

SELF-ACTUALIZATION ON STEROIDS: AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL SKILLS,
DATING, AND LIFESTYLE TRAINING FOR HETEROSEXUAL MEN
IN A WESTERN CULTURAL CONTEXT

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the participants in this study. The men I had the privilege of speaking with showed tremendous courage in their decision to put themselves through the Art of Charm Boot Camp and discuss their experiences with me despite societal norms that discourage men from seeking help and the negative connotations society seems to attach to men who seek dating and social life advice. Our conversations were transformative for me. Much respect!

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ABSTRACT

In 2005, *Rolling Stones* editor and *New York Times* writer Neil Strauss published a *New York Times* bestselling book titled *The Game* outlining his experience infiltrating the pick-up artist community in Los Angeles. The launching of this popular book was followed by the formation of companies that teach heterosexual men dating and relationship skills. From manipulation tactics to true social skills and personal growth, these companies are numerous and varied in what they teach men about dating and relationships. Masculinity norms of Western culture have been shown to discourage men from seeking help, especially for romantic relationships. These new forms of dating and relationship help specifically for men are marketed to them using masculine language. Men can also learn about these programs via the Internet without anyone knowing. Therefore, men may be more likely to seek out these programs than other forms of help, even if they don't openly discuss their participation with everyone. This study examined the experiences of eighteen men who have taken part in one of these dating and relationship trainings and explored how it has influenced their lives and relationships. I used qualitative methods and conducted semi-structured interviews. The participants revealed that because they decided to attend the six-day Art of Charm Boot Camp as part of a commitment to make positive changes in their lives, several important changes occurred. They became much more social, more self-actualized (through the lens of learning heterosexual dating dynamics), gained a supportive community, and experienced exciting new realities.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis explored the impact of social skills, dating, and lifestyle training on heterosexual men's subjective quality of life, including their social interactions and relationships, by interviewing 18 men who participated in such a program. This thesis specifically examined the way men articulated their experience of attending the Art of Charm Boot Camp with interview questions about: why they decided to attend, whether they believed the training program had an effect on their life, and if so, what specific ways their life was impacted, if they think any effects will last, and explored similarities and differences among the individual experiences articulated.

This study about the impact of social skills, dating, and lifestyle training programs for men is needed in communication studies for several reasons. First, romantic relationships and social interactions are a critical part of human life and these training programs focus on how to create and maintain romantic relationships, along with how to have better social interactions with other people. Second, this study is needed in communication studies because men are more likely to attend these training programs than they are to seek help from traditional academic and clinical sources. Third, these private training programs are relatively new and very few academic studies exist on the topic. Studies have been conducted on social skills trainings and on "pick-up artists" but not on these newer, more comprehensive training programs for heterosexual men.

Review of Literature

Men and Committed Relationships

Contrary to the common understanding within US culture, there is evidence that heterosexual men want committed romantic relationships just as much as women. According to an article published in *USA Today* in 2006 that highlighted a survey of 12,000 people aged 15-44 conducted by the Centers for Disease Control, 66% of men compared to 51% of women agreed that it is better to get married than to be single throughout one's life. The article explains that this data seem to corroborate author Neil Chethik's research for his book about husbands, "in which 90% of married men said they would marry the same woman if given a chance to do it again. 'Everything I've seen that has started to look at men more carefully shows that men are committed or dedicated'" (Jayson, 2006). The idea that heterosexual men do not want to commit to a relationship is simply incorrect.

The myth that heterosexual men are afraid of committed relationships starts with our ideas about dating in adolescence, when heterosexual boys are just starting to become heterosexual men. The common understanding is that adolescent boys will be more confident, less emotionally engaged, and more powerful than their female counterparts within their romantic relationships. However, Giordano, Longmore, and Manning (2006) found that girls are significantly more confident than boys in several areas of their relationships, that boys and girls are similarly emotionally engaged in their relationships, and that girls actually have greater power and influence than boys within these relationships (p. 282). The researchers explain that, "as boys make the transition from peers to romance, they lack the experience with intimate ways of relating [compared to

girls], even as they are beginning to develop a high interest and at times strong emotional attachment to certain romantic partners” (p. 282).

Many men do want to be in committed relationships. However, it also appears that men may be less skilled at “doing” romantic relationships than women beginning with the earliest years of dating. Training may be able to help men initiate and maintain the romantic relationships they desire.

While there are considerable individual differences involved in any discussion of sex and gender, there is evidence to suggest that heterosexual women may be better than heterosexual men at relationships and relationship skills in general. In contrast to men, “women seem to be exquisitely familiar with what occurs during courtship. They can describe in detail how they and other women flirt and pick up men. Even quite successful men seem to have no idea what happens during flirtation” (Grammer, Kruck, Juette, & Fink, 2000, p. 373). This may be partially due to social conditioning and partly due to differences in male and female brains. We don’t know why for sure, but Hall et al. (2012) explain that by the time people reach adulthood “cross-sectional studies in adults have confirmed that females have larger relative volumes of a number of brain regions implicated in social function” (p. 1). The researchers say their findings show that men’s brains have to do much more work than women’s brains when making decisions of a social nature. Grammer et al. (2000), for example, found that women are much more adept than men in reading and producing nonverbal behavior (p. 373).

More specifically related to romantic relationships, heterosexual women seem to have the upper hand over heterosexual men in initial encounters. In a study of the first 10 minutes of interactions between cross-sex strangers, men reacted more to female behavior

than vice versa, men revealed more personal information in conversation than women (because women actively asked for such information), and female behavior predicted how men presented themselves (Grammer et al., 2000, p. 386). The researchers go on to explain that a woman is able to influence male approaches using a variety of non-verbal displays such as a “coy smile” or “hair flip” (Grammer et al., 2000, p. 378-379).

It may also be difficult for men to tell if a woman is interested in them romantically. There seem to be two reasons for this. First, Grammer et al. (2000) were surprised to find that women do not make it clear when they are not interested in a man and in fact often interact with men in a way that would suggest to the man that they have interest when in fact they do not (p. 388). Second, men are not as likely as women to interpret rejection signals correctly and are therefore more likely to pursue women who are not interested in them than vice versa (Yeomans, 2009). This suggests that teaching men to discern initial female interest more accurately could be a solution to one or both of these problems.

Overall, women tend to be better at relationships than men. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, women also seek help for relationships at a much higher rate than men. It is particularly important to research relationship help for men because the dominant culture in the US makes it especially difficult for men who want help with relationships to get the help they need and want.

Masculinity Norms Prevent Men from Seeking Traditional Help

It has been shown that many men want relationships. If these men are to have the relationships they desire, they clearly need help initiating and maintaining romantic relationships. However, in 2008, 74% of books in the relationship and family category

were purchased by women (Blakely, 2009, p. 1). Most self-help and specifically relationship help products are marketed and sold to women. Hegemonic masculinity norms within the dominant US culture may partly explain why men do not seek the relationship help they need.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity was first conceptualized in the early 1980s by Raewyn Connell and updated by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). Hegemonic masculinity is the term that scholars use to understand social hierarchies that exist with the ideal man in the most dominant social position. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explain that this image of the ideal man subordinates other ways of being a man, as well as subordinating all women. The resulting social hierarchy has the ideal man at the apex, followed by men who do not meet this cultural ideal, and then followed by women who are the furthest from the ideal simply because they are not men. Hegemonic masculinity also refers to the way of performing “being a man” that is most acceptable in a given context at a given time and it is the social position that has the most power.

It is sometimes difficult to pinpoint what the ideal man looks like because the image of the ideal man is often invisible, which is one component of its power. For example, when people are asked to think of a “heroic” soldier in the US military, they will most likely picture a heterosexual white male. It is *assumed* that a soldier is heterosexual and white *unless otherwise specified*. It is also assumed that a soldier is a man (not a woman) unless otherwise specified, partially revealing the hierarchy of masculinities. When media reports in the US talk about US soldiers, they often point out that an “African American soldier” or “homosexual soldier” or “female soldier” did

something, but these reports almost never say a “white soldier” or “heterosexual soldier” or “male soldier” did something. The use of qualifiers points out that non-white males, homosexual males, and females do not meet all of the implied characteristics of ideal masculinity within US culture and carves out the sometimes hidden figure of the most socially dominant conception of a man in the US today.

Within different contexts, what is assumed to be the ideal man can be different. For example, in the National Basketball Association, “black” or “African American” players are most often seen as more masculine than “white” players and therefore hold the most dominant social position in that context. Some may argue that these assumptions about what a “normal” or “ideal” person in these contexts looks like are simply due to the fact that there are fewer “black” people, homosexual people, women, or “white” people in these contexts. However, it may also be that this is the case partly or wholly *because of* these assumed, socially constructed hierarchies.

Hegemonic masculinity oppresses both men and women and can have detrimental, real effects in the lives of both men and women. It seems clear that hegemonic masculinity oppresses women; women cannot be in the most socially dominant position simply because they are not men. However, hegemonic masculinity also affects men. For example, numerous alternative masculinities are suppressed. If a man does not perform masculinity in the most acceptable way, he risks his social position. Relevant to this study is the way in which hegemonic masculinity norms create a barrier for men who wish to seek help for personal problems and issues, especially in the area of dating and relationships.

Seeking help and support for personal problems or self-improvement may be easier for women than men within US culture. Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, and Hubbard (2011) explain that seeking help can be seen as a failure to meet internalized masculinity norms coming from the dominant culture like self-reliance (p. 375). The researchers demonstrated that this applies to men from diverse backgrounds. Vogel et al. (2011) also point out that men seek treatment less often than women even when they experience a similar level of need for help (p. 368). In a study of attitudes toward self-help groups, Seymour-Smith (2008) found that men felt the need to distance themselves from feminine stereotypes of self-help groups, such as the need to rely on others for support, while women had no such difficulty discussing their participation (p. 792).

The resistance to acknowledging the need for help may be due to social conditioning from other men. Vogel et al. (2011) explain that young boys tease each other if they show what is perceived to be weak behavior. As a result of this conditioning, boys begin to avoid any behaviors that may be seen as vulnerable or weak, including seeking help for their problems. Adherence to these masculinity norms continues to influence men to have negative views of help seeking and may prevent even adult men from seeking help for their problems (p. 369).

Vogel et al. (2011) suggest that gender roles are very difficult to change and that they are socialized very early in life and therefore help for men might be better presented in a way that appeals to men. Seymour-Smith (2008) agrees and adds that while we should work to change gender stereotypes, self-help groups should pay attention to the names they use if they are to encourage men to attend. The researchers go so far as to

suggest that self-help groups should market themselves to men in a way that may even uphold dominant masculinity norms if they want men to participate (p. 795). While traditional relationship help has not attempted to become more appealing to men, contemporary dating companies have done just that in marketing relationship training to men. The Art of Charm Boot Camp is an example of self-help for men that uses masculine language to attract clients. Additionally, the Internet has provided a safe place for men to seek the help they need and want in a way that does not violate masculinity norms in public.

PUA Movement and Internet Forums

The Internet has provided a platform for men to seek relationship help without risking being perceived by others as breaking masculinity norms. The need to be perceived as not needing help may generally be stronger in public than within each man's mind, so men may seek help in private that they would not seek in public. However, Vogel et al. (2011) also explain that men might be more likely than women to internalize the public stigma associated with seeking psychological help, which can be a barrier to seeking such help (p. 369). This barrier, based on gender stereotypes, can prevent men from seeking the help they desire with romantic relationships. However, men can now get information about relationships without anyone else finding out via the Internet. Companies that teach men dating and relationship skills typically market and provide their services online via e-books, online or downloadable videos, online forums, podcasts, and other audio programs.

