



The PUA Issue in Chinese Society: Causes, Current Situation, and Legal Regulations

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Abstract. The spread of the PUA phenomenon in Chinese society has attracted widespread attention and discussion. This article conducts an in-depth analysis of PUA from multiple perspectives, including its behavioral characteristics, causes, and legal regulations. Firstly, the article points out the characteristics of PUA behavior in emotional relationships, such as psychological manipulation and objectification, as well as its specific manifestations in different fields. It also explores the deep-seated causes of the PUA phenomenon, such as remnants of feudal thinking, gender inequality concepts, power dynamics, and more. Finally, the article provides a detailed analysis of the difficulties faced in the legal regulation of PUA behavior, including issues of behavioral classification, determination of subjective malice, and application of the law. It then proposes strengthening judicial interpretation and enhancing regulation of online platforms.

Keywords: PUA, Intimate Relationships, Legal Regulation, Patriarchy, Emotional Manipulation.

1 Introduction

"Gaslighting is a relatively unfamiliar term in psychology, but when it comes to PUA, almost everyone knows about it. Both are methods of emotional manipulation. Through emotional abuse and control, victims gradually lose their self-esteem and begin to doubt themselves. This phenomenon is based on a series of elaborate

emotional manipulation tactics that can't help but send the victim into a spiral of self-doubt.

PUA originally stands for "pick-up artist," and it originated in the United States during the 1960s, proposed by psychologist Albert Ellis. This theory aims to help people deal with emotional issues and enhance their confidence in intimate relationships. [1] Learning techniques and strategies to improve their ability to interact with the opposite sex in social situations, helps individuals with emotional anxiety grasp some principles of relationships between men and women. However, over time and with the spread of online media, especially against a backdrop of increasing emotional anxiety, it has gradually become distorted and evolved into a form of emotional manipulation that objectifies and subjugates women. In this process, many women are harmed by their partners in intimate relationships. Under the control of PUA language tactics, they experience cognitive dissonance, leading to symptoms of gaslighting.

Domestic and international scholars are continually delving deeper into the study of PUA, and their research approaches are becoming increasingly diverse.

First, in the field of international research, scholars Dayter and Rüdiger have studied PUA from the perspectives of linguistic frameworks and neuro-linguistic programming. They identified the narrative patterns and term frequency characteristics of persuasive behaviors in PUA community forums, thereby revealing the linguistic strategies and persuasive techniques of PUA behaviors.[2] Hendriks studied PUA from the perspectives of doctrine and self-development. He found that its doctrines emphasize endurance, self-discipline, self-observation, and continuous self-improvement, as well as achieving self-transformation through the practice of facing rejection and humiliation.[3] Schuurmans, studying from the perspective of respondents' self-identity, found that respondents did not view immersing themselves in seduction community courses as negative. Instead, they considered it a means of self-improvement and self-development.[4]

Secondly, in China, the manifestations of PUA have become increasingly complex. Initially focused on teaching pick-up techniques, it has expanded into comprehensive emotional consulting, utilizing online media to shape the image of high-quality men to attract women. This behavior is often accompanied by issues such as psychological control, gender discrimination, and legal disputes. Initially, due to a lack of effective regulation, it wasn't until a case handled by the Jiangsu Cyber Police in 2019 that the PUA problem entered the legal spotlight.

