Keeping It Casual: A Sexual Ethics for College Campus Hook Up Culture

by

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Introduction

1. Introducing Hook Up Culture

Over the past decade empirical literature has recognized a widespread shift in the sexual behavior of young adults on college campuses across the nation. This emerging phenomenon is referred to as hook up culture both in the popular press and in existing scholarship.1 Hook ups are described as uncommitted sexual experiences that occur outside of the traditional context of romantic relationships.2 In both sociological literature and my own research “hooking up” is defined as a range of behavior: anything from kissing, to having sexual intercourse.3 Those who engage in hook ups do not intend for it lead to a committed romantic relationship, therefore the motivation for hooking up is largely for sexual satisfaction.4 Hook ups often occur between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances.5 In this American Studies senior thesis I examine heterosexual hook up culture at Wesleyan University using a number of research methods, particularly ethnographic fieldwork, historical analysis, and feminist philosophy. I examine how heterosexual hook up culture impacts young adults’ conceptualization of sexual and emotional intimacy, and shapes their behavior. Throughout this thesis, I focus on the ethical implications of

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1 There is a large amount of variance in how academia defines hooking up. For example, it has been
3 For an in-depth discussion of the range of activities see chapter 1. This definition is consistent with sociological findings on sexuality on college campuses, wherein students interviewed provided a range of answers for the definition of a hook up. See Bogle, Kathleen A. Hooking up Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus.
5 Paul, Elizabeth L., Brian Mcmanus, and Allison Hayes. "‘Hookups’: Characteristics and Correlates of College Students' Spontaneous and Anonymous Sexual Experiences." Journal of Sex Research 37,
behavior in hook up culture.

2. Methodology

In order to explicate the nuances of hook up culture I conducted fieldwork on Wesleyan University campus and in New York City over the course of 10 months, and employed a variety of ethnographic research methods. More specifically, these entailed individual and group interviews, archival research, and sociological research. I utilized these latter methods in order to get a grounding in the literature, and historically contextualize hook up culture.

Overall, I spoke with 53 undergraduate students at Wesleyan University of all grades levels. I conducted individual and group interviews with students in order to accurately detail a wide range of their experiences of hook up culture. These interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour, and took place in private rooms around Wesleyan University campus and in student housing. For the final chapter of my thesis, I formally interviewed nine self-identified polyamorous individuals across Brooklyn and New York City. For the majority of these interviews, we talked privately in their homes and in two cases we spoke in cafés. Although I am focusing on formal interviews conducted with these individuals, during the course of my fieldwork process within this community, I informally spoke with close to one hundred polyamorous people about their lifestyle practices and behaviors.

For my fieldwork on Wesleyan University campus I wanted to capture the experiences of both men and women, and therefore spoke to students who self-
identified as one of these two genders. Over 72% of the people I spoke with identify as white. Research suggests that the way college men and women interact in hook up culture varies by race. Because this thesis focuses on heterosexual hook up culture, I spoke with self-identified heterosexual individuals. However, throughout my research, my conversations with five self-identified gay, lesbian, and queer students also shed light on existing and concurrent hook up cultures that intersect with the heterosexual hook up culture on campus.

I recruited student interview subjects mainly through flyers around campus, and posting on social media. I also made announcements to student groups on campus and in academic classes. Students, in turn, reached out to me from these sources, and by word of mouth. I began my interviews by asking interviewees background questions, and then asked if there was anything about hook up culture in particular that they wanted to discuss first. I did not define hook up. Rather, I asked them to explain, “Whatever definition of hooking up you and your friends use.” I specified this by asking about a recent hook up with someone that they were not currently in a relationship with. I then posed questions about the sexual script, their experiences, and behavioral norms. Though I did have formal interview questions for participants, my approach was more conversational in structure, which made students feel comfortable enough to talk candidly and honestly about their experiences.

I also tried to speak with students from various social groupings. For example, I interviewed students who were in fraternities/ sororities, and those who

\[\text{Health.}\]

\[\text{I recognize that students of other gender orientations also participate in hook up culture, however I do not have the time in this paper to account for the scope of their experiences.}\]
described themselves as part of the alcohol-centered “going out” or partying “scene” on campus. I also spoke with individuals who chose to opt out of hook up culture, as well as those who neither drank alcohol nor attended parties.

My ethnographic work in the polyamorous community in New York City led me to attend numerous social events such as social mixers, “poly cocktails,” and game nights between the summer of 2015 and winter of 2016. My recruitment of these subjects took place in these social events, where many people volunteered to be interviewees. When interviewing polyamorous individuals, I asked them about their personal history being polyamorous, and posed questions about communication styles and approaches to honest, consensual non-monogamy.

I attended these polyamorous events as a researcher and outsider of the community. I ensured those around me were aware of my role as a researcher, and communicated that I was engaging in research for an honors thesis in American Studies. During these events polyamorous people and their partners willingly shared their personal narratives and viewpoints. The particular polyamorous community that I engaged with was extremely welcoming, open, and willing to share their experiences and opinions with me.

In preparation for this work, which is grounded in interdisciplinary methodologies, I took an independent tutorial with Professor Ulysse that introduced me to different approaches to ethnography. I also took an independent tutorial with Professor Kim Cunningham that focused on affect theory and the sociology of emotion, so that I could have a better grasp on the existing literature. This material

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7 Glenn, Norval D., and Elizabeth Marquardt. *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right:*
showed me how to convey and represent the emotional conditions of the participants.

At the beginning of several chapters I incorporate several interviewees’ personal accounts of hook up culture with short vignettes. Each of these vignettes speaks to the subjective experiences of the students I spoke with. With these brief narratives I work to make their feelings, desires, and struggles palpable.

All of the names of the people I interviewed for this paper have been changed in order to keep them anonymous.

3. The Hook Up Scene

Since hook ups involve an unspecified amount of sexual interaction, the students I spoke with acknowledged that it has a range of meanings for different people. Hook up is a slang term, and by definition is informal and nonstandard language subject, thus is subject to change. Some people think of a hook up as “having sex” whereas for others it means “just kissing.” Others suggest that it means “everything but” intercourse, which includes kissing, sexual touching, and oral sex. Molly, a senior at Wesleyan shared with me that she changes her meaning of the term depending on who she’s talking with.

C: How do you define a hook up?
M: For me, it depends on who I’m talking to. I have to assess who I’m talking to and then alter my response. When I’m back home in New York I assume it’s just kissing or making out, but here [at Wesleyan] I assume it’s sex. It depends on where I am, and also what group of people. But because of who I am, I always assume it’s something less.

In this case, Molly altered her definition after considering a range of criteria. This

may include location, culture, and gender, among other factors. For instance, she later explained that she used the term “hook up” to refer to sexual activity on Wesleyan campus because the relatively small student population fostered the feeling of safety and community. Therefore, she felt safer “going home” with someone and initiating a sexual activity on a campus where she might know be familiar with her hook up partners or have mutual friends with them. Due to the ambiguous nature of the term “hook up,” it requires further questioning to uncover precisely how much sexual activity took place. In all of my interviews with students, respondents modified their answers using the term “usually,” therefore acknowledging that there fails to a universal definition of “hook up.”

For some university students, hooking up is the ultimate goal of an evening partying or night at a social event. They may have the intention of hooking up without previously deciding upon a hook up partner. For example, a freshman female named Shirley shared with me that at times it “doesn’t matter” who she hooks up with, what matters is that it happened.

C: Do people plan on who they are going to hook up with or no?
S: Sometimes people have their eyes on a guy or girl. But really I’ll be getting ready to go out, and just have a feeling I want to hook up with someone. I just want to let something out. I don’t even know who, and sometimes don’t care. It’s just like “I’m going to hook up tonight!”

As Shirley detailed, a “feeling” that they may want to hook up can motivate students to enter social events without a thoughtful approach to sexuality. Certain personal and situational factors may encourage students to hook up without making informed decisions about their desire to do so and understanding the potential outcomes (be
they positive or negative). For instance, young adults’ alcohol use has been noted as a robust predictor of engaging in hook up encounters, for it lowers inhibitions and alters the decision making process.

As previously mentioned, the most common outcome of a hook up is “nothing,” meaning that the two sexual partners have no further contact. A single hook up does not guarantee any commitment beyond the encounter itself. However, in some cases hook ups may lead to ongoing sexual relationships without emotional commitment, which are called “repeat hook ups,” or described as two people “hanging out” or “chilling.” For a hook up to develop into a committed monogamous relationship is extremely rare. Yet, because hook up culture is the dominant sexual culture on college campuses, it is considered to be the only pathway to a relationship. This does not mean that everyone on campus engages in hook up culture, however it does signify that hook ups are a primary means for initiating sexual and romantic relationships.

For the purpose of this thesis, I use the term “hook up” interchangeably with

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9 Paul, Elizabeth L., Brian Mcmanus, and Allison Hayes. "‘Hookups’: Characteristics and Correlates of College Students’ Spontaneous and Anonymous Sexual Experiences." 76.
10 Owen, Jesse, Frank D. Fincham, and Jon Moore. "Short-Term Prospective Study of Hooking Up Among College Students."
“uncommitted sexual encounter” and “casual sexual encounter.” I differ myself from other researchers who claim that committed relationships are a thing of the past, or that hook ups have effaced monogamous relationships structures on campus. Contemporary research reveals that 69% of heterosexual students had been in a college relationship of at least six months. Relationships are not going anywhere, however the beginning steps and script that lead to a committed romantic relationship are changing.

4. My Approach to an Interdisciplinary Thesis

One of my challenges as a researcher was to determine the most appropriate language to use when describing the experiences of young people in hook up culture. The discipline of sociology lends a helpful theory for better conceptualizing the normative behaviors of hook up culture. A foundational sociological theory poses that how a person behaves in social settings can resemble an actor following a script. The societal norms that flourish in one’s culture direct how someone will act in a given situation. Two sociological researchers John H. Gagnon and William Simon posit that sexual behavior is socially learned. Central to this theory is the notion of social constructionism, the interpretation of reality, including human behavior, derives from shared beliefs within particular social groups. Instead of posing that

sexuality is solely biologically determined, contrary to some biologists and psychologists who discuss sexuality in terms of “drives,” Gagnon and Simon suggest that individuals internalize “sexual scripts” in order to predict, organize, and understand interactions with a potential sexual partner. What they call “scripting theory” is helpful for understanding both the content and arrangement of behavior. It also sheds light on how society defines the appropriate scenarios that must occur for sexual behavior to ensue. Therefore, the norms within society dictate how and when sexual interaction will occur.

In heterosexual culture, the sexual scripts are gendered and determine the roles individuals will play within a scene. These are culturally prescribed, and assist in both men and women seeking potential partners. Traditionally, men are socially encouraged to take on the role of the aggressor and actively seek sexual partners. Women, on the other hand are prescribed the role of sexual gate-keeper, and decide if a male “gets any” sexual contact, and if so, when and how much. The social setting individuals are in, such as college campus, and the historical time period both shape the prescribed and gendered roles.

I use this sociological concept in order to illustrate how the behaviors of individuals are contingent upon their social and historical worlds. Young people learning about sexuality in the hook up era are utilizing the norms of their social setting in order to navigate their intimate lives. The culture in which they live provides the script for them to follow and make sense of sexual behavior.

With this foundation in place, I will let the experiences of young men and

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20 Gagnon, John H., and William Simon. *Sexual Conduct*
women I interviewed at Wesleyan University speak to the sexual script within hookup culture. Though I use this sociological theory and empirical research to buttress my work, before all else this thesis works to form an ethics of sexuality. I am pointing to hook up culture as an example of a sexual culture that is in dire need of analysis and change. This is first and foremost a feminist theory project. The works of feminist philosophers such as Ann Cahill, Nancy Bauer, and Erinn C. Gilson have set the groundwork for me to look within hook up culture, critique it, and propose a novel ethics of sexuality for a generation emerging in the hook up era.

I write this thesis while on a college campus, and my position as a member of this culture forced me to pose questions to the larger community about their own experiences. For that reason, I am beholden to the anthropological establishment and use over 50 interviews with Wesleyan University students. These personal conversations are my main point of interest and serve as my texts within this thesis. The urgency my interviewees felt to express – finally – what to them seemed strange, gratifying, and perplexing forced me to see that this topic needed to be discussed. I hope that these discussions helped my interviewees gain a more thoughtful approach to hookup culture, in order to more successfully navigate it.

5. Chapter Outlines

The best place to understanding heterosexual romance, in terms of how men and women get together, begins with looking at how they did so in the past. I begin Chapter One with a brief history of dating in the mid-1960s and then the subsequent

21 Bogle, Kathleen A. "From Dating to Hooking Up." Hooking up Sex, Dating, and Relationships on
rise of hook up culture. Within this chapter I explore the traditional and gendered behavioral norms that dictated appropriate or inappropriate behavior for young adults seeking to romance. With that historical groundwork, I utilize the narratives of the Wesleyan students I interviewed to shed light on the contemporary sexual script. This chapter works to guide my readers from the “traditional” script popularized throughout the mid- to late- twentieth century, into a contemporary one dictating hook up culture. I consider sexual norms within this culture, and several social and cultural factors that contributed to its emergence. In doing so, I argue that today there is something fundamentally different in how young heterosexual men and women form intimate partnerships. In this chapter I seek to de-mystify a culture that has been poorly portrayed in the popular press as one circulating around careless sex, lack of consent, and emotionless interactions. 22 By using the narratives of those within hook up culture, I hope to more accurately humanize those within hook up culture, and represent their continuous efforts to navigate it.

In Chapter Two I take a closer look at hook up sex. More specifically, I am concerned with whether or not hook up culture is the liberating sexual landscape individuals sought for in the sexual revolution. 23 In a post-sexual revolution era, young women in hook up culture are not immediately restricted by the gendered behavioral norms that regulated the behavior of women in previous generations. 24

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However, does this signify gendered equality? My approach is informed by feminist moral theory, which is an attempt to revise, reformulate, or rethink traditional ethics to the extent it depreciates or devalues women's moral experience. Additionally, I incorporate contemporary empirical research on college campus hook up culture to shed light on a gendered gap in sexual pleasure within heterosexual hook ups. I nod to feminist philosopher Ann Cahill, and use her theory of derivatization to analyze whether hook up sex is ethically sound.

In Chapter Three I shift focus to the emotional aspects of hook up culture. In particular, I put attention to the term “chill,” which was used by over 90% of participants to describe a desirable affective condition. Moreover they used “chill” as to describe their sexual politics. In this chapter I interpret this term as an emotional prescription that can help readers understand the cultural logics of hook up culture. Following the footsteps of affect theorist Sara Ahmed and scholar Arlie Russell Hochschild, I examine the way “chillness” is contributing to the self-monitoring of emotion, and how “chilling” relationships are impacting students’ ability for self-advocacy.

In Chapter Four I seek to go beyond hook up culture and look at practices of consensual non-monogamy in order to shed light on alternative, more ethical means of practicing casual sexuality. In particular I look to polyamory—a form of consensual non-monogamy that has the structure of multiple loving relationships—and includes the informed consent of all involved partners. I begin this chapter focusing on an

overarching theme of this thesis: vulnerability. I then analyze how a reductive conceptualization of vulnerability underlies the majority of interactions in hook up culture. I utilize the narrative of polyamorous individuals to illustrate how an alternative conceptualization of vulnerability in polyamorous communities can help produce more ethical modes of relationality.


I find it crucial to clarify to my readers the demographic that I am researching. The majority of studies of hook up culture remain non-intersectional, causing a flattened understanding of the factors that influence the establishment and popularity of hook-up culture. Little is known about how sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, class, religious affiliation, disability, and other variables influence both the act of hooking up among individuals, and the particular shape of sexual cultures at institutions. Sociological research on the experiences of students of color is notably absent in the literature on hooking up.27 However, there are reasons to suspect that individuals with different ethnic backgrounds might have different experiences with hooking up.

Research on uncommitted sexuality on college campuses reports that over three fourths of college students engage in casual sexual experiences that have no emotional commitment.28 Qualitative studies have found that white students are more
likely than students of color to engage in casual sex.\textsuperscript{29} White youth have been reported to be able to engage and experiment in sexuality, without the concern that it will be used to affirm any stereotype that whites are sexually promiscuous.\textsuperscript{30} Confirming this, Black and Latino youth interviewed in 2008 by researcher Michael S Kimmel expressed a reluctance to engage in hook up culture due to the fear that their behavior might entrench racism.\textsuperscript{31}

Moreover, upper- and middle-class female students hook up at higher rates than working class students.\textsuperscript{32} Sociologists Lisa Hamilton and Elizabeth Armstrong found that class-privileged women preferred hooking up because it permitted them to sexually experiment without forming committed relationships that might interfere with their academic goals and career plans.\textsuperscript{33} In contrast, working class women may chose to opt out of hook up culture on campus and favor monogamy and marriage. They may not envision the same degree of occupational success for themselves and therefore seek sexual inexperience as “feminine capital.”\textsuperscript{34} Family and friends at home may reinforce options such as marriage and monogamy, therefore making participation in hook up culture less feasible. Moreover, hooking up made little sense

\textsuperscript{29} Owen, Jesse J., Galena K. Rhoades, Scott M. Stanley, and Frank D. Fincham. "“Hooking Up” Among College Students: Demographic and Psychosocial Correlates." \textit{Arch Sex Behav Archives of Sexual Behavior} 39, no. 3 (June 07, 2008): 653-63. Accessed February 2016. Springer Science Business Media, LLC.


\textsuperscript{34} Wade, Lisa. "Hooking Up and Opting Out.” 130.
for women whose friends back home were already married or had children.\textsuperscript{35}

Contemporary research on gender, social class, and “slut discourse” on college campuses showed that classed resources provided affluent white women with more room to maneuver sexually.\textsuperscript{36}

72\% of the students I spoke with at Wesleyan University are white, and roughly 92\% were heterosexual, cis-gendered individuals. A majority of the students acknowledged that the particular heterosexual hook up culture that they engage in is predominantly white. The students I spoke with who chose to opt out of hook up culture explained their decision with using a variety of reasons. The most common reason was that they chose not to drink alcohol, which limited them from engaging in the “carefree” culture that centers on alcohol-fueled parties. One participant, a junior named Jonathan told me:

J: It’s more complicated for me because I chose not to drink for personal reasons. I like who I am sober, and I don’t need to change that. Drinking just isn’t fun for me. And at the same time, I won’t take a girl home who’s completely blasted or drunk out of her mind. I would feel gross and immoral. So I can go out, and have a good time, but I don’t really work within that culture. Also, it’s really important to me to get to know the person I’m sleeping with; that’s what makes me attracted and horny for her. I guess I have more conventional ways of finding a girl.

Other students who did not engage in hook up culture explained that they preferred being in exclusive relationships, and were not looking for ephemeral partners with no emotional commitment. In total 21 out of 33 female participants told me that they did not enjoy the style of treatment they were getting from the men they hooked up with.


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
Five shared that they “tried it out” a few times freshman year, but then became so disappointed by how they felt in hook up culture, that they decided to opt out all together. Those that did not hook up told me that they found it a nuisance that hook up culture seemed like the only way to finding a romantic partner on campus.