The internet has facilitated the rapid expansion of the “pick-up artist movement” (PUA movement) and communities of pick-up artists (PUAs). What began as a few

dating coaches teaching men how to “pick up” women and a small number of PUAs sharing tips on how to pick up women with each other via the internet has transformed into a relatively large industry. This expansion began with the publication of Neil Strauss’ *New York Times* bestselling book *The Game* in 2005. *The Game* showed men that it is in fact possible to improve results in the arena of dating women. This popular *New York Times* bestseller about the “best pick-up artists in the world” living together in Los Angeles exposed thousands of men to the PUA movement and fueled the launch of numerous dating companies, e-books, online message boards, audio trainings, and training videos all teaching men dating and relationship skills. Once men found out about the PUA community, the internet allowed men to participate and get relationship help without breaking masculinity norms, and *The Game* showed men that these resources exist.

One of the major features of the “PUA movement” has been the development of online forums related to dating and relationships for men. Holtz, Kronberger, and Wagner (2012) describe the internet as vehicle for reducing social constraints and highlight that users of online forums are more open and honest in their expression than they would be in other settings (p. 56). Tanis (2008) says that the anonymity of online forums are attractive to people who feel stigmatized because they do not have to make their identity public (p. 710). Tanis (2008) further explains that associating with similar others, even online, and being able to discuss their situation freely and ask potentially embarrassing questions help people destigmatize themselves and better deal with the issues they face (p. 711).

Dating and relationship help for men that grew out of the “pick-up artist movement” tends to appeal to men in a way that does not threaten their idea of masculinity. Instead of “self-help” groups, men who get together to discuss dating and relationships within the PUA movement are called “lairs” (Strauss, 2005). Many companies offering relationship training for men call their events “boot camps.” These more masculine terms may make these training programs more attractive to men than traditional relationship training.

Yeomans (2009) provides additional background information about the PUA movement and some of the men who teach PUA tactics. Men looking for dating tips will run into numerous master PUAs who teach men relationship skills. These PUA trainers often have a similar background story of wanting to master sexual seduction in spite of being unattractive, socially awkward, or consumed by anxiety (p. 2).

Hambling-Jones and Merrison (2012) expand on the point that PUAs want to become successful at picking up women despite any shortcomings they may personally perceive about themselves. The researchers claim that the main philosophical foundation of the PUA community is that seducing women is about how a man *interacts* with women and not about other measures of attractiveness, such as physical appearance and income. This philosophical foundation leads PUAs to learn how to have successful social interactions with both men and women. “Social mastery” is the goal. The researchers go further and explain that PUAs acquire these social skills in a few distinct ways. They learn techniques devised by other PUAs, practice what they learn out in the real world, and share the results of this practice with other members of the PUA community.

Learning and sharing mostly occurs online in the form of forums, ebooks, podcasts, and videos, but there are also live trainings held by master PUAs (p. 1116).

Of particular interest to communication researchers is the focus of PUAs on interaction as the basis of attraction and relationships. According to Hambling-Jones and Merrison (2012), PUAs claim to reach their goals exclusively by controlling their “verbal interactions” (conversations) with other people (p. 1115). Yeomans (2009) highlights that PUAs use systematic “routines,” which are pre-rehearsed conversations taught by master PUAs, in interactions with women to obtain a desired response, such as a date, phone number, or kiss (p. 4). This focus on using routines to gain specific outcomes in their social interactions may lead to the pure objectification of women specifically and people in general. While routines help men to get over their fear of approaching women they perceive to be attractive by providing them with pre-programmed ways of communicating, they can also lead to relationship problems.

Routines used by pick-up artists are designed to show women that the man using them is a highly valuable potential mate. The problem with becoming a PUA for most men is that demonstrating that one is a highly valuable mate to potential mates without actually *being* a high value mate only works on a short-term basis. Men who want better romantic relationships cannot simply learn techniques that cause women to be attracted to them for a short period of time.

Yeomans (2009) explains that it may be difficult for a PUA to form meaningful long-term romantic relationships because the foundation of trust between two romantic partners is established in initial interactions between the partners. If this foundation of a relationship is built on fabrications, it is unlikely to produce a positive long-term

relationship once the deceit has been detected (p. 20). Many men who participate in the PUA community come to understand this “PUA problem” and want more training to become better long-term mates. Several PUA trainers have even come to this conclusion themselves and have started to teach men what they call “inner game.” “Inner game” seems to be a masculine term for the kind of self-help now being offered by several companies connected to the PUA movement.

The anonymity of the internet, the publication of *The Game*, the “PUA problem,” and masculinity norms in US culture created the conditions for the development of a market for self-help products and trainings for men that transcend picking up women. New forms of training are emerging that provide a solution to the “PUA problem” by teaching men “inner game” in addition to or instead of pick-up tactics. These trainings show men how to become the best internally validated version of themselves in addition to specific skills for interacting with women and maintaining relationships. These trainings are essentially self-help and lifestyle coaching cloaked in masculine language.

The Art of Charm

The Art of Charm (AoC) is one such company that exists to solve the PUA problem. AoC seeks to teach men social skills for success in life, business, and dating. The Art of Charm Boot Camp is the main method used by the company to teach men social and life skills. Growing out of the PUA movement but moving away from routines, AoC uses language that upholds masculinity norms in order to market their services to men. AoC attempts to solve the PUA problem by teaching men how to actually *be* highly valuable men and attractive potential mates.

According to the Art of Charm website (www.theartofcharm.com), the main philosophy of the company is that getting the woman you like is about becoming a better man. The website claims that while men will learn specific skills to help them with women, the AoC's mission is to help men improve relationships with everyone in their life, from co-workers, family, friends, and women. The goal of the Art of Charm Boot Camp is to facilitate changes that will allow a man to pursue happiness in all areas of his life. When teaching men how to interact with women, the AoC does not teach men routines. Instead, they teach men skills that allow them to be the most attractive version of who they really are and to build strong connections with women and everyone else in their lives.

The Art of Charm Boot Camp is a week-long training program with mostly male coaches who claim to be experts in the areas of dating and social dynamics. The training program includes classroom instruction and practical application of lessons during the day at various locations and in the evening at bars and clubs in Los Angeles. Attendees live at the Art of Charm Headquarters for the week and typically take the program with 4-7 other men. The daily schedule usually runs from around 11:00 a.m. until after midnight. Interactions between boot camp students and volunteers are filmed and feedback is provided while the student watches the film with coaches. When students are at bars and clubs, coaches are also there to offer feedback and encouragement. At the end of the weeklong training program, the goal of the AoC is that each student is empowered with the proper tools and mindsets to create the lifestyle he desires.

Few Studies Exist on New Forms of Romantic Relationship Training for Heterosexual Men

Romantic relationship training programs for men are relatively new. The academic literature contains very few studies related to the kind of training offered by The Art of Charm Boot Camp while more traditional and clinical help has been thoroughly documented and other forms of romantic relationship help for men has been studied. For example, Blanch-Hartigan (2012) evaluated the effectiveness of emotional cues recognition training. Also, Yeomans (2009) as well as Hambling-Jones and Merrison (2012) analyzed what “pick-up artists” do and what “pick-up artists” teach other men about relationships with women. There is no literature discussing relatively new romantic relationship training programs for men that teach social skills and relationship skills to men such as The Art of Charm Boot Camp.

The literature about other forms of training shows that social skills training can effectively improve outcomes in social interactions within specific contexts. If romantic relationship training programs for men can be beneficial and men may be more likely to seek them out than other forms of help, it is important to evaluate them for the benefit of the men who participate in these romantic relationship training programs and for the numerous people they interact with in their lives. If men were able to improve the way they interact with others by attending a romantic relationship training program, it would likely have a positive effect on their perceived quality of life and on the way other people in their lives are able to relate to them.

Some social romantic relationship training programs offered outside of traditional academic and clinical settings seem promising, but data from these trainings is scarce.

Halford, Sanders, and Behrens (2001) assert that skills-based relationship education, for example, reliably improves communication by couples for months and years after completing such education. The researchers also explain that, in contrast to traditional martial and relationship therapies, romantic relationship training outside of these arenas has not been thoroughly studied (p. 750-751). Because men may be more attracted to this kind of romantic relationship training than traditional forms of relationship training, it is important to document and evaluate these trainings to find out what the effects of romantic relationship training programs are on the men who participate in them and the people who interact with the men who participate.

Purpose of Study

Trainings similar to the Art of Charm Boot Camp may be part of the answer to the call by researchers (Vogel et al., 2011; Seymour-Smith, 2008) for relationship training that allows men to seek the help they need without violating current masculinity norms, acknowledging there is also work being done to change these cultural masculinity norms. To find out if these emerging forms of relationship training can be helpful, this study explored how the boot camp has affected the subjective experience of the daily lives of attendees, if at all. This study aimed to find out the effects of these trainings by exploring the experiences of the men who have participated.

This study may also extend the analysis of dating and relationship training available to men in the private market. The Art of Charm Boot Camp also offers dating and relationship training without learning “pick-up artist tricks.” I was unable to find analysis of any private dating and relationship training programs for men outside of analyses of “pick-up artists” and what some of these “pick-up artists” teach to other men.

This study has the potential to extend the conversation about private relationship training for men.

In order to evaluate the articulated experiences of men who have attended a romantic relationship training program, I interviewed participants following guidelines for semi-structured interviews explained by Keyton (2011) and used thematic analysis with grounded theory as a frame for my methodological approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Owen, 1984). Interview transcripts and field notes provided the data for this study.

RQ: How is the subjective life experience of men impacted by attending a modern social skills, dating, and lifestyle coaching program?

CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

This study used qualitative methods to gain an understanding of the experiences of men who participated in social skills, dating, and lifestyle coaching through the Art of Charm Boot Camp. In particular, semi-structured interviews and field notes were used to gather data for this study. Qualitative research methodologies allow researchers to maintain a certain level of objectivity by following well-developed procedures while taking an active, subjective role as the instrument of data collection (Keyton, 2011). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) expand on the idea that the researcher plays a fundamental role in research when the phenomena under investigation involves human communication because, “knowledge of social reality emerges from the fundamental interdependence that exists between researchers and those they study” (p. 9). The goal of this research was to investigate the experiences of men who have participated in the Art of Charm Boot Camp as articulated to me in a single semi-structured interview.

Participants

Approval for this research was granted by Boise State University’s IRB. Participants were recruited using a purposive sample. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants who meet certain criteria, which is important in a study involving the experiences of people who have completed a specific course of action. Participants for this study were English-speaking men over the age of 18 who have completed social skills, dating, and lifestyle training through the Art of Charm Boot

Camp. Participants completed the training program a few months to a several years ago. Some participants had completed the program more than once. Participants were also selected based on their interest in the study and their ability to participate in a timely manner. Participants were selected by contacting The Art of Charm to obtain contact information for graduates of the boot camp who may have been interested in participating in this study. The participants were contacted by email or telephone, directly by me, to identify interest in participating in the study. Interested individuals provided verbal or written consent to be interviewed. All participants completed and signed a consent form prior to participating (see Appendix A). Participants received the consent form via e-mail before a scheduled interview and returned the completed form before the scheduled interview time.

Interviews

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews lasting 30-60 minutes each with 18 participants who had completed the Art of Charm Boot Camp. All interviews were audio-recorded and were conducted over the phone or via Skype at times and locations that were convenient to the participants, and in an atmosphere that was private and confidential. Field notes documenting the context of the conversation from my perspective were taken during and shortly after each interview. Interviews addressed the following topics: the factors that led to the decision to attend the weeklong relationship training, any obstacles that had to be overcome in order to attend the training, the experiences leading up to the training, the experiences during the training, how the training has impacted their subjective experience of daily life, if at all, and if they would recommend the training to others (for full list of interview questions see Appendix B).

Analysis

To analyze the collected data, thematic analysis was used (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Owen (1984) provides a method for identifying themes by the recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of ideas expressed in the data. Keyton (2011) explains that it is important to separate the processes of analysis and interpretation as two distinct steps. Keyton (2011) describes analysis as systematically identifying patterns and themes in the data while interpretation is described as applying meaning to these patterns and themes.

Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after each interview. Field notes were used for clarification of interview questions and answers. Once interviews were transcribed, the process of coding the interview transcripts began.

