



**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

## **Pick-up advice for online dating**

Analysis of dating and conversation advice of the Message Game by Ice White

Ronja Sandell

Bachelor's Thesis

Department of English

School of Languages and Translation Studies

Faculty of Humanities

University of Turku

June 2025

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

**Bachelor's Thesis**

**Bachelor of Arts, Department of English**

**Ronja Sandell**

**Pick-up advice for online dating: Analysis of dating and conversation advice of the Message Game by Ice White**

**Number of pages: 27 pages**

**Abstract**

Online dating has changed the way people make connections, meet new people, and find romantic relationships. Dating apps are becoming increasingly popular, but they often have more male than female users, which increases the competition between men. This study aims to discover what kind of online dating advice is recommended for men in the pick-up community, which is known for encouraging manipulative behaviour and seduction routines in face-to-face interactions.

This study examines *the Message Game: A Guide to Dating at the Touch of a Button* (2020), which is an online dating guide written by Ice White, who is a dating coach and an active member of the pick-up community. The purpose of this study is to examine what kind of dating and conversation advice *The Message Game* provides and whether the conversation advice is linguistically manipulative. The methodology of this qualitative study combines close reading and the approach of theoretical thematic analysis to examine whether the conversation advice fits the definition of linguistic manipulation.

*The Message Game* provides a wide range of online dating advice, which is divided into three categories: mental advice, action advice, and conversation advice. Mental advice aims to motivate and build confidence, action advice gives straightforward instructions on what to do, and conversation advice gives instructions on how to message efficiently to get dates in the real world. According to *The Message Game*, the only purpose of online dating is to arrange a date in the real world as quickly as possible, and therefore, all of the advice is focused on achieving that goal. *The Message Game* recommends indirect and deceptive approaches that attempt to coax a woman on a date, and if that does not work, pressuring and convincing by almost any means necessary is recommended as long as it leads to the desired outcome.

The conversation advice of *The Message Game* fits the definition of linguistic manipulation in that it sets a predetermined hidden goal for the interaction, demands that every message takes steps towards achieving that goal, and recommends intentionally using covert language and indirect approaches. *The Message Game* reflects the ideologies of the pick-up community where women are objectified, and their consent is neglected. The online dating advice shared among the pick-up community aims to move the conversation from online to offline as quickly as possible.

**Key words:** linguistic manipulation, online dating, dating advice, pick-up artist

## Kandidaatintutkielma

Englannin kieli

Ronja Sandell

**Pick-up advice for online dating: Analysis of dating and conversation advice of the Message Game by Ice White**

Sivumäärä: 27 sivua

### Tiivistelmä

Nettideittailun suosio on kasvanut merkittävästi viimeisen kymmenen vuoden aikana. Nykyisin uusien parisuhteiden etsiminen ja muodostaminen tapahtuu pääsääntöisesti erilaisten nettisivujen, deittailuun tarkoitettujen mobiilisovellusten tai sosiaalisen median kautta. Deittisovelluksissa on tyypillisesti enemmän miespuolisia käyttäjiä kuin naispuolisia, mikä lisää miesten välistä kilpailua deittimarkkinoilla. Tarkastelen tässä tutkielmassa, minkälaisia nettideittailuun tarkoitettuja neuvoja jaetaan pickup-artistien eli pelimiesten yhteisössä, jotta miehet voisivat menestyä nettideittailun maailmassa kasvaneesta kilpailusta huolimatta.

Tarkastelen tutkielmassani nettideittailuun tarkoitettua opaskirjaa nimeltä *The Message Game: A Guide to Dating at the Touch of a Button* (2020), jonka on kirjoittanut deittivalmentaja ja pickup-guru Ice White. Hän on osa laajempaa pickup-artistien yhteisöä, jossa pääsääntöisesti heteromiehet kehittävät ja jakavat naisten viettelyyn tarkoitettuja strategioita ja rutiineja. Tutkielman tavoitteena on selvittää, minkälaisia ohjeita ja neuvoja opaskirja jakaa nettideittailuun sekä arvioida ovatko opaskirjan keskusteluun tarkoitettut neuvot luonteeltaan manipulatiivisia. Tutkimusmenetelmänä hyödynnän aineiston lähilukua sekä temaattista analyysyä, jossa vertaan opaskirjan keskusteluneuvoja manipulatiivisen kielen määritelmään.

*The Message Game* opaskirja tarjoaa monipuolisesti neuvoja nettideittailuun. Luokittelin neuvot kolmeen kategoriaan niiden kohteen perusteella: mentaaliset, toiminnalliset ja keskusteluneuvot. Mentaaliset neuvot pyrkivät motivoimaan lukijaa ja lisäämään itsevarmuutta, toiminnalliset neuvot ovat konkreettisia ohjeita mitä tulisi tehdä eri tilanteissa, keskusteluneuvot pyrkivät opastamaan, miten viestitellä tehokkaasti ja tavoitteellisesti. Opaskirjan mukaan nettideittailun ainoa tarkoitus on treffien sopiminen, joten kaikki neuvot on suunniteltu tämän tavoitteen mahdollisimman pikaiseen saavuttamiseen. Avoimuuden ja suoruuden sijasta viestittelyssä kannustetaan epäsuoraan lähestymiseen ja piilevien vaikuttamiskeinojen käyttöä. Tilanteen vaatiessa opaskirja suosittelee myös treffien puskemista ja toisen vakuuttamista sekä suostuttelua keinolla millä hyvänsä.