When I asked students about whether they think other schools have a similar hook up culture they expressed that it thought it was probably the same, but made one distinctions. They noted that Wesleyan University, as a small liberal arts school, was an environment wherein one could “bump into a hook up anywhere.” They contrasted Wesleyan to larger state universities, described as “party schools,” with an active Greek-life and reputation for heavy alcohol consumption. In these schools one could hypothetically hook up with someone and then never see him or her again. Omar, a senior who transferred to Wesleyan from a larger school explained to me that he had to adjust in order to more smoothly navigate this culture.

O: In my other school, you could hook up with some girl and then literally never, never see her again. It’s just so big, it's not like you would easily run into them on the street. You could find them on Facebook maybe, but you could also just vanish if you wanted to. Here it’s like, if I hook up with someone I know I’ll catch them at lunch, in the library, on my way to class. It can get really awkward really quick. Or, because Wes is so small we might have mutual friends. It’s just like a very different culture than other schools.

Thus, because Wesleyan has a smaller student population than other schools, it is more difficult to remain completely anonymous to one’s hook up partner. Wesleyan’s relatively small campus population is important to consider when thinking about how the hook up culture on campus compares to those of other schools.

7. Limitations

Like most studies my findings do not necessarily speak to the experiences of
all college students. My experience as a heterosexual woman is the background upon which everything else stands in relief. For this reason, I use my interviews as the sources upon which I can describe, and give life to the experiences of others in the heterosexual culture of sexuality and intimacy. At the same time, I am aware that I cannot fully cover the scope of all student experiences of hook up culture.

A consistent difficulty for me as a researcher positioned in this culture has been to conceptualize the behavior that occurs behind closed doors, on dance floors, or in social events as particularly strange. At the beginning of this project I found the practices of hook up culture to be normal, and any other form of courtship seemed to me foolishly archaic. To expand my own perceptions and do what the German poet Novalis called “making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange” has been possible by historically contextualizing hook up culture, and by attempting to explain the normalcy of these behaviors to my thesis advisors. I try my hardest to observe from all angles, though at the same time I recognize my limitations due to positionality. What my research can show is what hooking up means at Wesleyan, explain why some students have complicated relationships with hook up culture, and point to potential pathways for a more ethical means of navigating this sexual culture.

8. My History with Hooking Up

My introduction to hooking up came first hand. Throughout my own college career hooking up has been at the center of the social scene. I remember my initial confusion and feeling of being disoriented when being introduced to this culture as a first year student. In 2015, as a junior at Wesleyan University, I decided to begin a
research project on the subject. When I reviewed the existing scholarship I found that the relatively few studies examined or even addressed what I consider urgent issues of hook up culture: cultural avoidance of emotionality, objectification, and conceptualizations of vulnerability. By using an interdisciplinary approach in my research, I am able to touch upon each of these issues, and theorize a more ethical approach to physical intimacy.

I initially chose to write this thesis with the idea that I had finally understood hook up culture enough to successfully navigate it. Here, I define successful as having acquired the skillset to avoid the rapid vagaries of emotions, fear of vulnerability, and hardening of personality that is so easy to come by in hook up culture. My confidence in flipping the script, in demanding honesty, and valuing emotionality developed once I learned the positive benefits of vulnerability with intimate others. Yet, the most challenging aspect of this work was just that: vulnerability with my reader. When attempting to write, I often felt shy and speechless. My continuous streams of lucid and articulate thought vanished the moment I sat down to write. The relationship between hook up partners, which I will deconstruct later in this work, may often be one of long, awkward silences and the reluctance to vocalize emotional vulnerability. Thus, the challenges of hook up culture I had considered part of my past, reincarnated in my research. Only through a loving commitment to this project, an immersion in feminist theory, and the support of my advisors and peers, was I able to once again learn the power of vulnerability, voice my thoughts, and create this work.

My reason for writing this thesis is two-fold. Both my academic and
interpersonal experiences as a Wesleyan student challenged me to critically consider both how and why hook up culture is the predominant sexual culture on campus. Courses offered to me by both the American Studies department and the Feminist Gender and Sexuality Studies Department introduced me to transformative ideologies and conceptual frameworks, which challenged me to unlearn normative and problematic understandings of power, sexuality, and self-advocacy. These concepts that emerged in the classroom followed me out of the academic setting. They followed me into parties, around campus, and became embedded in my personal life, radically transforming my way of intimately relating to others. Moreover, my interpersonal relationships on Wesleyan campus motivated me to question the normalcy of hook up culture. With my personal involvement in trusting, committed relationships and open, communicative relationships I began to question the limits that hook up culture imposed upon students. These experiences at Wesleyan ultimately lead me to study intimate and romantic relationships on campus, and consider alternative modes of relationality.
Chapter 1

The Sexual Script: From Dating Culture to Hook Up Culture

Intimacy in the Dating Era

As society comes to terms with changes in youth culture, we have a tendency to regard these changes with fear and condemnation. Hook up culture has been the target of scrutiny and criticism in the popular press, as it deviates from the normative dating culture that lasted throughout the mid-twentieth century. Articles such as “7 Reasons Why We Need To Kill Hook Up Culture” and “Is Hook Up Culture Destroying the Possibility of Love?” press the idea that the contemporary sexual culture on college campuses is harmful.\(^{37}\) Many argue that as a society we should revert back to the “good old days,” with a romantic culture of courtship. In light of this, I have found that a helpful way to explore the contemporary hook up culture script in the United States and is to compare it those that came before it, specifically the dating script that dominated romantic life from the early to mid twentieth century.

Scripts are “mutually shared conventions” that help make meaning of sexual situations by organizing sequences of behavior into a coherent story.\(^{38}\) Sexual scripts afford us recognizable patterns of behavior so that involved individuals have an understanding of what to expect, and what his or her role in the sexual interaction

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should be. For that reason, I stitch together a short history of the script and norms emphasized in dating culture from the early twentieth century to the mid nineteenth century. Finally, I use interviews with Wesleyan University students to outline the script for hook up culture in a contemporary context.

Researching how young people developed intimate relationships in the past is a difficult and tricky task for historians. Prior to the twentieth century, information on the private and sexual lives of individuals did not exist. Little is known about the history of young people in Western societies seeking romantic partners. Generally, middle- and upper-class individuals underwent a process that was heavily monitored by their parents, family, and communities. This supervision of partner choice was beneficial for families in a number of ways, the first of which was ensuring that their son or daughter had limited intimate experiences with his or her potential partner. Since premarital sex was largely prohibited in until either marriage or the family’s favorable acceptance of a partner, the family needed to monitor sexual interaction. Both the family and the larger community had an interest in ensuring that a child was not born out of wedlock. In addition, the family needed to ensure that the partner was suitable in regards to practical concerns. For example, a man was not considered

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40 Social historians have had to look at sources such as diaries, medical records, letters, and other expert texts. Many of these sources are written by middle- to upper-class white society. Therefore, what we know about this intimate behavior is that of the upper class, or “elite” more so than society as a whole. Moreover, because of lack of mass communication in this time there was a variation of sexual scripts in local practices.
42 Ibid.
44 For more on familia Shorter, Edward. The Making of The Modern Family. New York: Basic Books,
suitable unless he demonstrated that he could financially support his future wife and family. However, over time romantic feelings and sexual attraction were given greater importance for intimate partnering throughout the twentieth century.

According to social historian Beth Bailey, the word “date” entered the vocabulary of the white middle-class public by the early twentieth century. The first use of the word date with its contemporary meaning is first recorded as lower-class slang. Dating soon became a way for upper-class youth to go out with one another and avoid the watchful eyes of parents. Other societal shifts caused an increase in the popularity of dating. Growing numbers of women were enrolling in college and taking jobs, which pushed them into the public sphere. Though for some, dating was still considered risqué, by the start of the twentieth century dining alone with a man or being in public without a chaperone was not a threat to an unmarried woman’s reputation.

Exclusive dating, called “going steady,” with one person became increasingly popular in the postwar era. “Steadies” might give each other something to wear, such as an athletic jacket or pin, in order to indicate that they were “taken” to those in their school or social circles. The invention of the automobile further facilitated privacy and mobility among young couples. Cars gave youth both mobility and privacy, and men could easily take their dates “out on the town” into public spaces.

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1975.

45 Bailey, Beth L. *From Front Porch to Back Seat.*
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.; The aftermath of World War II in the 1940s led men to become literally scarce resources, and college girls began hoping to be “pinned” to a man or soldier fighting over seas. Thus, dating took on a more serious tone. The end of World War I also lead to economic prosperity across the United States, allowing young men to marry sooner because they could financially afford it.
49 Ross, Susan M. *American Families Past and Present: Social Perspectives on Transformations*, 125.
This access to independent transportation accelerated a process that was quickly extending across the country, and contributed to the normalization of dating across the United States. By 1925 it was the dominant romantic script across the country and a “universal custom in America.”

Though scarce formal studies on sexual behavior exist before the mid 1960s, guidebooks and personal letters speak to major conventions of intimacy throughout dating culture. The traditional sexual script in dating culture permitted limited sexual behavior such as “petting” and “necking” among young people coming of age. Though there are not formal definitions of these terms, necking was generally accepted as intimate caresses above the neck, and petting referred to caresses below the neck. Though these demonstrations of intimacy not uncommon, their significance lies in the fact that they were publicly acknowledged conventions and expected elements in a romantic partnership in the dating era. As the twentieth century progressed, these behaviors became staples of a young couple’s romantic experience. Thus because of a young couple’s privacy and mobility, the decrease in parental monitoring, and wider cultural acceptance of sexual behavior, this dating script allowed for more sexual intimacy between unmarried couples than the calling script had.


53 Bailey, Beth L. *From Front Porch to Back Seat*. 80.
Moreover, there were distinctly gendered sexual script throughout the dating era that differentiated appropriate behavior for men and women seeking romantic partnership. It contended that the man ask for the date, pay for the dates, and provide the transportation for the date. The traditional sexual script also dictated that the man was sexually proactive and the woman was sexually reactive. That is, men were socially encouraged to be sexually pursuant with female partners, whereas women were socialized to read signals from him, and respond to them accordingly. Dating advice book from the 1950’s sheds light on typical gendered dating scripts, stating that:

Girls who try to usurp the right of boys to a to chose their own dates [will] ruin a good dating career… From the Stone Age, when men chased and captured their women, comes the yen of a boy to do the pursuing. You will control your patience therefore and respect the time honored custom of boys to take the first step.

“Sexual conquests” were encouraged among young men in dating culture, and they were expected to desire and pursue sexual opportunities regardless of context.

On the other hand, women were socialized to engage in “just enough” sexual activity to keep an male partner interested and keep to keep him from straying and finding sexual satisfaction elsewhere. Women were instructed to be cognizant of not engaging in too much sexual activity, so as to ruin their reputations. Thus, women

55 Ibid.
were put into an interesting position of sexual gatekeeping due to a societal double standard about appropriate gendered sexual activity.  

**From “Going Steady” to “Getting Busy”**

According to Bailey, the mid-1960s represented a period of change in American culture that “ushered in a new system of courtship.” In his book, *Mating, Dating and Courtship* Martin King Whyte also acknowledges a dramatic shift in the sexual behavior of single young people who ‘came of age’ after 1965. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, scholars such as Bernard Murstein and Helen Horowitz noticed the lack of traditional dating in college. Horowitz’s historical analysis found that “formal dating… had largely stopped in the 1960’s, replaced by informal group partying.” In his analysis of mate selection in the 1970’s, Murstein asked “Is Dating Dying?” These studies demonstrated how scholars began to question the relevance of formal dating on college campuses, and spoke to a shift in the romantic script.

Another contribution to this cultural shift is the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s that aimed to free women of traditional gender roles and sexist labeling, while encouraging them to embrace their sexuality. Throughout this era it became

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60 Contemporary research on gendered sexual scripts speaks to the continuance of a sexual double standard for women across hook up culture. See: Hamilton, L., and E. A. Armstrong. "Gendered Sexuality in Young Adulthood: Double Binds and Flawed Options." *Gender & Society* 23, no. 5
61 Bailey, Beth L. *From Front Porch to Back Seat.*
increasingly socially acceptable for women to have sex prior to marriage.\textsuperscript{66} Although it is difficult to pinpoint an exact time for when hook up culture began on college campuses throughout the United States, evidence points to a shift towards more casual sexual practices throughout the late 1960s and 1970s.

While casual sex at college is nothing new, the heterosexual college culture in the United Stated has only recently come to define hook ups as the sexual norm. The term “hooking up” can be documented in a number of studies from the 1980s and 1990s.\textsuperscript{67} Scholarship on relationships and sexual behavior did not look directly at “hooking up” as a phenomenon until the 1990s and early 2000s.\textsuperscript{68} The primary definition was to “acquire a sexual companion.”\textsuperscript{69} Almost 20 years before researchers and social scientists began documenting this term, it was being used across the country.

What distinguishes hooking up from the occurrence of casual sex is the disappearance of the “going steady” dating culture that dominated in the postwar period.\textsuperscript{70} With dating no longer a socially sanctioned option, casual sex or “hook ups” have become the normative and dominant means of initiating romantic activity.\textsuperscript{71}

Along with the increase in young people engaging in sexual intercourse before

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
marriage, there was an increase in sexual acts that had been previously reserved for marriage.\textsuperscript{72} Specifically oral sex became an increasingly common element of the sexual script, particularly among well-educated whites.\textsuperscript{73} Therefore, the avenues of sexual expression for unmarried heterosexual people were expanding.

Although hook up culture has replaced dating as the conventional means for heterosexual partners to become sexually intimate, college students are familiar with the term. The students that I spoke with demonstrated an understanding of its traditional meaning in the context of the historical dating era. However, they also use the term “dating” in a manner that differs from the traditional dating script that dominated romantic culture from roughly 1920s- mid 1960s on college campuses.\textsuperscript{74} The word “dating” is used in hook up culture to describe a man or woman who are already an exclusive couple going out together on dates or attending events together.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, dating in the traditional sense no longer describes what is happening between single men and women on college campuses.

\textsuperscript{74} Although there is research pointing to differences in prevalence of oral sex in race and ethnicity groups, there is little work done on why this is so. In his book \textit{Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men}, author Michael Kimmel speaks to these behavioral differences, and points to how individuals in minority groups may tie such sexual acts as further entrenching racist stereotypes. Other sociological research on sexual behavior of women of color on college campuses also ties sexual restraint with a fear of racial stereotyping.
\textsuperscript{75} Bailey, Beth L. \textit{From Front Porch to Back Seat}. 
What is Hooking Up? It Depends on Who You Ask

Hooking up is different type of intimate interaction than traditional dating; it is not merely a contemporary term used to describe two people who are dating. A landmark study by Glenn and Marquardt in 2001 found that college students rarely go on traditional dates, and instead engage in what students described as a “hook up.” This study, among several others, confirmed that hooking up is a dominant practice among heterosexual students on modern college campuses, and governs male-female interactions in these spaces. They conclude that hooking up is a “distinctive sex-without-commitment interaction between college men and women is widespread on college campuses and profoundly influences campus culture.” Moreover, dating partners may constitute a larger part of the adolescent’s public self since it is a relationship that is known to friends and parents. Adolescents view non-dating sexual liaisons or hook ups as more private.

Research indicates that roughly two thirds to three quarters of college students hook up at least once during their undergraduate experience. College students that I spoke to defined hooking up as anything ranging from “kissing to have full on sex.”

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78 Glenn, Norval D., and Elizabeth Marquardt. *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today*.
It therefore consists of a spectrum, and it is up to the individual to determine what behavior within that spectrum counts as a hook up. This term generally refers to when two people pair off at the end of social event or college party in order to begin sexual interaction. One participant I spoke with named Robin spoke to its meaning:

C: What does hooking up mean to you?
R: It’s different for everybody. For me it means that I either made out or had sex with someone. I could mean oral too.
C: What about kissing?
R: Kissing is hooking up for some people, but usually if I’m telling a story to someone and we just kissed I’ll just say ‘we kissed.” But honestly it’s different for everyone. One of my friends uses hooking up only to talk about sex! It’s weird.

Will, a college senior defined a hook up in terms of what it is not: an exclusive, monogamous relationship between two people.

C: What is a hook up?
W: I would describe a hook up any way that is some kind of physical sexual activity that is beyond kissing… When the two or more partners are not in a committed relationships that is strictly like “this is a relationship” there could be gray, blurry lines. It’s not like a relationship.

The ambiguity within hooking up’s definition usually means that a further explanation is required from the speaker. The term "hook up” focuses on the uncommitted nature of the sexual interaction, and not so much on what behavior "counts.”

Participants I spoke with told me that they usually clarified the meaning by asking the following question “Did you have sex?” Regardless of what occurs sexually between the two partners, there was a consensus among my participants that neither one is obligated to one another, making it a “no strings attached” encounter.

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Thus, the three central themes that delineate hook ups from other intimate encounters are that 1) the two parties involved are not in a committed relationship, 2) the encounter is short term 3) a range of sexual activity can be classified as hooking up.\footnote{Epstein, Marina, Jerel P. Calzo, Andrew P. Smiler, and L. Monique Ward. "Anything From Making Out to Having Sex": Men's Negotiations of Hooking Up and Friends With Benefits Scripts.}

**The Hook Up Script**

The hook up script is dramatically less formal than that of dating.\footnote{Hamilton, L., and E. A. Armstrong. "Gendered Sexuality in Young Adulthood: Double Binds and Flawed Options."} Either the man or the woman can initiate a hook up encounter. Hook ups generally occur on weekends at the culmination of a night partying, going to a concert, or “hanging out” among a mixed-gender group of friends.\footnote{Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health.} At parties students drink, dance, and talk amongst themselves while also surveying varieties of hook up partners.

How does one select a potential hook up partner? Physical appearance plays a central role in selecting a potential hook up partner. A striking physical appearance is a valued trait of a potential hook up partner. A freshman male named Mark explained:

C: How do you find a potential hook up partner?  
M: Like at a party? Well usually the first thing I notice is how she looks I guess. That’s important [laughing]. You don’t want to wake up the next morning and be like ‘Fuck, what the hell did I do last night…’  
C: So you see someone attractive, then what?  
M: I’ll go near her, maybe dance or something to make her laugh. Then I’ll talk to her.

Sometimes, students do not have a particular person in mind that they would like to hook up with that evening. However, one is not limited in options when choosing; a
hook up can include someone that students may or may not know prior to the night of the party. In some cases, students regard friends as potential hook up partners. In other cases, a potential hook up partner may be someone that they have “seen around” in real life, or have seen on social media platforms such as Facebook or Tinder. Lisa, a senior at Wesleyan argued that when she “goes out” she feels as though she knows many more potential hook up partners because of social media.

L: It’s crazy because we now have such a large pool of mating partners, because names travel not only through word of mouth. We can also hear of someone or see them in class, and then look them up on Facebook so it’s like we know them.

C: Does that influence how you interact with them?

L: Well, I feel like range of friends and acquaintances have extended so that in order to we “know of” more people, but we don’t actually know them. It also creates situations where because we have Facebook stalked them, we think we know who they are, their interests, or what to expect when we talk to them.