To analyze the data, open coding and integration along with thematic analysis were employed. Open coding means reading through the data and identifying patterns. Integration refers to the process of consolidating these patterns as they are identified and looking for them as I read through more data, followed by combining these patterns to form larger categories. The final step in the integration phase is combining these patterns further into themes.

The initial interpretation of a phrase during the open coding process is called a code. Codes that link together to form a pattern are called concepts. Concepts that are integrated together are called categories, and categories that are connected form themes.

Open coding is the first, unrestricted pass through the data used to identify concepts, which are phrases that are repeated (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Keyton, 2011). The unit of analysis for this thesis was phrases. During this open coding phase, concepts about the impact of attending The Art of Charm Boot Camp emerged directly from the

dataset. For example, when a participant said, “we worked out the things that have been holding us back inside our minds,” the code from this phrase was: changing unhelpful mindsets. The concept that included this code and numerous others was: “having a new mindset.”

Also during the open coding phase, the process of making meaningful connections among codes and concepts that emerged from the data began. Once data has been broken apart to identify codes and concepts, it must be put back together in a meaningful way (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This part of the open coding phase allows the researcher to link phrases that emerged during the open coding process together and apply them to the dataset to uncover what categories began to take shape (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, the codes “having to actually apply techniques at a club,” and “completing goals during boot camp activities,” “relating in a high-pressure environment,” and “putting the material to work,” were linked together in a category called “applying social principles.” This two-part open coding phase produced categories that were further analyzed. These categories represent my interpretation of the significant ideas expressed by the participants in the study regarding their experience attending The Art of Charm Boot Camp. Exploring the relationships among these categories and combining them into larger themes provided a methodologically sound way to interpret what is most significant about participating in the boot camp according to the men themselves.

During the integration phase, the data was coded a second time using categories that emerged during the open coding process to establish interrelationships among the categories (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process increased the significance of each

category and helped me identify interrelated categories. For example, the categories “becoming more of who you really are,” “becoming internally motivated,” and “being yourself” were linked together into a category called “becoming internally validated, self-aware, and confident.” Once interrelated categories were established, I began the process of reviewing the data again to determine the occurrence of each category within the data set. Using thematic analysis to interpret the categorized data, I identified five themes.

Themes are a range of similar interpretations used by the participants in a study to conceptualize their experiences. Thematic analysis is defined as “a method of qualitative analysis based on participants’ conceptions” (Keyton, 2011, p. 313). Three criteria were used to identify a theme: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984).

Recurrence refers to the same concept appearing more than once in the same data set, but with different wording. For example, when a participant said, “boy that was an intense week,” and later in the interview said, “it will make you very uncomfortable,” about explaining the week-long program to a friend, this would be an example of recurrence because the same idea about having strong emotions during the week appears in slightly different language. Repetition means that the participant says the exact same word or phrase more than once. For example, one of the participants used the word “insecurities” six times in our interview. Forcefulness means that the way the participant says something carries particular weight. For example, when I asked one of the participants about his favorite part of the boot camp, he took an exaggerated pause before he began, laughed nervously, seemed mildly embarrassed, changed cadences several times, and seemed to struggle to tell me what he wanted to say before he finally told me that he

“kissed a girl at a club for the first time,” indicating the gravity of the incident for him. Field notes were used to clarify instances of forcefulness in the data (see Owen, 1984).

This method of analysis was deemed most conducive to this study because the participants’ own subjective experiences are the primary considerations guiding this thesis. While the researcher’s unique life experience affected the way the data was analyzed as the instrument of qualitative research, this method of data analysis is meaningful because it provided a way for the researcher to make conclusions based on the articulations of the participants themselves and using their own unique ways of expressing ideas.

Using this thematic analysis process allowed the researcher to identify five overarching themes and organize the categories, concepts, and codes within these emergent themes. These themes and categories are discussed below.

CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

It was a privilege to connect with 18 men who have attended the Art of Charm Boot Camp through interviewing them for this study. The interactions I had with the participants not only provided the required data for this study, they were also transformative at times for me and possibly for the participants. The interviews changed some of my own perceptions. In our conversations, the participants and I discussed why they decided to go to the program, what the experience of the program was like for them, and the impact the boot camp has had on their lives.

After engaging in the analysis process as described, the data demonstrated five broad themes: 1) Desiring Change; 2) Becoming a More Social Person; 3) Becoming Self-Actualized (through a western, heterosexual dating context); 4) Gaining a Supportive Community; and 5) Experiencing New Realities. Each theme was made up of several categories.

The first theme –Desiring Change – included categories relating to the participants discovering the need for the Art of Charm Boot Camp, overcoming obstacles in order to grow, and being willing to change. The second theme – Becoming a More Social Person – contained categories about learning social skills, applying social principles, and experiencing “social abundance.” The third theme –Becoming Self-Actualized (through a western, heterosexual dating context) – encompassed categories pertaining to becoming internally validated, self-aware, and confident, and believing that

the Art of Charm Boot Camp is universal. The fourth theme – Gaining a Supportive Community – contained categories about seeking help and support despite masculinity norms, and gaining a lifelong support group. The fifth and final theme – Experiencing New Realities – was composed of categories relating to changing perceptions and mindsets and experiencing a new way of life.

Each of these themes and categories are described in detail below. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of the participants in this study.

Climbing Maslow's Mountain: Desiring Change

In our conversations, the participants demonstrated a tremendous desire to change something about themselves or their lives. For example, David explained, “I was at the point where I was like, right now I’m gonna either improve or I’m just gonna forever be complacent and always want this, you know?” Each of the men came to the conclusion that going through the boot camp would benefit them for different reasons but also discovered the need for the week-long program in similar ways. In order to experience the change that they so desired, the participants were willing to change and overcame obstacles before, during, and after their boot camp graduation. The researcher identified three categories that demonstrated the participants’ strong desire for positive change: 1.) Discovering the need for the Art of Charm Boot Camp, 2.) Being willing to change, and 3.) Overcoming obstacles.

The first category discussed below explores how the participants came to the decision to attend the boot camp.

Discovering the Need for the Art of Charm Boot Camp

Each of the men I spoke with came to the decision to attend the boot camp in their own way. However, they all wanted to change or improve something about their lives or themselves. Almost all of the participants indicated that listening to the Art of Charm Podcast was how they discovered the boot camp and that the podcast led them to conclude that attending the program could help them affect the change they were seeking. Most of the participants talked about having conversations with Art of Charm Co-Founder Jordan Harbinger before they made the final decision to pay several thousand dollars and go to Los Angeles or New York City for the live-in program. The participants decided that the boot camp was the answer to the need(s) or problem(s) they were experiencing in their lives.

All of the participants indicated that they desired some kind of positive change in their lives. Many of the participants wanted to overcome social anxiety and to be more comfortable and skilled socially. Blake provided an example when he said:

If something goes wrong with your computer, I can roll with it and fix it. But socially, I wasn't as good. So that was kind of like, you know what, you guys are socially where I'd like to be...So that day...I called them [Art of Charm] and I scheduled everything.

Others were comfortably social in one area but not in others. Cody told me:

I thought it was funny. Like why do I need to go to this because I should be pretty social being a bartender. You know, this is, I have to be social with people. And I would find that outside of work, if I wasn't in my work mode that I'd just be kind of like sitting there doing nothing. You know?

A small number of the participants declared that they wanted to become better at dating women. Mitch confided, "I was really just, wasn't having any success with, much of any

success with women. And the success I was having was not with women that I was choosing. That's for sure." Kevin went further than talking about dating; he explained that he did not want to end up in a relationship like the one his parents had:

I don't want to be like my parents where, you know, they kind of felt like they were, you know, one of them selected the other one. And so when the divorce happened like, their entire world was shot. Because the other person selected them. They had no purpose being in that relationship to begin with because they weren't, they weren't doing anything. So when they go to cheat on the other person that's now their justification, was they weren't really in love with them. And, and I don't want to be that, that person and bring children into this world eventually like, that's just not, I'm not about that life.

Several participants mentioned that they had gone through a break-up, that they were having relationship issues, and that they wanted better relationships with their families.

Several participants also said that they wanted to "de-militarize" their communication style after serving in the military so they could better connect with people outside of the military.

In addition to wanting to improve social aspects of their lives, the participants discussed wanting to grow internally and in areas of life beyond dating and social skills. They told me that they wanted to work on inner being, that they were dealing with grief, that they did not have control, that they felt insecure, that they were tired of being a "nice guy," and being needy, that they wanted to get past sticking points, that they wanted confidence, that they felt depressed, or that they wanted more success, and that they were not satisfied with life and wanted feedback. David summed up quite nicely the reasons why most men decided to attend the Art of Charm Boot Camp when he explained:

I know people take the boot camps for different reasons. You have guys who take boot camps for, because they want to find the woman of their dreams or you know the guys who are like you know, I want to be in a better social circle. And you

have other people who are like you know, I want to handle life, get ahead in life in my, at my work. I want to have better professional relationships with people and network. And so whatever, for some reason you want to get off that. And what was it, the way the boot camp is structured it's very much so aimed toward the personal aspect.

The men told me they wanted to be more social, improve their dating skills and relationships, and grow faster, and they believed that getting coaching from the Art of Charm could help them do so. Two of the main ways the men discovered that the boot camp could be the answer to their needs was by listening to the Art of Charm Podcast, as previously mentioned, or by having a friend who had taken the boot camp.

Most of the participants had listened to the Art of Charm Podcast prior to attending the boot camp. The free podcast, with over 250 episodes at the time this study, allowed the men to become familiar with the philosophy of the Art of Charm and its core teachings, which made them feel more comfortable about their decision to attend. Josh made this clear:

I listened to a lot of the podcasts and the material so I was quite familiar with their um, I guess their underlying message and so forth. So I wasn't too concerned about that. It was just more like you know, whether or not I could commit to the program and you know, do all the exercises and be able to go through the program and grow as much as I wanted to.

One of the reasons for attending the week-long program that many of the participants articulated was that they wanted to go beyond what was available to them via the podcast.

They liked what they were hearing but wanted more. Andrew commented:

I started using some of the stuff from the podcasts and found some success with that. And you know, like most folks who find some success with that stuff there you think, well that worked. I wonder what else, what other advice these guys have. You know, I'm looking for more.

A second reason some of the participants mentioned as a reason for attending the boot camp was seeing the results a friend had gotten from the program. Cody commented that, “seeing the change in someone else made it so much easier for me to take the course. And want to take the course.” Once the participants decided they wanted more than what was freely available via the podcast or saw how well a friend was doing after attending the boot camp, most of the participants had a conversation with Art of Charm Co-Founder Jordan Harbinger on the phone that impacted their decision to attend the program.

A majority of the participants discussed talking with Art of Charm co-founder Jordan Harbinger on the phone, some of them multiple times, before deciding to attend. Andrew alluded to the way the Art of Charm seems to screen potential clients to make sure they are a good fit when he says that “Jordan and I did like a Skype call from Tampa, kind of doing that initial kind of why do you want to come to the boot camp and what are your goals kind of thing.” These conversations seemed to be pivotal in the participant’s decision to spend the money and go to the Art of Charm Boot Camp.

After discovering their desire for change, listening to the podcast, and talking to Jordan Harbinger, the participants in the study concluded that the week-long boot camp was right for them and decided to attend.

The decision to attend the boot camp indicated that the participants were willing to change. In order to get the most out of the boot camp, participants expressed that one must be open and willing to change one’s self and one’s life.

Being Willing to Change

The participants in this study showed a great degree of willingness to make a change to themselves and their lives. They considered the boot camp an investment in themselves and expected returns into the future. Tim said of the program:

The benefits that you get here, they last you, like your, they'll last your entire life. So I get an ROI for the next, you know, sixty or seventy years. And that's huge. And it's a, it's a compounding effect.

The participants also expressed that they wanted to learn and grow and were open to this kind of internal change when they attended the Art of Charm Boot Camp. Josh said of his experience:

I was just so busy reflecting internally and focusing on my own growth. And just you know, the magnitude of my growth during that short period of time you know, it was seriously, was you know, such an eye-opening experience.

