

# **Gender and Sexuality in College Hook-Up Culture: How Confession Websites Challenge (and Uphold) Oppressive Ideologies**

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## **Introduction**

You've probably heard of hook-up culture. The term refers to a dominant sexual script on American college campuses which allows participants to hook-up, or engage in casual sexual encounters, with few clear expectations. The term hook-up is ambiguous, referring to different levels of sexual intimacy, depending on the social group and individual. It can range from kissing a stranger to having sex with your best friend. There is no set meaning of a hook-up, which ideally allows participants to self-define their experiences. 91% of college students say that their college campuses are characterized by hook-up culture.<sup>1</sup> As a result of its dominance, participating in hook-up culture is the most visible option for young people to pursue sexual intimacy, as well as friendships and committed romantic relationships. Like all narratives, this has potential to be confusing, awkward, and coercive. Like all narratives, it has potential to be liberating.

Youth today are not having more sex; however, we are organizing our interactions differently. Hooking-up has come to replace dating as the most common way to socialize or initiate a relationship. It is often compared to the script of dating culture, in which actors socialize in heterosexual pairs and those who do not have a date are excluded from interacting. This is problematic for women, who often must wait to be asked out on dates to be included, ensuring reliance on men. Non-heterosexual interactions are made invisible in dating culture because dating events often require an opposite gender date. While participants in hook-up culture might still go on dates, socialization is now a group activity allowing individuals who might have been excluded in the dating paradigm to engage. This allows women to define themselves independently of men and could allow queer participation in peer culture. Making space for casual sex, and ultimately expression of individual identity, is an important step toward equality. The hook-up script has maintained the strict gender roles of larger American culture, men are defined as active, seeking, and desiring sex. Women are still expected to be the passive gatekeepers to sex, responsible for ending a hook-up before intercourse. While men are expected to benefit from sexual interactions, women are still stigmatized for engaging in casual sex. We can see this in the language we use to describe sex where men "get laid" or even in anti-rape discourses, "get consent" while women are stigmatized for "giving it up." Gendered roles reflect more than just double standards; they define the roles of women in opposition to those of men, meaning all interactions rely on a script of coercion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Feminist theorist Judith Butler is credited with first articulating the idea of gender performativity, arguing that power is exercised through the repetition of normative roles "to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity".<sup>ii</sup> She finds the theories of gender performativity and compulsory heterosexuality to be explicitly linked tiers of the sex/gender/sexuality system, or the ideology of genitalia informing our identity and sexual preferences. She critiques our assumptions of gender and sexuality as universally experienced, explaining that gender and sexuality are expressions of this specific ideological system of awarding privilege to those who adhere to dominant scripts and condemning all others as deviant.<sup>iii</sup> Participants in hook-up culture respond to this reward system by altering their gender expression to reflect hegemonic values. The result is an appearance of binary gender and heterosexuality as naturally occurring, rather than the outward expression of internalized cultural values. This allows for the subordination of non-conformist behavior as unnatural, which is visible in the continued discrimination against non-heterosexual persons in hook-up culture. When we interpret heterosexuality through Judith Butler's ideas of performativity, we can see sexuality as a reiteration of normative behavior. Rather than making the choice to be heterosexual, we tend to choose the path of least resistance and adopt heterosexual patterns, whether they fit or not. The invisibility of social scripts leads to the appearance of individual choices; however, our choices arise out of specific contexts based on what is valuable in a specific culture.

Through repeated stories in Western culture, women are taught that they are most valuable as sexual objects. The American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Young Girls found that many girls today are sexualized, or assigned value as sexual objects before they can develop their own desires.<sup>iv</sup> Girls and women in hook-up culture exist as a part of a larger culture teaching us to view ourselves in terms of our commodity value to men. Conversely, masculinity is closely linked to the sexual desire for women. In her research on reconstructing gender, Tatiana Masters defines misogyny as "widespread fear or hatred of women, including attributes in our selves traditionally labeled feminine".<sup>v</sup> For men to be valued in a misogynistic culture, they must reject all feminine aspects of themselves. To express vulnerability and emotion is to lose standing with peers. Masters found that when masculinity is explicitly connected to sexuality, as it is in hook-up culture, expressions of both are riddled with identity crises.<sup>vi</sup> The resulting gender roles "deny sexual autonomy" by limiting expression to the masculine norm.<sup>vii</sup> Exhibiting heterosexuality becomes a requirement to be valued as a man. The portrayal of cis-gendered, heterosexual interactions on college confession websites presents these interactions as the only option. When sexuality is constructed for us through dominant

scripts, like those available in hook-up culture, we are denied authorship in our own lives. Rather than self-determining sexuality, participants often follow the unquestioned expectations of heterosexuality.

These ideological systems limit our ability to imagine alternatives, and force us to repress aspects of our personalities that fall outside of normative standards. We still have personal agency, but it is important to consider every decision is made in a specific cultural context. Our decisions are made in the context of a patriarchy that assigns value to masculine traits and subordinates the feminine. Participants in hook-up culture respond to this reward system by altering their behavior to reflect hegemonic masculine values and sexual behaviors. Equipped with these philosophical frameworks of gender performativity and compulsory heterosexuality, it is possible to analyze the existing scholarship on hook-up culture to determine their influence on the experiences of cultural participants.