Opaskirjan keskusteluneuvot on suunniteltu kommunikaatioon, jossa tavoitteet pyritään saavuttamaan epärehellisin ja epäsuorin keinoin, joten neuvot ovat luonteeltaan manipulatiivisia. *The Message Game* heijastaa pickup-yhteisön ajatusmaailmaa, jossa naisia välineellistetään ja heidän suostumustansa vähätellään. Pickup-yhteisön nettideittailuun suunnattu ohjeistus pyrkii siirtämään keskustelun deittisovelluksista mahdollisimman pikaisesti treffeille.

**Avainsanat:** manipulaatio, nettideittailu, deittivinkit, pick-up artisti, pelimies

## **Table of contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Background and Theory</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1	Pick-up Artist and the Game	7
2.2	The Pick-up Community	7
2.3	Linguistic Manipulation	9
<b>3</b>	<b>Materials and Methods</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1	The Message Game: a Guide to Dating at the Touch of a Button	12
3.2	Thematic analysis	13
<b>4</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>15</b>
4.1	Dating Advice of the Message Game	15
4.2	Message Game Lines	17
4.3	Three Types of Communication	19
<b>5</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>23</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>

## 1 Introduction

Online dating has changed the way people make connections, meet new people, and find romantic relationships. There is no longer a need to rely on chance encounters or blind dates because dating platforms and apps offer a more efficient way to meet people outside one's social circle and location. Dating apps have over 350 million users worldwide, and they are most often operated via phones (Copson 2024). Men tend to outnumber women on most dating apps for example, in 2023, 67% of Tinder users in the United States are male and only 33% female ("Statista 2023" n.d.). This uneven gender distribution means that men get on average fewer matches than women, which increases the competition between men. This competition creates an opportunity for dating coaches to sell dating advice and capitalize on men who struggle on the dating scene.

Pick-up artists are men who practice the seduction of women, and they have created and shared seduction strategies and dating advice for decades. They often believe that interaction is the key to seduction instead of physical attractiveness, social status, or wealth (Hambling-Jones and Merrison 2012). Therefore, pick-up artists believe that seduction is a skill that can be learned and improved. They are often active members of a wider online space known as the pick-up community, where they share different pick-up techniques, routines, and their experiences with women. Pick-up gurus are members of the community who have demonstrated success with women and have thus gathered a large online following. Many of them capitalize on men seeking seduction and dating advice by selling seduction material and services that reveal their secrets to success. Teaching men how to approach women is a lucrative business, and a \$100 million industry (Kale 2019). Pick-up strategies and instructional materials were originally designed for face-to-face interactions with women. This study observes how the pick-up community has adapted their content to the increasingly popular world of online dating.

This study examines *the Message Game: A Guide to Dating at the Touch of a Button* (2020) (henceforth *The Message Game* or TMG), which is an online dating guide written by Ice White. This material was chosen for two reasons: first, because it was published relatively recently, and therefore gives insight into how the pick-up community currently operates, and second, because this book specifically focuses on online dating advice in the community, which has received less attention in the research community.

The pick-up community is known for their manipulative seduction strategies and pick-up routines in face-to-face interactions; therefore, it is interesting to see how they have adapted to the world of online dating, where interactions are limited to written messages (Zuckerberg 2018). This study aims to discover what kind of online dating advice is shared among the pick-up community by examining the dating and conversation advice of *The Message Game* and whether the conversation advice could be considered linguistically manipulative. The methodology of this study combines close reading and the qualitative approach of theoretical thematic analysis. The research questions are as follows:

1. What kind of dating and conversation advice does *The Message Game* offer for online dating?
2. Is the conversation advice linguistically manipulative?

Section 2 provides an overview of the pick-up community, culture, and language, as well as describes the theoretical background of this study by discussing linguistic manipulation and its definitions. Section 3 introduces the material of this study and the qualitative methods that are used in the analysis. The analysis of this study is conducted in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the findings and how they relate to online dating and the pick-up community. Lastly, section 6 concludes this study by summarizing the main findings and providing suggestions for future research.

## 2 Background and Theory

Section 2.1 defines the terms *pick-up artist* and *game* which are central to the pick-up community. Section 2.2 outlines the history of pick-up artists and introduces the online pick-up community. Lastly, Section 2.3 provides the theoretical background of this study by describing theories and definitions of linguistic manipulation.

### 2.1 Pick-up Artist and the Game

Researchers have defined *pick-up artists* (PUAs) as “men who practice speed seduction of women, strongly influenced by the belief that the application of specific routines and scripted techniques is key to being successful in this endeavour” (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022, chapter 1, 2). The community itself defines themselves as men who are dedicated to improving their dating lives through the seduction community (Game Global n.d.). Anyone who practices the art of seduction while using the methods of the community can identify as a pick-up artist. While the community mostly consists of men, there are also some female pick-up artists (FPUAs) (ibid.).

The term *game* is used in a few different ways, and its meaning depends on the context. The verb *to game* means to engage in pick-up activities, such as seduction routines, whereas the noun *game* means the ability to influence people and their behaviour in a particular way to create some kind of relationship (Game Global n.d.). The term *game* has been further divided into *day game*, *night game*, *inner game* and *outer game*, and more. Day game means approaching women in public places during the daytime, while night game means approaching women in nightclubs and bars (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022). Inner game means self-improvement, such as reading, learning and confidence building, and outer game means different seduction tricks and techniques (King 2018). In summary, seduction and dating are viewed as a game, where pick-up artists are the players who try to win by using different seduction routines or techniques on women. Winning therefore often means receiving a phone number, a date, or a sexual encounter with a woman.