Several participants mentioned that anyone who wishes to benefit fully from the boot camp being must open to growth.

The participants in this study felt that they needed to grow in some way and that the week-long program could help them do so. They were open to making changes to their inner and outer lives. However, none of these changes came easily. Each of the participants had to overcome obstacles to achieve their goals. Overcoming these obstacles demonstrated the participants' deep desire for and commitment to the positive change they were seeking.

Overcoming Obstacles

Overcoming obstacles was a major category that surfaced in nearly every interview. Some of the men overcame obstacles to get to the Art of Charm Boot Camp.

Many participants had to travel long distances to reach the program site and one participant flew to Los Angeles from another country. The financial investment was a significant hurdle for several participants. Some also had difficulty getting time off of work. The participants also explained that there were mental obstacles. John summed up the gravity of making the decision to attend even after the payment for the program had been made:

Well I wrote the check but I like was back with my ex-girlfriend. So I kept like, Jordan was probably getting annoyed actually because he kept like, "hey you know. This program's coming up. Let's get you in it. You know, you already paid and everything. Like, let's do it." And I kept blowing him off and like pushing him off. I'd be like uh no, I can't that weekend or whatever. I kept pushing it off. But I finally got to a point where I was just like you know what, these skills are like, they're for business and networking and in my job I do a ton of networking. Like I do consultant work so I was like you know, I'll just take it and it will probably just, I'll focus less on the picking up chicks part and go on with the rest of it. You know I had to be forced by the balls.

In the minds of the participants, deciding to attend the boot camp was a significant decision.

Many of the participants expressed the doubts they had about the Art of Charm Boot Camp before they went through the program. They invested a significant amount of money and time into the program and were concerned about whether or not it would be worth it. Nick expressed this feeling nicely:

As I was flying across the country to California I was just kind of hoping that this wasn't a scam. That it was actually real. So that was definitely on my mind but you know, when I finally found the building that they were in in Hollywood you know I, one of the coaches ended up opening the door, and I'm like, "Oh thank God! It's legit."

Once the participants overcame any obstacles that may have prevented them from showing up for the boot camp, they also overcame numerous obstacles during the week-long program.

All of the participants talked in one way or another about overcoming internal obstacles at the boot camp itself. David shared:

The Art of Charm Boot Camp was probably one of the scariest things I've ever done...I felt it was a very, very scary place initially. And actually like it was...I'll just be completely honest with you, after the first night I almost wanted to like leave...You have to check your ego at the door you know.

Many of the men explained that the hardest part or their least favorite part of the boot camp was also their favorite or the most valuable part of the week for them. John explained:

The field nights are tough, man. When you start out, you do get blown out a lot [rejected by the person you are speaking with, most often referring to a woman]. You know, but the guys push you. Like go talk to that girl. Go do that. And that's probably the hardest, but also it was fun. Because at the end of every night like you just feel good.

Mitch added that "through all the week, probably my least favorite part of the week was also an important part of the week. Um, it was the signatures exercise." Mitch is referring to an exercise where he was required to stop 50 strangers and ask them to write their first impression of him and have them sign his notebook. Ramon added, "my favorite part of the week was also my least favorite part of the week." Mark echoed these sentiments when he mentioned that:

The least favorite at the time was doing the stuff during the day [signatures exercise, starting conversations with women, etc.]...And but now, I mean knowing the lessons that came out of it, was probably the biggest learning lesson of them all. It's just painful to go through it.

The men overcame obstacles during their time at the program with the help of the other men at the boot camp along with the coaches. According to the participants, these moments of tension and getting support in overcoming them spurred the most growth throughout their time at the program.

The participants also frequently discussed getting help from the boot camp in overcoming obstacles in life. Mark talked about changing his career to do more of what he loves because of his experience at the program when he said that, “one of the big things I took out of it is um, when we worked out our interpersonal goals and the things that have been holding us back inside our minds...I decided to go back to that type of work [that I love].” Kevin talked about letting his debt hold him back before the training and how he has thought about his debt and other insecurities since the boot camp:

It's like, well I've created this debt that I have now and as much as an insecurity as that could be, like, I'm not going to let that hold me back from you know, walking up to the cutest girl in school. You know, or this year I have my ten-year reunion and you know, I'm not going to let that hold me back from anything. Because those are just excuses to why you shouldn't do something when really they're excuses why you should. You know, you should always, if you feel uncomfortable you should always seek that out and get after that.

The participants in this study wanted to improve their lives and were willing and able to overcome obstacles to do so. One of the deeply desired life changes that most of the participants indicated as a reason for attending the boot camp was that they wanted to improve their social life. The next theme deals with the participants' social transformation.

Charm School: Becoming a More Social Person

Every interview involved much discussion of becoming a more social person. The “curriculum” of the Art of Charm Boot Camp is designed to teach men social skills and principles. The challenges and activities at the boot camp require men to put these new skills and principles into action. Learning social skills and then applying them at the boot camp led to a significant perceived improvement in the social lives of each of the men interviewed for this study. Three categories were identified that relate to becoming a more social person: 1.) Learning social skills and principles, 2.) Applying social principles, and 3.) Experiencing “social abundance.”

The first category discussed below explores the social skills and principles the men learned in the classroom of the Art of Charm Boot Camp.

Learning Social Skills and Principles

The participants in this study highlighted learning social principles in an informal classroom setting with Art of Charm instructors as part of the boot camp experience.

David paints a vivid picture of the boot camp classroom:

They structured designated classroom time with one of the instructors where you had like Alex, Jordan, AJ, Johnny...And basically they would structure your class, you have your classroom hours and you sat down there with your notebook. And they go over a rudimentary structure of like just the basics, you know. Kind of like basically (laughs) forget everything you know about being a guy of value and let us just you know, drop some knowledge on you guys. That’s kind of what they did. They talk about, there’s different things from storytelling, like being a better storyteller or talking, to expressing banter back and forth...I would say it’s 90% aimed at the dating and the relationship frame.

John mentioned that they learned, “more advanced ways of building rapport. Like how to have deeper conversations.” One of the specific things most of the participants said they

learned in the classroom setting was an interaction framework that they could apply to any social situation. Joe articulated learning about this interaction framework in the classroom:

The classroom portions are really valuable; they just go over...the fundamentals that they talk about in communication. They talk about the basics about gender roles, gender dynamics, social dynamics, and how to go from not knowing somebody to making a good friend. And you know, or from not knowing somebody to romantically escalating. Um and they map it all out.

The participants also spoke about learning skills that specifically related to interacting with women but most of which applied to interacting with everyone else in their lives. These social skills included role-playing (having playful conversations by assuming an imaginary role, e.g. a police officer and speaking to the other person as if they are in another role, such as a robber), approaching (starting a conversation), bantering (playfully dealing with challenging statements and questions, e.g. if one person says, "Will you buy me a drink?" the other could banter by smiling playfully and saying, "No thanks, I already have a drink"), qualifying (one person tells the other that they appreciate them and then asks follow-up questions to get to know them more deeply to decide if they are right for them), touching comfortably and appropriately, confident body language including smiling and good eye-contact, going on dates, romantically escalating (e.g., holding hands, then kissing), and knowing where you are in an interaction or relationship. Once these social skills and principles were covered in a classroom setting, the participants also had the opportunity to apply them.

Applying Social Principles

The participants explained that while the classroom “curriculum” of the Art of Charm Boot Camp was valuable, transformative, and credible, they actually got more out of putting their new knowledge into action. All of the participants emphasized the importance of applying social principles in our interviews. Many participants noted that they knew most of the concepts and principles they were learning before they went to the boot camp and that putting them into action made a huge difference for them. To graduate from the program, attendees must complete “challenges” that put what they are learning into action.

One of the ways the men applied the social skills and principles they learned in the classroom was during “field nights” where they and Art of Charm coaches went to bars and clubs together to practice. Khang explained that after getting classroom instruction they would, “go out at night and try to implement what we were taught.”

Cody uncovered what happens at the first of several field nights:

That first night is probably the toughest one of all. Because you really only have those first few things that you went over with them like you know, smile, have a nice presence, and here’s a couple things to do. You know they want you to high-five or cheers this many people. They put a number on the board. And we want you to dance with this many people. Just to get you more social in this bar venue.

Many of the participants talked about field nights as harrowing and growth-inducing experiences. Ramon described his last field night in detail:

This was the last night. There had been five days and we'd been through theories and we'd had two nights out. And I had the worst fricking night. I was getting, I'd got blown out early. I was feeling like awful. I was angry and not feeling it. We changed locations and this was, that was a whole part of their thing that okay, we're starting here and then we're going to go somewhere else. And the whole night I was just so down and the coach was just beside himself. He was, he was

trying to get me motivated. He was getting frustrated because I was pushing back at every, every challenge. And finally he said just go dance. I don't care. Get out there, do something. And thank God for Gangnam Style. And I had this jacket on, I'm Chinese looking. I look Korean too. So when Gangnam Style comes on I'm doing the thing and the crowd goes wild. I had people coming to me. It was...and but the thing was I didn't see it at the time because I was too blown out and I was too far inside my head. I didn't notice or really enjoy it. And finally about two o'clock in the morning they said let's just get out. We're going to go get the other guys. We're ending the night. And I was still kind of, I was still pepped up. And then I was standing outside decompressing and this couple walks out and they were just like, "Oh my God. It's you!" And I'm like, what the fuck are they talking about? And the guy was talking to me like she wanted to dance with you all night. Take a picture with us. Really? And, and the whole thing was just like as I was decompressing people were coming out and they were really positive to me. And it was mostly just that one couple that I can remember. But the following day we have our debrief and the other guys are saying the entire club was talking about you, meaning me. They were, they overheard people talking about did you see that Asian guy on the dance floor doing Gangnam Style? And they said oh yeah, he's with us. And they got into interactions because of me. And people weren't talking negatively about me they were talking like that guy was awesome. That guy was really rad, you know he was really into the music. So that's when I kind of realized that everything I was telling myself is holding myself back, is stupid. Because that's not what people mean.

Everyone who mentioned field nights commented that they were an important part of the boot camp for them.

Another way the participants were able to apply what they were learning at the Art of Charm Boot Camp was by doing exercises during the day. Two exercises were specifically mentioned by all of the participants in this study and seemed to be the most memorable and impactful exercises for most of the men: video work and "signatures" or the first impressions exercise.

On the first day of the boot camp, men are videotaped approaching a female Art of Charm coach and starting a conversation with her. All of the men then watch these taped interactions together on a sixty-inch flat screen TV and offer feedback along with the coaches. Many of the participants said that seeing themselves on film was an

incredible and sometimes scary moment of increased self-awareness. Josh said of the video work:

And then we just, you know, watched ourselves doing approaches and so forth. And that was just an eye-opening experience, you know. You really see all your nervous energy come out. And you know, you're just stuttering and all your nervous tendencies. That just becomes so overpowering.

The men are videotaped more than once throughout the week, and many found it valuable to see themselves on camera and to see their improvement in real terms.

