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Seducing Women to Assess Each Other: Male Hierarchies within the Seduction Community

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Seducing Women to Assess Each Other: Male Hierarchies within the Seduction Community

Mélanie Gourarier

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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“To seduce women was first and foremost to assess each other. Men assessing men.” (Sam, 24 years old, Paris)¹

- ¹ Drawing from an ethnographic inquiry² involving a group of men who place the acquisition of seduction skills at the core of their relationships, this paper questions how community bonds are structured through the apprenticeship of masculinity. The fieldwork was conducted within a specific group: the Seduction Community – as its members call it – which is indeed an exclusively male and heterosexual community where learning to seduce is also and primarily learning to be a man. Despite the fact that the first purpose of the group is to establish an effective method to seduce women – known as the Game within the Community – respondents seem more interested in masculinity and male relations than in women and feminine conquest. These hypotheses need to be verified and confronted to ethnographic data. To this aim, I shall firstly explore how the Community is structured and organized in order to determine how it functions as a male group. Then, I shall discuss the process of assessment of masculinity. Finally I shall explore the articulation between male bonds and the hierarchy of masculinity via the

confrontation of opposite models of masculinity mobilized within the Seduction Community.

Between Men

- 2 Firstly appearing in the late 1990s in California, the Seduction Community is structured around a discussion group started by founder Ross Jeffries during which participants discuss their difficulties in seducing women and seek strategies to become ‘good’, if not ‘great’ seducers. Ross Jeffries’s techniques seemed particularly innovative at the time due to his adaptation of Neuro-Linguistic Programming methods³ to the practical apprenticeship of seduction. With Ross Jeffries, seduction became a separate domain within the self-help movement, then a synonym of development and self-achievement. By using a terminology pertaining to personal development, certain members of the group, well-known for their mastery of seduction techniques, refer to themselves as “seduction coaches”. They usually share their knowledge with novice members by way of group seminars or individual coaching, where they integrate, in addition to instructions on the specifics of masculine seduction, makeover and lifestyle advice (e.g. culture, daily organization, health, etc.). The development of the Seduction Community, a society based on the model of college fraternities and fictional secret societies, such as *Fight Club*,⁴ was formed through the Internet. This particular group is structured around masculine bonding and its organization is kept a close secret. In 1994 Lewis de Payne, a student of Ross Jeffries and an associate of Kevin Mitnick,⁵ founded the newsgroup *alt.seduction.fast*. Its purpose was to organize meetings and discussions among group members, reinforcing ‘community’ bonds as well as the confidential nature of exchanges between members. Following the success of this first newsgroup, many forums, mailing lists, websites and blogs emerged, participating in the worldwide display of the Seduction Community. Thus, the Internet is the first mode of recruitment of new members as well as the preferred medium for group interaction. The Seduction Community is composed primarily of young men aged from 18 to 30.⁶ Due to their young age, they are digital natives and tend to treat the internet as their favorite, if not exclusive, means of communication, socialization and information. All Community members who have taken part in the investigation were registered on more than three social networking websites⁷ and held an account with at least two discussion forums (outside of the Community). Their entrance into the Seduction Community is also part of a ‘digital trajectory’ that corresponds to the use of the Internet as a major relational mode. Composed entirely of young men, Community organization appears essentially as a structure of production of male bonds.
- 3 Though the primary and explicit function of the Seduction Community is the development of a guaranteed method of success with women, which is generically named the Game,⁸ the results of this inquiry lead me to consider that its implicit but essential function is to develop sociability among men. These homosocial practices are so important within the Community that the time devoted to them greatly surpasses time devoted to the seduction of women. Despite the difficulty of precisely quantifying the time group members spend on the various Community activities, the inquiry showed that they devote themselves mainly to developing their relationships with other men. As a matter of fact, during seduction-training sessions, relationships with women remain secondary if compared to the construction of male bonds. For example, during a night-session organized by some of the novices in order to seduce women in the neighborhood

of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, only one of the four hours that I spent with the group was actually dedicated to approaching women in the street. The rest of the time the men went to a bar to develop their male friendships.