As Lisa explained, social media platforms transform the hook up scene by making students feel familiar with those around them. However, whether looking at acquaintances’ online page actually informs students about potential partners, is questionable.

In other cases, students engage in a “random hook up,” implying that there was no prior connection to that person before they hooked up. Of the students I spoke with, people reflected that freshman engage in more random hook ups since their relatively brief time at college has prevented them from knowing a wide range of students. Marielle, a freshman spoke to her experience hooking up in a school where she knew a small amount of people.

C: It is common for people to hook up with someone they do not know?

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M: Oh yes! Oh yeah… I do that all the time [laughing]. But that’s also because most people here are random hook ups to me. Especially upperclassmen guys. I only know them from seeing them at a party or in the library, so a lot of the times when I hook up with one its just like “Cool! Who are you?”

C: What happens after a random hook up?
M: Usually nothing, so it’s pretty weird actually. We hook up at a party or go home together. And then I’ll see them at lunch weeks later and don’t really know what to do.

Sometimes, mutual friends work to initiate hook up encounters between students.

These friends either provide introductions, or directly tell one friend about the other’s interest in hooking up. I asked a junior named Greg about his experiences hooking up on campus, and he spoke to the little amount of work it was for him to find a hook up.

C: What’s your typical night like after the pre-game?
G: You go out, probably get to two events. Then it gets pretty clear to me if there’s going to be a girl in the mix or not. One of my biggest liberations, is that I’m not invested in casual sex at all. I’m not like chasing someone and constantly texting “Where are you?”

C: If you’re not chasing, how do you know if someone’s interested?
G: I don’t know. That’s one of the things that I think people don’t appreciate about here. I’ll be out at a party and then someone comes up to me, and I hear about people who want to hook up with me. Like, I can get told who wants to hook up. People put their friends up to it without being asked.

In Greg’s case, he learns of potential hook up partners by mutual friends who share the news with him directly. Thus, what we can conclude from these student insights is that young adults have a variety of potential hook up partners across campus.

Once a potential hook up partner is selected, students then seek to identify mutual interest. The most common way to do this is through nonverbal cues.

Numerous participants explained that they find someone who they might be sexually interested in by keeping eye contact or smiling numerous times throughout a night.

Finding a partner is an indirect process wherein neither person asks if the other wants
to hook up directly.

**Leaving the Scene: “Do you Wanna Go to My Room?”**

After two people sense mutual interest in each other, the main question is determining where they go to engage in the hook up. Paul and Hayes’ 2002 study of students’ perceptions of hook ups reported that 67% occur at parties, 57% at dormitories or fraternity houses, 10% at bars and clubs, 4% in cars, and 35% at any unspecified available place. The level of sexual interaction the partners want often determines the location of the hook up. In some cases, if they are going to “just kiss” or “make out” with someone, they feel no need to leave the social event and thus initiate a hook up in a private room or corner. Other times, pairs will begin a hook up on the dance floor. This is commonly known as a “DMFO,” short for “dance floor make out.” Graham, a senior at Wesleyan described this occurring in more crowded social events.

C: Does a hook up ever begin at a party?
G: *[Laughing]* Yeah why not... it happens pretty often honestly. I’ll be dancing with someone and she is really on me. If we’ve been dancing for a little while then I’ll start hooking up with her
C: And you’re still on the dance floor?
G: Yeah it’s normal though. Like sometimes dance floors are just filled with people hooking up *[laughing]*. Not all the time at all, but what I’m saying is that it’s not weird.

In heterosexual hook up culture, intimate interactions are not limited to private spaces. It is actually socially acceptable for hook ups to occur in public party spaces.

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Although publicly hooking up at a party is common, it is not for everyone.

One participant I interviewed, a freshman female named Victoria, expressed discomfort with “making out” with someone in front of a crowd. She explained:

V: I just don’t want to hook up in front of fifty people. But that’s not really how it works.
C: How does it usually work?
V: It’s usually like you flirt with someone for twenty minutes and then you just hook up with them at the party. That’s how it is here. I just don’t do that. I like to talk with someone and then walk somewhere and hook up.

As Victoria outlined, if the hook up is not initiated at the party or concert space, then the pair will depart from the scene and find another location to begin hooking up.

Most often, this is private dorm space or on campus housing. Students often made decisions based on situational factors. For example, if one’s dorm room is closer than the other’s is, the pair might decide to go to the closer room. Or, if one student has a roommate, then they choose to go somewhere more private.

In some cases whose room or house partners decide to go to depends on feelings of comfort or power dynamics based on age. People may choose to hook up at their partner’s living space so that they have the freedom to leave whenever they please. Greg shared that he disliked taking a hook up partner home because of such power dynamics, as well as because of the discomfort he felt once the hook up ended.

C: How do you know whose space to go when you decide to hook up?
M: I prefer going to their place because I can leave whenever I want. I have a hard time telling people to leave. Its one of those things where you’re just thinking… “Do you really want to have a weird conversation tomorrow?” And more so like, ‘I think you’re great and this is great, but I really want to get a good night’s sleep. I think we both got a part of what we wanted out of this interaction. Do you really want to stay here?’ I always wonder if that’s
part of the script because, do people really want to stay over?  
C: Are there any other factors that help you choose where?  
M: I also don’t really like the power dynamic that comes with bringing girls into my apartment. Because it already feels like that interaction is unbalanced especially if they’re younger. I don’t like bringing a girl into my space.

From Greg’s narrative we can gather that students consider age and gender, among other factors, when making decisions about appropriate hook up spaces.

Other students stated that they avoided sleeping over because of a range of factors. They wanted to avoid the “walk of shame,” or as some students phrased it “the stride of pride.” It was commonly expressed that a “good night’s sleep” was impossible to achieve when sharing a bed with a hook up partner. One of the most common reasons students expressed was the awkwardness of waking up next to someone the next morning. Maria, a senior at Wesleyan, indicated that the potential for this uncomfortable experience was one of the main reasons why she usually did not sleep over after a hook up.

C: What’s it like in the morning after the hook up?  
M: Well, when I’m drunk in the moment it’s like “Word! This is fine!” but in the morning I’m like, “Ohhhhh god.” I think the awkwardness comes from you having an intimate experience with someone that you wouldn’t have had sober. And when you’re sober in the morning you’re like “Oh... do you hook up again, or do you not…”

As Maria stated, when one engages in a “drunk hook up,” there is often tension between how one should behave the morning after, when sober. The night before, alcohol may have served as a social lubricant, making it easier to approach, talk to, and engage in a hook up with another student. However, when sober the following day, two students may feel confused about how to related to each other intimately.86

86 More than three quarters of the students I spoke with shared that they experienced an “awkwardness” or discomfort when facing their hook up partners soberly the next day.
For that reason, students who were drinking may prefer leaving a partner’s room before the following morning.\textsuperscript{87}

**Determining “How Far” To Go**

Once the two students initiate a hook up, it is up to both of them to determine "how far" to go. Personal beliefs about sexuality and appropriate sexual attitudes undoubtedly dictate the extent to which one will engage in sexual activity. However, perceptions of what peers do sexually also impact one’s decisions about sexual limits and boundaries.\textsuperscript{88}

I spoke with a sophomore named Talia who learned about the norms of hook up culture through personal experience.

C: How did you learn about the norms of hook up culture?  
T: Honestly, I still am. When I was a freshman I just had sex with so many people because I thought that’s what I was supposed to do. Like, I went to a middle of nowhere high school and didn’t really have a boyfriend until college. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do when it came to hooking up every weekend, so basically let the guys take the reigns. I still don’t really know what’s “normal” for people, but after making great friends this year I feel like I have people to talk to about it.

I then asked Talia about how things have changed since her freshman year. She replied:

T: It’s funny actually… Maybe not funny but odd. So freshman year I would get hammered, like so wasted and then just have sex with someone

\textsuperscript{87} I do not have the space to go into the role of alcohol on hook up culture, however it is regarded as a leading facilitator of hook ups on college campuses. In her paper *Beer Goggles, Catching Feelings, and the Walk of Shame*, sociologist Lisa Paul found that alcohol use is a primary predictor of engaging in a hook up, and that accelerated alcohol use may facilitate hook up culture. The frequency and quantity of college students’ alcohol consumption was positively associated with their number of sexual partners in the past 11 weeks. Moreover, the disinhibitory factor of alcohol use may also serve as outcome expectancy, especially for sexually inhibited or nervous individuals. For more information on the role of alcohol in hook up culture see: Downing-Matibag, T. M., and B. Geisinger. "Hooking Up and Sexual Risk Taking Among College Students: A Health Belief Model Perspective." *Qualitative Health Research* 19, no. 9

random because I thought it was fun. I used to think “Oh, I need to get drunk to have sex because that’s the only way it will be fun for me.” But it was terrible… to wake up at sunrise next to a senior you didn’t know, find your underwear, and slip away before he woke up. And then I would tell my friends about it because it was all about having a story the next day. But then I realized that not everyone was doing this. In fact, my roommate wasn’t doing it. So sophomore year I’m listening more to my body and not just losing myself.\(^{89}\)

As Talia illustrated, students’ decisions about the extent of sexual activity to engage in may change with their experience in hook up culture.

Another factor students consider when determining “how far” to go sexually is whether or not they want a hook up to develop into a relationship.\(^{90}\) Students expressed that “too much” sexual interaction in the early stages of hooking up may dictate the chance of pursuing a future relationship with a partner.\(^{91}\) Elliott, a sophomore explained:

E: There’s a big difference between a one-night stand and a girl I would bring home to my parents.
C: What’s the difference?
E: Well, if I’m hooking up with a girl and she straight up just wants to get at me and have sex right away, that’s not a good sign for a girlfriend. Because then she’s probably having sex with a thousand other guys here and that’s not cool with me. But for a random hook up that’s awesome.
C: Why?
E: It keeps me wanting a little more maybe? If we fuck immediately then it’s one and done. You got the fuck and then it can get awkward between you two. But if there’s more time for it then, I at least, want to see her again for more.

As Elliott expressed, getting too sexual is a poor way to initiate a committed relationship. Another male senior, named Jesse, put his terms simply:

J: People I’m having sex with, I was usually only seeing them when we were having sex. I try to not cross that line and confuse them.

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\(^{89}\) Talia’s interview is consistent with Heldman and Wade’s (2010) finding that college aged women tend to “go father” sexually because they do not know how to say “No” to their hook up partner

\(^{90}\) Bogle, Kathleen A. "From Dating to Hooking Up." 38.

\(^{91}\) Ibid.
From Jason’s experience, he distinguished the women he was only having sexual relationships with, from those he felt more emotionally connected to.

Students of both genders expressed the importance of “taking it slow” when they liked someone. Women in particular may manage the extent of their sexual interaction depending upon whether they want it to lead to a committed relationship. Many women I spoke with expressed that sexual intercourse during a first hook up may ruin the chance of “having something more.” Others expressed a fear that having sexual intercourse with someone during a first hook up encounter marks women as “easy” or “only hook up material.” A male partner may not respect her in the future nor consider her “girlfriend material.” Isabel, a junior at Wesleyan, understood this from the beginning of her college career and told me that this knowledge helped her navigate hook up culture.

I: It is so simple. I get it, and I don’t understand why some other girls don’t fully grasp it. Simply put, if we have sex right away then it ruins everything. I’ve seen so many of my friends just jump into sex and then complain like “Ohh he won’t text me back now.” Well! You gave him what he wanted so quick! Also then you don’t get to know them.

Isabel further explained that from her understanding, men in hook up culture primarily seek “only sex,” therefore instantly providing sex marks a woman as disposable. By withholding sex, a woman may have an opportunity to increase her desirability and intrigue her partner to further develop their relationship. Members of the campus community had to learn over time that withholding sex to keep a

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92 Bogle, Kathleen A. “From Dating to Hooking Up.” 38.
93 Isabel’s notion of female desirability and description of her sexual politics parallel the cultural logics that dictated sexual norms during the dating era. Thus, we should keep in mind the persistence of these conceptual frameworks in hook up culture. For research on the gendered double standard in hook up
partner’s interest is a norm within hook up culture. Upperclassmen women that I spoke with demonstrated that there was a particular way for women to successfully navigate this: leave all expectations behind. A senior named Lisa told me:

C: What do you think you’ve learned since freshman year about hook up culture?
L: It’s about knowing how the game is played, and not wanting anything out of it when you decide that’s how you feel about someone.

Given that one quantitative study conducted in 2000 found that 49% of college students who engaged in sexual intercourse during a hook up encounter never saw that person again, Lisa’s experience speaks to the cultural norms within this culture.94

The learning curve in heterosexual hook up culture speaks to how young adults may be unprepared for dealing with hook up culture when beginning college. One student, a sophomore male named Jordan, also described the hook up culture learning curve. He shared with me the ways in which he would “mindlessly” hook up throughout his freshman year, and how he slowly began to notice that that lifestyle was not sustainable for him.

J: I came with the mindset that no matter what happened, no matter who I met, or no matter what was thrown at me I wasn’t going to settle down with anyone because I needed that crazy experience of hooking up with a lot of people
C: How did it make you feel to do that consistently?
J: Regardless of whether that made me feel really good or really shitty or I was hurting other people I just didn’t really care, because in my mind I was thinking I need to be going sort of wild.
C: But now?
J: Going into sophomore year I’ve tried to be more intentional about it, because it’s like you are interacting with other people, it’s not just a blank wall. You’re interacting with people with feelings and emotions. I’m learning.

Hook up culture is managed by norms that often are not widely known until one has first hand experience. Freshman may throw themselves into this system which promises instant gratification without fully understanding the emotional and social consequences of doing so. Over time, students learn appropriate behavior within the script in order to successfully predict and interpret sexual situations.

“We Hooked Up, so What Next?”

There are several potential outcomes of an initial hook up encounter. Both the men and women I spoke to shared that the most common outcome is “nothing,” which implies that after the hook up both parties continue on as they had prior to the hook up. “Nothing” also implies that there is not further romantic development of the relationship. Empirical research on the psychological effects of casual sex on college campus indicates that these opinions are true, and that the majority of these relationships do not transition into a committed romantic relationship.95 A junior woman named Haley shared her knowledge of hook up

C: What usually happens after a hook up?
H: What do you mean? Like romantically… Not much. Sometimes I’ll run into him somewhere and we will smile but that’s about it?
C: Is that the only option?
H: Oh no, of course not. Sometimes we end up hanging out and chilling more consistently, which is really nice, because then you have a hook up not for just one night but throughout the week. I did notice though that it gets really distracting for me to do school work on the week nights when I’m mentally preparing to see someone later, so I just have to balance. I guess another option is a relationship, but that’s a bit more rare. It’s definitely more common and socially expected to just go on living life and not really talk to your hook

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up though. I don’t know why though.

As Haley outlined, there are several routes for hook ups to develop into something more. However, it is uncommon for hook ups to extend beyond the initial encounter.

Students also frequently expressed feelings of awkwardness when seeing a previous hook up partner. The majority of the people I spoke with shared that they attempt to be friendly with past hook up partners, and may greet them crossing paths along campus. Other students reluctantly shared that they ignore their partners because they were too intoxicated when they hooked up. Underclassmen students considered publicly greeting upperclassmen hook up partners especially confusing. As they are still learning heterosexual hook up culture etiquette, they may not know if they should greet partners, and when precisely they should say “Hi.” Brianna, a freshman vocalized this concern when negotiating how to approach her previous hook ups:

B: All the people I’ve hooked up with have been older, and I feel like there is this weird stigma. There’s a barrier because I’m a freshman that I can keep hitting but I can’t surpass in terms of going up to this person and instigating. But because of the culture… or when he’s with his junior friends I can’t just go up to him.

Since there is not a standard for greeting hook up partners in heterosexual hook up culture, it is up to the student’s discretion to decide if and when to do so.

Both parties are not always in agreement about what should happen after the initial hook up. One of the main reasons for this is because neither party feels comfortable enough to talk about it, and asking the question could make one seem

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96 This is consistent with Glenn and Marquardt’s finding that 57% of college women felt “awkward” after a hooking up with someone.

97 Bogle, Kathleen A. "From Dating to Hooking Up." 40.
“too involved.” David, a sophomore shared with me his hesitation to begin a

conversation about where the hook up could lead.

C: What happens after a hook up?
D: You just see where it goes. I mean pretty much nothing most of the time,
but that’s because you just hook up and then part ways. I mean sometimes you
don’t even remember! That’s why I gotta keep track, because sometimes I’ll
bump into a girl and I totally forgot we made out at a party or something
random. That doesn’t happen all the time obviously, but it’s good to just keep
track and remember.
C: Do you talk about taking it further?
D: Not really… No. No I don’t. Unless she’s really chill and we end up
hanging out all the time. But then that conversation just gets weird so I like to
see where it goes.

Many people I spoke with expressed confusion about where a hook up could lead.

One study by Heldman and Wade found modest gender differences between men’s
and women’s motivations for hooking up and forming a relationship afterwards.98

Sociologist Catherine Grello investigated expectations for romance development, and
found a difference between men’s and women’s views. In Grello’s survey, 18% of
females and 3% of males believed that their most recent casual sex encounter was the
beginning of a romance.99 A number of freshman Wesleyan students expressed
confusion about how to proceed, given that their short time at college afforded them
little time to learn the nuances of the hook up script. Victoria, who I spoke with
several times, told me that this uncertainty about romantic trajectory was due to hook
up partners’ reluctance to communicate with one another.

V: The other person I slept with this year was literally a one-night stand. And
now it’s totally fine… Actually it’s weird. There’s just no standard with hook
up culture. You don’t know what to expect. I love spontaneity and I love

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mystery, I take it all in. I’m a super sexual persona and I take in mysterious energy, but when it’s to the point where it’s obvious we need to talk… It’s just crazy.

Lack of communication between sexual partners in hook up culture can lead to misunderstandings about the trajectory of the relationship. Although communication might add clarity to hook up interactions, students considered communicating about needs, intentions, and expectations too vulnerable of an experience for them to initiate. Students told me that conversations about romantic expectations were “too intense” or uncomfortable, so they avoided those types of conversations unless they felt it absolutely necessary.

Repeat Hook Ups and “Chilling” Relationships

Although “nothing” is expected to form between two hook up partners, that does not mean that the two individuals never hook up again. In fact, as Haley mentioned earlier, hooked up partners may choose to hook up consistently. Students explained that an initial hook up encounter may turn into something called “repeat hook ups” or “drunk hook ups,” in which the two partners continue to hook up during weekends, but maintain no contact or communication during the weekday or nights. These hook ups most often occur when both are drunk and it is late in the evening. This differs from monogamous relationship because within “repeat hook ups” there is

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100 In chapter three I explain this lack of communication as a cultural norm in depth.
101 Bogle, Kathleen A. "From Dating to Hooking Up." 40.
102 Students may initiate these hook ups may by sending a text message late in the evening, called a “booty call.” This “booty call” is considered a request for sex, and some students considered them disrespectful because of their straightforward nature. See: Jonason, Peter K., Norman P. Li, and Margaret J. Cason. "The “Booty Call”: A Compromise Between Men's and Women's Ideal Mating Strategies." Journal of Sex Research 46, no. 5 (October 24, 2009): 460-70. Accessed June 04, 2015. doi:10.1080/00224490902775827.
little or no emotional commitment. Once created, a relationship of “drunk hook ups” is seemingly impossible to escape from. One male participant, Jordan explained:

J: If the first three times you hook up with someone you’re out and you’re drunk, and you don’t speak any other time I really think it’s a very small chance that that will go anywhere. Because you’ve set precedence three to four times you’ve hooked up and you’re drunk each time. And that’s what all freshman year hook ups are. You’re out and you’re drunk and you’re like ‘Oh I have this other number that I can booty call later.’ … You’re never going to get out of it.