The other daytime exercise that every participant mentioned or discussed at length was the "signatures" or first impressions exercise. During this exercise, the men would go out to Hollywood Boulevard (Los Angeles) or Union Square (NYC) and collect signatures from 50 strangers. Before the stranger could sign their notebook, they were required to write down three words to describe their first impression of the man asking them to sign. Similar to field nights and video work, many participants said that they were terrified of the signatures exercise. Several others said that the signatures exercise was their favorite part of the week. David encapsulated the experience of doing the signatures exercise:

I think the most, well one of the most shocking things that kind of like really just opened my eyes was one part of the boot camp where you actually, you go out during the daytime on Hollywood Boulevard where it's really touristy. There's a lot of high traffic areas and um, there's one part where you actually, you walk around and you're approaching strangers and you're asking them to instantly judge you with, they're asked to instantly judge you with, whatever your first approach...when you approach the stranger whether it's guy, girl you know...you approach them, you ask them, 'How did I approach you? What, like your initial reactions of me - can you please write it down on this piece of paper?' And like just that's to me is like, was like stressful. Because you're asking someone to immediately judge you like right from the get-go. That was one of the hardest things. I know me and my group, that's was probably one of the most challenging things that, and the thing, the thing that was really rewarding was, I think I had

somewhere close to forty-five to fifty people within an hour and a half I think. And then I know other people asked a little bit less, a little bit more. But what was nice was seeing that other people were actually a lot nicer and a lot more respectful and would write a lot more nicer things than my mind could think. You know I think the only negative thing someone wrote down out of the 110 adjectives people used to describe me, the person wrote 'talkative'. That was my most negative thing someone wrote down. But it was nice to see other people, they basically are projecting what they would like to see in themselves onto you. You know so whatever they are pointing out those are things usually they want to see in themselves. You know, so people would write oh you're nice, you're good looking or you're funny, you're charismatic. And while it was comforting hearing it from other people, especially strangers who don't even know you very well, and that...that was one of my favorite things – the most eye-opening thing.

Many of the men mentioned that they liked having 150 pieces of “data” about how people were perceiving them from the 50 people they stopped. All of the participants said that the signatures exercise was positively impactful and that they gained new insights and self-awareness from the exercise.

Going beyond learning social skills and principles in a classroom by completing exercises at the Art of Charm Boot Camp was something that the participants unanimously concluded was one of the most beneficial aspects of the boot camp. Many of the participants also mentioned the imperative of continuing to practice applying the skills and principles they learned (e.g., bantering, qualifying, etc.) in their lives after the boot camp.

After learning social skills and principles and then applying them at the boot camp, the participants in this study told me that their social lives had dramatically improved. Experiencing this new social abundance is discussed in the next category below.

Experiencing “Social Abundance”

The participants in this study expressed that they were much more satisfied with their social lives after attending the program. Several participants used the term “social abundance,” meaning that they had many more potential friends, dates, and activities to choose from and that they could choose what they perceived to be higher quality in each of those areas as a result. Almost every participant specifically mentioned having more fun, enjoying life more, laughing more, and being more playful. Mitch explained that if one graduates from the boot camp, he is “going to have more fun, whether it’s communication with, with girls, with friends, [and] with co-workers. Uh, you’re having more fun just humorous communication also.” Nearly all of the participants talked about having more social options. Joe commented that after completing the program, “my schedule can be pretty much as busy as I want it to be. Um and it’s, if ever, there’s never a shortage of things to do.” Another rewarding aspect of this new social abundance according to the participants was having so many options that the men felt a sense of having the power to select who they think of as the right people for them into their lives. The ability to screen for the right people also applied directly to dating the right women for them. The participants explained that they had much more abundant dating lives than they had before the boot camp and now had the power to select a good partner for them.

Tim shared:

In terms of dating and all that, so it's, it's been a lot better as well. Um before, I got like a date or two a year and like, now I have...oh god, like six or seven dates set up. Each date's with different girls set up. So that's just next week. So it's, that's got better, a lot better as well. So I guess the main point that, the main conclusion is having more options. And when you have more options you can choose higher quality.

Beyond having a higher quantity of dates or better relationships with women who were better suited for them, the men also expressed that they have been taking break-ups more easily, and approaching dating from an abundance mindset instead of being attached to outcomes when they are dating. They are also now treating “hot” women like everyone else – not putting up with bad behavior just because they find the woman attractive.

Learning social skills and principles and then applying them at the Art of Charm Boot Camp led to social abundance and dating abundance according to the participants. Even though this social aspect of the boot camp represented a large part of what was discussed in the interviews, another equally robust part of the conversation was a little more hidden in terms of what the program advertises itself to be. While the men certainly seemed to have enjoyed an improvement in their social lives, perhaps even more importantly, they seemed to experience an improvement in their internal lives. This self-actualization or personal growth aspect of the boot camp is discussed in the next theme below.

Solving the PUA Problem: Becoming Self-Actualized (Through a Western, Heterosexual Dating Context)

The participants in this study explained to me that even though they were learning how to become more attractive to heterosexual women, the boot camp was different from what is taught by the pick-up artist (PUA) community. The men explained to me that the boot camp has female staff members, that the program does not rate women on a physical attractiveness scale, that it does not teach manipulation, that one learns to become more giving instead of learning to get something (e.g., sex), and that the program is about becoming a better man from the inside out, not the other way around. This indicates that

the Art of Charm provides a solution to the PUA problem (discussed in the introduction). Self-actualization is ultimately what the men were searching for, even if it began as an attempt to become better with women. The boot camp facilitated this self-actualization process.

However, the self-actualization and lifestyle change taking place at Art of Charm Boot Camps is still achieved through a western, heterosexual dating context. For example, boot camp attendees work on becoming internally validated *because that is said to be more attractive to “high-quality” heterosexual women*. The men discussed numerous personal mindset shifts and an increase in self-awareness in our discussions, but these things all happened within the context of being able to attract who they perceived to be “higher-quality mates.” Many of the social skills and principles men learned were specifically concerning and put into practice with “attractive” heterosexual women at the boot camp itself.

The participants in this study firmly held the belief that major parts of the boot camp would be universally beneficial. One of the reasons the men perceived the week-long training as something that could benefit all people, even though it is clearly designed for heterosexual men in the West, is that one of the main benefits of the boot camp is turning inward and becoming internally validated, self-aware, and confident. According to the participants, this inward turn toward the self solves the PUA problem (as explained in the introduction). Two categories support this theme: 1.) Becoming internally validated, self-aware, and confident, and 2.) Believing the Art of Charm Boot Camp is universal. The internal focus of becoming self-actualized is the main idea behind the first

category of this theme discussed below: becoming internally validated, self-aware, and confident.

Becoming Internally Validated, Self-Aware, and Confident

The participants in this study made it clear that they wanted to “be themselves.” One of the main reasons they were drawn to the Art of Charm Boot Camp was that it offered the ability to learn more about who they were and to learn how to express their true self in a more attractive manner. Khang elaborates:

The Art of Charm Boot Camp is basically, it's like an internal awakening of like who you are, how you talk to yourself, and how you should talk to yourself to allow yourself to be who you want to be. It's a way for you to you know, handle whatever genius you have – whether you think that you have them or not, you have them – and any insecurities you have. And it's just a way of um, taking a different mindset and applying it to every aspect of your life. If you want girls you'll be much more confident going up to a girl and not even caring if she says no or not. You just forget about it. Or having different mindsets, if you want a different job, you want to wake up with the courage to say 'you know what? Fuck this job. I'm out. Like I'm gonna go do what I actually want to do. And if it's something, just security in the position like I am, or I have a relationship that I like but I wanted to make it better, and then I have a career that I want to get better at and eventually won't wake up and say you know what, I'm in the wrong career anyway. So, just change careers. Have that courage. Then I think the boot camp is for you.

This quote, along with the earlier sections on video work and the signatures exercise, demonstrates a major concept in our discussions: experiencing a significant increase in self-awareness at the boot camp.

According to the participants, the week-long program also facilitated an increase in confidence. Some of the men expressed that they were confident in some areas of their lives before they attended the boot camp and that they were not confident in other areas.

After the program, the men articulated that they felt a general sense of confidence that applied to all areas of their lives.

While the men in this study said that they became more self-actualized by becoming more internally validated, self-aware, and confident because of the boot camp, this self-actualization took place in the context of learning how to attract heterosexual women. However, the participants strongly believed that all people could benefit from the program, indicating that the boot camp attempts to solve the PUA Problem, even though the program teaches men dating skills. The belief shared by the participants that the week-long training could benefit all people, and therefore is different from PUA trainings, is the next category outlined below.

Believing the Art of Charm Boot Camp Is Universal

The participants expressed that while the Art of Charm Boot Camp is designed specifically for heterosexual men in a Western context, the principles, social skills, and the focus on becoming your best self could benefit people of all cultures, genders, and sexual orientations. Many indicated that the boot camp curriculum should be taught in school (K-12) or college. Khang touched on all of these ideas when he said:

I think um, girls that are looking for self-empowerment would absolutely benefit from the boot camp. Especially a lot of the philosophical things and internal dialog things that builds a kind of program in American culture - to be so conscious and so like aware of like the wrong things: all the physical aspects and all the external things. When really it's really internally where change happens and people, people react to you as a person and how you are inside your mind and you kind of try to portray it outwards. Um, I think people from different cultures could absolutely learn things from the boot camp. You know, just based off of like a lot of the body language things. I mean I know there are some cultures that are really striking, like there are those certain things. But overall you know, if you're from a different culture and you're able to, and you're allowed to express yourself, you know if you're from Europe or something I'd think you would absolutely benefit from the things that they teach at the boot camp. And I think

people are all the same. What, what type of people they're into, whether it's guys into guys or girls into girls, or you know whatever other orientations there are out there, you know at the end of the day the only way you're going to attract your, the person that you are attracted to, is by being attractive yourself. And that's kind of what the boot camp is about. It's about you feeling attractive to yourself and then letting other people know that you think that, and then also doing it without being a pompous asshole. So I think anyone on the planet would actually benefit. Even, I mean, even older people that are already stuck in their ways. You know, if they were even slightly open to being a better person I think, I think it would make the world a better place. I think any of those things should be, or a lot of the principles and things that they teach should be like ingrained in the education system at a young age. And I think there'd be a whole, there'd be a big change in how America performs in terms of the rest of the world.

While the participants indicated that heterosexual women could benefit from the program, many of the men claimed that women would not need it or be interested in it.

Blake offered, “what men have to learn and the insecurities that men have to deal with as opposed to what women have to learn and what they have to deal with, is very different.”

Troy was adamant that while the internal work offered at the boot camp could benefit women, they do not need the specific dating-related training:

So, a woman goes through the program what, they're gonna tell her to approach, approach dudes? You know, it's a little...okay okay so a girl...my girlfriend can go to a coffee shop right now and walk up to some guy and say, “you're nothing” and throw herself on him and she, she'd probably get laid, really. It's a whole different environment for men and women...Could they benefit? Learn from it? Yeah. But the structure would have to be a little bit different.

While the program offers its training in the context of heterosexual men dating women within a Western cultural context, in our discussions the men forcefully explained that the boot camp is different than PUA trainings. While most of the men were familiar with the general idea behind PUA trainings, they did not say they participated in such training. Dennis, however, conceded that he had experienced PUA trainings and had

several “successful PUA friends.” He explained the PUA problem and how the boot camp is different in depth:

So, I've done all that too [PUA trainings]. Okay so I would say the way they teach it is very different. So I have friends that are pick-up artists. I swear man, they take like nose blow, Jacks, and weed before they go to the club and get all this energy going. And they're just, I mean they're really good. I mean I'm sure, I have a friend that can, he probably gets laid by like 37 women within the first four months of the year. And they're all like gorgeous women. I have friends that are more natural. I have friends that are more social game. And they're all successful. One of them, his car payments are like \$2300 a month. That's like people's mortgages. Another one has a house on a cliff where one of the walls is literally a glass. Another one doesn't have a degree and he's completely successful in website design and stuff like that. So, I mean, it's this, it all depends pretty much. I'd say [the Art of Charm Boot Camp is] different because you don't learn, you do learn like some words and sentences that help you out. But you don't learn just the outer realm of it. Like speaking, listening, touching, feeling, putting it in I guess...You're supposed to learn like the inner side. How your mentality is supposed to be...That would be like what kind of AoC is. But if you want to read like the *New York Times* bestseller *The Game*, which I'm sure you read, is sort of how like pick-up artistry is now. But honestly I believe truly that pick-up artist scene is completely dying out. It's gone almost. Because it doesn't work. It's not satisfying. I mean any decent man who has any type of motivation to grow up...I remember when I started in the beginning I was like 'oh, this is so good'. After having so much of the same candy you're just kind of like eh, okay. It just gets more boring and boring and then you get depressed. So then you have to figure out what's going on in your mind. And then you have to revamp everything...So that's the difference. You learn from the core values how to be an executive charmer versus that you just learn lines and quotes from a book.