- 4 This leads us to ask if the pre-eminence of homosocial practices constitutes a paradox in a Community which is supposed to focus entirely on the affirmation of heterosexual inclination. For what reasons would a group that devotes itself primarily to the conquest of women allot so little time to them, to the point of excluding them from the Community's social spaces? I hereby propose to resolve this apparent contradiction by shifting the terms of the issue: what if seducing women was not the aim but the method by which to achieve the acquisition of masculinity with the support of a peer group?

Quantifying Masculinity : Making Visible the Invisible Men

- 5 Becoming a great seducer is first of all to fulfill oneself as a 'real man'. This occurs through the acquisition of skills which are perceived by the Community as specifically masculine. At the heart of the Seduction Community, the 'real man' is subject to at least two antagonistic definitions of masculine ideals, which result in rivalry within the group. Community trajectories aim to teach these ideal masculinities through the acquisition of seduction techniques. Upon their entry into the Community, individuals are identified as novices. The more theoretical knowledge and empirical experience they acquire, the closer they come to the masculine ideal, the ultimate achievement being the promise to become an Alpha Male. The few who reach this level are designated as the group's elite, and often become coaches, reinvesting their knowledge for the benefit of the novices. Considered this way, masculinity is a process that requires continuous refinement. As the level of masculinity acquired determines hierarchies between men inside the group, the object of the Seduction Community is thus to develop a rational system of measuring masculinity. If one of the issues of the Community trajectories is to make men, then masculinity becomes the subject of exhibition strategies and showy practices. The challenge is to make male invisible qualities observable in order to better quantify them.
- 6 If, to paraphrase Anne-Marie Sohn, the 'complete man', that is to say a man of adult age, rarely lets himself appear as a man and proceeds to inhabit an invisible masculinity, invisible because perfectly interiorized,⁹ can one still "consider man as a poster stuck to a wall to be read", as it was put by an English phrenological journal at the end of the nineteenth century?¹⁰ These two approaches, formulated in different contexts and eras, still inform how we analyse the way the masculine stereotype functions. On the one hand, masculinity should be considered invisible insofar as it is the result of a process of normalization. This is the thesis that Michael Kimmel defends when exposing the socio-historical process that shapes 'men as men', that is men that are invisible in the accounts of American history. According to Kimmel, men remained invisible because of their neutral gender quality as a referential point:

American men have come to think themselves as genderless, in part because they can afford the luxury of ignoring the centrality of gender. [...] That men remain unaware of the centrality of gender in their lives perpetuates the inequalities based on gender in our society, and keeps in place the power of men over women, and the power of some men, which are among the central mechanisms of power in society.

Invisibility reproduces inequality. And the invisibility of gender to those privileged by it reproduces inequalities that are circumscribed by gender.¹¹

- 7 Thus, normative masculinity, which is characterized by R.W. Connell as hegemonic masculinity, gains its power from the fact that it passes for 'normal', as opposed to "subordinate masculinities"¹² which are, on the contrary, specified and characterized.¹³ Connell's analysis that sociological effects of the production of the countertypes, can also be found in the work of Monique Wittig. Wittig is particularly interested in groups which are marginalized because they occupy an outsider position related to the norm.

[...] To constitute a difference and to control it is an "act of power because it is an essentially normative act. Everyone tries to present others as different. But not everyone manages to do so. One must be socially dominant to reach this point".¹⁴

- 8 Therefore, it would appear that masculinity cannot be legible except on the margins. This is the argument put forward by Anne-Marie Sohn and Judith Halberstam, who consider masculinity to become visible when it leaves the hegemonic form. According to Anne-Marie Sohn, masculinity becomes more easily observable via the process of becoming a man at the moment of adolescence when masculinity is at the peak of its construction.¹⁵ In her seminal work dedicated to "Feminine Masculinity", Judith Halberstam shows that the study of "masculinity without men", allows for the deconstruction of the norms pertaining to masculinity:

I claim [...] that far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. In other words, female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing [...] Masculinity [...] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body.¹⁶

- 9 On the other hand, discursive regimes of politics, religion, medicine, etc. abound in descriptions of what masculinity should be.¹⁷ These different discourses never cease to construct masculinity in terms of stereotypes such as the homosexual or the effeminate man.¹⁸ And yet, how should a stereotype function, if not by objectifying human nature, making it immediately visible and able to be judged, as assumed by Georges Lachman Mosse?