Therefore, it is extremely rare for a repeated hook up to turn into an “actual relationship.”

In other cases, a hook up may develop into a “chilling” or “hanging out” relationship.\(^\text{103}\) In these relationships, partners contact each other throughout the week by either text messages, messaging on social media platforms such as Facebook, or through email. Students may dine together throughout the week, or organize plans to meet and work on academic assignments together. Low levels of commitment characterize these “chilling” relationships, so hooking up with other students remains a possibility.\(^\text{104}\) Greg, a junior explained his personal situation “chilling” with someone, and the little communication between partners:

G: Hanging out gets really intense, especially here because we all get our own rooms. It’s if fun once, it’ll be fun twice, and then you just keep going. You don’t stop because it’s fun and then before you know it a month as gone by, and you’re like “Oh, what’s going on”… And we shared a lot of really personal stuff, but I was having sex with a lot of other people. But that wasn’t discussed.

Despite the fact that “chilling” relationships are more intimate than “repeat hook ups” they are still open by nature. This distinguishes them from committed relationships on

\(^\text{103}\) For a further examination of “chilling relationships” see chapter 4

\(^\text{104}\) Bogle, Kathleen A. "From Dating to Hooking Up." 41.
campus.

Who decides if a hook up is going to turn into a “chilling” relationship in heterosexual hook up culture? My conversations with Wesleyan students were consistent with contemporary sociological research, which pose that women in heterosexual relationships find that men control the trajectory of the relationship more often than they do.105

L: I guess I just realized this, but in every hook up I’ve ever had it’s seemed that the guy has set the tone for what kind of hook up it’s going to be. And I’m kind of open to whatever, like we can hook up once or we can continue hooking up. But it’s the guy’s actions and demonstrated interest and following movements that make me have expectations one way or the other. Because I always go into it thinking this could just happen once, and it’s fine. And everything the guy does either convinces me of that or otherwise.
C: Would you want anything more?
L: Well, I don’t think it necessarily seems like that bad of a thing. Like I don’t want to invest time in someone who’s not interested in me.

Usually women find themselves initiators of “the talk,” questioning the trajectory of the relationship. Moreover, women demonstrated that they could not explain why a “chilling” relationship ended.106 Men that I spoke with had mixed responses on whether this question was gendered.107

The least common outcome of a hook up is for it to turn into a committed monogamous relationship.108 However, hook ups have also been noted as the only

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105 Glenn, Norval D., and Elizabeth Marquardt. Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today. These findings show that women usually initiate “The Talk” to see if a further romantic relationship will develop, and it is men who decide whether the relationship will progress.
106 See chapter 4 for more on “The Talk,” also known as the “What are We Question,”
107 Despite this, evolutionary psychology research shows that men self-report a greater desire for sexual partner variety than women, regardless of relationship status (Schmitt et al. 2003)
pathway to forming a relationship on a college campus. Many students I spoke with considered hook up culture as the only available route for romantic partnership at college. A hook up may develop into a committed relationship if partners chose to define their relationships as “exclusive.” Starting a committed relationship is least common during freshman year, when both men and women express an interest in making many friends, “exploring” a many hook up partners, and “seeing what the school has to offer.” Traditional first year college students find themselves in a highly sexualized environment with great freedoms and few resources to navigate them. However, as they progressed throughout college, some students express more interest in seeking committed monogamous relationships.

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110 Bogle, Kathleen A. "From Dating to Hooking Up." 42.

111 Ibid.
Chapter Two

The Ethics of Hook Up Sex

A Generation of “Netflix and Chill”

“Do you want to hang out?” He’s looking at down at his phone and grabs it to re-read the text. It’s simple, but not disappointing. Yes! Yes, he does. He types back “yeah, what are you up to later tonight?” A few minutes later she writes back, “just chilling, you should come over later.” Later that evening he walks across campus to her dorm room. He’s never been to her place. They usually hang out in his on-campus house, which is what he’s comfortable with. He likes the comfort of being in his own space, and the satisfaction of showing it to her. When they start hooking up he’ll ask her if she’s comfortable – sometimes. Sometimes he just wants to impress her and take the lead without saying a word. Once she lets him in, they sit on the edge of her bed and scroll through Netflix options. They land on a funny television show they both have seen before. Half an hour in, as they laugh together he leans close to her face. It’s half-lit by the blue light of the screen. They haven’t talked much, but that’s fine… A little awkward, but that’s normal. He kisses her. As they’re hooking up, he breaks for a moment to place the abandoned computer on the nightstand.

I begin this chapter with a short vignette illustrating a typical scenario called “Netflix and Chill.” A sophomore participant expressed this particular event to me, and I use his narrative as an example of a normative sexual experience in hook up culture. “Netflix and Chill” is sexual innuendo for inviting a hook up partner to watch the online streaming service Netflix, with the thinly veiled intention of hooking up. In this chapter I use “Netflix and Chill” as a jumping off point to dive into a larger discussion on sex in heterosexual hook up culture, communication, and notions of responsibility and care. Using the narratives of Wesleyan students I interviewed in 2015 and 2016 along with contemporary sociological literature on hook up culture, I offer the argument that hook up sex in heterosexual hook up culture fails to benefit
both partners equally and thus is a site of gendered inequality. The final sections of this chapter borrow concepts from feminist philosopher Anne Cahill’s philosophical theory of derivatization to explicate how hook up sex in particular can wield ethically problematic conditions.

What does it mean to “Netflix and Chill”? Consulting Urban Dictionary leads one to blunt definitions such as “It means you are going to go over to your partner’s house and fuck with Netflix in the background.”\textsuperscript{112} This specific definition holds cultural relevancy, as it is the most popular on user-rated content websites.\textsuperscript{113} Moreover, as Urban Dictionary is the prevailing resource for young people to learn about contemporary cultural terms, there is a widespread understanding of its meaning.\textsuperscript{114} Collectively, the students that I spoke with had similar definitions for “Netflix and Chill,” and described it as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Although it was once solely a slang term, it is now becoming part of popular culture and mainstream vocabulary.\textsuperscript{115}

In order to trace its current meaning, we will follow its short history across the beginning of the twenty first century. “Netflix and Chill” was first used in 2009 a

\textsuperscript{112} As an online platform Urban Dictionary works as a satirical crowd sourced dictionary that informs and describes slang or cultural terms for its readers. It allows for multiple definitions each rated by popularity, and unlike traditional dictionaries does not include etymology, parts of speech, or even spelling standards.

\textsuperscript{113} It is rated with 19,875 “upvotes” and 7,162 downvotes. Online websites such as Urban Dictionary or Reddit, run on the principle of voting aggregation. Each user can give a post an “upvote” of approval, or “downvote” of disapproval. Highly ranked news or content goes to the top and poorly ranked content sinks to lower sections of the web page.


\textsuperscript{115} Highly visited websites such as Forbes.com, Wikipedia.com, seventeen.com, and Fusion.com now all feature articles related to “Netflix and Chill.”
nonsexual context. Netflix’s popularity pushed forward the use of the phrase, and by 2014 the euphemistic nature of the phrase began to unfold. Twitter users began posting the phrase with a wink of innuendo. Along its transition into a sexual innuendo a particular heterosexual gendered dynamic emerged, wherein a female brought into an innocent-sounding situation would be surprised by her partner’s true motives. Online posts erupted with warnings for teenage girls: when a boy said that he wanted to “Netflix and Chill” he meant something other than just watching television of a movie.

One definition from Urban Dictionary is consistent with this dynamic, posing that “Netflix and Chill” is an indirect means for men to lure women into sex.

A subtle way to lure a girl to come over to your place, initially as just a "friend", so that it can lead to an opportunity of getting intimate with her while something is playing on Netflix. Romantic movies that the girl is interested in watching are ideal for getting her into the mood.

By 2015 its popularity spread beyond the Twitter and the sexually charged term “Netflix and Chill” gained popularity on other social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram and Vine, and in daily conversation. As part of the jokes made by online

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120 By August of 2015 mass media started following the trend, and with pieces on News.com.au and Yahoo News UK.
users, many would create images of one partner shocked by the other’s ulterior motives, with the caption “20/30 minutes into Netflix and Chill.”

By May of 2015 hundreds of these tweets appeared online. By July of 2015 Netflix recognized the joke and posted a meme on the company’s official Tumblr page. The company’s recognition of the phrase speaks to how “Netflix and Chill” has spread beyond youth culture and has found its way into popular media. Moreover, its popularity not only indicates a widespread use and understanding of the term, but also a prevailing type of sexual interaction for young adults.

Essentially, a “Netflix and Chill” situation is when two hook up partners meet for sex without explicitly communicating about physical limits, intentions, or sexual needs. In an interview I spoke with a sophomore named Erica about her own experiences with “Netflix and Chill.” She explained:

C: How would you describe that Netflix and Chill experience in terms of sexuality and intimacy?
E: Okay, well sometimes you just get a text to come over, and it’s like “Haha, sure,” I guess we’re gonna have sex tonight.
C: Do you talk about it?
E: Like about the sex? What? No! That would be really strange. It just kind of happens. I’ll be sitting there and we’re both really quiet pretending to watch a

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movie (I can never focus on the movie) and then I’ll feel him making a move. Sometimes I do it. Depending on how confident I feel it varies.

As Erica details, two partners watch Netflix together and then silently begin to hook up.

Another participant, a junior named Sarah, described the frequency of these situations across campus. She spoke to how “Netflix and Chill” situations provide minimal opportunities for familiarizing oneself with one’s partner.

C: Is it normal for people to “Netflix and Chill?”
S: Yeah, well especially for me when I was a freshman. But when I was a freshman we didn’t call it that, we just did it. Now there’s a term that everyone knows about. I would Netflix and Chill with someone that I might have hooked up with the weekend before.
C: How about now?
S: Now, I don’t quite do it as much because it’s such a roundabout way to have sex. I think it’s still normal, but when I hook up with someone we mostly just talk and then hook up. I know more people as a junior so I’ll probably be hooking up with a friend that I want to talk to. I’d say that when I Netflix and Chill with someone it’s when I’m cougar-ing and hooking up with a hot freshman that I don’t know well, and don’t really want to talk to.  

In Sarah’s case, “Netflix and Chill” is an appropriate situation to keep her from developing communicative relationships with her hook ups. The situation fits her needs, for it allows her to have sexual encounters with minimal emotional intimacy. Similarly, some students spoke of how they “Netflix and Chill” with partners that have not known for a long period of time. Thus, they feel uncomfortable or unsure of what to talk about with their partner, and so they appreciate situations where they do feel the need to communicate.

Other students were critical of the silence fostered by “Netflix and Chill” situations. Communicating in these situations is not impossible; rather it is simply
poor manners to do so. It is socially unacceptable to pause the entertainment, face one another, and begin a conversation. Students felt it especially rude to talk over Netflix, because one’s partner may be engaged in the entertainment. One interviewee in particular interpreted the Netflix, as an online streaming service, to be a metaphor for hook up culture sex: a viewer of Netflix has access to endless entertainment, may pause the entertainment momentarily, and resume watching. This parallels the way students in hook up culture have access to constant hook up partners, can jump from one partner to the next, and then may resume a hook up relationship when he or she pleases.

Netflix as an entertainment form serves as a third party that defers individuals from communicating before a sexual encounter. Yet, without the occasional moment of honest conversation, partners are hindered from learning about each other’s preferences, gestures, and needs. These situations make it easy for students to overlook partners’ subjectivity, and treat partners solely as source of sexual gratification. For this reason, I read the “Netflix and Chill” scenario as a site of sexual objectification. In the section that immediately follows, I examine the treatment of sexual subjects by accounting for the distribution of pleasure in heterosexual hook up culture. Using sociological data and feminist moral theory, I critique this behavior and develop an argument that aims to shed light on the often-overlooked forms of gendered inequality in hook up sex. One implication of this feminist orientation is that although the main focus is on sexual practices in hook up culture, a critical analysis of gendered sexual treatment is also of utmost concern.

122 Sophie’s use of the term “cougar-ing” refers to when older or upperclass females have hook up
Addressing the Pleasure Gap: It’s Gendered

The scholarly work on college campus sexuality lacks a discourse of desire. The ethical significance of desire and pleasure in sexual interactions should not be overlooked or taken for granted, as both desire and pleasure are latent with indications of power and agency. Key components of sexual subjectivity include expectations of pleasure during sexual intercourse and sexual self-efficacy. Thus, I measure an ethical hook up by considering consent, pleasure, and self-advocacy.

Specifically, I pose orgasms as an appropriate indication of physical pleasure.

From interviewing young women at Wesleyan University I came across an interesting and troubling conclusion concerning the heterosexual female sexual experience. Women reported that hook ups interested them because they were “fun,” but with experience they learned that hook ups fail to provide them with the sexual pleasure that they expected when entering the situation. This is consistent with quantitative studies showing a significant gendered orgasm gap in heterosexual college campus hook up culture. In her paper “Accounting for Women’s Orgasms and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hook Ups and Relationships” sociologist Elizabeth

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125 Lack of orgasm does not inherently imply a lack of sexual pleasure, but respondents who did have orgasms were more likely to say that they enjoyed the experience very much. Thus, it is a good indicator of pleasure.

Armstrong finds that only eleven percent of the female college students interviewed experienced orgasms in their first hook up. I find this statistic to be extremely troubling: it forces us to question to what extent the contemporary sexual landscape on college campuses offer positive experiences for students. In analyzing this statistic we should ask what conditions give rise to this unequal distribution of pleasure and consider how this problematic statistic may grow out of a combination of social and psychological forces. 

Men and women hook up at similar rates, and many students of both male and female gender identities report enjoying hook up culture. However to date, scholars have paid more attention to women’s experiences within hook up relationships, and have focused on ways they may be less enjoyable for women than for men. Glen and Marquardt indicate that, “hooking up is an activity that women sometimes find rewarding but more often find confusing, hurtful, and awkward.” In Elizabeth Armstrong’s aforementioned study, female college students described hook ups as lacking of mutuality of pleasure and absent of sexual enjoyment. Other research suggests that more women than men find hooking up to be a negative experience. I talked to Eliza, a senior about her experiences with her most recent hook up. She explained that her most recent sexual partner failed to meet her needs:

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127 Ibid.
E: Anytime he would concern himself with my pleasure at all, it was like trying to balance the scales a little bit, like that is all that it was. And it was so apparent he wasn’t even trying to hide it. No empathy, it was like I was a sex object. I was just there for his pleasure… The fact that I was so disinterested in him made it so that I wasn’t really violated by it… But I was still thinking, he probably does this to a lot of girls and thinks he’s the man.

Eliza was not the only participant who was disappointed by her hook up partner and her “Netflix and Chill” experiences. A number of the upperclassman women that I spoke with reflected upon their initial hopefulness in finding a “good hook up,” and then the subsequent sexual dissatisfaction after several months or years in hook up culture.

Francesca, a junior, remarked that hook up experiences were not always negative, but she did find such experiences to be standard and recurrent. With time, she learned to limit her sexual activity in order to minimize disappointment.

F: A lot of the times I go into a hook up and only want to make out, because I’ve learned that the sex probably won’t be that good. At first I was so so hopeful that the guys I was hooking up with would know what they’re doing in bed because they were hot. That’s what we expect. But boy was I wrong… Okay so I’m being a little harsh. Some guys have made me come, it’s not always bad. But it was only the third or fourth time we had sex. So for that reason, I stick to just above the waist a lot of the time because there’s no point. I don’t like the feeling of being naked and having someone be like “done with me.”

Francesca’s opinion is consistent with sociological data that contends that rates of orgasms and enjoyment dramatically increase between the first hook up and subsequent hook ups.133 However, partners that do not explicitly communicate about needs, and women who do not continue hook ups with the same partner, may

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continue to find themselves unhappy with the rate of sexual satisfaction they experience.

**Frequently Faking it: The Female Hook Up Experience**

When I inquired upon this information with female participants they voiced that men “expect an orgasm” and spoke to the prioritization a man’s pleasure over that of a woman’s.¹³⁴ Whereas a man’s pleasure was “a given” in a hook up, a woman’s pleasure was merely an added “bonus.”¹³⁵ Moreover women in hook up culture may not only express dissatisfaction with the skills of their partner, but also deprioritize their own needs.¹³⁶ Research by sociologists Caroline Heldman and Lisa Wade suggest that females in heterosexual hook up culture are more likely to please their partner than vice versa.¹³⁷ I noticed this when I spoke with female students about whether they communicated with their partner about their physical pleasure, or instead feigned pleasure by pretending to orgasm. A number of women I spoke to expressed that they fake orgasms frequently because of a pressure to please their hook up partner. This was consistent in both “random hook ups,” and “Netflix and Chill” situations. Karen, a freshman told me about her stress to make her partner feel validated.

K: It’s so easy for guys to get off. And I want to enjoy it as much as him, but I’m not so I’ll just pretend I am. It’s all about perception, and this self-


¹³５ Five women that I spoke with used this terminology to describe sexual expectations.


conscious idea that I need to be like, doing this because he’s doing that. I need to pretend he’s pleasing me because I pleased him, and to validate him, so we can have sex again.

Karen’s anecdote correlates with contemporary research in which women reported extensive efforts to please men in casual hook ups. Despite the transitory nature of hook ups, women of all ages revealed a pressure to ensure their partners’ sexual satisfaction. Joelle, a freshman admitted to her own anxieties when it comes to female sexual performance.

J: Sometimes I just feel like I’m putting on a show. I know that they will tell their friends later about my body and stuff. They’ll talk about what I did, you know. I just feel like when I’m hooking up guys I just zone out, and kind of forget I have a body and do all the things I know works for them. I’m just realizing this as I talk about it.
C: What about you?
J: I just do it. I just go along with it because literally no guy has shown me that he can reciprocate, literally no one.

Joelle later expressed that the pressure to please her partner made her put aside thoughts of her own physical pleasure, and inhibited her from advocating for her sexual needs.

Eliza, a senior, shared similar thoughts about her almost four-year experience in hook up culture. I asked her about the phenomenon of women faking orgasms, and she explained to me why it she does it so frequently.

C: Have you ever faked an orgasm during a hook up?
L: All the time. Actually, all of the times that I want it to end. I am honestly still at the point of my sexual career that I don’t really like sex. I haven’t really had a sexual partner that I feel comfortable enough with to explore and try things with, where I can know what I like and what I don’t.