Khang explained that his main takeaways from the boot camp were not about seducing or dating women:

I think it's pretty clear that my take on the boot camp is not really specifically related to women. It's related to people. Because people are universal. Like everyone, that's, everyone that's here. We're all human and uh, you know, we all have emotions whether we want to address it or not. And how we express those emotions and how we control them is gonna affect every interaction we have on a daily basis. So you know, whether you're a woman or you're a male; whether you know, whoever you are, it's, I just think that whether you do the AoC boot camp or another type of program that addresses those same things of getting over your insecurities, being comfortable with them, and then being able to take yourself

and drive yourself to become a better you every day then I think that the world would be a much better place.

Kevin talked about the men in his boot camp coming into contact with a PUA convention at a club. The incident highlights what the participants articulated as the difference between PUA training and the Art of Charm Boot Camp. While the PUAs at the club were strangely attired (one PUA was wearing a giant feather boa), talking to women using pre-rehearsed routines, and goading the boot camp attendees to admit they – the PUAs – were better with women:

we [Art of Charm Boot Camp attendees] were just these guys that were like yeah, let's go out and have fun, you know. And, that was it. But I would say the biggest difference between the two sides is, one is about putting a mask on rather than the other is about taking the masks off.

One of the main ways that the men saw the Art of Charm Boot Camp as different from PUA training is the idea of becoming self-actualized instead of taking on the personality and tactics of a PUA trainer. Many of the men referred to this as learning to be and project your best self (AoC Boot Camp) vs. “putting whipped cream on shit” (PUA training).

Along with solving the PUA problem by becoming more internally validated, self-aware, and confident, the participants in this study also emphasized that they gained a support system that they did not have before the boot camp. Joining this new fraternity was tremendously important to most of the participants and is the next theme discussed below.

Fraternity: Gaining a Supportive Community

Becoming part of the Art of Charm “fraternity” was one of the most impactful parts of the boot camp according to the participants. The participants indicated that they did not have a support group before they attended the boot camp, that they felt comfortable being vulnerable with the other men and coaches at the week-long program, and that they gained a lifelong support group consisting of other boot camp graduates and coaches. Two categories discussed below form the pillars of this theme: 1.) Seeking help and support despite masculinity norms, and 2.) Gaining a lifelong support group.

Seeking Help and Support Despite Masculinity Norms

In the introduction, the idea that men resist help-seeking and joining support groups due to masculinity norms was discussed. The rules of masculinity help explain why the participants did not feel that they previously had the same supportive network that they say they gained from attending the program. Vogel et al. (2011) explain that seeking help can be seen as a failure to meet internalized masculinity norms coming from the dominant culture, like self-reliance (p. 375). The researchers demonstrated that this applies to men from diverse backgrounds. Vogel et al. (2011) also point out that men seek treatment less often than women even when they experience a similar level of need for help (p. 368). These norms also explain why the participants had some difficulty telling people they were going to the Art of Charm Boot Camp and why many of them have rarely discussed their participation with “outsiders” after their graduation.

Masculinity norms made an appearance in the interviews for this study in both explicit and implicit terms. Almost all of the men expressed having some difficulty telling people about going to the boot camp, suggesting that they sought out the boot

camp even though masculinity norms discouraged them from discussing it openly. Nick summed up the experience of talking about the boot camp before and after attending:

Well I mean I told the girl I was with. I wouldn't tell anyone the truth. I told, I told my uh all my roommates and my girlfriend at the time, and all my other friends that, all a lie. I lied to all of them. It was bad. I...well, I didn't really know how to explain it. So I just said, 'cause I was, I'm also into music production so I told them all that I was taking a music production boot camp in California. And they all bought it. So I mean it worked out. But I know after uh, after I came back I came clean. It was nice because the uh Justin, one of the coaches there, he uh he, you know kind of went over how to you know, tell what you did here to people. So you know he just gave me a lot of pointers. Now whenever someone asks me or if I bring it up I just tell them about the social engineering boot-camp that I went to. And not everyone knows what the fuck you're talking about. And then you know, I kind of explain to them you know, I was a very introverted person and this boot-camp basically taught me how to develop confidence and you know, break that boundary of my uh you know, what I feel is uh, what I'm comfortable doing. And pretty much stuff like that. Building confidence and what not. Some people are just like 'oh, okay' you know. And like usually people you just like say it to say okay, cool. But if it's someone that I'm close with will be like 'wait. Now what did you do?' And then at that point I kind of go into like the podcast and anything like that. And you know, no one has really, my friends are pretty cool so no one has really said 'dude, you're a fucking loser for taking that.'

None of the participants were able to say that they felt they could discuss everything about the program openly with anyone any time or that they particularly wanted to talk about it. Josh put it more lightly, but still had reservations: “I’m definitely not ashamed or have any fears in telling people about it. It’s just something that I guess I don’t go out and about and advertise.”

The participants also expressed masculinity norms explicitly in our interviews. Josh said, “guys are guys. We don’t really talk about our emotions. We don’t talk about our feelings as such.” Troy explained, “as a man, you’re not supposed to need help with anything. Nothing! ‘What, you need help? Pussy!’ You know there’s a whole bunch of that.” While the men clearly showed that masculinity norms have impacted their lives,

the participants found that the environment at the Art of Charm Boot Camp was supportive of them dealing with issues and seeking help in contradiction to the masculinity norms found in Western culture.

The participants in this study spoke often of the supportive environment they experienced during their week-long program. Many of the participants talked specifically about the openness of the Art of Charm staff and other boot camp attendees. The men confided that they felt comfortable being vulnerable, some for the first time. Kevin described the environment:

I really appreciated the, the openness that they had. Um, so that was really, really great. And then the other thing was uh, they made it very comfortable for me to get vulnerable and for everybody else to be vulnerable. Um, and the cool part was, was like when you first start you get up, you stand in front of the room and you tell them why you're there. And you know, like you, you'll hear everything from just got a divorce or I'm graduating college this year and I want to deal with...to where it's so hard for me to be social and like, so I can do well at interviews, you know? I mean, you'll get a little bit of everything.

Beyond the supportive environment the men experienced at the boot camp, the participants emphasized the importance of gaining a new support network.

Gaining a Lifelong Support Group

Each of the men in this study indicated that one of the benefits of attending the Art of Charm Boot Camp was gaining male friendship and support. Almost all of the participants specifically discussed how much they enjoyed interacting with the other men who were taking the boot camp with them. They also pointed out that they stay in touch with these fellow boot camp graduates long after the program and that there is a Facebook page that connects graduates from all over the world. Many of the participants

said that they continue to meet up with other boot camp graduates in their home town.

Kevin articulates this connection with other boot camp attendees quite nicely:

What I really loved was it felt like that, like the, the friendships that I developed with the people that were there – those were the types of friendships that I describe as that's what a fraternity should feel like. Um where like, I could call one of those guys up and an example of this is like...I'm driving down to California next week and I'm going to meet someone I've never met before. But I know that's gonna be fun because we're gonna go grab a beer together. And, and I know that because he's part of our family that we have. And it's sort of like it's the bond that, that we all develop together and because so many people have gone through the program, and we're connected through the Facebook family page that we have, um that's really allowed for a lot of us to be able to reconnect with each other or connect with people that we haven't met before. And so my experience that I loved the most was just the connection that I got from the other people that were coming in to the program and knowing that we were kind of like the band of brothers that was doing all of this together.

At the boot camp itself, the participants cheered each other on, encouraged each other, and enjoyed seeing the other men succeed. David offered:

Going out at night with these guys was, it's ridiculous. Like nothing puffs me up more than like seeing my AOC buddies like talking to a gorgeous girl. Like you know, you see them earlier in the week talking about what their dream girl is, someone who they want to marry and have kids with. Then you see them like talking to that, someone of that description a couple of days later. And like they're hitting off and you can tell she's into him. Nothing like gets me more excited than like, just being a wingman or feeling like you help guys is awesome. Like, it totally adds, so they hit it off, they totally go out afterwards. I really like winging people and seeing my friends or my quote, unquote 'new friends' be happy in their own life and achieve success.

The participants also noted that it was nice to know that other men had similar struggles and that the Art of Charm family was the most underrated part of the Art of Charm Boot Camp. While the men in this study said they loved joining a “band of brothers” by connecting with other boot camp attendees and graduates, they also expressed affection for the Art of Charm coaches and staff.

The Art of Charm coaches and staff were also an integral part of the supportive community experienced by boot camp graduates. The men in this study indicated that they admired and trusted the Art of Charm coaches. Blake put it this way:

The teachers of all the guys that I've been around have been awesome. You know of course you have people that are different in personalities, but it's a great group of people. So you're in, if you're like a little bit hesitant or you're shy like I am, like you kind of feel okay fucking up in front of them.

Many felt that they already “knew” many of the coaches before they went to the boot camp by listening to them via the Art of Charm Podcast. They had a sense that they knew what the Art of Charm stood for before they went and they were not disappointed.

Beyond getting valuable classroom instruction at the boot camp, the participants explained that getting specific, personalized feedback from coaches during the week of the camp and online afterward was instrumental in the growth they experienced. According to the participants, the coaches both supported them and “pushed” them into situations that allowed them to grow. The coaches also modeled the behaviors the men were learning and provided male role models that may have been previously lacking in the lives of the participants. The Art of Charm employees and the other men who have participated in the boot camp provided a supportive environment to the men in this study.

In addition to gaining a support group by joining the “Art of Charm fraternity,” the participants discussed experiencing numerous breakthroughs from attending the week-long program. Experiencing new realities is the fifth and final theme discussed below.

Breakthroughs: Experiencing New Realities

After making the decision to attend the Art of Charm Boot Camp and in addition to learning to be more social, becoming more self-actualized, and gaining a supportive community, the participants also overwhelmingly expressed that they experienced “new realities” as a result of the boot camp. The new realities experienced by the participants were made up of the two categories discussed below: 1.) Changing perceptions and mindsets, and 2.) Experiencing a new way of life.

Changing Perceptions and Mindsets

Each participant highlighted changing perceptions and mindsets as important components of the boot camp in our conversations. A majority of the participants used the specific phrase “eye-opening” when talking about one of the exercises or the boot camp as a whole. The participants commented that they had experiences during and after the boot camp that didn’t seem real because they were things that would have been previously impossible. According to the participants, there is even a popular phrase for these shocking experiences at the boot camp: “so that happened.” For example, Tyler revealed that while he was working on his body language at a grocery store near the Art of Charm headquarters, a beautiful actress approached him, talked to him for a bit, and invited him to hang out with her and her actress friends. He couldn’t believe it:

So then, you know, that really boosted my confidence. In fact when I came back to the headquarters I asked like the instructors like, ‘Do you send out like models to hit on us or something like that?’ ‘Cause I couldn’t believe that someone that you know beautiful and charming would hit on me without me even speaking to her, you know.

Troy had a similar experience:

I guess my favorite part would be when we were at one of the clubs and it was uh...actually it's funny. Um, yeah. I was, we were out at one of the clubs and it was the first time I kissed a girl at a club. Okay? So that was my favorite part. (laughs) So, I was like 'holy shit'! Oh yeah, and she was like smokin' hot. That's even better.

Many of the participants reported that they have a new outlook on life thanks to the boot camp. Nick commented:

I have definitely a different outlook on everything that I go into. Like I said before I feel like I have this thing in my, in my pocket that I can just kind of take out and like grab by the horns and just go. I don't know, I guess I just have a lot more hope now than I did before if that makes any sense.

The participants also reported that they see failure differently, are more satisfied and content, and feel optimistic, happy, and proud.