The public nature of a stereotype needs emphasis. It made the invisible both visible and public, and it was in this manner that stereotypes gained their social and political importance.¹⁹

- 10 Masculinity, which Judith Halberstam and Anne-Marie Sohn claim to be invisible except on the fringes of society, must resort to discursive practices in order to become perceptible and appreciable. This is precisely the work of a stereotype that, in fixing characteristics, authorizes comparison and evaluation. In a community where, as I have stated, the major issue is to 'become a man', the ability to measure this process is absolutely necessary. Thus, as a whole, the Seduction Community is structured around modalities of assessment, which permit each member to place himself in relationship to other members according to the degree of acquired masculinity. More than just a conquest, the seduction of women serves as an instrument to measure masculinity. Knowing how to make oneself desirable to a woman is commonly understood as the result of the appropriation of masculine qualities. In such a context, figures such as the great seducer and the 'real man' become conflated.

Male Hierarchy

- 11 Within the Community, techniques of seduction are classified according to their supposed difficulty on a scale of seductive practices. In fact, within the Seduction Community, the seduction techniques required from a novice are not the same as those required to become a confirmed member. These techniques are tested daily during training sessions on the field, sometimes with the assistance of a coach. The goal of such a test is to verify, through practice, whether a method has been thoroughly assimilated by a Community member before he passes on to the next level. For example, a novice is advised to begin his training by approaching girls in the street with the goal of obtaining nothing but their first names. As this exercise is considered to be the basis of the practice of seduction, the coaches recommend this method as a way to mold the more timid novices. This first goal seems easy to attain and the evaluation may be optimized by the introduction of a temporal restraint. For example, the aim might be to obtain at least three first names during a one-hour training session. Once this first test is passed, the novice will be invited to move on to the next level. The different levels that must be validated by the Community members during their seduction apprenticeship correspond to the interaction between couples as they go through the different stages of traditional dating rituals,²⁰ producing a hierarchy within the degrees of intimacy.²¹ Therefore, after having obtained the name of a woman, a man will be required to ask for her phone number, embarking on the next step in the process of seducing her. Once the telephone number has been acquired, the level of difficulty increases and involves obtaining a first kiss. Finally, the closest degree of intimacy, which precedes the establishment of a long-term relationship, is to ask to engage in the act of sexual intercourse. Those who achieve this level are considered to be great seducers and reach the highest level of the group's hierarchy.
- 12 These steps, which correspond to various degrees of masculine skills, are coded within the community vocabulary with the terms *numclose*, *kissclose*, or *fuckclose*, with the suffix '-close' inferring that the act has been completed. The validation of each stage is subjected to peers acting as eyewitnesses who post *Field Reports*²² on Internet forums as soon as each step has been completed. It is, for that matter, not unusual to see the phrase "Mission accomplished!" appear as a conclusion to these testimonies. Once the 'cycle' of seduction is completed, the seducers are rated both by the number of conquests and the 'level' of the women they have seduced. In fact, women are classified according to a grading scale from 0 to 10, which is based on esthetically subjective criteria and calls the top category the *Hot Babe* to indicate the girls rated as the 'sexiest'. An experienced seducer explained to me that he considers the seduction of just one beautiful girl to be more "noble" than the seduction of ten "better than average" girls, because he sees it as "technically more difficult". "The challenge has to be at my level", he concludes.²³ It is not enough for him to achieve feats; he must also communicate them, preferably in written form. The 'legible' characteristic of masculinity mentioned by Judith Halberstam is visible here in its literal form, as each group member must solidify his skills in a narrative form by writing a Field Report in order to evolve within the Seduction Community.
- 13 Among these individual trajectories, however, certain men will be valued above others. A certain number of the apprentice seducers, being perceived as 'elite', will reach the highest level of the Community scale. The rivalry between members is therefore an