Domestic scholars Li Ke and Zhang Zhe conducted an in-depth study of the PUA phenomenon from the perspective of legal regulation. They found that PUA behavior has caused increasingly significant negative impacts on society. However, the existing legal framework is not comprehensive, presenting numerous challenges such as difficulties in defining the behavior, investigating the facts, identifying evidence, and applying relevant laws.[5] Scholars Pan Xuming, Pan Hongyu, and Zhou Siqu conducted an in-depth study on "emotional temptation" from a behavioral research perspective using the grounded theory method. They selected young individuals with personal experiences as their research subjects and focused on six typical behavioral categories: social opportunities, interactive participation, goal involvement, relationship power, efficacy reduction, and sacrifice encouragement, to uncover the underlying mechanisms of "emotional temptation." [6] Starting from Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, Mei Zhixing studied dating tips articles on the WeChat public account "Langji Emotion". It was found that PUA discourse strategies include constructing a positive image and dominant identity for men, rationalizing men's power in dating, concealing ulterior motives, and reflecting gender discrimination. [7] From the perspective of the hyperpersonal model, Yang Jingru's study in "Impression Management of Malignant PUA Groups in Social Networks" posits that malicious PUA groups "perform" through specific impression management strategies on social networks to attract and control their targets. It also suggests that vigilance should be increased to maintain a healthy online social environment. [8] From a legislative perspective, in the study "The Legal Regulation Dilemmas and Suggestions for PUA-Induced Suicide," Yin Lirong argues that there are significant challenges in legally regulating PUA-induced suicide. She suggests clarifying the nature of such behaviors and introducing the crime of inciting suicide to address these issues. [9] In the paper titled "Research on Criminal Law Regulation of Undesirable PUA Behavior in the Internet Era" Zheng Shujun identifies some major issues for legislative approach to combating undesirable PUA behavior. To her suggestions, she elicits a discussion on the nature of the promoted behaviors and analyses the possibility of developing remarkable legal provisions to deal with these matters. [10] From a legislative perspective, in the study "Criminal Regulation of Suicide Caused by Mind Control: 'The Reason Why People Commit Suicide Controlled by Mind': A Case Study of 'Instigation of Suicide' by PUA," Hu Jieren & Mei Shuqin whose concern is on criminal regulation of suicides induced with special reference to 'instigation of suicide' with emphasis on PUA. It also brings out the legal issues that come with the

behaviours and recommends different criminal codes that may be required to manage the actions. [11]

In summary, the aforementioned research perspectives largely focus on broader social phenomena, somewhat neglecting that PUA often occurs within intimate relationships. This article will adopt this micro perspective to explore the characteristics of PUA in China, reveal its underlying causes, and discuss how to use legal tools to protect one's rights, thereby establishing healthy intimate relationships and a safe online social environment.

2 Characteristics and Manifestations of PUA in Chinese Society

With an understanding of PUA knowledge, we realize that the phenomenon of PUA occurs around us and even within more intimate relationships: between couples, in the workplace, within families, and in schools. Its manifestations are becoming increasingly apparent. Unlike traditional violent behavior, PUA often achieves its goals through psychological manipulation. This manipulation typically includes verbal disparagement, questioning the victim's abilities, blaming the victim for negative outcomes, and giving superficial and formal apologies for wrongdoings (rather than genuine repentance). Such psychological oppression and control cause the victim to develop emotional dependence and anxiety, making them more susceptible to the manipulator's influence. From this, it can be seen that PUA is no longer just a simple emotional game; it involves various aspects of society and has had a profound impact on people's emotional lives, workplace relationships, family harmony, and educational environments. In addition, PUA issues can often be observed in the following areas:

Firstly, in the workplace, some leaders or colleagues might use their authority or position to verbally oppress, question, and criticize subordinates. They may blame subordinates for mistakes or shortcomings at work and even resort to personal attacks or humiliation. Such workplace PUA behavior not only undermines employees' motivation and confidence but can also lead to strained relationships among employees and a decline in team cohesion.

Secondly, PUA behavior by parents toward their children frequently occurs within families. Some parents may employ psychological pressure and control through excessive expectations, strict demands, and criticism. They might impose their wishes on their children, ignoring their individuality and needs, leading to a lack of

confidence and independence as the children grow up. This type of familial PUA behavior not only affects the children's mental health and development but can also undermine the harmony and stability of family relationships.

Thirdly, in schools, teachers often engage in PUA behavior through verbal oppression, questioning, and criticism to exert psychological control over students. They tend to ignore the students' individuality and needs, focusing solely on their grades and performance. This can lead to a lack of interest and motivation in the student's learning process. Such PUA behavior in schools not only affects students' enthusiasm and confidence in learning but also negatively impacts their mental health.

3 The Reasons for the Formation of PUA

The formation of PUA is caused by multiple factors, which can be roughly categorized into the following aspects:

Firstly, the remnants of patriarchy. Historically, male dominance has been central to social structures, and China is no exception. Under this system, men were endowed with absolute authority, and all standards for measuring and evaluating women were established by male participation. Although modern society has made significant progress and the concept of gender equality has become a shared consensus, the residual influence of patriarchy remains profound. In many families and social institutions, men are still viewed as symbols of authority, while women are considered their appendages or secondary entities.