### 2.2 The Pick-up Community

Pick-up culture began in the 1970s after the publication of Eric Weber’s *How to Pick Up Girls* (1970), which was the first mass-marketed pick-up book (King 2018). Weber interviewed women about their thoughts on dating and sex and based his book on these

encounters (King 2018). The book encouraged men to be more confident in approaching and talking to women and to give compliments (ibid.). In the 1990s, the focus shifted to men's experiences of dating, and pick-up artists expressed frustration at the conventions of dating, especially with the concept of being *a nice guy* (ibid.). In order to overcome women's resistance, several new techniques were developed, such as more elaborate approaches and pick-up lines, which were then marketed and shared on the internet (ibid.). The most notable of these new approaches is *the neg*, which is a backhanded compliment that is meant to lower a woman's self-esteem. It was first introduced in 2005 in Neil Strauss' book titled *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (henceforth *The Game*), which gained popularity and brought pick-up artists to the attention of mainstream media and popular culture (ibid.). *The Game* inspired many TV shows about pick-up artists demonstrating their methods, such as VH1's *The Pickup Artist* (2007–2008) and Comedy Network's *Keys to the VIP* (2006-2008) (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022). As a result, men were introduced to new types of dating advice described as “shockingly instrumental, unromantic, and overassertive” (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022, chapter 2, 2).

The followers of these pick-up artists and TV shows formed online communities and platforms where they shared gaming advice and experiences with each other (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022). Pick-up artists who created new seduction methods and demonstrated success with women became known as pick-up gurus, and they gathered followers and often began to sell their seduction methods in various forms such as guidebooks, boot camps, and coaching services (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022), which has turned into a \$100 million industry (Kale 2019). While the pick-up community's methods target women, the seduction material and coaching services target men and capitalize on their loneliness and insecurities (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022).

The pick-up community remains active and has expanded from online forums and blogs to more interactive platforms such as YouTube, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Reddit. The pick-up community is a part of the manosphere, which consists of various different websites, online forums, and blogs related to men's rights and mostly united by their shared hatred of feminism (Zuckerberg 2018). Other prominent groups of the manosphere include men's rights activists (MRAs), men going their own way (MGTOW), and involuntary celibates (also known as incels)(Jones, Trott, and Wright 2020).

The pick-up community has been criticised for its morally questionable methods (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022). Some famous pick-up artists have induced public outrage that has even led to legal actions, for example, a pick-up guru Julien Blanc was blacklisted and thus prevented from entering the UK for promoting violence against women and another pick-up guru Daryush Valizadeh, also known as Roosh V, was accused of promoting rape culture after writing a blog post that suggested stopping rape by legalising it (ibid.). In 2019, a pick-up artist Adnan Ahmed, also known as Addy A-Game, was arrested and convicted for threatening and abusive conduct that targeted a group of women. He was known in the pick-up community for filming his interactions with women, without their consent, and sharing these videos online, some of which included “tips on how to overcome ‘last-minute resistance’ to sex” (BBC 2019).

After these controversies, many pick-up gurus wanted to appear separate from the community and rebranded themselves as dating coaches or lifestyle coaches and the pick-up community became also known as ‘the seduction industry’ (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022). Members of the community might refer to each other as pick-up artists, but prefer not to do so in public (Hambling-Jones and Merrison 2012). This rebranding and distancing did not change the community itself, and it still operates with the same methods, terminology and “narrative framing of courtship as sports training and warfare” (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022, chapter 2, 9). It should be noted that the pick-up community also has a more positive side, which advocates for self-improvement, confidence building, and encourages men to approach and interact with women to gain more experience. Confident men are expected to have more success with women, and for that reason, positive affirmations are recommended in the pick-up community to boost men’s self-esteem, however, it has been argued that these affirmations are more used to legitimise harmful behavior than to empower men (Dayter and Rüdiger 2025). While pick-up artists often create helpful spaces where shy and lonely men can learn how to meet and interact with women (Dayter and Rüdiger 2022), they still share advice which promotes harmful practices and encourages manipulative strategies (Dayter and Rüdiger 2025).

### **2.3 Linguistic Manipulation**

Before addressing the topic of linguistic manipulation, it should be noted that there is a lack of consistency in terminology regarding the concept, and sometimes it is referred to as *manipulative speech*, *deceptive communication* or *manipulative discourse*, but they often mean the same thing. Deceptive communication has been argued to be a type of linguistic

manipulation (Galasiński 2010), but it does not depict the whole concept. *Discourse* is often used to refer to connected utterances or continuous written communication (Cockcroft and Cockcroft 2010), and for that reason, *manipulative discourse* is a more appropriate term for studies that analyse actual discourse between people, instead of conversation advice. The term *linguistic manipulation* is used in this study because it represents the idea that manipulation is attempted through linguistic means, regardless of form, so it refers to both spoken and written language. For the sake of clarity, the term *subject* will be used to refer to the person who attempts to perform manipulation, and the term *object* will refer to the person who is the target of manipulation.

*Manipulation* seems like a simple concept at first, but it is surprisingly difficult to define precisely and satisfactorily. It has even been stated that every researcher who approaches the field of manipulation “is aware of the vagueness, the semantic complexity and the lack of clear-cut definition for the concept manipulation” (de Saussure 2005, 117), especially when it comes to linguistic manipulation (ibid.). Nonetheless, several definitions and theories have been suggested which tend to overlap to some degree, providing consensus about the central characteristics of linguistic manipulation. This study defines linguistic manipulation as follows:

[L]inguistic manipulation is influence exercised by one person upon another or a group of people through speech and non-verbal means oriented toward achieving a certain goal that consists in changing of the addressee’s behavior, perceptions and intentions in the course of communicative interaction. (Akopova 2013, 3)

Manipulation is often contrasted and compared to other behaviour control methods like *persuasion* and *coercion* (Kligman and Culver 1992). These are closely related to each other as they all aim to influence the object’s behaviour and perceptions in a way that benefits the subject of the communication. Sorlin (2017) suggested that manipulation appears on a spectrum rather than as either persuasion or coercion. On this spectrum, coercion means that the subject of manipulation attempts to coerce the object through linguistic means to act in a certain way, and persuasion means that the subject attempts to convince the object without concealing information and aims to get the object to consent to the subject’s viewpoint (Sorlin 2017). This means that in persuasion, the object can act and make decisions freely, while in coercion, the object’s freedom of choice is restricted, and there is more obligation to comply. According to this view of manipulation as a spectrum, there is no sharp dividing line between persuasion and manipulation, and overt persuasion can be considered to be a type of

manipulation (*ibid.*). Other researchers also support the view that the boundary between manipulation and persuasion is unclear as it is notably context dependent (van Dijk 2006), and that linguistic manipulation can also be direct and overt in nature (Akopova 2013). The definition that is used in this study also views persuasion as a form of linguistic manipulation.