In addition to having “eye-opening” experiences, the participants also said they became more aware of and broke out of some cultural assumptions at the Art of Charm Boot Camp, especially related to dating, relationships, and being social. Brett explained:

The role models that I had regarding women, relationships between men and women are like from movies and TV shows. And let's just say like the male figure wasn't really the most you know, (laughs) one-sided characters. You know they're usually like the nice guy who gets walked over. The jerk asshole from like, you know, in high school, the jock or whatever. Or, you know, the bumbling husband who doesn't know what's going on. Like the Homer Simpsons of the world. And I'm just like that's what we have to offer in terms of you know, male, male role models? That's what the group is. So I figured the closest one to me seems like the nice guy. So I'm gonna be the nice guy. What I do now, because I'm done with the whole nice guy thing, now I'm focused on the people who love me. And that's it. If they don't care about me, that's fine. That's their prerogative. If they hate me, that's also fine. I'm not trying to please everybody. I'm trying to please myself. But that was, I had to learn that.

In addition to becoming aware of social conditioning and working to break out of it, the participants also frequently discussed being exposed to other perspectives and

learning to see them as valuable as a beneficial aspect of the Art of Charm Boot Camp.

Blake summed up this experience:

So now the way I see it, not everyone sees the world the same way I do so matter what the problem is, like my problem isn't bigger than your problem because your problem's happening to you and my problem's happening to me. So they're just equally as bad, we would just see them differently. And so, so when I say that 'hell is other people,' it's just because it took me a long time to figure out that, like I didn't understand why people reacted in certain ways. Or why people didn't immediately see things the way I did. Like I would try to help someone with a computer problem and I would, I just would not understand why they didn't just instinctually know how to fix it. And then I realized I have been working on computers since I was twelve. Of course I know how to fix it. This person probably hasn't and so yeah, it sounds dumb now to say it out loud but when you're young you don't realize that other people are different in kind of great ways. If we were all the same that would be boring. And I wouldn't have a job if everyone knew how to fix computers the same way I do. Once I, you know, the [Art of Charm Boot Camp] helped me realize who I was and kind of what my strengths were and that, that ability to know where I was at let me be more open to where everyone else was at.

The men also said that the boot camp increased their social awareness. When John was asked how his life had changed, if at all, from attending the program, he responded:

Like I said I kind of know what's going on in social situations. And I've continued to grow and like try new development skills. The Art of Charm like gives you kind of that framework, which gives you awareness to like what's going on [in a social situation and] where you are. And the more you do this the better that you get. So it's just, I just notice things now that like, were so oblivious to like my radar prior to that. You know, it's not even funny.

The participants all touched on the fact that they felt an increased sense of social awareness after the boot camp. Every participant also talked about having a new mindset directly or indirectly.

According to the men in this study, significant changes in the way they think about themselves, the world around them, social situations, and life in general occurred because of the program. The men spoke of having their "minds blown," changing their

mentality, changing unhelpful mindsets to positive ones, re-structuring beliefs, “seeing the matrix,” assuming women are attracted to them and that people like them, and being more open-minded. Brett described a new mindset he learned at the boot camp that is helping him improve his social life:

My whole mindset is that it's like a village now, not strangers. So like, I assume that you're my friend until proven otherwise. So I don't think I would have that mentality, I would have not had that mentality if I had not gone to the like, to the Art of Charm. You know? So for me, like I said before for me it's like a change in mindset.

The participants stressed that these new mindsets and new ways of thinking were important and that they expected these mental shifts to have lasting positive effects in their lives. They also made it clear that their entire reality had changed and this idea is the basis of the next category outlined below.

Experiencing a New Way of Life

In addition to the internal shift experienced by the participants, they also talked about how they thought their whole reality had changed due to the week-long program. The participants said that they continue to experience things that seem impossible after the boot camp. They reported feeling more secure, feeling happier, being easier on themselves, feeling empowered, changing habits, changing their priorities and goals, being more likable, taking more risks, and having an easier time facing challenges. Many participants described their experience at the program as life-changing. John reported:

[Before the Art of Charm Boot Camp] you just don't know what to expect and then your whole world's changing for sure. First you're coming from a place where you haven't been exposed to all the material before. It was like, the best way to put it, it was like life changing dude. Totally life-changing.

The participants reported that after the Art of Charm Boot Camp, they wake up excited more often, have more energy, nail job interviews, meet up with more people, have happier clients, are full of life, and have more and better dates. One way the participants reported being able to see these results of the boot camp was other people pointing out differences they have noticed. David explained, “I mean most all of my friends now that know about this see how it's changed me. Completely changed me. So they see the value in it now for sure.”

Many of the participants talked about having a better dating life after the boot camp. Several specifically mentioned that they are dating women they truly want to have relationships with for the first time. All of the participants discussed having improved relationships with women and everyone else in their lives in one way or another. The participants explained that they are now able to have more meaningful interactions with others and allow others to open up more. They discussed how surprised they were to find that their family relationships had improved thanks to the boot camp. David recalled:

Increasing kind of like my personal relationships with like my family was definitely a benefit that I didn't see coming. I remember about two weeks after my boot camp I went home and I was by my mom. And we went out to coffee and she was like, 'something has changed about you.' I'm like, 'oh, like in a bad way?' And she was like 'oh, no. Like you seem taller or you...' Taller. Second time. So 'something about you seems a little bit different. You seem a lot more positive. A lot more happy.' And I was like 'oh, Mom. I am happy.' It was just, it's nice to convey how you internally feel and match that with your outside, with your body language so that way other people can also see how you feel. You know, they don't have to guess. That was a very surprising thing that I didn't think so. That taking the boot camp helped my personal relationships. Because family, I did the boot camp because I wanted to obtain new relationships. I didn't think that the boot camp was going to already improve the relationships I've already had. And that that was a very much welcome benefit.

The participants also reported being able to deal with confrontation and issues in their relationships and being able to express emotions appropriately after taking the Art of Charm Boot Camp. They reported caring more about people. Having better relationships with everyone in their lives was a benefit of the boot camp according to the participants in this study.

The participants in this study paid several thousand dollars to live for 6 days with 4-7 other men at the Art of Charm Headquarters in Los Angeles or New York City and participate in a training marketed primarily as a way to improve dating success. According to these men, after making the decision to invest in themselves and attend the week-long program, they came away with a more abundant social life, more internal confidence, a lifelong community of support, and a whole new reality. Almost all of the men said they had a great experience at the boot camp and all of them said they would recommend it to people they think are open to the kind of personal work men go through at the program. Most of the participants brought up the fact that they deeply felt the program was worth the money. David said it was the best decision he has made in his life beyond joining the military. Brett said he would pay ten times as much and several participants said it was the best money they have ever spent. The participants were also unanimous in their belief that the structure of the program was pretty close to ideal. When asked to suggest improvements, it was a struggle for them to come up with something. It appears that, according to the men in this study, in addition to helping them with the goals they had going in to the program, the Art of Charm Boot Camp provided a portal to a whole new life.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

The Art of Charm grew out of and away from PUA movement to solve the “PUA problem” referred to by Yeomans (2009). The “PUA problem” is the inability for men who learn PUA tactics to have satisfying relationships because they are learning tricks and “routines” that lead to some short-term, surface-level “success” in seducing women and not actually improving themselves in a way that leads to more lasting, satisfying social relations. The evolution of the Art of Charm’s podcast provides an example of this change within the company itself. What was formerly known as the “Pick-up Podcast” is now called “The Art of Charm Podcast.”

The podcast and the boot camp are both much more focused on personal growth than specifically teaching men how to become better at seducing and dating women, even though they are both very much aimed at heterosexual men who want to improve their chances with women. The marketing of the boot camp has traditionally focused mainly on improving dating skills. An Art of Charm employee explained that this tactic was a “bait and switch” or involved “hiding the broccoli” so that men would be willing to go through the personal growth and social skills focused program. However, the Art of Charm has learned that men are smarter than that and have found that they actually don’t need to “trick” men into coming to the boot camp. Marketing messaging now includes references to learning skills that will help you get a better job, learning to create a presence that is attractive to everyone, living with integrity, and being free to be your

authentic self. The participants in this study confirmed that they got as much or more value out of these aspects of the boot camp as they got from learning specific dating and relationship skills.

This study found that the Art of Charm Boot Camp both reinforces and breaks masculinity norms. It reinforces masculinity norms by using masculine terms such as “boot camp” and “getting the girl,” and by teaching men how to be “more masculine.” It transcends masculinity norms by making it okay for men to seek help, providing help with romantic relationships, fostering a support group, encouraging men to be vulnerable, and by explicitly identifying societal norms in the instruction curriculum of the boot camp itself. The boot camp provides a safe, masculine closet for men to seek the help they desire.

The finding that the men in this study felt they were finally joining a supportive fraternity for the first time is one way the Art of Charm Boot Camp transcends masculinity norms. Connecting with other men and staying in touch with them after the boot camp was surprisingly important in our discussions of the week-long program. The men described it as gaining a support network they didn’t have before. They may be seeking help in a masculine closet due to masculinity norms, but at least there are a large number of other men in the closet to whom they can relate and find support.

The fact that the Art of Charm actually coaches men on how to talk about their boot camp participation (they direct graduates to say they went to a “social engineering” boot camp) shows the presence of masculinity norms in Western society. In general, the men did not feel comfortable telling many people about the boot camp even after they said they became more comfortable with themselves there. The men told me that they

told close friends, told their girlfriends but feared their reaction, told other boot camp graduates, and told friends who were also open to personal growth. The idea that the men carefully consider who to tell about the program and how to talk about it also demonstrates the presence of masculinity norms.

It was surprising that there was little discussion of learning about dating women or about dating women in general in our interviews given that improving one's dating skills is supposedly what the boot camp is primarily about. This suggests that the participants may have been consciously or unconsciously affected by the norm that men should know what they are doing when it comes to dating women and therefore spoke little of that topic on the phone with me, or that the main purpose of the Art of Charm Boot Camp is self-actualization and general social skills training even though these ends are achieved through learning about dating women and are marketed to men using the promise of dating more and better women as an attractive "hook."

Masculinity norms in Western culture dictate that men should not seek help, especially in the arena of having relationships with women. Men also have reason to be wary of the negative image of pick-up artists in Western society. Men who seek to learn more about dating women are often seen as predatory. This double-standard of not being allowed to seek help with dating in the first place and when they do they are seen as predators forces men who learn dating skills at a training program such as the Art of Charm Boot Camp to do so in a very shadowy closet. While the Art of Charm itself is extremely public, the individuals who participate in the boot camp feel they must exercise caution when discussing their participation. They indicated that they don't want women to think they are predators and they don't want anyone to think they are not masculine.

While the participants in this study varied in their comfort with telling people about their involvement in the boot camp, none were able to say they could talk openly about a very significant event in their lives outside of what they perceived to be safe spaces.

As discussed in the introduction, Vogel et al. (2011) suggest that gender roles are very difficult to change and that they are socialized very early in life and that while we should work to change gender stereotypes, self-help groups should pay attention to the names they use if they are to encourage men to attend. Contemporary dating companies have done just that in marketing dating, social skills, and lifestyle training to men. The Art of Charm Boot Camp is an example of self-help for men that uses masculine language to attract clients. For example, “boot camp” sounds more masculine than “counseling,” “training program,” or “support group.”

Even though the boot camp involves improving all aspects of one’s lifestyle and social skills with all people, The Art of Charm has marketed the boot camp as primarily a way to improve dating skills as a way to attract men to the program. In a discussion with a high-ranking Art of Charm employee, he called it “hiding the broccoli.” The Art of Charm Podcast, for example, which at this point has more “personal growth” episodes than episodes specifically about dating women and is the number one personal growth podcast on iTunes, was still called “Pickup Podcast” (as in picking up women) until recently. While this may have been important in generating initial interest in the Art of Charm, the company told me it has learned that men do not need to be “fooled” into or “lured” into doing personal development. They made the decision to change the name of the podcast to “The Art of Charm Podcast” and have not seen a decline in business. This may be due to the fact that men do not have to discuss the podcast or boot camp in public.

While the anonymity of the internet allows men to discover the Art of Charm and attend the boot camp without publicly breaking masculinity norms, they may never have sought out the help they needed if such anonymity were not possible.