important factor in the organization of the group. Indeed, its structure is based on a strict hierarchy of individual trajectories. The use of websites by members of the Community of Seduction is regulated according to a hierarchical distribution. On the Community websites, one can count no fewer than three levels of accessibility, from the most visible to the most secret. 'Visitor' status is granted to all the guests. Though guests can consult a plethora of articles they are never able to interact with Community members nor read messages posted on their forums, because access is limited to members only. To participate in the Community you have to create a personal account. Most of the time newcomers are expressly invited to introduce themselves in the "Welcome newcomers" section by stating their identity and indicating their reasons for wishing to join the Seduction Community. The degree of engagement on the part of the individual within the group is also evaluated, as each message posted in the forums leads to a collegial vote indicating the popularity of its author. Those who obtain the most votes are thus recognized by their peers as the best seducers in the group and the most 'virile' ones. They can also accede to a third level of the website which is kept secret from the large majority of the apprentice seducers. It is forbidden to speak of this area which is concealed and reserved to the elite. Only the website administrators are entitled to decide on the acceptance of a new member into this particularly closed circle.

- 14 The seminars given by the Community's coaches are spatially governed by the same strictly structured divisions. Novices are grouped in the back rows, while the regulars occupy the front seats. For the more high-profile seducers, there is no question of sitting among the audience. On their way to becoming coaches themselves and attaining the highest community level they remain close to the stage, always ready to lend a hand to those officiating.
- 15 In addition, the terminology created by the Seduction Community allows for a classification among its members. I have only given three examples that correspond to the most significant steps of progression, but there are a number of intermediate levels, which complicate the hierarchical Community scale. The term *player*, for example, refers to members who have recently entered the Community and are only just beginning to play the seduction game. They are, therefore, at the novice level. The next term, the *pick up artist*, is a *player* who has acquired a high level of technique and whose seductive qualities are recognized by his peers. Finally, at the top of the hierarchy, the *guru* is someone who embodies the Community's ultimate level, someone who has gained the whole set of masculine skills and who might therefore be assimilated with the figure of the *Alpha Male*.
- 16 Acquiring the status of the Alpha Male, however, is never a unanimous decision. Critics appear on all sides, suspecting or opposing the model of masculinity presented by one of the Community's members. If the evaluation process through which impartiality is maximized via the process of rational judgment, allows for the establishment of a masculine hierarchy, it is on the definition of masculinity as well as on the modalities of its expression that opinions differ. At the heart of the Community, therefore, many models of masculinity enter an "arena" of rivalry, to use Connell's terminology (2005), in order to maintain their hegemony.