Persuasion can fluctuate between overt and covert variations, and the more covert it becomes, the more manipulative it is (de Saussure 2005). This covert nature of manipulation makes it deceptive (*ibid.*). Manipulation is also realized when the object is unable to notice the subject's hidden intentions and influence (Akopova 2013), highlighting its covert and indirect nature. Manipulation is always intentional; it does not happen by accident (de Saussure 2005). While language can be in and of itself imprecise and ambiguous, leading to distorting depictions of reality, in linguistic manipulation, the subject intentionally attempts to use language in a way that hides their true motives from the object (Akopova 2013). The subject of manipulation has come up with a specific goal and has the intention of achieving it (Sorlin 2017). Linguistic manipulation has even been defined as any verbal interaction that is goal-oriented and that it is a goal-preconditioned phenomenon (Grischechko 2013). Goal-orientedness, intentionality and covertness appear to be central to linguistic manipulation, and in this study, these are considered as the central characteristics of linguistic manipulation. However, this study also acknowledges that linguistic manipulation can fluctuate between overt and covert variations, but covert attempts are viewed as more manipulative and deceptive.

Lastly, it is worth noting that manipulative language tends to stay “within the framework of regular speech practice” (Akopova 2013, 1), and the same linguistic structures that are used in manipulation are also used to fulfil other communicative functions (*ibid.*). People can manipulate linguistic structures to suit their needs, but the structures themselves are not inherently deceptive (Zienkowski 2011), and for that reason, linguistic manipulation cannot be discerned by only examining linguistic structures. In order to recognize linguistic manipulation, the aims, intentions, and motives of the communication need to be analysed (Akopova 2013).

### 3 Materials and Methods

Section 3.1 introduces the material of this study, *The Message Game*, and section 3.2 describes the qualitative research methods that are used to conduct the analysis.

#### 3.1 The Message Game: a Guide to Dating at the Touch of a Button

*The Message Game* (2020), written by Ice White, is an online dating guide for men. White is a dating coach and an active member of the pick-up community, where he shares his thoughts and experiences about dating, relationships, and more, on various platforms. TMG compiles his previous writings and dating philosophy in a book format, which provides a comprehensive guide for online dating. The goal is to help men improve their communication skills and take the lead in conversations in order to get dates quicker and maximize their desired sexual outcomes and relationships. The book contains advice for all things related to online dating, such as which apps or platforms to use, how to approach women and start conversations, how quickly or slowly to respond to messages, and how to create an appealing dating profile. In addition, it also gives some advice on how to arrange dates and provides a list of date ideas. The advice is based on the author's own dating experiences and his work as a dating coach. The content reflects and aligns itself with the pick-up community's general approaches and views about the dating and seduction of women. Overall, the book uses distinctive terminology that is typical of the pick-up community.

TMG focuses on the male perspective, and its content is designed for the use of heterosexual men, which is the norm in the pick-up community. The conversation and dating advice that it offers is based on traditional and stereotypical gender roles and assumptions that emphasize the assertive and leading role of men, which is evident in the following passage:

You should be the one in control and you should be the one leading and setting the frame. You should be the one to define the relationship, not waiting for her to accept you or choose you. You choose her. (White 2020, 83)

This line of thinking is present throughout the book, highlighting the male-centred perspective and stereotypical gender roles, and for that reason, the dating advice of TMG is not likely to be useful to other demographics, at least without some modifications.

TMG contains numerous screenshots of Ice White's conversations with women on different apps such as Tinder, Facebook, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. These screenshots are used to demonstrate how his methods and opening lines have been successful with women before. Success here means getting a woman's phone number, which is referred to as a *number-close*, and getting them to agree to go on a date offline. TMG also contains screenshots from other people, which White then analyses and points out what went right or wrong and how these interactions could be improved. It is worth mentioning that any of the screenshots or conversations in the book could have been forged and that the screenshots only reveal a part of the conversations that took place. White frequently describes what happened after these screenshotted messages during or after their dates, such as sex. However, these stories could be fabricated to brag or to promote his methods and expert status as that is common in the pick-up community (Rüdiger and Dayter 2020). He might have also only included positive and successful examples.

### **3.2 Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be used to analyse and identify patterns and themes within data (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is a flexible method that can be used to analyse a wide range of qualitative data (ibid.). Thematic analysis can be divided into inductive and deductive or theoretical approaches (ibid.). Inductive thematic analysis is a data-driven approach, meaning that themes are developed from the data itself, while theoretical thematic analysis is a theory-driven approach that applies a pre-existing theory to guide the analysis and identification of themes (ibid.). This study takes the latter approach because it can be used to examine whether the conversation advice contains the central characteristics of linguistic manipulation and fits its definition. Theoretical approach is hypothesis-driven and suited for studies that aim to test or confirm existing theories (Naeem et al. 2023), and in a way, this study hypothesizes that TMG contains linguistically manipulative conversation advice. The analytic process applies the approach of theoretical thematic analysis and modifies the six phases of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) to fit this research design and research questions. The following paragraph outlines the qualitative analysis of this study.