Questions for Further Analysis

This study uncovered several additional possible lines of questioning that could lead to interesting research. These potential research questions are discussed here.

One prospective area of further exploration involves long-term effects of programs like the Art of Charm Boot Camp. Interesting questions might include: how do training programs like the Art of Charm Boot Camp affect the lives of attendees years later? How do they impact the relationships and marriages of graduates? How do they impact the children of graduates? What effect does such training have on lifelong income? What effect does this kind of training have on long-term life satisfaction?

A second possible line of questioning could involve the effects of the portrayal of heterosexual men in romantic relationships in the media. Several of the participants in this study indicated a lack of masculine role models in their lives, on television, and in movies as one of the reasons they felt the Art of Charm Boot Camp was necessary and helpful for them. Specifically, the men told me that they battled with the idea presented to them by various forms of media that they should be “nice guys” and that acting that way has failed them in the arena of dating women. They explained that men who are highly attractive to women are portrayed negatively as “players” on television shows and in movies. This negative connotation associated with attractive men caused many of the participants I spoke with to self-regulate attractive behaviors in their lives to avoid the negative connotation of being a “player” or “bad boy.” The men were unable to initiate

and maintain high quality romantic relationships with women partly due to the negative connotations that go along with being an attractive heterosexual man. The Art of Charm Boot Camp seemed to give the men permission to behave in a way that allows them to have the romantic relationships they wanted all along according to our conversations. Questions worth exploring might include: how do media portrayals of heterosexual men relating to women affect men and their relationships? Do media portrayals of heterosexual men relating to women have an effect on men's ability to attract a woman?

Another potentially interesting line of questioning could involve whether or not the principles and skills taught at the Art of Charm Boot Camp ought to be taught within the traditional educational framework in the US (i.e., elementary school, high school, and/or college). Many of the participants said that they think what they learned at the boot camp should be taught within the formal education system. Education researchers might ask what principles and skills being taught at the Art of Charm Boot Camp might be adopted into the traditional educational curriculum. This may prove particularly relevant in today's environment of increased social media use and decreased social interaction. Education researchers may also ask what the effects of such training within the traditional education curriculum might be.

Limitations

This study involved several limitations: there was a gatekeeper, the interviews were retrospective, and the researcher had considerable background knowledge of the Art of Charm prior to conducting the study.

In order to contact men who might be interested in participating in this study, I was required to ask the Art of Charm directly to provide a list of potential contacts. This

could have caused a positive bias in the data as the Art of Charm could have provided only contacts they believed would be likely to have a positive view of the Art of Charm Boot Camp. However, there were a large number of men on the contact list provided to the researcher by the Art of Charm. The fact that they were able to produce such a list of contacts and were willing to provide the list to the researcher is itself an indication of the nature of the boot camp and its impact on graduates. It should be said here, however, that all of the men who participated in this study did have a positive experience with the week-long program. This could be because men tend to have a good experience at the boot camp or because men who had a positive experience were more likely to participate in the study. Alternatively, perhaps men who participate in the training are open to or desperate for change and therefore are more likely to get value from the program than men with other experiences.

A second limitation of this study is that the method of gathering data involved retrospective interviews. While conducting retrospective interviews adequately answered the research question, tracking men throughout the process of attending the boot camp could provide more and different answers than asking the participants to reflect on past experiences.

A final potential limitation is the researcher's background knowledge of the Art of Charm. The researcher has listened to nearly every Art of Charm Podcast episode and participated in the Art of Charm's Online Academy. While this could have led the researcher to take a "rose-colored" view of the Art of Charm Boot Camp, it was also this background knowledge that allowed for rich descriptions of meanings expressed by the

participants in this study. It also created a sense of camaraderie with the participants, which may have allowed them to share more openly about their experiences.

Conclusion

This study began as an investigation of how heterosexual men might improve their ability to initiate and maintain satisfying romantic relationships by attending a training program like the Art of Charm Boot Camp. It evolved into an exploration of the experiences of men who attended such a program. The findings of this study illustrate the way men must navigate masculinity norms to seek out this kind of help in the first place and the importance of the self in the quest for healthy, satisfying relationships.

The findings of this study demonstrate one of the ways hegemonic masculinity can impact the lives of men. One of the things the participants in this study said they learned about themselves is that they do not have to accept the social position or value placed on them by society. While the participants said they now acted from this place of self-worth, they still were not able to escape the effects of hegemonic masculinity in one key way: telling others that they sought help, especially for their dating lives. Telling friends and associates about their participation in the program would expose them to the possibility of a lower social position based on common understandings of what “real” or “normal” men do unless these friends and associates are open-minded. The men no longer accept the position given to them by society, but other people may still judge them based on common conceptions of masculinity and social norms.

The findings of this study also reveal the potential limitation of focusing relationship help on “the couple” rather than on each individual in a relationship. In order to have satisfying romantic relationships, some of the emphasis must be taken off the

relationship and put onto the self. It seems clear that one's partner and the relationship between two individuals would have an effect on relationship satisfaction. However, research has shown that the self-esteem of each individual also has a significant effect on relationship satisfaction and that the self-esteem of each individual becomes increasingly important to satisfaction as a relationship progresses.

Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) showed that once the positive effects of the newness of a relationship have faded away, one is left with self-esteem as one of the strongest predictors of how satisfied they will be in their relationship over the long term. Sciangula and Morry (2009) found that high self-esteem individuals perceived that their partners idealized them. The researchers showed that self-esteem and perceived regard were both significant factors in predicting relationship satisfaction. The most satisfied participants had high self-esteem and perceived that their partners rated them higher than they rated themselves on moderate relationship-relevant traits. Robinson and Cameron (2012) found that relationship satisfaction and commitment were predicted by the shared self-esteem levels of the two people in the relationship, showing that self-esteem may be a shared resource in a relationship. These studies show that the self is a critical part of being able to have satisfying long-term romantic relationships. However, the self of each individual is often ignored in traditional relationship counseling; couples therapy tends to focus on improving communication in specific situations between partners (Zeidner & Kloda, 2012).

According to the participants in this study, the Art of Charm Boot Camp attempts to address the internal aspects of the self-in-relationship in addition to teaching men specific dating skills. They were originally attracted to the Art of Charm and its concepts

most often because they wanted to improve their dating lives; they were under the impression that dating more or “better” women would lead to a satisfying life. However, while the boot camp does teach skills specifically related to dating women, according to the men I spoke with the most significant effects of the week-long training were the internal changes that took place. They leave the boot camp feeling comfortable with themselves and find that they are able to attract more women and women who are better for them as a result. These findings, in addition to the literature cited above, suggest that anyone looking for help with their interpersonal relationships should not ignore the most fundamental relationship of all; the relationship with one’s self.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

DIVISION OF RESEARCH & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board

humansubjects@boisestate.edu | (phone) 208.426.5401 | MS 1138

DATE: June 14, 2013

TO: Jim Wolfe (PI)
Heidi Reeder (co-PI)

FROM: Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: IRB Notification of Approval
Project Title: *An Investigation of the Experiences of Men Who Participate in Relationship Training*

The Boise State University IRB has approved your protocol application. Your protocol is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance (#0000097) and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46).

Review Type: Expedited, Category# 6,7	Approval Number: 008-SB13-039
Date of Approval: June 14, 2013	Expiration Date: June 13, 2014

Your approval is effective for 12 months. If your research is not finished within the allotted year, the protocol must be renewed before expiration date indicated above. The Office of Research Compliance will send a reminder notice approximately 30 days prior to the expiration date. The principal investigator has the primary responsibility to ensure a RENEWAL FORM is submitted in a timely manner. If the protocol is not renewed before the expiration date, a new protocol application must be submitted for IRB review and approval.

Under BSU regulations, each protocol has a three-year life cycle and is allowed two annual renewals. Please note that if your research is not complete by June 13, 2016, a new protocol application must be submitted, rather than a third annual renewal form.

All additions or changes to your approved protocol must also be brought to the attention of the IRB for review and approval before they occur. Complete and submit a MODIFICATION FORM indicating any changes to your project. When your research is complete or discontinued, please submit a FINAL REPORT FORM. An executive summary or other documents with the results of the research may be included.

All relevant forms are available online. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, 208-426-5401 or humansubjects@boisestate.edu.

Thank you and good luck with your research.

Dr. Mary E. Pritchard

Chairperson

Boise State University Social & Behavioral Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: An Investigation of the Experiences of Men Who Participate in Relationship Training

Principal Investigator: Jim Wolfe

Co-Investigator: Dr. Heidi Reeder

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

➤ **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about the experiences of men who have attended a relationship training program. The information gathered will be used to better understand the impact of these trainings on the daily subjective life experience of men and their relationships. You are being asked to participate because you have attended a relationship training program and because you are a volunteer over the age of 18.

➤ **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in one interview. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked about your experience of attending a relationship training program along with your experiences before and after the program. The interview will be audio-recorded and the researcher may take notes as well.

➤ **RISKS**

Some of the questions asked may make you uncomfortable or upset. You are always free to decline to answer any question or to stop your participation at any time.

➤ **BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may help encourage others to attend a relationship training program.

➤ **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study

will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Boise State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is complete and then destroyed.

➤ **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

➤ **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you should first contact the principal investigator at jimwolfe@boisestate.edu or (208) 703-1097. You may also contact the faculty adviser for the study at (208) 426-2404 or hreeder@boisestate.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Boise State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM Mountain Time, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138.

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time. I have received a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Study Participant

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX C

Interview Script

Interview Script

Investigator will collect consent forms.

For interview:

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today.”

“The purpose of this interview is to have you share your personal experience of attending the Art of Charm Boot Camp. Specifically, we want to understand how you think your subjective experience of daily life has changed, if at all, from attending the training program.

The underlying assumption that we are working with is that training can influence the subjective experience of life. You have first-hand experience of the Art of Charm Boot Camp. That is why I am talking with you.”

“The interview will last about 45-60 minutes and we will audiotape the discussion to make sure that it is recorded accurately.”

“Do you have any questions for me before we begin?”

Interview Questions

- 1. What factors led you to decide to attend the weeklong relationship training?**
- 2. Some people find that they have to overcome obstacles, either from the outside or internally, in order to attend. Did that happen for you?**
 - A. Was there any social pressure against your decision? If so, what was that like? How did you deal with it? Was there anyone who supported you?
 - B. Was there resistance within yourself? What was that like? How did you deal with it?
- 3. How would you describe your thoughts and feelings in the days leading up to the training?**
 - A. Were you excited and/or nervous? What else was going through your mind in the days and weeks leading up to the training?
 - B. What was it like when you first arrived? What was your first impression?
- 4. Describe your experience during the relationship training.**
 - A. What did you do each day? What were some of the activities, exercises, or lectures that were most beneficial to you?
 - B. What did you learn? About yourself? About yourself in relationship?
 - C. What was the relationship training like?
 - D. How did you feel throughout the week?
 - E. Describe your thought process throughout the week.
 - F. How did your feelings and thoughts change during the training?

- G. Did you experience any significant moments? What were they? How would you describe their significance?
 - H. Have you done other relationship training or received other relationship advice? If so, how was this training different?
 - I. What was your favorite part of the training?
 - J. What was your least favorite part of the training?
 - K. What was the most effective part of the training?
 - L. What was the least effective part of the training?
 - M. What could be improved?
- 5. In what ways has your life changed since you completed the training (if at all)?**
- A. In what ways has it impacted your daily quality of life (if at all)?
 - B. Have there been any surprising effects?
 - C. Did the training “wear off” after a while?
 - D. What seems permanently different?
 - E. What have been the positive outcomes?
 - F. What have been the negative outcomes?
 - G. Was the training worth the time and money you paid?
- 6. Would you recommend the training to others? Why or why not?**
- A. Do you think women can benefit from the training program?
 - B. Do you think people with other sexual orientations can benefit from the training program?
 - C. Do you think people from various cultures can benefit from the program?