Even in the urban nightlife, despite its reputation for omnipresent one-night-stands, many sexual encounters followed a dating blueprint. A couple would meet in the bar, exchange numbers and go on a date in the following days or weeks. My estimation is that approximately half of the sexual encounters initiated by players in the urban nightlife of the Bay Area followed this scenario. Additionally, practitioners met most of their sexual partners during the daytime, in places like cafes, on high streets and in shopping malls. After the initial meeting in these spaces, the couple would go on a date, often in the days and weeks following this encounter. Outside of the campus arena, dating not hooking up, is the dominant sexual script of young heterosexual men and women.

Upon close scrutiny, the rituals enacted within the 'game' made the sexual encounters arising from them not so casual. An elaborate ranking and screening protocol was enacted in nearly all flirtatious interactions. Within the 'game', practitioners ostentatiously communicated a wide range of identity markers to their partners.

They aimed to present themselves as hyper-masculine subjects, energetic, social and humorous, who were popular within the erotic market place and successful, ambitious and adventurous. They fished for personality traits, tastes and preferences of their flirts to foster the impression that their interests were more than merely physical. Many of the rites, tactics and techniques enacted within the 'game' were primed to establish emotional intimacy between interlocutors, by sharing determining experiences of their life-biographies and through games and efforts to stretch the experiential dimension of time. These rites brought the interaction further and further away from a hookup. An inherent contradiction of the game was that players often aimed for a hookup but instead enacted rituals of a dating script.

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