Desirable Masculinity. A Hegemonic Model Questioned

- 17 Justifying his use of the term “hegemony,” Connell engages in an analysis of Gramsci’s concept where he wishes to “empathize the dynamic character of [...] hegemony, which is not the functionalist theory of cultural reproduction often portrayed. Gramsci always had in mind a social struggle for leadership in historical change.”²⁴ For Connell, hegemonic masculinity is by necessity dynamic, contextual and contestable.
- 18 To understand the dynamics at play within the Seduction Community it is necessary to discuss the contestable character of hegemony. For Judith Halberstam, hegemonic masculinity “depends absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities”.²⁵ Thus, hegemonic masculinity maintains an interdependent link with the other masculine regimes. Georges Lachman Mosse, in his analysis of modern virility, goes so far as to view the formation of a countertype as intrinsic to the model’s function. Countertypes are thus “enemies against which the masculine ideal sharpened his image.”²⁶ A veritable repellent and threat to the stereotype, the countertype is above all a core element that determines and establishes them as a model. Within the French Seduction Community, there are two models in permanent rivalry, which I characterize as hegemonic. At times, as Demetriou suggests, a certain number of their properties interpenetrate in a process which he identifies as “hybridization”,²⁷ but these models are most often apprehended in their opposable dimensions. In the Seduction Community, the first model put forward by respondents corresponded to “American masculinity”, while the second possesses French particularities. The first corresponds to the stereotype of the Pickup Artist of college campuses, and the second to the *artiste de la drague*, resulting in the French lover myth. Among members of the French Community, those claiming American origins are easily qualified as Pickup artists. Through the name Pickup Artist they are identified with the American model of masculinity, based on rules of seduction. They adopt an ethos of controlled masculinity: an athletic build and sports culture are particularly valued among them. On the other hand, certain members praise the uniqueness and superiority of the French model over the American one. The French model seems to represent the reverse of the American model’s qualities. Rather than valuing technical competencies, French model supporters praise the art of improvisation. Referring to the dandy’s aesthetic, appearances are particularly elegant and the language is formal.
- 19 These two stereotypes are set against countertypes which act as repellents. The countertype to the American masculinity is the ‘social robot’ who systematizes the rules of seduction without reflecting their use, whilst the countertype to the French masculine model is the homosexual or effeminate man, whose flirtatious manners cause him to lose his virility. In characterizing what a ‘real man’ is not, these two countertypes indeed reinforce hegemonic masculinity.
- 20 If the notion of hegemonic masculinity affirms the dynamic processes of power and resistance at work in the regimes of masculinity, it seems to me that it does not allow us to address the functions of the “heroic masculinity” stereotype discussed by Judith Halberstam²⁸ nor the “ideal virility” described by George Lachman Mosse.²⁹ And yet an ideal is precisely that which can never be attained. Fixed in stereotype, the masculine ideal cannot be achieved. Its expression thus results in a parody, a copy without an original that is doomed to failure. In Butlerian terms:

The notion of gender parody [...] does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a 'figure' in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect – that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation.³⁰

- 21 The impossibility of personifying a 'real man' not only opposes the different models of hegemonic masculinities at the heart of the Seduction Community, but it also challenges each individual's attempt to achieve the masculine ideal. The 'usurper' of masculinity is a recurring figure, threatening the group by his deceit. The issue is to unmask imposters, thereby making the *Alpha Male* both ideal and suspect.
- 22 One can notice a Community malaise around which the group is structured. If the 'real man' cannot be embodied, it remains necessary to go on performing him. To avoid the danger of seeing the Alpha Male dissolve in favor of masculine counter-types, the community's system of evaluation is a product of performative repetition, producing the masculine being rather than judging it.
- 23 It remains to be determined what is the Alpha Male model that the Community members aspire to become. I would like to quote a laconic and significant response given by one of the interviewees when I asked him his own definition of the Alpha Male: "An Alpha Male is a man who dominates other men".³¹ He could not be more explicit: defining the Alpha Male is first and foremost a matter concerning men, or rather a matter concerning relationships between men. Although devoted entirely to the seduction of women, the Seduction Community is more structured around homosocial relationships between men. The principal goal of community apprenticeships is thus to structure relationships between men, by placing each member within the hierarchy of masculinity. The question then is that of conquering virility rather than simply conquering women, and this virility must be confirmed by one's peers and for one's peers: "Virility must be validated by other men [...] and certified by the recognition of affiliation to the 'real men's' group."³²