139 Armstrong et al. (2012) demonstrate that young women most frequently have orgasms with a caring sexual partner who is “willing to take the time to perform what worked.”
Interestingly enough, Eliza’s displeasure yet commitment to hook up culture is not odd. Contemporary sociological research examining hook up culture reports that negative hook up experiences do not decrease the likelihood of hook ups in the future.\textsuperscript{140} Sociologist Lisa Paul found that college students’ negative hook up experiences motivated more hooking up, in an attempt to erase unpleasant memories of previous hook ups.\textsuperscript{141} From a critical perspective, there is an abundance of possible reasons to explain why women who experience little to no pleasure in hook up culture maintain a commitment to participating in it. We might also think about this through the lens of the pleasure one gets when being the object of desire, or the object of sexual attention.\textsuperscript{142} In this thesis I do not have the time to cover this topic in depth, but what we should take away from this is the lack of connection between unpleasurable hook ups and the ceasing of future hook ups.

Contemporary research on frequency of oral sex in heterosexual hook up culture also indicates that young women prioritize men’s pleasure in lieu of their own needs.\textsuperscript{143} The gendered difference emerged for giving and receiving oral sex with more women indicating that they give more, and more men indicating that they receive more.\textsuperscript{144} I spoke with two female seniors, Tina and Melissa, about their

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{144} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
opinions on this and they shared that a main concern of theirs was whether the oral
sex was appreciated or not.

C: Have you ever enjoyed performing oral sex?
T: It depends on the guy. It sucks because your power is also contingent upon
how the guy is towards you. Like, when I give Patrick head I feel really
powerful because he’s really respectful. He’ll hold my hair back or whatever,
and it’s really mutual. He’s not like “You can’t kiss me” right afterwards like
other guys.
M: There’s the difference of gratitude versus expectation. I think that some
guys are like ‘Oh we’re hooking up of course you’re going to do this’ and
other guys are like… appreciative.
T: Also whether or not it’s an expectation makes you feel powerful because if
they are expecting it then it’s like ‘Oh I’m submitting to them.” If they’re not
expecting it then it’s more like “Oh I’m giving this to them, you’re welcome!”

In our conversation, they shared that it was rare for them to receive oral sex, unless it
was a committed partner. They expressed that in heterosexual hook up culture, there
is a general expectation that women provide pleasure, and men receive it.

For this thesis I drew on male interviews to provide insights into how men
treat women during a typical heterosexual hook up encounter. When I asked men
about how they knew their partner was pleased or not, several participants told me
that they “could tell,” by her facial expression, or “vibe” more so than by
communicating directly with her. Javier, a sophomore shared his ability to “tell” if he
had pleased his partner or not.

C: How do you know when you please your partner?
J: It’s definitely more complicated for women, because you can’t really tell
ever. With guys it’s obvious. But for women when I have sex with them they
generally voice it when what I’m doing works. Other times if they don’t I can
just tell.
C: How can you tell?
J: Okay so maybe that’s assumptive of me, but I can tell by like, what they’re
doing with their body.

Instead of communicating about preferences, Javier made assumptions about his
partner’s sexual satisfaction. Javier was not the only male to do so; in roughly 60% of the interviews I conducted with male students, they expressed an ability to “tell” when they physically pleased their hook up partners.

Let’s Talk About Pleasure

Throughout my interviews, students disclosed that they felt awkward when communicating about sexual behavior, and did not know the most suitable means to ensure mutual comfort. A junior named Greg mentioned consent education and a lack of appropriate vocabulary to talk about sexual behavior in the moment. He expressed that direct communication during a sexual encounter may be “weird,” and ruin the moment.

G: I think that consent education has a long way to go. You’re not going to be like “How about if I lick that?” If a girl said that to me I would be like “Never mind. Don’t worry about it.” It’s weird. I think you can read people too. And there are certain things like if you’re going to go down on someone you might have to verbalize that.

C: How do you communicate about it?
G: It’s corny to say like “Do you like this?” when you’re talking about sex. I also never say do you want sex, I say “Should I get a condom”

A number of students agreed with Greg and admitted to using indirect means to insinuate sexual intercourse, because it does not “break the mood” and halt the sexual interaction.

Alternatively, students told me that when they attempt to communicate about sex and consent, they are not always met with reciprocation. They understand that vocalizing physical needs underlies a mutually pleasing experience, however they often feel that both the social norms in hook up culture and their own levels of comfort expressing vulnerability thwart their attempts. If they were in “Netflix and
“Chill” scenarios, they expressed a reluctance to voice their limits or boundaries, because of the expectation to silently hook up while watching the movie or television show. Louisa, a freshman told me that from her past experience she learned the sexual needs of her ex-boyfriend by directly talking about them. However, when she tried that tactic with hook up partners during her first year of college she was disappointed by their unresponsiveness.

L: It was weird because in hookup culture there’s a lack of communication. I would just never know what this person was feeling, like if they were comfortable. I would literally ask like, “Is this how you want me to do it?” Because that’s how I figured out how to do stuff with my ex boyfriend and the person was like ‘do whatever.’ I mean people have preferences. I think it’s this concept of comfortability that’s really lacking because of a lack of communication. Like in my hook up I was very forward with him, saying “We’re going to have sex now.” But that’s where [the communication] ended.

Frank, a senior shared a similar narrative with me, wherein his attempts at ensuring mutuality are somewhat rejected.

F: I’ve personally had very weird hook ups that have scared me. So I’ve been very clear in saying “Do you want to have sex?” To the point that I’ve had women laugh at me and say “What do you mean?” or like I’ve had people get almost mad at me for reaffirming a lot of little things.

Other students like Louisa and Frank may try to communicate, but then become discouraged after dealing with a reluctant partner. Despite students’ attempts at communication, a general discomfort with vulnerability and pressure to adhere to behavioral norms limited their success.

Another possible cause for the gendered pleasure gap in hook up culture is further illustrated by Armstrong and Fogarty’s 2012 research. They found that male student’s deprioritized female pleasure when in a fleeting hook up encounter, but not
when in committed relationships. Reasons for this range from drunkenness that inhibited them from considering their partners’ needs, to feeling a lack of accountability because a hook up is “a onetime thing.” With this information we must consider the conditions within which hook up culture is situated, and question how it fosters or prevents a feeling of responsibility in participants. Intoxication, anonymity and the brevity of sexual encounters here make participants feel less obligation to care for and attend to the needs and desire of those they are intimate with.

**Overcoming Objectification**

Because I am using mutual sexual pleasure as a measurement of ethically considerate sexual interactions, the shockingly unequal distribution of pleasure in hook up culture forces me to regard it as a space of gendered inequality. Here, I focus on the nuances of this inequality by bringing attention to the subjective embodied experiences and feelings that participants of hook up culture expressed. 40% of the female participants shared that they felt “like a thing,” as though they were being “treated like an object” or a “sex toy” in hook ups. However, is the subjective experience of feeling “like an object” reason enough for me to call this unethical? It would be erroneous of me to pose a sweeping generalization that all forms of objectification are “bad.” After all, as a student brought up to me, “If we’re both

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146 Ibid. For more on causes for the gendered pleasure gap see Armstrong et al. (2012)
getting what we want then it’s totally fine.” How can we unwrap objectification and parcel out the nuanced intricacies of an ethical sexual experience? More importantly, when does objectification become dehumanizing?

To answer these questions I am indebted to feminist theory’s ability to create a positive embodied sexual ethics, which celebrates rather than denigrates the body, as it helps me situate the significance of materiality in a larger conversation about morally responsible sexual interactions. I borrow from the contemporary feminist philosopher Ann Cahill and situate objectification in a larger context of moral theory. In particular, Cahill’s theory of derivatization is helpful for unpacking the significance of embodiment as a central aspect of personhood, and helps us delineate when objectification is problematic.

To begin this argument I introduce philosophical concepts that contextualize Cahill’s theory in a larger history of Western intellectual thought. The dualistic logic established by the Cartesian legacy poses that the inside of the subject and the outside of the subject are two mutually exclusive and substantially different entities. Meanings associated with mind/ body oppositions are conceptually enmeshed with culturally entrenched oppositions, such as masculinity and femininity. Challenges to these conceptual networks of associations have been limited by cultural assumptions about corporality: that the body is a passive entity to be controlled and governed by the mind. Yet, these presumptions are reductive, and so have made the body a site of analysis for those dedicated to transforming and

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restructuring cultural dynamics of power.\textsuperscript{151} For this reason, feminist thinkers such as
Elizabeth Grosz and Ann Cahill, among others insist that an analysis of embodiment is crucial for understanding and deconstructing how power relations managing sexual difference become entrenched within a culture, and pose possibilities for their transformation.\textsuperscript{152}

A common notion of ethical relationality rests upon looking beyond temporal aspects of the self – the “outside” body - and connecting with them to what really counts – “the inside.” The colloquial phrase used to describe a degrading experience is being treated like a “piece of meat.” For instance, in an interview with a college sophomore named Emily, she described a “terrible” hook up as one in which she felt “used” for her body.

E: It was terrible, annoying too. Probably one of the worst hook ups. They’re bad when the guy just finishes and falls asleep. He’ll spend all this time wooing me, as if he wants to get to really know me, but then once we get into my dorm it’s like all that vanishes and wham, he’s just another horny dude again. He’ll pretend to be interested in who I am, and then just use me for sex. He won’t even like, ask me anything. Then he just rolls over and falls asleep once he’s done. It’s just like, sorry I’m not here to be your sex toy.

A modern conceptualization of the self posits that the body is inherently inferior to what matters most: the mind/ soul. As Emily stated, to be mistreated is simply to be treated as a thing without personality, preference, or desire. This is why Emily was so frustrated when she wrongly assumed that her hook up wanted to “know” her, that being he wanted to interact with her mind, and not merely with her body.

I wish to trouble this distinction between materiality—the body—and something supposedly more meaningful—the mind or soul. This conceptualization of the self merits scrutiny, for ultimately the self is marked and molded by its own materiality. Being a pulsing, fleshy body both informs and indicates one’s sense of being a fully human subject. To villanize objectification is to overlook the role of embodiment in the creation of personhood. Therefore, we cannot frame the recognition of materiality—as in being treated like a material object—to be inherently opposed to ethical forms of treatment. This acknowledgment of how materiality has been historically conceptualized and constructed (as passive, inert, and waiting to be acted upon) enables a thoughtful critique. A more complex and nuanced approach to understanding what it means to be an embodied sexual subject requires an incorporation and appreciation of the bodily aspects of existence.

In light of the foregoing discussion I argue that if materiality is central to identity, then objectification, being treated as an object, is not necessarily dehumanizing. To pay attention to the body and acknowledge its quality as a shifting and marked entity can be a positive affirmation in and of itself. Being seen as a “sex object”—a bodily being whose material appearance arouses the sexual interest of another—can actually be enhancing to one’s sense of self. Given the multifaceted nature of embodiment, it is unsurprising that the experience of being treated as a carnal and incarnate subject may be deeply pleasurable. For example, when I spoke with a sophomore named Madeline about partying on campus and her motivations of going out, she described a feeling of power she gained from her appearances.

C: How do you feel when you go out?
M: Um... That depends. Sometimes I go out when I feel social pressure to, just like I need to because what else would I do? So in those situations I just want to go home and feel like crap. But, when I’m going out and looking hot and I know I look really sexy, then it’s amazing. I feel amazing.
C: Why?
M: I can tell when guys can’t stop looking at me and it’s the best feeling. I’m this mystical thing and they just can’t help themselves. I love knowing that people want me, it’s really good for me.

Madeline’s narrative is then an example of when objectification can serve as a positive, affirming condition. What is of primary importance here is consent for this type of treatment, and mutual respect.

Derivatization versus Objectification in Hook Up Sex

With this more nuanced picture of objectification, we can then examine when precisely sexual situations become dehumanizing. An ethical problem arises not simply when one objectifies another, but in what Cahill calls derivatization. As a mode of ethical analysis, derivatization problematizes not only materiality, but also a kind of ontological reductionism by which one subject is reduced to the being of another.¹⁵⁵ In other words, derivatization takes place when one overlooks his or her partner’s subjectivity and utilizes them for personal gain. Where “objectify” means to turn into an object, “derivatization” means to turn into a derivative. She writes:

To derivatize is to portray, render, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection or expression of another being’s identity, desires, fears etc. The derivatized subject becomes reducible in all relevant ways to the derivatizing subject’s existence – other elements of her being or subjectivity are disregarded, ignored, or undervalued.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.
¹⁵⁶ Cahill, Ann J. Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics, 32.
In heterosexual hook up culture, the act of sex is often defined by merely the male partner’s fulfillment of sexual pleasure.\textsuperscript{157} When there is continuously only one locus of control in sex, then the interaction is unequal. The pleasure gap within hook up culture, wherein women’s pleasure is deprioritized and often unconsidered, is an illustration of ethically troublesome sex. Women enter these situations with particular expectations but then find themselves being utilized for their partner’s orgasm. In these situations, hook up culture benefits men at the expense of women.\textsuperscript{158}

I must repeat a thought from a student that argues an alternative point: “If we’re both getting what we want, then it’s totally fine.” In my conversations with students, they explained to me that if they both “just want to use each other” then the hook up does not inherently “feel” invalidating and negative. When I asked a freshman named Kristina about why she repeatedly seeks hook ups when they rarely result in her sexual satisfaction, she replied:

K: In the hopes of orgasming. I’m not \textit{always} actively seeking to orgasm, but I want to have sex and I want to have good sex. And you can’t ever know what it’s gonna be before it happens.

If half of the heterosexual hook up pair is deprived of what they sought, that being physical pleasure, then this sexual interaction cannot be a mutual exchange.

When both partners are simply there to “objectify” each other, there should be a mutual understanding of said treatment. I stress the crucial role of communication in ensuring that both parties are indeed “getting what [they] want.” With that foundation in place, then both partners can at least make an attempt to, as one person put it “be

\textsuperscript{157} 23 participants told me that they know sex is “over” once the male partner orgasms.
\textsuperscript{158} For further analysis of this see Armstrong, E. A., P. England, and A. C. K. Fogarty. "Accounting for Women's Orgasm and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hookups and Relationships."
on the same” level about their personal needs and expectations. Randal, a senior at Wesleyan shared with me his experience in hook up culture as a male intending to stay single. He enthusiastically shared his personal goals as a musician, and how from his perspective a college relationship would hinder him from fully devoting himself to accomplishing those goals. For that reason, hook up culture was about a “sexual release.” Unfortunately, when he did not begin a hook up interaction explicitly sharing those intentions, he continuously ran into trouble with hook up partners.

R: Some people would tell me “Oh well, you’re using me for sex.” Well I’m also using you for good conversation sometimes. A lot of people don’t see the reciprocal nature and they only see the sex part if it’s not an exclusive, real relationship. Unless there’s good communication and it’s established that we’re in it only for the sex.

By communicating with his partner about his intentions, he found a means to more ethically engage in casual sex without disappointing his sexual partner.

I want to clarify with my reader that I am not dismissing objectification itself as a means of gender inequality in heterosexual hook up culture. I am simply arguing that if objectification is desirable in specific hook up encounters, then there should be mutual consent regarding such sexual treatment.

**Problematizing the Liberal Sexual Landscape**

The de-prioritization of not only female pleasure, but also comfort, sheds light on how a seemingly “freeing” sexual landscape actually is latent with questionably immoral interactions that leave women devalued, displeased, and feeling “used.” It is true that the generation of young women in contemporary heterosexual hook up culture are less sexually restricted by the sexual norms that dictated appropriate
female sexuality prior to the sexual revolution. In her book *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*, author, Laura Session Stepp, acknowledges the young women of today as self-proclaimed “lady pimps.” She quotes a young woman who states:

A new revolution of women is emerging. Girls are retaliating against the boys who once played them by using them. I know several girls who pride themselves on being ‘lady pimps,’ claiming to have no emotional attachment to guys, going out with multiple boys at one time and manipulating them for their own benefit.\(^{159}\)

The young women of this generation she introduces in this text are highly competitive, confident, and unwilling to accept mistreatment from male hook up partners. They talk about boys as “trophies” and flip the traditional gendered sexual script stating, “Guys can do it, so why can’t we?”\(^{160}\) Despite these remarks, I must question that in this post-sexual revolution cultural landscape, whose pleasure is being accounted for?

With that foundation, let us refer back to the narratives and quantitative studies on the pleasure gap in hook up culture. My main concern here is that the sexual experiences for women in heterosexual hook up culture demonstrate instances in which female bodies are being utilized for others’ needs. As Amelia, a junior, said:

A: It’s so fucking demeaning, when this happens. I’ll have sex with a guy and he comes literally in a minute, and he’s like… “I’m sorry.” He recognizes how annoying that is for a girl. Because that did nothing for me. Literally nothing. But it’s not uncommon.

When students hook up with the intention of being sexually satisfied, and one person is consistently utilized for the needs of the other, then the later individual becomes the

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single locus of subjectivity. Therefore, what is happening is more than objectification; it is derivativization. In this case, the woman is being reduced not only to a body, but a body that is serving the needs and desires of others. This constitutes the clear crossing of a line into moral unacceptability in sexual interactions.

Ibid.
Chapter Three

Chill Emotions: Examining Emotionality in Hook Up Culture

In this chapter I focus on the emotional aspects of heterosexual hook up culture. In particular, I focus on a normative emotional condition students described as “chillness.” As I sat with students to interview them for this project, the word “chill” reoccurred in every interview despite differences in age, year, gender, or ethnicity. For my reader who may be unfamiliar with the term “chill,” I use the definitions provided to me by my participants. They discussed “chill” as a condition that includes being easygoing, even-tempered, unaffected, and happy. The popularity and frequency of this term in student life forced me to consider its wider meaning and function in the cultural landscape of hook up culture. In this chapter I engage my reader in a critical analysis of “chill” and “chillness” by presenting it as an emotional prescription with ethical implications.

My use of the term emotional prescription addresses how particular expressions of emotionality are culturally prescribed as appropriate and standard. By posing “chill” as an emotional prescription, I hope to help my reader better understand the cultural logic of the heterosexual hook up space. My approach is informed by affect theory and sociological theory, and thus acknowledges how one’s social environment guides and shapes his or her emotions. I borrow ideas from Arlie Russell Hochschild by incorporating notions of “emotional management” into a larger critical discussion of ways participants of hook up culture seek to successfully navigate unfamiliar social landscapes. The effect that “chillness,” as an emotional
prescription, has on ideas of relationality, connection, and self-advocacy indicates a need for both this work of critique and for a more thorough account of the relationship between social norms and ethical behavior.

“Chillness” as an Emotional Prescription

She’s walking out of her room and her phone buzzes. There’s a text “want to chill later?” from him. She registers what is on the screen, sensing the buoyancy of anticipation and excitement surge within her chest. She pauses, puts her phone face down on the table to consider a casual response. She’s learned the danger of appearing too interested, so pretends to forget her phone on the table. After a while she texts back “mhm sure thing.” Hours later, after whatever concert she went to, she falls back on her dorm room bed and waits. Buzzed from the beer, she feels the annoyance at his delayed response rises sharply. She considers texting again… But no, only crazy girls double text. Here, on her bed she feels the anxiety of being forgotten, rejected, replaced for another. This hollow ache of being disregarded pulsates and grows first in her belly, and then across her body. She keeps her phone by her pillow, just in case. The ability to fall asleep when being accompanied by gnawing doubt, is a skill. In the morning there is a short response “got too drunk and totally crashed, sorry. see you sometime.” This flippant disregard of her time and emotions stimulates stinging anger. Yet, she can show none of this. In the afternoon she replies “no prob. it’s chill.”