First, I familiarise myself with TMG while focusing on the overall content and different types of dating advice it provides. I also summarise the book and provide examples of different types of dating advice. Then, I develop categories that characterise linguistic manipulation

based on previous studies and theories. These categories form the central characteristics of linguistic manipulation, which were introduced in section 2.3 in Background and Theory. Next, I analyse the conversation advice using these central characteristics and observe how the advice relates to each category. Lastly, I review the conversation advice under each category and analyse how it fits into the definition of linguistic manipulation.

To summarise, the analysis will be guided by the theory and definition of linguistic manipulation. The analysis applies the approach of theoretical thematic analysis and combines it with close reading to identify the central characteristics of linguistic manipulation (goal-orientedness, intentionality, and covertness) within the conversation advice of TMG.

## 4 Analysis

The analysis is divided into three sections. Section 4.1 describes the overall content and structure of *The Message Game* and provides an overview of what kind of online dating advice it provides. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 analyze the conversation advice more in depth and observe whether it contains the central characteristics of linguistic manipulation.

### 4.1 Dating Advice of the Message Game

Ice White, a dating coach and an established member of the pick-up community, published *The Message Game* in 2020, providing a comprehensive online dating guide for men. The guide aims to improve men's online communication skills to maximize their desired sexual or relationship results. The book is organized into 15 chapters that explore various aspects of online dating. The first two chapters give a brief overview of how online dating has changed the way people meet each other, how men can adapt to these changes, and highlight the importance of setting goals for dating. The main objective of this guide is also stated clearly, which is to help men achieve dates with women in the real world. Chapter 3 informs readers of common mistakes men tend to make in online dating and how to avoid them. Chapter 4 describes the advantages and disadvantages of different social media and dating apps. Chapters 5-7 offer conversational advice in various forms. Chapter 8 gives insight into the timing of messages. Chapters 9-11 are focused on dealing with mistakes, handling rejection, and solving potential problems. Chapter 12 instructs how to create visually appealing and attractive profiles on social media and dating apps. Chapter 13 discusses the usefulness of Snapchat as a platform for messaging and arranging dates. In chapters 14-15, the author lists his favorite date ideas and shares his dating advice and strategies for face-to-face interactions. A glossary is also included at the end, where typical terminology of the pick community and some terms coined by the author himself are defined.

Based on the overall content of the book, I classified the advice of TMG into three categories based on the target of the advice: mental advice, action advice, and conversation advice.

Mental advice focuses on self-improvement and covers topics like inspiration, confidence building, setting goals, mental preparation, and dealing with rejection. The following two examples illustrate the mental advice of TMG:

- (1) Stop building up the confidence to ask her out by trying to entertain her, **you should be confident in the first place** (White 2020, 47; emphasis added).

Example (1) encourages readers to be more confident in themselves. Confidence is viewed as an attractive quality that is also necessary to lead conversations. White claims that everything you do and how you communicate will reveal information about your personality and self-esteem, and therefore, in order to appear confident in conversations, you need to first be confident in yourself.

- (2) She blocked me. **Her loss.** If she is to act in such a way, then she definitely would not be good enough for me; **you also must believe in this idea** (White 2020, 225; emphasis added).

In example (2), White encourages to believe that when a woman rejects a man, she was not good enough for him in the first place, and therefore he did not lose anything important. Instead of getting angry or mourning the loss of that connection, men are encouraged to move on and continue approaching women who are more deserving. Both examples demonstrate how the mental advice aims to change men's mindset by encouraging them to be more confident and to believe in their higher value. The pick-up community often encourages self-improvement and refers to it as inner game, which includes the same topics as the mental advice.

Action advice includes topics like what apps to use and how to use them, what to do on dates, how to choose the best profile pictures, and how quickly or slowly to answer messages. The following two examples illustrate action advice:

- (3) Whatever you show on Tinder needs to be time-relevant; your present self. If you look different from a photo from long ago, do not post it (White 2020, 262).

In example (3), White recommends using recently taken photos in dating profiles that reflect the present self, which creates authenticity and prevents awkward situations from occurring on a first date. This advice is straightforward and states clearly what kinds of photos should be included in a man's dating profile to make him appear authentic and attractive.

- (4) You should wait at least 150% of the time she took in the case of up to a few hours as a general, but loose, rule (White 2020, 180).

Example (4) gives advice about the timing of online messages. White argues that replying to a woman's message too quickly will make the man seem desperate and needy, and to avoid that, he should not appear too available. White recommends that in situations where a woman messages back slowly, a man should respond even more slowly to appear nonchalant and indifferent. Preferably, the timing of a man's messages should convey to a woman "that you have other girls to talk to and that you have a life and things to do" (White 2020, 181).

Timing is used to create positions of power in online interactions, and making a woman wait longer for a response is meant to show who controls the situation.

Conversation advice includes topics like how to start conversations, *what* to say and *what not* to say, how to use Ice White's three communication types (discussed in section 4.3), and how to message effectively to achieve predetermined dating goals. Action and conversation advice aim to improve how men portray themselves to others and how they interact and use different techniques, and therefore, it is focused on what the pick-up community refers to as the outer game. Most of the conversation advice was presented in chapters 5-7, but it was also laid out sporadically throughout the book. I identified three types of specific conversation advice: White's opening lines, White's three types of communication, and pushing. The following sections will focus on the conversation advice because it is linguistically more interesting and related to interactive situations in online dating. The pick-up community also believes that the key to seduction lies in interaction, rather than physical attractiveness (Hambling-Jones and Merrison 2012). The conversation advice will be analyzed in relation to the definition of linguistic manipulation and its central characteristics.