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NOTES

1. This sentence comes from an interview conducted with one of my respondents and establishes a direct link between the seduction of women, male bonds and the assessment of masculinity.
2. This paper is based on ethnology fieldwork experiences (2007- 2010) in France during a study conducted within the Seduction Community. The method adopted consisted primarily in participant observation of the different community social areas such as seminars, boot camps and other seduction meetings led by different group coaches. I also accompanied a small group of members on the seduction-training "field" and participated in meetings held in Paris where members meet in order to strengthen their community bond. A significant collection of data was taken from various web sites, blogs, and group forums on the Community's web sites as *Frenchtouchseduction.com* or *Spikeseduction.com*. Finally, semi-directed interview sessions were conducted with a sample of ten respondents aged from 18 to 34 to complete this body of work. As a result, most of the data is of a qualitative nature.
3. "Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is aimed at enhancing the healing process by changing the conscious beliefs of patients about themselves, their illness, and the world. These limited beliefs are 'reprogrammed' using a variety of techniques drawn from other disciplines including hypnotherapy and psychotherapy [...] NLP was originally developed during the early 1970s by linguistics professor John Grinder and psychology and mathematics student Richard Bandler, both of the University of California Santa Cruz". <http://medicaldictionary.thefreedictionary.com/neurolinguistic+programming> (accessed May 4, 2010).
4. *Fight Club* is a 1996 novel by Chuck Palahniuk, adapted for the screen by director David Fincher in 1999. The fiction's protagonists create a fight club restricted to men and kept secret.

5. An internationally recognized hacker condemned several times by the American justice system.
6. A survey conducted in February 2010 among 100 registered members on the Frenchtouchseduction.com web forum shows 57% were aged from 18 to 25.
7. Facebook, Myspace and Twitter were systematically cited.
8. *The Game* is also the title of the most famous book of the Seduction Community considered the bible of the seducer. See: Neil Strauss, *The Game. Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (Los Angeles: Regan Books, 2005).
9. Anne-Marie Sohn. "Sois un Homme!" *La Construction de la masculinité au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), 9.
10. "Character Reading", *Phrenological Magazine*, 3 (1882): 18.
11. Michael S. Kimmel, *The History of Men. Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 6.
12. Subordinate masculinities is a concept employed by R.W. Connell (1995) in relation to hegemonic masculinity in order to indicate its opposite.
13. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 78.
14. "Car constituer une différence et la contrôler est 'un acte de pouvoir puisque c'est un acte essentiellement normatif. Chacun s'essaie à présenter autrui comme différent. Mais tout le monde n'y parvient pas. Il faut être dominant pour y réussir'" Claude Faugeron and Philippe Robert, *La justice et son public et les représentations sociales du système pénal* (Paris: Masson, 1978), cité in Monique Wittig, *La pensée straight* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 2001), 58. (My translation)
15. Sohn, "Sois un homme"
16. Judith Halberstam, *Female masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 2.
17. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, t.I, *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris : Gallimard, 1976).
18. George Lachman Mosse, *The Image of Man: the Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Jacques Le Rider, *Modernité viennoise et crises de l'identité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994).
19. Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 6-7.
20. Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Éric Fassin, "Un échange inégal: sexualité et rites amoureux," *Critique*, 596 (1977): 48-65.
21. Viviana Zelizer, "Transactions intimes," *Genèses*, 42 (2001): 121-44.
22. Within the Seduction Community, Field Reports is the storytelling of a seduction experience.
23. Interview extract, Lynx (pseudonym), coach in seduction, 36 years old, Paris.
24. Connell, Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity", 77.
25. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1.
26. Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 12.
27. Demetrakis Demetriou, "Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique," *Theory and Society*, 30 (2001): 337-61.
28. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.
29. Mosse, *The Image of Man*.
30. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 137.
31. Interview extract, Tom (pseudonym), 26 years old, engineer, Paris suburb.
32. "La virilité doit être validée par les autres hommes [...] et certifiée par la reconnaissance de l'appartenance au groupe des 'vrais hommes'." Pierre Bourdieu, *La Domination masculine* (Paris : Seuil, 1998), 59. (My translation)

ABSTRACTS

Drawing from an ethnographic inquiry involving a group of men who place the acquisition of seduction skills at the core of their relationships, this paper questions how community bonds are structured through the apprenticeship of heterosexual masculinity. First appearing in the late 1990s in California, the Seduction Community is structured around the assessment of masculinity built upon a hierarchy of novice seducers from the group.

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Keywords: male bonds, heterosexuality, seduction, hegemonic masculinity

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