Secondly, women are objectified. Objectifying women is one of the typical manifestations of PUA behavior. For instance, men judge women's bodies and appearances, categorizing different women into various ranks—these are all forms of objectification. This concept further propagated through certain popular cultures and media, combines the desire for control with the notion of women as objects, exacerbating this unhealthy mindset. Some PUA practitioners employ specific techniques to "win over" women, even resorting to deception and manipulation.

Thirdly, power inequality. This phenomenon is prevalent in various social contexts, including the workplace, family, and even social media platforms. For instance, some individuals have more resources and greater influence, while others are in relatively weaker positions. In the workplace, men often occupy higher positions due to societal expectations and norms, while women face various obstacles in their career development. In families, traditional views still hold that men should

dominate family decisions, making women more susceptible to men's control and influence. This aligns closely with the characteristics of PUA behavior, making it not only difficult for victims to escape their manipulators but also normalizing PUA in the eyes of many people.

Fourthly, mishandling of intimate relationships. In modern society, social interactions have become increasingly complex and varied, and intimate relationships are no exception. However, many people lack the necessary communication skills and respect when managing intimate relationships. They often exhibit a strong desire for control and selfish tendencies, unwilling to genuinely understand and tolerate their partners. This can lead to very unhealthy psychological relationships. This unhealthy way of managing intimate relationships is a significant manifestation of the PUA phenomenon. Some individuals attempt to gain a so-called "sense of satisfaction" through manipulation and control, behavior that not only disrupts the balance of the intimate relationship but also causes profound psychological harm to both parties.

In summary, PUA behavior inflicts deep psychological trauma on victims. Being manipulated and deceived not only causes victims to lose trust in interpersonal relationships but can also lead to severe psychological issues such as depression and anxiety. The prevalence of PUA also negatively impacts social norms. When deception and manipulation become everyday tactics for some individuals, the overall level of mutual trust in society inevitably suffers. To address this issue, the collective efforts of all sectors of society are required. On one hand, it is important to strengthen awareness campaigns about PUA to raise consciousness about countering it. On the other hand, establishing and improving laws and regulations is crucial to protect victims' rights, thereby fostering a healthy, equal, and respectful social environment.

4 The Legal Dilemma of PUA and Its Legal Regulation

4.1 The Dilemma of Legal Regulation of PUA

The behavior patterns of PUAs (Pick-Up Artists) are typically divided into multiple stages: from initial ordinary social interactions to later manipulative and controlling behaviors. In the early stages, PUA behaviors are often covert and difficult to detect, such as slowly engaging the target through social media or offline activities to gain their trust and favor. These behaviors may appear normal at the initial stage, but as they progress to the middle and later stages, the harmful nature of PUA behaviors

becomes apparent, including psychological manipulation that causes the victim to lose their ability to make independent judgments, and even exploitation and control in economic, emotional, and physical aspects. This also makes the legal characterization of PUA behaviors a very complex issue, primarily due to difficulties in defining the behaviors, investigating facts, ascertaining evidence, and applying the law.

In legal regulation, determining the subjective malice of the perpetrator is very important. The subjective malice of PUA behavior is primarily manifested in its deliberate psychological manipulation and emotional control to achieve the exploitation and control of the victim. However, due to the covert and gradual nature of PUA behavior, judicial authorities often face issues of insufficient evidence and unclear standards when determining subjective malice. Therefore, in practice, it is difficult for the judiciary to effectively crack down on and punish PUA behavior.

The fact-finding investigation of PUA behaviors also faces difficulties. Due to the covert methods and complex processes involved in PUA behaviors, victims often find it challenging to provide sufficient evidence to prove the harm they have suffered after the incident. Additionally, PUA behaviors are frequently conducted over the Internet, which makes the collection and preservation of relevant evidence even more difficult. In many cases, victims, due to psychological trauma or lack of legal knowledge, may be unable to provide timely and accurate evidence, further increasing the difficulty of fact-finding investigations.