## 4.2 Message Game Lines

Ice White introduces three official message game lines which he recommends for conversations online: the spontaneous line, the adventurous line, and the three things line. The adventurous and spontaneous lines are used to initiate conversations. Because these two lines have the same structure and function, their meaning and purpose are examined together.

(5) The spontaneous line: "Let's skip all the bullshit. How spontaneous are you?"  
(White 2020, 80)

(6) The adventurous line: "Let's skip all the bullshit. How adventurous are you?"  
(White 2020, 81)

The main objective of TMG is to achieve dates in the real world, and all the advice is designed to accomplish that goal. White states that any message that does not take a step towards a meeting or attempt to solve problems preventing a meeting is ‘bullshit’ (White 2020). The spontaneous and adventurous lines are meant to ‘skip all the bullshit’ and guide the conversation towards arranging a date. The recipients of these opening lines most likely do not have the same definition for ‘bullshit’ as White, and they might interpret it as ‘let us get straight to the point’. The use of profanities or crude language could be used to appear more masculine and assertive, which is important for pick-up artists, and men tend to use more swear words than women (Güvendir 2015).

White argues that these lines are successful because they are direct and ask the first question in the conversation, while they approach the topic of a date only indirectly. These opening questions are meant to assess a woman’s value and test her, which in turn gives control for the man and changes his “position from inferior, which many guys fall into, to superior” (White 2020, 81). These questions are used to create asymmetrical positions of power. These lines also attempt to create a situation where women should try to impress men even though they did not initiate the conversation. Spontaneity and adventurousness are generally viewed as positive and attractive qualities in a person, so women might be more inclined to say that they are adventurous or spontaneous in response to these lines, because if they do not, they might seem boring or less interesting.

- (7) The three things line: “Can you name 3 things that would be amazing for a date?” or “Can you name 3 things you wanna do on our first date?” or “Tell me 3 things you want to do if we meet” (White 2020, 81)

There are three different formats of the three things line, and they all try to get a woman to inform what she would like to do on a date. This line mentions a date without explicitly asking her out; therefore, if a woman rejects this line by declining a date, the man can safely save face and back out because he never directly asked for one. In this situation, women are meant to look silly for making such assumptions. The informational content of the three things line inquires about a woman’s preferences, but the underlying meaning suggests a date. If a woman responds to this line by listing three things that she likes to do on dates, it is easy for a man to suggest a date that she would enjoy, which would make it harder for her to decline the proposition because she has already admitted to enjoying that activity. In this situation, a man can evaluate a woman’s preferences and reject her if he does not approve or

like the date options. The three things line attempts to indirectly move the conversation towards arranging a date, and in a way that is harder for the woman to decline.

TMG sets a specific goal for online interactions, which is to arrange a meeting or a date, but this goal is not revealed to women directly. All message game lines attempt to take steps towards that goal and can be considered goal-oriented and intentional. These lines are used to imply or suggest a meeting without explicitly asking her out, which illustrates their indirect and covert nature. The question format of these lines expects a specific answer from the recipient and tries to engage them in conversation and elicit a favourable response. These lines limit the direction of the conversation and the response choices of a woman. She can either not answer, which would make her seem impolite or rude, or answer, which would mean revealing her preferences, which can then be exploited. These lines are intentionally designed to be indirect to prevent outright rejection.

If a man uses these lines according to the instructions of TMG, he has a predetermined hidden motive of arranging a date with a woman. He uses these lines to compel a woman to participate in a conversation and attempts to influence her to want to go on a date, all the while intentionally using covert language. The three official message game lines are goal-oriented, intentional, and covert in nature, and therefore contain the central characteristics of linguistic manipulation. These lines attempt to use linguistic means to manipulate women's behaviour and perceptions, and for that reason, they fit the definition of linguistic manipulation.

### 4.3 Three Types of Communication

White categorizes online communication into three types according to their function and intent: *attraction*, *comfort*, and *entertainment*. Attraction means communication that aims to build attraction, for example, sexting, which means sending flirty or suggestive messages. Attraction communication is not recommended because it focuses on building arousal instead of focusing on the real purpose of messaging, which is arranging a date. White argues that attraction should be built in the real world and not online. The following example illustrates this point:

- (8) Your goal is to meet and then take things from there; it is better to meet and to physically lead to sex than to message her to try to convince her to have sex with you (White 2020, 192).

Comfort means communication that aims to build comfort and provide assurance when a woman seems hesitant to exchange phone numbers or meet; “Comfort is all about assuring her that something is not a problem” (White 2020, 112). According to White, comforting is an important tool in conversations because it can be used to remove obstacles and solve problems that may prevent moving forward (ibid.). Entertainment means communication that aims to entertain and have fun while messaging. White recommends entertaining as long as the purpose of the conversation is first and foremost to meet, as “[h]aving fun is secondary to arranging to meet” (ibid.).

From these three types of communication, only comfort is recommended and seen as useful because it takes concrete steps towards arranging a date, which is the main objective discussed in TMG. The idiom ‘the end justifies the means’ can be used to describe comfort communication, because any means, including lying and deception, are accepted and recommended if they lead to the desired outcome. Comfort communication is recommended along with *pushing*, which means insisting and repeatedly suggesting or demanding something, when a woman seems hesitant to exchange phone numbers or to meet. Comfort communication and pushing are used to push women outside of their comfort zones and disregard their consent. This advice normalizes such behaviour and may lead to similar situations on a date where women’s boundaries are continuously and surreptitiously negotiated or violated. White claims that when a woman agrees to go on a date, it means that she is interested in the man, even if she agreed to the date after being pushed and pressured. The pick-up community recommends similar methods for face-to-face interactions that neglect women’s consent, aiming to overcome ‘the last-minute resistance’ to exchange numbers, to kiss, or to have sex, which perpetuates rape culture.