This anecdote comes from the narrative of a Wesleyan sophomore. In our conversation she admitted that after one year of experience she continues to struggle navigating the “ups and downs” of her emotions in hook up culture. She told me about her visceral urge to scream at the bruising pain of disrespect, and then the self-monitoring that inhibited her from doing so. She feared that expressing negative emotion to her hook up partner would prevent him from wanting to spend time with her in the future. Moreover, he might be inclined to invalidate her thoughts, and label her as “unchill” or even “crazy” for exhibiting a negative emotional reaction.

\footnote{For more information on the identities of participants see Methodology section in the Introduction}
In the aforementioned case, the hook up participant feels a pressure to maintain a condition of “chillness.” Thus, “chillness” works as a culturally imposed emotional prescription that coerces one to self-monitor. The language that my participants utilized to describe their feelings while participating in hook up culture exposed deep anxiety toward obtaining and maintaining “chillness.” A helpful parallel for further understanding how “chill” is an emotional prescription is Arlie Russell Hochschild’s term “feeling rule,” from her book *The Managed Heart*. Hochschild defines feeling rules as “standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owing in the currency of feeling.”162 Conceptualizing “chillness” as an emotional prescription particular to hook up culture exposes how it assigns particular emotional displays as appropriate and others as inappropriate. In regards to “chillness” specifically, emotional displays that are deemed as acceptable and socially encouraged may be condensed to several words: easygoing, independent, happy and unbothered. “Chillness” is a state of being amiable yet indifferent. “Unchill” can be described words such as: affectionate, highly opinionated, angry, needy, and vulnerable. I gather these associations from my interviews with Wesleyan students.

Indications of will in how students talked about their feelings – trying to be “chill,” working to stay calm, pushing down anger, and trying to not feel sad – further grounds “chillness” as an emotion prescription in heterosexual hook up culture. In short, students spoke about acts upon feelings, or managed feelings. For instance, a

sophomore named Jody provided an account of her successful obtainment of “chillness”:

J: It’s like a learning process, basically. When I was a freshman and I liked a guy I would tell him. Or I would try to text him and form something. Because that’s just how I felt. But then I never really got the response that I wanted. So I kind of had to change my approach, which was pretty hard. I knew that if I was excited or something then it would show so I would try to just like put myself in a mental place of being really calm, maybe even detached before hanging out with him. I would try to channel this coolness to give off a vibe of “Oh you like me? That’s nice, I don’t care.” And now people respond to that.

From this anecdote it is important to note that “unchillness” is not only acquired through negative emotional expression, but more so through emotionality in general. Jody was inclined to show positive emotions to her hook up partners, however even that was not received well. As she mentioned, it is by telling herself “I don’t care” that she is able to be “chill.” With experience in hook up culture, Jody learned the appropriate emotional displays and incorporated them into a larger behavioral change regarding her sexual politics.

The continuous process of managing feelings can be best conceptualized as a form of labor, what Hochschild calls “emotional labor.”\textsuperscript{163} This form of emotional labor requires one to either induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain an outward countenance that produces a proper state of mind in the other. In the case of hook up culture, one may engage in emotional labor in order to make his or her partner feel liked, but not emotionally connected or vulnerable. The emotional labor required to produce “chillness” is the product of active monitoring and controlling of feeling.
What is “Chill” and Why is it Here?

For further clarification on “chill,” I will outline a number of its characteristics that arose in student interviews. “Chill” was ultimately conceptualized as a state of being unaffected. As a female participant explained it is “just being alright with whatever happens, and not really showing anything else.” “Chillness” is generated through the achievement of invulnerability as a desirable character trait and form of subjectivity. In particular “chillness” is based on a negative conceptualization of vulnerability, and as such, marks emotionality as undesirable. This explains why students regard expressions of emotionality negatively, and more importantly, burdensome. Quinn, a female senior told me that she regarded a partner’s emotionality as an encumbrance.

Q: When he’s chill he’s completely in harmony with whatever I want. Like don’t need to alter my desires, my way to approaching sex, my life, my time, my schedule. Any of these things are completely left in tact so that my life is not changed or burdened by the other. It’s like a minimal engagement.

“Chillness” then boxes in emotionality so that feelings are not poured outwards, where they could potentially burden or encumber another person.

Although students are not forced to deal with the emotions of their partners, they may feel an obligation to. This obligation is tied into a broader understanding of social responsibility. Emotionality calls for a particular ethical response of care and attention; when one expresses vulnerability, then the listener has a responsibility to respond. Andrew, a senior, told me that “chilling” allows for a sexual relationship with out emotional responsibility.

163 Ibid.
A: [Chilling] has to do with the amount of responsibility when it comes to the other person’s wellbeing. That’s a huge reason why people don’t get tied down. Because if you say “We’re in relationship” then you’re responsible to help them when they need it. You have to care for them at all times. If you’re just like, “I’m chilling up with them,” then you’re not going to go to them with your emotional baggage, and so you don’t have to be responsible at all.

As Andrew explained, “chilling” relationships require minimal emotional engagement, and therefore minimal responsibility for a partner outside of the sexual space. Moreover since being “chill” is being “alright with whatever happens,” being “chill” requires silencing one’s problems or concerns. This silence allows partners to be free from the ethical obligation of emotional or psychological support.

**What if You’re Not “Chill”?**

If we maintain that “chilling” is a culturally imposed emotional prescription, then we place it within the realm of the social. Thus, there are social consequences to adhering or deviating from this prescription. For instance, when one is “chill” and successfully sustains a countenance of unaffectedness, he or she receives social benefits. On the other hand, if one is not “chill,” then he or she must face negative social consequences. We can see this in the aforementioned narrative, where Jody reports negative reactions to her “unchill” expressions of emotionality. Victoria, a freshman, detailed a time when she was faced with an “unchill,” or an overly affectionate hook up partner.

V: He was really into me and just told me a lot. I’m not used to that and wasn’t into it.
C: How did you tell him that him weren’t interested?
V: It was kind of immature of me, but it got to a point where he would text me all the time, and I just wouldn’t respond. I thought that he would get the message… though I know that’s horrible because I would hate that if
someone did that to me

Thus, when a hook up partner fails to obtain the normative emotional prescription he or she faces negative social consequences and may be discarded for a more “chill” sexual partner. Students described these negative social consequences as manifesting in a variety of forms: being labeled “crazy,” being ignored by a hook up partner, or having a hook up relationship suddenly end. More experienced participants of hook up culture may become familiar with these consequences, and ultimately adopt “chillness.”

Students who regarded emotionality positively and decided to reject “chillness” found themselves struggling to navigate the hook up space. One student that I spoke with clearly labeled himself as “unchill,” and perceived this as a personal virtue. However, at the same time he acknowledged the difficulties of being “unchill” in hook up culture, and shared several anecdotes of hook up partners “ghosting” or backing away from him. Other students who described themselves as “unchill” told me that they opt out of hook up culture entirely, and seek other ways to find romantic and emotional connection. Ultimately, being “unchill,” in hook up culture posed difficulties for students.

“Chilling” as A Mode of Indefinable Relationality

Students who obtain an affective condition of “chill” with their hook up partner may then enter a form of relationship called “chilling,” which is ultimately
based on casual sex without emotional commitment. In short, “chill” works both as an adjective and a verb: those who are “chill,” do “chill.” This relationship most commonly develops once two people have previously hooked up and wish to continue a sexual relationship. A fundamental characteristic of this relationship is that it is technically not a consensual form of non-monogamy, as there is seldom vocalized consent of its open, uncommitted style. Rather, students told me that the uncommitted nature of the relationship is implied or suggested. One may even be unaware of the fact that his or her hook up partner is concurrently involved in more than one sexual relationship. Based on the emotional prescription of “chillness,” engaging in a frank conversation about the conditions of their relationship, or personal expectation, is socially discouraged. Such conversations are conceptualized as unnecessary or inappropriate in the sense that they force partners to talk vulnerably about their subjective needs, opening the door for alienation or rejection.

Due to lack of communication between sexual partners, students feel freedom from relational responsibility. Thus, they may obtain numerous hook up partners without emotional obligations. As one male participant phrased it, “if we don’t talk about it then they don’t know, and vice versa.” In my conversation with a college male junior Sam, he told me:

S: “When I’m chilling with someone, it means were hooking up but not in any way exclusive. I mean… we just don’t really talk about the exclusivity part. I’ll invite her over to hang out and watch something, and we’ll hook up. Then… we hang out again later on the next week or something. But she’s definitely not my girlfriend or anything…”
C: “What is her relationship to you, or your relationship to her?”
S: “Well, we’re definitely not monogamous. I don’t know what we are. We’re

Participants described “chilling” relationships synonymously with “hooking up.” One could say “we are chilling” and have it refer to them engaging in a non-committal sexual relationship with out emotional investments.
just chilling. I’ll usually be chilling with more than one person, because why not.”

As Sam described, lack of communication about one’s “chilling” partners may permit the freedom to have multiple sexual relationships at once. Thus, “chillness” is conducive to having a variety of sexual partners without being responsible for communicating with each of them.

The main characteristic of “chilling” relationships is its overwhelming ambiguity. The absence of regular and transparent conversations frequently creates potentially frustrating psychological conditions. Interviewees were at a loss for words when they attempted to articulate their orientation towards their “chilling” partner. The silence around partners often generates mutual confusion in regards to their relationship. It creates situations where students are unsure of role they have in each other’s lives. One student explained that they are “indefinable” to each other: they do not fit in traditional heterosexual relationship roles such as “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” nor do they fit in reductive sexual roles such as a “one night stand.” The most common description of their relationship was a “limbo space.” Melody, a college senior detailed the dynamics of “chilling”:

C: Can you describe what’s happening when someone asks you to chill, or if you’re already chilling with someone?
M: It’s a way to hang out with someone that you like to be with, you haven’t really defined yourself and what you are (if you’re in a relationship or exclusive) and it’s kind of like a limbo space. It’s a way to avoid being honest with someone. It seems like a game.
C: Is everyone in on the game?
M: I feel like everyone’s played the game, where they’re like, ‘I’ve gotta be flirtatiously texting and skirting around the subtext.’ Chilling feels like a continuation of that.

Kerry, a freshman shared with me that their relationship lacked term:
C: How would you describe what you have with someone you were most recently chilling with?
K: It’s not a relationship but it’s also not… there’s literally no terms. Not that there has to be, because I’m not looking for a relationship per se… but because there were no spoken terms it just faded out and I didn’t really know where I sat with this person. And it’s still kind of off.

“Chilling” relationships are not instances of “random hook ups,” nor are they committed sexual partnerships, yet they do not sit midway in between. “Chilling” pushes partners into a puzzling position within the social, into a space of feeling of what I call relational suspension. I use this term to link position with feeling— the feeling of being ungrounded, the feeling of being neither here nor there, while not knowing if one should, or if one wants to “settle” with someone. From Kerry’s narrative we can gather that “chilling” feels disorienting. One does not know what role to play in a partner’s life, so he or she is unsure of how to approach the other. “Chilling” is a feeling of being not quite right, being unable to sense direction, and feeling unsure of one’s position in relation to another. “Chilling” relationships can be imagined as ambiguous coupling.

“Chilling” as a mode of indefinable relationality permits particularly ambiguous trajectory of behavior. Because neither partner has admitted to having a relationship—that is, being in relation to each other—neither one can accurately vocalize an end to that relationship. For instance, one participant told me that ending a “chilling” relationship was difficult because she could not “end what never was a real thing.” Thus, when an individual in a “chilling” relationship wishes to end future intimacy or contact, he or she may simply cut ties and disappear. This behavior is colloquially called “ghosting,” and is when a partner vanishes from contact as
smoothly and instantly as a ghost might. “Ghosting” may take shape in behaviors mediated by technology: ignoring text messages, refusing to respond, or simply sending brief replies until their partner “gets the hint.” For example, a sophomore athlete named Ryan explained his technique of ghosting:

C: How did you cut it off with her?
R: I just wanted to not hang out anymore, so I would reply with short things, like “cool,” or “ok” and then never ask her questions or anything. After a few texts she got it I think.
C: That’s a rather roundabout way to do things
R: I guess, I mean I’m not going to like tell her I want to stop hanging out because it would be mad awkward. I feel like people get the hint pretty easily sometimes.

Thus, because a formal relationship was never established, partners feel no need to end it like they would a formal relationship.

Both feeling of relational suspension and the absence of definitions produced conditions wherein partners felt they had no ethical responsibility to regard their partners as subjects to care for. As some participants told me, they are “nothing” to each other, therefore implying no ethical responsibility to concern themselves with their partner outside of a sexual space. By remaining unattached, they leave doors open for future, and perhaps better sexual opportunities.

**Ethical Implications of “Chilling”**

In this next section I focus on the ethical implication of “chilling” as an emotional prescription. The trajectory of this inquiry follows two central questions: First, how does “chilling” and the behavioral norms that it imposes influence participants’ ability to communicate and address personal concerns to their sexual partners? Second, what is the cost of this emotional labor? The argument of this
section joins these two questions to reflect on how “chilling” impacts both interpersonal treatment and students’ management of their own emotions.

In this chapter I have discussed how “chilling” can be read as a culturally imposed emotional prescription, in that it prescribes a set of appropriate emotions individuals should perform. It normalizes certain feelings, and coerces participants into monitoring themselves. In this conceptual framework, candid conversations concerning subjective needs boundaries, and intentions are often regarded as unnecessary and uncomfortable, as they inherently require an honesty and openness that is incompatible with the emotional state of “chillness.” In heterosexual hook up culture autonomy, self-control, and independence underlies a notion of desirability, therefore leaving dependence and affectedness as undesirable or negative traits.

I see the consequences of “chilling” in hook up culture as problematic. If a partner is dissatisfied by their treatment or the relationship in general, a culturally imposed pressure may silence his or her concern. Because demonstrations of discontent are vulnerable and “unchill,” this emotional prescription limits the range of vocabulary individuals can utilize to vocalize their mistreatment. As shown in the first narrative of this chapter, voicing one’s feeling of pain, or being not “okay with everything,” can be invalidated and rendered baseless by being labeled “unchill.” The fear of a negative reaction to one’s “unchillness,” and the fear of being undesirable, ultimately hinders self-advocacy. If we pose this in relation to the gendered inequality demonstrated in Chapter Two, then we can imagine how there are troubling ethical implications to this silencing.
My second concern with “chillness” as an emotional prescription regards its potentially harmful influence on those for whom it operates. When individuals must persistently manage emotions and work to maintain an unaffected disposition, they are involved in what Hochschild calls “emotional labor.” What is the cost of emotional labor?

Before I explore this, I follow the work of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed, and frame emotions as being instructive. Emotions inform bodies what situations to approach, what situations to avoid, and serve as compasses for navigating one’s social environment. If a student feels only negative emotions when with a hook up partner, then he or she may read those negative emotions as a sign that there is something in need of mending in the relationship, or a sign to end the relationship altogether. As Hochschild writes in *The Managed Heart*:

…A person totally without emotion has no warning system, no guidelines to the self-relevance of a sight, a memory, or a fantasy. Like one who cannot feel and touches fire, an emotionless person suffers a sense of arbitrariness, which from the point of view of his or her self-interest is irrational.

Feelings are clues for better understanding and working through ones’ social landscape.

This conceptual framework, wherein we understand emotions as instructive, reveals how the individual engaged in emotional labor may become estranged from an aspect of himself or herself that is used to do such labor. Emotional work, especially emotional work that is dulling or numbing, can influence the degree to which one listens to his or her feelings, and sometimes even the capacity to feel.

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166 Ibid.
Those who normalize the transmutation of feeling may pay a cost in how they hear their feelings, and a cost in what – for better or worse- those feelings tell them about themselves. I argue that there are negative ethical implications of “chill.” “Chillness” hinders one’s expressions of emotionality and prevents sexual partners from experiencing non-sexual intimacy together. Moreover, it limits one’s range of vocabulary to express injustice and inequality. Ultimately, the prescription of “chillness” is a cultural mandate to tone down the volume of one’s emotions.
The Ethics of Vulnerability

In this final chapter I focus on what I read as an overarching theme throughout my paper: vulnerability. I divide this chapter into two sections. In section 1, I look at emotionality in hook up culture as a form of vulnerability, and examine students’ orientations towards these concepts in their romantic and sexual practices. I put attention to how psychological and emotional vulnerability is conceptualized on the basis of a dualistic logic that associates it with powerlessness and weakness. The work of feminist and cultural theorists such as Erinn C. Gilson, Annette Baier, and Sara Ahmed help me to devise an ethics of sexuality based on a positive conceptualization of vulnerability. I incorporate trust into a theory of vulnerability, in order to account for its emotionally positive potential.

Is it possible to integrate this ethics of vulnerability into social life of hook up culture? I answer this question in section 2 where I turn to polyamory, a form of consensual nonmonogamy. Polyamorous behavioral practices often feasibly and positively incorporate vulnerability in sexual interactions. Thus, by detailing those practices, I may remedy a one-sided picture of vulnerability and create and an ethics of sexuality that could help students navigate hook up culture.
Part I

Unshakable Vulnerability

I begin this discussion of vulnerability in hook up culture by addressing three features of vulnerability. First, vulnerability is an unavoidable feature of human existence that never goes away. Vulnerability is a basic susceptibility that we all possess, as it underlies our notions of harm and wellbeing, security and insecurity, and interests and rights. In consulting a dictionary, the state of being vulnerable is defined as “susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury.”167 Its normative significance leads us to three conclusions. Because it is unavoidable we can work to modify our state of being vulnerable, however we can never do away with it entirely. Second, there is an ethical centrality to vulnerability; its presence calls for a particular response that is coded in ethical imperatives. As the scholar Erinn C. Gilson writes in her book _The Ethics of Vulnerability_, “vulnerability compels or motivates action.”168 For example, if a person is unaffected, or invulnerable, there is no compulsion to care for or feel compassionate towards that individual. It is his or her vulnerability that is the basis for a compassionate compulsion. If our care for people had no impact on them, then we would feel no ethical obligation to provide it. Third, in ethical, political, and social discourses vulnerability is conceptualized negatively as a precondition to harm. Although vulnerability is not generally considered synonymous

with harm, it is understood as a condition that leads to it. As such, vulnerability is considered as a state to be avoided and prevented and warrants protection.\textsuperscript{169}

There is a significant connection between the aforementioned three points; specifically, there is a tension between the first and third point. If vulnerability is an unavoidable condition, then we can never adequately protect ourselves from potentially harmful circumstances. Thus, if vulnerability is conceptualized solely as a proneness to harm, then we find ourselves constantly pursuing an unachievable form of security. We find ourselves seeking the total alleviation of the condition of being vulnerable.\textsuperscript{170} This may take the form of denying one’s vulnerability, or avoiding particular situations or particular people that make one feel vulnerable.

This predominantly negative view of vulnerability is commonplace in hook up culture. Emotionality is regarded as a form of incapacity that results in the dependency of others. In the following section I will outline how this conceptualization of vulnerability takes shape and molds social and sexual practices in hook up culture. To speak to this tension between the normality of vulnerability and its negative conceptualization, I use students’ subjective experiences as they explain a desire to seek particularly invulnerable conditions.