Evidence ascertainment is a crucial aspect of legally regulating PUA behavior. However, due to the covert and complex nature of PUA behavior, there are many challenges during the evidence ascertainment process. Firstly, victims often lack sufficient self-protection awareness when subjected to PUA behavior, making it difficult to preserve relevant evidence. Secondly, the covert nature of PUA behavior makes it hard to obtain many key pieces of evidence, such as online chat records and specific methods of psychological manipulation. Additionally, since PUA behavior often involves psychological manipulation, proving the perpetrator's subjective malice and the specific behavior process presents considerable difficulty in evidence ascertainment.

Finding specific regulations that address PUA behaviors is another significant challenge. Currently, China's legal regulation of PUA behaviors mainly relies on existing legal frameworks, such as the "Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China" and the "Public Security Administration Punishments Law of the People's

Republic of China." Due to the diversity and complexity of PUA behavior, the current law often lacks pertinence in its application.

For example, relevant provisions in the criminal law often have ambiguities in regulating PUA (Pick-Up Artist) behavior, making it quite challenging in judicial practice. Additionally, due to unclear standards and procedures for the application of the law, judicial authorities often face difficulties in interpreting and applying the law when handling PUA cases. This, to some extent, weakens the deterrent effect and credibility of the law.

4.2 Suggestions on Getting Out of the Dilemma of Legal Regulation

Given the current dilemma of legal regulation of PUA behavior in China, it may be solved from the following perspectives:

First, improve the existing legal framework to clearly define the criteria and punitive measures for PUA (Pick-Up Artist) behavior. This can be achieved by enacting specialized laws or adding provisions related to PUA behavior in current laws to enhance their specificity and enforceability. For example, it could delineate the various stages of PUA behavior and their harmful effects, and impose specific penalties for actions taken at each stage.

Second, strengthen judicial interpretations to clarify the evidence standards and identification procedures for PUA (Pick-Up Artist) behavior. Judicial authorities can issue guidance or judicial interpretations to clearly define the standards and procedures for recognizing evidence of PUA behavior, thereby enhancing the practicability and fairness of judicial practice.

Third, enhance social awareness and strengthen education on the prevention of PUA (Pick-Up Artist) behavior. The government and social organizations can raise public awareness and vigilance through campaigns and educational initiatives, thereby increasing self-protection awareness. Particularly, targeted psychological health and legal knowledge education for young people and women can help them identify and guard against PUA behavior.

Fourth, strengthen the regulation of online platforms to curb the spread and proliferation of PUA (Pick-Up Artist) behavior. This can be achieved by enhancing the oversight of online platforms, requiring them to strictly review and handle information related to PUA behavior, and eliminating channels for its dissemination.

Additionally, technological and legal measures can be employed to combat PUA behavior online, protecting the legitimate rights and interests of the public.

5 Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the spread of the PUA (Pick-Up Artist) phenomenon in Chinese society has attracted widespread attention and debate. This article provides a systematic and in-depth analysis of PUA from various perspectives including its behavioral characteristics, underlying causes, and legal regulation. Firstly, the article outlines the psychological manipulation and objectification traits of PUA behavior in emotional relationships, as well as its specific manifestations in different fields. The article also delves into the deeper causes of the PUA phenomenon, such as the remnants of feudal societal ideologies, concepts of gender inequality, and power dynamics. Finally, the article details the challenges faced in the legal regulation of PUA behavior, including issues related to defining the behavior, determining subjective malice, and the application of the law. It also suggests strengthening judicial interpretations and the regulation of online platforms.

Given the complexity and severity of the PUA (Pick-Up Artist) phenomenon, its emergence in China should command our attention. To address this issue, it is necessary to tackle it from multiple angles: improving the legal framework, enhancing judicial interpretations, and strengthening the regulation of online platforms.

In summary, the emergence and development of PUA (Pick-Up Artist) in China is not a random phenomenon but rather has its inevitabilities, closely related to factors such as the underlying patriarchal society, rampant consumerism, objectification of women, and imbalances in intimate relationships. This reminds us that the PUA issue is not only a matter of emotional deception and manipulation that individuals may face, but also a structural problem pervasive throughout Chinese society. Correspondingly, addressing the PUA issue requires efforts not only from individuals and families but also necessitates the entire nation and society to enhance awareness, strengthen legal regulations, and recognize the severity and complexity of the PUA problem from all levels. Only then can this social issue be fundamentally resolved.

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