If a man follows the conversation advice of TMG and uses comfort communication and pushing as instructed, he has a predetermined motive of arranging a date with a woman. In summary, he will indirectly suggest a date and he will respond to her potential concerns and hesitation by comforting her and assuring her that something is not a problem and that meeting is agreeable and safe, and if need be, by pushing the idea of a date until she eventually agrees to one. The conversation advice recommends starting with indirect and covert methods, but if they are not effective, a more overt and direct approach should be used. The conversation strategies fluctuate between overt persuasion and covert deception.

## 5 Discussion

The results of this thesis indicate that *The Message Game* provides advice for various aspects of online dating. The advice can be categorized into three types: mental, action, and conversation advice. Mental advice aims to inspire men and encourages them to be more confident. Action advice instructs how men can portray themselves favorably online and how they should act in certain situations to gain the upper hand. Conversation advice aims to help men message purposefully to achieve their desired results without seeming needy or desperate. The overall advice of TMG is in line with the previous methods of the pick-up community in that it highlights the importance of interaction and addresses topics related to inner game and outer game (King 2018). The objective of TMG is to help men get dates in the real world, and the dating and conversation advice is centered around that goal.

The advice is designed for heterosexual men, and only their perspective and goals are considered and valued, which is in line with the male-centered and anti-feminist ideology of the pick-up community (Zuckerberg 2018). Pick-up artists often believe that women are biologically and socially conditioned to want hypermasculine men, and for that reason, they embrace qualities like assertiveness (ibid.). This belief is apparent in TMG as it relies heavily on stereotypical gender roles, and the advice aims to help men behave and portray themselves as dominant and in control because they believe that women are attracted to those qualities.

The focus of TMG is on online dating, and other than providing some suggestions for date ideas, it does not address what should happen on a date or how men should interact or seduce women during a date. Online dating and conversations are not utilized for seduction, and TMG does not introduce any new seduction strategies. Instead, it rather relies on the already existing seduction methods of the pick-up community, the majority of which are designed for face-to-face interactions with women, and in a way, the book complements them by attempting to move the conversation quickly from online to offline. One explanation for this could be that the author is keenly aware of the limitations of online communication.

TMG sets a goal for all online conversations, that is, arranging a date, and claims that every message should take steps towards that goal, yet this intention is not directly conveyed to women. Men are encouraged to message goal-orientedly, whilst also hiding their true motive. Every message should be formed with intention and purpose, and therefore, the conversation advice is goal-oriented and intentional. Indirect and covert approaches are recommended first

and foremost because those are harder to reject and they make men seem casual and confident, but not needy. White argues that his methods, like the official message game lines, are successful because they are straightforward, even though they are actually indirect. All his methods are indirect approaches that imply and suggest a date without explicitly asking for one. The aim is to guide the conversation towards a date and imply and suggest until she eventually gets the hints and optimally agrees to go on one, and if these covert methods do not yield the desired results, more direct approaches are recommended. Therefore, both indirect and direct persuasion methods are approved as long as they lead to the desired outcome. The conversation strategies of TMG fluctuate between overt and covert approaches, and often it is hard to distinguish between them, which aligns with existing research about the connection between manipulation and persuasion (Akopova 2013; Sorlin 2017; van Dijk 2006). The advice endorses men to push women's boundaries until they give in or block men online.

The conversation advice aims to help men use language to influence women's behavior and perceptions to achieve their goals, meaning that it fits the definition of linguistic manipulation. The conversation advice is goal-oriented, intentional, and recommends covert methods initially and overt methods when necessary, and therefore, the central characteristics of linguistic manipulation are present. According to existing research (de Saussure 2005), covert methods are considered to be more manipulative than overt ones, and therefore the covert approaches of TMG can be considered clearly manipulative. The underlying message presented in TMG seems to be that it is okay to say anything as long as it leads to the desired outcome, which is inherently deceptive and manipulative. In other words, the conversation advice of TMG can be considered linguistically manipulative.

The pick-up community is known for their deceptive and manipulative seduction strategies and pick-up routines (Zuckerberg 2018), and therefore it is unsurprising that these same approaches are reflected in online dating. While this study discovered that members of the pick-up community endorse manipulative strategies in online dating, their effectiveness remains unproven and debatable. Despite this, the manipulative intent is present within the community. The findings of this study shed light on how members of the pick-up community operate and approach online dating while providing insight into their conversation strategies and practices. This may also assist in identifying linguistic manipulation attempts in online conversations.

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis explored the online dating advice of the pick-up community by examining *the Message Game: A Guide to Dating at the Touch of a Button* (2020) by Ice White. The content of *The Message Game* addresses various aspects of online dating, from setting goals to creating an attractive dating profile and handling rejection. The book's dating advice was divided into three categories based on the target of the advice: mental, action, and conversation. Mental advice is focused on self-improvement, also called the inner game within the pick-up community, and aims to inspire, motivate, and build men's confidence. Action advice gives straightforward instructions on what to do and what not to do in online dating, while conversation advice focuses on messaging and instructs men how to lead conversations and message purposefully to achieve dates. Both action and conversation advice are related to the outer game of the pick-up community as they aim to improve how men present themselves and how they interact with women. TMG reflects the male-centered and anti-feminist ideologies of the pick-up community, where women are objectified and their consent is neglected.

TMG states that the purpose of messaging is to arrange a date and that every message should take steps towards that goal. Online dating is not recognized as a way to seduce women, but rather viewed as an obstacle that needs to be removed before seduction can happen. Previous seduction methods of the pick-up community are mainly designed for face-to-face interactions with women, and therefore, TMG complements them by attempting to quickly move the conversation from online to offline.