**The Avoidance of Emotionality in Hook Up Culture**

Expressions of emotionality in hook up culture can take various forms. If affection has developed alongside sexual interactions, a student may speak to these

\textsuperscript{169} Gilson, Erinn C. "Responsibility for the Vulnerable." In *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 15-16.  
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
feelings using the common colloquial phrase “I have feels.” Similar colloquial expressions of emotional attachment are “catching feelings,” or “falling for someone.” Several students I spoke with expressed that if one develops romantic attachment towards a partner they refer to the situation as a partner “making you weak.” In hook up culture there is an imperative to avoid such emotionality. “Catching feelings” is ultimately an act of vulnerability, and it signifies that one has been impacted or affected by their sexual partner. On popular social media websites such as Instagram and Facebook, there are hundreds of relatable Internet memes that demonstrate a cultural avoidance of this experience of “catching feelings.” The popularity of these posts speak to a wider consensus that emotionality is a nuisance, and is a sign of losing hold of one’s complete independence. Hook up culture is centered on the avoidance of dependent relationships so that one can easily transition from one hook up partner to the next one without attachment. “Catching feelings,” on the other hand, interrupts the possibility for a detached sequence of sexual partners, and speaks to a moment of intimate connectivity.

In my conversations with students, they described having “feelings” and being vulnerable as potentially harmful processes they were unwilling to engage in. Some

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171 All of the students I spoke with were familiar with the term “I have feels,” as a colloquial or slang term to admit romantic attachment. It is a simplification of the phrase “I have romantic feelings for you.”

172 An "Internet meme" is a concept that spreads rapidly from person to person via the Internet, largely through Internet-based E-mailing, blogs, forums, social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, instant messaging, and video hosting services like YouTube.
feel that vulnerability was a clear path to future distress. Amber, a senior at Wesleyan, shared with me that she learned not to be honest with hook ups.

A: I never get attached. It’s because you have to expect literally nothing. You each will probably just move on to the next one so there’s no point to talk about much. You might even move on to the next person in the same night. It’s just like yeah we fucked. Bye!

Amber’s thoughts speak to how these behaviors are often developed as a means of self-protection. Jordan, a sophomore at Wesleyan had a similar understanding.

J: So I think that people lie a lot to protect themselves. Your friends can ask you how are you feeling about this person that you hooked up with, and even with them you say, “Oh, I don’t know yet.”
C: Why do the say that?
J: Because they don’t want to admit they like someone. Unless they know for sure that person likes them back.

The urgency to defend oneself against potential harm is demonstrated through behaviors such as feigning indifference towards a hook up, meticulously crafting and repeatedly editing text messages, and intentionally avoiding communication with hook up partners (i.e. “ghosting”). These behaviors are acts of disengagement: dipping one’s toe in to test the water, and even if it is warm enough to jump in, choosing to tread back to land. Disengagement is particularly helpful to minimize susceptibility to harm.

In some cases, the students fear that exposing themselves, or being fully seen, would invite painful judgment and criticism. A junior named Chris conveyed these thoughts to me.

C: I’ve been hurt, and I’m not in a place to do that again. I just can’t. Like, I don’t want to know what would happen. I guess what this means is that I can’t really rely on a ton of people, because I’m not in place to be judged for everything that I am right now. Just too much. I’m crazy brave in other ways though.
Chris later detailed his enthrallment in risk taking activities that would make the average person’s knees tremble: cliff jumping, traveling alone, sky diving. His bravery is unmistakable. Yet, in the arena of affect being terrified of judgment makes vulnerability a clear impossibility. Allowing oneself to be affected by others, being marked and molded by people, is an act of emotional exposure. However, when this emotional exposure is conceptualized as purely harmful, then openness translates to a proneness to injury.¹⁷³

A number of the students I spoke with acknowledged and finally accepted their own denial of emotionality. After striving to be detached from others, they realized that avoiding vulnerability is impossible. Ava, a freshman, shared with me that she personally denied that her sexual encounters affected her life throughout the beginning of her sexual career.

A: What I will say and what I denied for a really long time was that any sexual encounter does affect me. I can brush it off, but it still is something that happened to me. So I think when people are like “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s chill, blah blah blah.” And maybe I’m just a naive freshman… but everything and any kind of encounter affects me, for my next encounter. Just because I wasn’t dating this person doesn’t mean I don’t have some kind of feelings.

Ava’s experience is one in which she sought invulnerability, only to later realize that she could not do it successfully. Her initial refusal of vulnerability in sexual encounters eventually subsided, and she now recognizes that her sexual partners impacted her in some way, shape, or form.

This conceptualization of vulnerability as a purely negative condition, and its unavoidable presence throughout life, thus prompts some individuals to seek an unachievable security. As previously mentioned, denying emotionality may lead students to cope with vulnerability through potentially harmful and socially disengaging behaviors, such as “ghosting” or avoiding honest conversations. Reading these as negative behaviors based on an erroneous understanding of vulnerability, I work to expand the definition of vulnerability in the following section.

Towards a Holistic View of Vulnerability

A common strategy for minimizing the import of vulnerability has been to regard vulnerability as a state of extreme incapacity and frailty that ultimately leads to dependence on others.174 I argue that in hook up culture a dualistic pattern of association concerning autonomy, gender, and power render vulnerability something to overcome, rather than something to be experienced and understood. The reductive definitions and descriptions of vulnerability in hook up culture polarize vulnerability by conceptually opposing it to notions of strength and wellbeing. This understanding contributes to a narrow sense of relationality, in that it encourages feelings of emotional dependence and affectedness to be signs of a negative condition. This conceptual framework fundamentally disregards the ethical importance of vulnerability.

As previously stated, a reductive view of vulnerability is dualistic in that it poses ideas concerning self-sufficiency, competency, and power as incompatible with

174 Gilson, Erinn C. "Responsibility for the Vulnerable." In The Ethics of Vulnerability, 16.
a state of vulnerability. Being emotionally open is then posed as an undesirable human condition because it forces one to be dependent upon others. Moreover, with this narrow conceptualization, being in a position of power is thought of as the ability to defend oneself, control, and perhaps do harm to others. For example, I spoke with two seniors, Taylor and Abigail, about their hook up experiences, and asked them when they feel most powerful. We discussed gendered behaviors in oral sex, and in the interview they posed the male’s vulnerability when receiving oral sex against their sense of power when in complete control.

C: Do you feel powerful when you’re giving?
T: Yes, because I’m in control of his pleasure from there on out.
A: Also orgasms are vulnerable as fuck.
T: Making someone else come makes me feel powerful sometimes, because they’re literally crying and making the weirdest noises, and its just vulnerable.
A: And you’re the one dictating pleasure, but that’s provided that the head is something you want to do, that it was like, “I want to make this person come.” And I don’t actually think that that is always the case. It only makes me feel powerful if it’s something of my own volition that I can control.

Here, vulnerability – being open and receptive rather than closed and defensive – is not compatible with subjective feelings of power and mastery. Power is conceptualized as the act of making someone else feel vulnerable. Within this conceptual framework, the imperative to avoid one’s own vulnerability is connected to the subjective feeling of being detached and as Abigail stated, in a place of “control.”

This model of vulnerability merits scrutiny from a both theoretical and practical perspective. Within our framework of vulnerability we must ask whether this concept operates in our theoretical framework in a valuable way. Practically, we

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
must ask what effect does the use of this concept have on those to whom it applies. I seek to rearticulate vulnerability in a way that accounts for its full significance, therefore unburdening it from the weight of negative presumptions. This reductive and dualistic understanding of vulnerability simply fails to account for the power and positive effect of being a porous, impressionable, and receptive body. Relations with others are primarily constructive to the self; they add shape, color, and texture to our psychological and emotional lives. Embracing vulnerability ultimately allows individuals to embrace a more enriched social and personal life.¹⁷⁶

Whereas negative understandings of vulnerability make one prone to adopt attitudes of arrogant self-sufficiency and emotional detachment, a more nuanced and positive picture of vulnerability illustrates a meeting point of risk and growth. Openness and receptivity introduce us into spaces and temporalities that are shared and common because of the intertwining relationships that compose them.¹⁷⁷ It is through vulnerability that individuals learn to be fully seen, loved, and actively engaged in their social world. However, when integrating this ethics into social life, I find that another emotional component must be added to vulnerability in order for it to be actively embraced. I see trust, a belief-informed and action-influencing attitude, as a necessary component for a holistic understanding of vulnerability.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ I do not have the space here to go into a gendered analysis of vulnerability. However, we might think about gender norms that identify masculinity with power, invulnerability, strength and the role of protector, and femininity with weakness, vulnerability, and the need for protection. We may also think about how the bodies and behaviors of women have been subject to control, scrutiny, and subjugation. The gendering of the reductive definition of vulnerability also ties to sexuality; if women are considered more vulnerable than men it is because of their bodies which are considered weaker. For more gendered analysis of vulnerability see: Gilson, Erinn C. "Vulnerability in Social Life." In The Ethics of Vulnerability, 127.

¹⁷⁷ Gilson, Erinn C. "Responsibility for the Vulnerable." In The Ethics of Vulnerability, 127.

Trust and Vulnerability in Sexual Interactions

In feminist philosopher Annette Baier’s essay “What do Women Want in Moral Theory” she devises a theory of trust that radically alters vulnerability.

To trust is to make oneself or let oneself be more vulnerable than one might have been to harm from others – to give them an opportunity to harm one, in the confidence that they will not take it because they have no reason to.\(^\text{179}\)

Trust lies at the heart of our social relations. It is a form of reliance, but it goes beyond reliance.\(^\text{180}\) When we trust another person, we expect this trusted person to show us good will.\(^\text{181}\) By incorporating trust into a situation of vulnerability the situation transforms into a site of potential human growth and positive social engagement. Trust expands a reductionist understanding of vulnerability to account for the beneficial and valuable consequences of being dependent. In her bestseller book *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* researcher Brené Brown writes:

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity…We dismiss vulnerability as a weakness only when we realize that we’ve confused feeling with failing and emotions with liabilities.\(^\text{182}\)

Trust transforms this vulnerable space into a site of enriching human experiences.

Rather than associating vulnerability with weakness, fear, and the need for protection, one can read it as a site for potential human growth and positive emotional

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\(^{181}\) Ibid.

experiences. Without the component of fear, then vulnerability is an opening wherein hearts and minds can leak into each other, meet, and merge. Moreover there are ethical implications to incorporating this framework into social life. When one trusts that his or her partner has no intention to harm, one can develop positive social relationships.

The task of integrating ethics into social life forces me to consider the practical dimension of this argument. How can one cultivate trust with one’s partner? When I asked Wesleyan students, they shared that trust is most easily cultivated with committed partners, specifically those who are boyfriends or girlfriends. Specifically, in these relationships they felt comfortable communicating needs and actively attending to their partner’s needs. With communication they could work together to optimize their personal, sexual, and emotional lives. I spoke with Isaac, a freshman about when trust is best developed.

C: When do you feel like you can trust your sexual partner?
I: Not all the time. I actually think that I only really trust people when I’m in a relationship with them, because there’s something else there besides the sex. In relationships, like the ones I had in high school at least, we just talk about everything so understand where we’re each coming from. I know what she likes and why.
C: Do you feel that here?
I: Well, I haven’t had a relationship here. When I hook up with people it’s just a situation where we’re both pretty drunk unfortunately, or don’t know each other. I think it’s like that because you live with people and there are no, you know, parents or anything restricting your actions. But, to answer your question: no. I haven’t felt trust like that at college.

Both because hook up encounters rarely facilitate communication between sexual partners, and because of the cultural prescription of being unaffectedly “chill,” some students feel unable to communicate intentions and desires with one another. Without

communicating intentions and needs with a partner, trust and vulnerability are impossible. However, throughout my research process I felt an obligation to question whether casual sexuality is inherently a site where partners feel as though they cannot trust one another. Here I turn to polyamory, a form of consensual non-monogamous partnerships, as a site that lends ideas for how to incorporate trust into casual sexuality and ultimately create more ethical sexual encounters.

Part II

Polyamory and Rethinking Trust in Hook Ups

The hook up culture described among college campuses draws many comparisons with polyamorous practices. Polyamory is a form of consensual non-monogamy, which encompasses a relationship arrangement in which all involved partners consent to engaging in sexual and/or romantic relationships with other people. Given the root words of the term, polyamory translates to the “love of many people.” Poly stems from the Greek term meaning “many,” while amor stems from the Latin term meaning “love.” Polyamory, in particular, is structured around multiple loving partnerships and has an emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships. All of the polyamorous individuals that I spoke with share a similar definition of this word. Polyamory differs from adultery with its focus on honesty.

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183 It is important to note that Recent studies with United State samples have demonstrated that approximately 4% to 5% of people are currently involved in consensual non-monogamous relationships. See: Sheff, E. "Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity and Power." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 34, no. 3 (2005): 251-83. Accessed February 20, 2016. doi:10.1177/0891241604274263.


185 Many people were clear to point out that it is consensual aspect of their nonmonogamy that distinguishes polyamory from “cheating” in traditional monogamous relationships.
and full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to additional partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing them from polygamy. The Polyamory Society describes polyamory as the non-possessive, honest, responsible and ethical philosophy and practice of loving multiple people simultaneously.

The winter of 2015 through 2016 I engaged in ethnographic research and interviewed several self-identified polyamorous individuals around New York City. I found this community by beginning an online search for local polyamorous groups, and then personally contacted and met with polyamorous community leaders and individuals around New York City. Luckily for me, there is a thriving and welcoming polyamorous community across New York, and I was able to recruit interview subjects by attending community events, talks, and social gatherings. I turn to polyamory in this section because their practices allow for the development of trust and enact an ethics of vulnerability that is compatible with casual sex. Moreover, individuals who practice this form of consensual non-monogamy are reported to engage in safer sex practices and have high levels of subjective wellbeing. In this section I will outline several of the major behavioral patterns, all based on open

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communication, that these polyamorous individuals revealed as fundamental to respectful and ethical nonmonogamy.\textsuperscript{190}

Due to the complex relationship structures that are possible in polyamorous relationships, communication about intentions and personal needs ensure that partners feel respected and safe.\textsuperscript{191} Polyamorous interviewees expressed that honest and clear communication is crucial for healthy relationships with both their primary partners, called “primaries,” and with casual sexual partners with whom they have no emotional commitment.\textsuperscript{192} Reid, an amiable middle-aged polyamorous male, shared that non-traditional relationship structures, such as those formed in polyamorous relationships, inhibit partners from continuing inadequate and communication habits.

R: I think that in polyamory, because there is so much customization, you can’t get away with not talking. There is no default. You can’t be like okay we’ve been together long enough I guess we have to be primaries now. Or, we’ve been together long enough I guess we have to get engaged, or I have to meet your family. Any of these things could happen, but they don’t have to. So you need to communicate because there are so many permutations and options.

Rather than forming false assumptions about the needs and intentions of their sexual partners, polyamorous people ask clarifying questions to their partners. In one

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\textsuperscript{190} Open communication occurs when all parties are able to express ideas to one another, such as in a conversation or debate. Many relationships utilize open communication. Closed communication occurs when only one party is actively communicating, such as when we lecture or present rules to our children.


\textsuperscript{192} The terms “primary” and “secondary” are commonly used to describe distinctions between one’s personal relationships. Most often the terms are used to generally describe the "category" of a relationship, regarding involvement, commitment, or priority. The exact distinctions between these relationship categories vary depending on the speaker. However, “primary” usually refers to a "marriage-like" relationship in terms of living arrangements, finances, commitment or child-rearing; while “secondary” usually implies less of these aspects.
interview a participant explained that polyamorous individuals are often extremely versed in “sharing information” immediately and expressing what they are looking for, whether that be a serious dating relationship or a physical, sexual partnership without emotional obligations. These attitudes and behaviors are anchored in a positive conceptualization of vulnerability, wherein openness and communication is fundamental to physical and emotional satisfaction. As one polyamorous participant shared with me, “open and honest communication is absolutely required in all relationships, however in polyamorous relationships it is actively practiced because there can be such complex relationships.” In the following sections I outline how polyamorous people adopt three skills: self-awareness, communicating needs, and avoiding “playing games.” These skills precipitate an embracement of relationality and result in positive sexual experiences.

**Self-Awareness before All Else**

Three main behavioral patterns emerged in all of my conversations with polyamorous people, both formally in interviews and informally in my conversation with them at social events. These behavioral patterns shed light on ethical alternatives for dealing with issues of vulnerability in noncommittal sexual relationships. Moreover, I read these steps as directly transferrable to hook up culture, and helpful for college students who strive to engage in ethical hook ups.

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993 An example of this that came up in an interview was a polyamorous online profile on a dating website. One participant shared with me that even before meeting someone, an online profile might include their sexual orientation, who their primary partner is, a link to their primary partner’s online dating profile page, and a sentence or two about what kind of relationship they are seeking in new partner.
The first practice polyamorous people shared with me was reflecting upon subjective needs. \(^{194}\) Participants shared with me that they reflect upon their previous behavior to learn about their preferences. They then use that information about themselves to determine their sexual and romantic needs. This step was fundamental in preventing confusing or uncommunicative sexual interactions. For example, one polyamorous woman that I spoke with named Elise told me that she avoids one-time casual sexual experiences, which are referred to as “one-offs.” This is comparable to what college students described as a “random hook up,” or “one night stand.” Elise’s familiarity and commitment to her sexual and emotional requirements are useful for identifying which sexual encounters she should engage in or avoid.

E: I know that one-off sex to me is boring most of the time. I use my first time of having sex with someone as a gage for if I want to have sex with them again. I never go into a single sex situation saying “I want to have sex with this person once.” And if that’s what the person is looking for, then I’m just like “Awesome, I really hope you find it. It’s not with me, but I know another person who you might be interested in, who might be interested in that as well.”

Because Elise is aware of her own preferences, she is able to more clearly navigate her sexual experiences.

Anita Wagner, a polyamorous educator and cofounder of the Chesapeake Polyamory Network, compares this form of self-awareness to emotional intelligence.

What emotional intelligence means for me is understanding my own emotional wiring. For example, someone who has abandonment or serious self-esteem issues needs to be aware of it. They need to know that those issues are going to make them especially vulnerable in succeeding in poly relationships. If they’re not working on them and getting a pretty big handle

\(^{194}\) Participants explained that they had an intentional commitment to learning more about themselves, which many of them the practiced through reflective activities such as journaling, art, writing, and other creative activities.
on them, the first time their sweetheart goes out to be with someone else, that abandonment button will get pushed big time.\textsuperscript{195}

As Wagner explains, awareness of one’s personal needs is foundational for non-monogamous relationships because it can help one prepare for and navigate situations with their partner.\textsuperscript{196} Maintaining a critical awareness of one’s personal desires then serves as the initial means of beginning an ethical sexual encounter. By emphasizing the positive effects of self-knowledge, polyamorous people are more deliberate about putting themselves in situations that are compatible with their subjective needs.