The conversation advice of TMG fits the definitions of linguistic manipulation in that it sets a hidden goal for all online interactions, demands that every message takes steps towards achieving that goal, and recommends intentionally using covert language along with indirect and deceptive approaches. The advice recommends communication that is goal-oriented, intentional, and at least initially covert, and therefore contains the central elements of linguistic manipulation.

This study examined only one online dating guide from the pick-up community, which may not represent the views and approaches of the community at large. As a result, there are some limitations as to how generalizable the findings of this study are to the pick-up community. The methodology of this study also has some limitations. The analysis relied heavily on the

researcher's interpretations and applied theoretical thematic analysis rather loosely. While this modified approach suited the research design and questions adequately, there is potential for subjectivity and bias.

Future research could explore the topic of linguistic manipulation in the pick-up community further by analyzing excerpts of real interactions between pick-up artists and women, which could be done through screenshots of conversations or video clips, albeit there are some practical and ethical challenges in doing so.

## References

- Akopova, Asya. 2013. "Linguistic Manipulation: Definition and Types." *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education* 1, no. 2: 78–82.
- BBC. 2019. "'Pick-up Artist' Adnan Ahmed Jailed for Two Years for Threatening Behaviour," October 22, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-50137960>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2: 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- Cockcroft, Robert, and Susan M. Cockcroft. 2010. *Persuading People: An Introduction to Rhetoric*. 2nd ed., Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Copson, Kit. 2024. "Online Dating Statistics 2025: Facts, Trends and Insights." *Cloudwards* (blog). Accessed May 19, 2024. <https://www.cloudwards.net/online-dating-statistics/>.
- Dayter, Daria, and Sofia Rüdiger. 2022. *The Language of Pick-Up Artists: Online Discourses of the Seduction Industry*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge. Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003041313>.
- . 2025. "Problematizing Expressives: The Case of Magical Affirmations in the Pick-up Artist Paradigm." *Journal of Pragmatics* 241: 30–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2025.03.005>.
- de Saussure, Louis. 2005. "Manipulation and cognitive pragmatics." In *Manipulation and Ideologies in the Twentieth Century: Discourse, Language, Mind*, edited by Louis de Saussure and Peter J. Schulz. 113–145. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Galasiński, Dariusz, ed. 2010. *The Language of Deception: A Discourse Analytical Study*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Game Global. n.d. "Game Glossary - Full List of PUA Terminology and Definitions." Game Global. Accessed March 5, 2023. <https://www.gameglobal.net/glossary/>.
- Grischekko, Oksana. 2013. "Communicative Effect Achieved Through Speech Acts of Manipulation." *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education* 1, no. 2: 144–151.
- Güvendir, Emre. 2015. "Why Are Males Inclined to Use Strong Swear Words More than Females? An Evolutionary Explanation Based on Male Intergroup Aggressiveness."

- Language Sciences* 50, no. July: 133–139.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2015.02.003>.
- Hambling-Jones, Oliver, and Andrew John Merrison. 2012. “Inequity in the Pursuit of Intimacy: An Analysis of British Pick-up Artist Interactions.” *Im/Politeness across Englishes* 44, no. 9: 1115–1127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.04.008>.
- Jones, Callum, Verity Trott, and Scott Wright. 2020. “Sluts and Soyboys: MGTOW and the Production of Misogynistic Online Harassment.” *New Media & Society* 22, no. 10: 1903–1921. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819887141>.
- Kale, Sirin. 2019. “50 Years of Pickup Artists: Why Is the Toxic Skill Still so in Demand?” *The Guardian*, November 5, 2019, sec. Life and style.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/05/pickup-artists-teaching-men-approach-women-industry-street-harassment>.
- Keys to the VIP*. 2006. Seasons 1 to 3. Alpha Male Productions; BUCK Productions; Showcase. Comedy Network.
- King, Andrew Stephen. 2018. “Feminism’s Flip Side: A Cultural History of the Pickup Artist.” *Sexuality & Culture* 22, no. 1: 299–315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-017-9468-0>.
- Kligman, Michael, and Charles M. Culver. 1992. “An Analysis of Interpersonal Manipulation.” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 17, no. 2: 173–197.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jmp/17.2.173>.
- Naeem, Muhammad, Wilson Ozuem, Kerry Howell, and Silvia Ranfagni. 2023. “A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22, no. October: 16094069231205789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>.
- Rüdiger, Sofia, and Daria Dayter. 2020. “Manbragging Online: Self-Praise on Pick-up Artists’ Forums.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 161, no. May: 16–27.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.02.012>.
- Sorlin, Sandrine. 2017. “The Pragmatics of Manipulation: Exploiting Im/Politeness Theories.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 121, no. November: 132–146.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2017.10.002>.
- “Statista 2023.” n.d. *Statista*. Accessed May 14, 2025.  
<https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1358191/us-online-dating-users-by-gender>.
- Strauss, Neil. 2005. *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*. United States: ReganBooks.

- The Pickup Artist*. 2007. Seasons 1 and 2. VH1. 3Ball Productions.
- Van Dijk, Teun A. 2006. "Discourse and Manipulation." *Discourse & Society* 17, no. 3: 359–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250>.
- Weber, Eric. 1970. *How to Pick Up Girls*. New York: Symphony Press.
- White, Ice. 2020. *The Message Game: A Guide to Having the Power of Dating at the Touch of a Button : A Tinder and Online Dating Guide for Men*. London: Olcan Press.
- Zienkowski, Jan. 2011. *Discursive Pragmatics*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Zuckerberg, Donna. 2018. *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.