It is important to note that this behavior is not always easy to begin and at times required a process of unlearning. Elise shared with me that this behavior is not always intuitive, and requires effort to practice. She explained:

E: What I felt [when I was younger] was that I wasn’t entitled to needs if I was hooking up with somebody, or that the experience itself was enough for me and that I shouldn’t have to ask for more. Or I would think that it would be implied, when it really wasn’t. Because there was really no conversation saying that this was the expectation and are we going to meet this expectation. My expectation was, “If we’re having sex today, I want to know that we might be having sex tomorrow also, or next month.”

With time Elise became more comfortable with acknowledging her subjective needs, and now takes that information to her relationships. Thus, claiming a right to one’s needs can be a daunting process, yet is ultimately rewarding.


\textsuperscript{196} Interviewees explained that learning more about themselves required them to be critical of socially prescribed roles based on their gender, class, or sexual orientation. They worked to distinguish between what they thought society was telling them they should be, do, or act like, and what was they felt was their authentic self. For example, because polyamory is widely viewed as objectionable across the United States, individuals who decided to share their polyamorous status with friends and families had to overcome the fact that they might not be supported or understood. See: Matsick, Jes L., Jennifer D. Rubin, Terri D. Conley, Ali Ziegler, and Amy C. Moors. "Love and Sex: Polyamorous Relationships Are Perceived More Favourably than Swinging and Open Relationships." Psychology & Sexuality 5, no. 4 (2014). Accessed February 3, 2016. Sage Publications.
Communicating Needs with Others

According to polyamorous individuals that I spoke with, communicating one’s needs with a sexual or romantic partner—whether that is a “primary” partner or a casual or short-term sexual partner—is the foremost skill for maintaining consensual non-monogamy. However, one can only intentionally communicate the needs they are conscious of. For this reason, this step is second after personal self-awareness. The polyamorous people that I interviewed often used the phrase “open and honest communication.” Open and honest communication includes sharing information about not only romantic expectations (for example, distinguishing whether one is seeking a one-night stand or a more emotionally committed partnership), but also sexual expectations (including one’s sexual boundaries, levels of comfort, and physical preferences).\(^{197}\)

Here I wish to expand upon the role of these conversations in sexual experiences, precisely because they contribute to safer sex practices and mutual consent.\(^{198}\) Empirical studies looking at sexual health practices in relationships consensual non-monogamous relationships found that they were more likely to be

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\(^{197}\) Participants described examples of “sexual boundaries” as “how far” they chose to go with their partners, or the extent of their sexual activity; “levels of comfort” as what activities they were comfortable with, when, and where; “physical preferences” as what kind of physical intimacy they desires, such as “touching” or “kissing.”

\(^{198}\) In this paper I refer to consent as a “mutual verbal, physical, and emotional agreement that happens without manipulation, threats, or head games.” Consent is a whole body experience. It is not just a verbal “yes” or “no” – it involves paying attention to partner and checking in with physical and emotional cues as well. Consent is also mutual (both people have to agree) and must be continuous. One can stop at any time, can change his or her mind, and just because one said yes to one thing does not mean one has consented to anything else. See: "Consent - Yes Means Yes." http://www.yesmeansyes.com/consent-0.
cognizant of their sexual health risks, take more precautions, discuss their history with partners, and use condoms.¹⁹⁹

Polyamorous individuals I spoke practiced informed consent; they would pause the physical interaction to casually and confidently address their desires and the acts that they found pleasurable.²⁰⁰ This practice allowed both partners to then shape the trajectory of the sexual experience so that everyone “gets what they want.” Two interviewees described these conversations as “elevator pitches,” that could take at most a few minutes. Anna, a female participant explained that they are difficult to begin, because they may “break the mood.”

A: I definitely had an initial fear that they would break the mood and I think that I’m not alone in that. I think that’s a fear for a lot of people. If you’re both drunk and making out or about to have sex, it can be at first strange to pause everything and have a short conversation. And it can be awkward having that break and then going back to doing whatever you were doing.
C: Yet, you still have that talk, despite the awkwardness?
A: In reality, that break can be one minute if you want it to. And more importantly it has the power to mold your night. Do you want an excellent night where you get what you came for, or a horrible night where there’s not consensual behavior? Each person has to make the choice for whether that awkwardness is worth it.

These conversations are spaces where two people can confirm whether or not they are sexually compatible, and if they seek similar outcomes from the experience.

Moreover, these conversations are also essential for establishing physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological boundaries. One participant described an example of an open and brief conversation about sexual preferences as, “You’re really awesome. I don’t want to necessarily have penetrative sex today but I’m down for

some hand stuff, how do you feel about that?” This example demonstrates self-awareness about preferences and a nonjudgmental, and casual question to confirm that they are at a point of mutual understanding. If the other sexual partner is dissatisfied with the limits, then it is simply a sign that the two people seek different sexual experiences. On the other hand, a sexual partner may be grateful for an honest exchange and two may find themselves at a point of mutual agreement. Tristan Taormino, author of the book *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships* writes:

> When you have healthy boundaries, you recognize that you are an individual with your own wants, needs, and values. You don’t take on other people’s issues as your own or allow others to dictate your behavior based on what they want.  

By establishing boundaries one ensures that he or she does not sacrifice needs and desires in order to please another person. This habit establishes an agreement between partners so that neither one attempts to control, or falls into being controlled, by the other. With these norms, preferences, and boundaries established, individuals are then more willing to trust their sexual partners because they have formed a promising line of communication.

Despite their frequent occurrence, these conversations are not always natural for polyamorous people. Like Anna explained, “breaking the mood” can be seen as a disruptive to the sexual experience, and unsettling for a partner who may not be familiar with open communication. Moreover, claiming a right to needs was described as challenging for some people who did not want to seem self-important or

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200 For an example of how they did this see Anna’s quotation on the previous page.
201 Ibid., 45.
“greedy” in the eyes of their sexual partner. Elise explained her own difficulties when attempting to communicate with partners:

E: Sometimes standing up for my own needs is really tricky because I don’t want to feel selfish, I don’t want to feel egotistical, I don’t want to feel like entitled but at the same time it’s my body and my experience so in that way I know that it’s better, and I know how it’s better and why it’s better so it makes it easier to do. As opposed to people who may not have communicated about things like that don’t realize how important it is because they’ve never done it and have never had that experience of communicating like that.

Elise shared that the act of communicating one’s needs is extremely vulnerable in that it requires one to be open, heard, and consequentially respected. As Elise explained, with experience she realized that it is ultimately worth going through a few moments of potentially uncomfortable conversation, in order for her to advocate for her bodily needs.

Finally, polyamorous participants commonly refer to a communication habit called “checking in.” “Checking in” is taking a moment to psychologically “touch base” with a partner, and confirm that both are at a point of mutual understanding whether that be during a date, in the middle of a conversation, or during a sexual encounter. A polyamorous man named Wyatt explained to me that he frequently “checks in” with both his romantic and sexual partners.

W: You can check in. Check in is a great term, we use that a lot. If you’re at a party with your partner and your other partner is there, you check in. You say, “Hey are you comfortable if I do this?” or “Hey how are you? Are you having fun?” Checking in is huge. It gives you a richer and deeper experience and relationship, period. Everyone’s on the same page. There’s no confusion around things like, “Oh, is this person going to call me?” You just straight up tell them, “Hey, I like you and I would like to continue this,” or "Hey I’m busy with these other things, so let’s hang out next week."

By checking in, people are able to cut away the confusion that can so easily develop between romantic or sexual partners, and focus “getting what they want.”
Communication in intimate interactions constructs an environment of mutual understanding, and potential trust. As one polyamorous participant told me, “The whole point, as far as poly people are concerned, is to find people that are compatible with us and to make sure that we are all on the same page.” If communication is feasible, allowed and even celebrated, vulnerability is no longer a daunting state that one must navigate alone. Clear communication channels open up the possibility for vulnerability to be an active site of exciting dynamic emotionality.

**Avoiding “Games,” and Maintaining Clarity with Partners**

The third and final practice that polyamorous individuals use to welcome vulnerability and form ethical sexual interactions is a refusal to harm others with misleading or ambiguous language. Polyamorous participants claimed that avoiding “playing games” with their partner is part of a larger project of ethically relating to partners as fully human subjects, rather than merely as instruments for pleasure. Avoiding “games” and establishing clarity could take the form of reaching out through text message after a sexual encounter to demonstrate appreciation, or communicating a desire for it to be a “one time thing.” Polyamorous individuals are committed to corresponding—whether through technological devices or in person—with their sexual partners because it is a behavior that they personally appreciate. By respectfully contacting their romantic or sexual partner, polyamorous individuals are able to either consensually develop these relationships, or bookend them.

Continuing communication to clarify long-term or short-term intentions with a partner is regarded as a learned behavior that polyamorous people have to
intentionally decide for themselves. When I asked participants about whether open
communication was learned or not, many of them said that they had to intentionally
put effort into eliminating hurtful or confusing communication habits, such as
“ghosting,” or ignoring a partner’s text messages when they wished to end
the relationship. I asked Elise about the phenomenon of “ghosting,” and whether or
not being misleading or unclear was common in polyamory, to which she stated:

E: I’m totally guilty of ghosting. But when I recognize I’m doing that I think,
“I’m doing this, and now I have to be intentional about it and have a
conversation.” So usually the conversation will be something along the lines
of “This was a really awesome time. I’ve really enjoyed hanging out, but I
don’t really have the emotional bandwidth to be doing this at this point, so I
think it would be better if we hung out less often,” or "I think I might not be
interested in doing this at all anymore."

Elise later expressed that the first step is acknowledging that whatever occurred
between two partners actually did happen, and should not be ignored. Merely because
their intimacy might have taken shape at a party or when inebriated was not sound
reason for her to disregard it.

Moreover, deliberately communicating intentions is vital for the wellbeing of
both partners, because as one polyamorous woman named Helen observed, “At least
you’re not floating around, not knowing.” Several concrete examples of following up
with a partner were:

- That was so great I look forward to seeing you at the next party.
- That was so great, this probably is a one-off for me, but that was awesome
thank you.
- Hey, that was really great, and I’d like to do this again some time. In fact
would you like to have a non-sexual date also? I’m really interested in
exploring this connection that we have.

By evading any inclination to “play games,” both partners can trust that they are not
going to be intentionally hurt. This communicative initiative is often part of a larger
project of cultivating compassion, and leading intentional lives. Timothy, another polyamorous man I spoke with, told me he made the decision to live honestly and put an end to unnecessarily complicated relationships.

T: For me personally, the game is done. I don’t have to play the game, which is why I am poly. I can’t speak for everyone, but I really think because it’s so cut and dry and clear, it’s really not a game. Other stupid things that people do, like not texting back. That’s a stupid game and I don’t do that. I try not to mess with someone’s head. I think part of being poly is the freedom to do what you want to do, so there’s no reason to be fake and play two people against each other. You just go out, and be you, and be open and honest about it. Communicate your intentions and then you don’t have to play any games!

By acknowledging one’s personal needs and desires, communicating them with others, and ensuring that neither partners is confused, consensual nonmonogamy can successfully flourish.

These practices create an environment where vulnerability and trust are compatible with casual sexuality. More specifically, these behaviors are transferrable to the situations that arise in hook up culture. They are not inherent to polyamorous individuals; many of the polyamorous people that I spoke with told me that these skills were initially challenges, and required high levels of reflection, courage, and confidence. However, in the long run the adoption and commitment to these behaviors radically optimized their relationships because it removed the uncertainty that plagues hook up culture at Wesleyan and beyond.

**Being Vulnerable and Inspiring Others**

Polyamorous individuals acknowledge that this communication in intimate interactions is far from commonplace in normative social exchanges, especially those between potential sexual partners. One participant, named Reid, nodded to the fact
that immediately honest communication can be “disarming” for people who are not part of, or are unfamiliar with, the polyamorous community. However, despite the initial shock value, communication is incredibly important because it may inspire others to do the same.

Reid shared with me that he continued to communicate in his relationships because he knew that by doing so he would model this behavior to others, and possibly encourage others:

R: When I learned about polyamory I realized that if I know what I want, and I can be completely straight forward and honest about it, it’s disarming and refreshing to people that are growing up on hook up culture and being pick up artists. People know how to play games, and I don’t think people know how to be honest and communicative. By being honest and communicative, not only am I being disarming, but also I’m modeling behavior for any partners that I meet. When I’m speaking with them honestly it gives them the freedom and permission to do what they want, and share their information with me openly and honestly. I think that everyone wins.

Reid was among several others who described their honest communication as an ethical imperative because it could, as one participant named Alisha explained, “travel through networks, and inspire others to be honest with endless partners.”

Comparing Practices: Where Can Hook Up Culture Improve?

As I spoke with polyamorous individuals, I found myself comparing their behaviors to those of hook up culture participants. In a number of ways, their practices shed light on areas where hook up culture can improve. For instance, communicating in intimate situations is an extremely important step for ensuring mutual sexual experiences. Wesleyan students that I spoke with shared the opinion that these conversations are important, yet extremely rare in heterosexual hook up
Students regard candid communication about sexual preferences and needs as shocking, and sparse. One student told me that because it was “just a one time thing,” he did not feel the need to communicate about sexual preferences or discuss boundaries with his partner. As mentioned in Chapter Two, students’ avoidance of communication in intimate encounters may lead them to make assumptions about a partner’s preferences. This is problematic because, when making these assumptions, one may also wrongly assume consent.

Conversations such as the one exampled by polyamorous people help address an ethical concern mentioned in Chapter Two: the gendered pleasure gap in hook up culture sex. Elise, a polyamorous woman, explained on possible reasons for the orgasm gap:

E: Then there’s a lot of women that go into hook ups hoping to impress their partner, so are pressured by themselves to orgasm. But if they’re anxious or uncomfortable then it’s too hard to actually orgasm, so they fake it. Then men are being trained by those fake orgasms that this is what works, this is what gets girls off. If girls fake it then they’re learning an incorrect pattern. And not only that, but the men are being rewarded for not actually putting in the work that would make a girl orgasm.

Elisa then connected this issue to a commentary on gendered power dynamics in society, and how poor communication leads to poor sexual experiences:

E: Women are pressured because they’re socialized generally to be people pleasers and wanting to make sure that they are seen positively. So if their partner does a good job then they will be seen positively and there’s a chance that this person will want to see them again… But, for all of this, by not admitting its happening you’re not able to admit you have needs around it, by not admitting you have needs around it you can’t communicate your needs, and by not communicating your needs you can’t have your needs met. Therefore you are causing poor sexual experiences.

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Wesleyan students shared that consent was important in sexual interactions, however expressed that they were reluctant to actually communicate needs and sexual boundaries when engaging in sexual interactions.
Of course, to more generally address this phenomenon we are required to elaborate upon a rich and comprehensive set of social, psychological, and sexual factors. However, absence of communication cannot be overlooked, and should be considered a contributor to the pleasure gap in heterosexual hook up culture.

I also read the polyamorous habit of “checking in” as a helpful antidote to “chill” habits of hook up culture mentioned in Chapter Three. In heterosexual hook up culture the social imperative to be “chill,” and therefore seem approving of anything and everything, creates a fallacious assumption that partners are consenting to partner’s behaviors at all times. As discussed in Chapter Three, students in heterosexual hook up culture feel an unwillingness to be vulnerable and honestly express polarizing or personal experiences with their partner, for fear of being marked as “unchill.” If we renounce a reductive model of vulnerability, wherein communication is unwelcomed, we can then imagine “checking in” as a feasible practice of hook up culture.

Polyamorous people’s habit of “avoiding games” contrasts sharply from “ghosting” that occurs in heterosexual hook up culture. Students in hook up culture spoke of situations wherein they eschewed affinity with hook up partners instead of clearly communicating their intentions. This is accounted for in numerous interviews wherein students described at least one sexual interaction with a partner who “acted as if [the hook up] never happened.” “Ghosting” is a negative hook up habit that emerges out of an avoidance of potentially emotional conversations. However, this absence of communication leads students to be unsure about the trajectory of their relationships. This ambiguity of both “ghosting” and relational suspension, mentioned
in Chapter Three, cause psychological distress for the majority of hook up culture participants, and therefore create negative emotional experiences. By “avoiding games” one must be clear about intentions, and that clarity releases his or her partner from the anxieties of ambiguity.

**Final Words: The Implications of Vulnerability in Hook Up Culture**

One of the overarching themes of this work has been the need to examine the experience of vulnerability and the significance of vulnerability and a social and sexual context.203 The dominant conceptualization of vulnerability has posed it as almost exclusively negative, equated with weakness, dependency, and powerlessness.204 This fear of emotionality in hook up culture, demonstrated through disengaging and defensive behaviors, is ultimately tied to a reductive conceptualization of vulnerability, wherein it is opposed to capacity, strength, and wellbeing. The ability to be affected is read as a proneness to injury, or potential site for harm. When vulnerability is conceptualized solely as a precondition to harm or danger, then one is forced into a narrow understanding of the word that limits the power vulnerability has to motivate responsible action and enrich subjective experiences.

In addition, when vulnerability is conceptualized as an undesirable condition of weakness, there is a personal imperative to avoid one’s own vulnerability. This precipitates a denial of relationality in which one disassociates from those that are

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204 Ibid., 15.
vulnerable, or those that make one enter a subjective experience of receptivity or softness. As seen in the interviews of participants of hook up culture, a repudiation of our own vulnerable condition facilitates an exploitation and rejection of vulnerable others. The connection between renouncement of vulnerability and denial of relationality, and the contribution of both to oppressive social relations is manifests itself in many cases in hook up culture. Thus, a purely negative view of vulnerability leads to problematic implications, jeopardizing ethical responsiveness. This thesis looks to advocate for a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability, one that accounts for it as positive and empowering condition.

As I work to remedy a one-sided and narrow picture of vulnerability, I draw attention to the constructive, creative, and life-affirming implications of being vulnerable. When vulnerability is linked with an ethics of trust, then it is more practically enabled. Yet, in saying this I do intend in making vulnerability something easy to deal with, as its ethical salience lies precisely in its difficulty. Vulnerability as a condition of openness and affectivity entail a condition that we cannot control or predict. When we are open, we do not know how the world will affect us. For that is the central challenge of vulnerability: that it is an experience born of discomfort with the unknown and the unpredictable, and yet only through exposing ourselves in this uneasy experience do we learn, transform, and extend ourselves beyond our current limits.

After listening to the narratives of Wesleyan students involved in hook up culture, I noticed a complicated relationship with vulnerability. This relationship

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emerged in students’ anecdotes of hook ups, their gestures, and even their facial expressions. Yet, at the same time, so many students asked to be interviewed for this thesis precisely because they needed to talk about hook up culture. They expressed relief when finally opening up, and they brought voice to what “chillness” had silenced. Through the interview process, they could enter a space where they could be critical of hook up culture in order to better understand their cultural landscape. As a researcher I have learned that heterosexual hook up culture rejects emotionality, and at the same time urgently craves it. I see a future of hook up culture where students learn from emotionality, embrace discomfort, and with courage, dive into their own vulnerabilities.

206 Gilson, Erinn C. "Responsibility for the Vulnerable." In The Ethics of Vulnerability, 89.
207 Ibid.


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