The three most-cited studies on hook-up culture come from Kathleen Bogle, Paula England, and Lisa Wade with Caroline Heldman. Kathleen Bogle, published *Hooking Up* in 2008, inciting a whirlwind of academic debate. Her study surveyed 76 people between 2001 and 2006, providing the first, and still most widely cited, substantial research on this emerging sexual culture.<sup>xviii</sup> Paula England, a sociologist at New York University, surveyed over 24,000 students at 21 universities to produce the most extensive set of information on hook-up culture to date. Lisa Wade and Caroline Heldman studied a smaller sample of only 44 undergraduate students, but their data provided insight into the complexities of this culture, combatting claims of radical changes to the sexual script.<sup>xix</sup> They have each produced data defining the practices of participants in this culture. Their findings complement each other to produce a more complete definition of hook-up culture and the practices within it.

Peer and media culture tells us that everyone is having a lot of sex, when in reality only 20% of college students who hook-up have had ten or more hook-ups by senior year.<sup>x</sup> These realities contribute to our understanding of the hook-up scripts as dominant. We know college students are basing their choices on their perceptions of normative behaviors.<sup>xii</sup> Often those perceptions are false and based on ambiguity of terms like “hooking-up” and result in young people who feel pressured to engage in certain forms of sexuality.<sup>xiii</sup> Regardless of gender, 11% of students loved hooking-up, while 50% felt ambivalent and 38% chose to abstain from hook-up sex.<sup>xiiii</sup> Experiences of participants are diverse, but the normative behavioral ideal is heavily gendered and heterosexual. The invisibility of alternative options is potentially the most problematic aspect of hook-up culture, confining participants to a largely heterosexual script.

Participants in each study recognized the double standards limiting their behaviors and most performed normative gender to experience privilege. Most interpreted this system as providing increased sexual agency, but the common sentiment conveyed described men as benefiting disproportionately from this new dynamic. Every researcher found a serious gap in orgasm rates.<sup>xv</sup> In first time hook-ups, men are three times as likely to have an orgasm as their female partners.<sup>xvi</sup> Wade’s qualitative focus found that “the guy kind of expects to get off, while the girl doesn’t expect anything”.<sup>xvii</sup> Though the ideas were expressed elsewhere, one participant went so far as to describe hook-up culture as a “guy’s paradise” because of the increase in women’s sexual availability: “Clearly, women’s rights activists who called for sexual equality with men did not intend to promote a form of interaction that would be considered a “guy’s paradise”.<sup>xviii</sup> Women in hook-up culture are still struggling against a patriarchal system that values them, or denies them value, based on a singular ideal of womanhood.

Heldman and Wade found 75% of participants expressed a desire for “meaningful” sexual interactions.<sup>xix</sup> Wade found students expressing their dissatisfaction with the present script in disturbing narratives: “my sexuality was filled with anxiety and my need to please the guy instead of worrying about my own pleasure” and “I was just a warm body being used to make a guy have an orgasm”.<sup>xx</sup> Despite potential for sexual liberation, women are often socially shamed for expressing their sexuality.<sup>xxi</sup> Hook-up culture “creates the illusion of choice” when, in actuality, complex unwritten rules leave few options for sexual expression.<sup>xxii</sup> Power in the hook-up exists not in terms of physical barriers to empowerment, but gender performativity, which requires participants to perform normative behaviors and compulsory heterosexuality, restricting interactions to the masculine/feminine binary.

## METHODS

The data used for this analysis comes from anonymous posts on a public “Confessions” Facebook page upon which a diverse range of students post about their experiences at a small co-ed public liberal arts college in the Southwest during October 2013. 128 posts over this time referenced campus hook-up culture. At the time of the study there were approximately 4,000 undergraduate students. Over 2,000 students participated in this community dialogue by “liking” the page from their personal Facebook accounts so they receive posts on their newsfeeds. It is equally popular with male and female students. The most prevalent age group is 18-24, reflecting the average age of the student body. Diverse sexual experiences are reflected in these posts, implicating the prevalence of hook-up culture across racial and heterosexual lines.

Posts on this page are confidential to all readers, so it is unclear exactly who is posting, but it allows for a unique perspective, gaining information from students who might not articulate their experiences in the same way during an interview. There are no questions or prompts for posters, so posts reflect the priorities of the student body. No incentive is given for participation, minimizing bias.

Previous studies have explored extremely privileged communities representing higher than average incomes and a mostly white student body. Students in this study are more likely to represent underserved populations as 22% are first generation college students, 28% are racial minorities and 27% are from low-income households.<sup>xxiii</sup> While previous studies have explored coercive practices within the *Greek* social system, there are no fraternities or sororities associated with the college, allowing for analysis of how hook-ups are experienced in alternative

party settings. This study of an unusual college campus allows for consideration of the emergence of hook-up culture in less privileged communities and explore the pervasiveness of these scripts across cultural boundaries.

In this analysis, posts mentioning sexual encounters were coded for terms and concepts relating to relationships with sexual partners. Data is organized into groups reflecting the three most prevalent types of relationship referenced: long term monogamous partners, long-term non-monogamous partners, and short-term non-monogamous partners. These categories are necessary to understanding the diversity of experiences within this greater culture, as well as continuities and change over time.

## FINDINGS

This examination is founded in key findings mirrored in previous research: the dominance of the hook-up script, sexual double standards, and social policing. While these phenomena have been considered elsewhere, this analysis is unique because of the use of gender performativity and compulsory heterosexuality as a lens to analyze the impacts on the experiences of participants in this community. These two components were evident in each post I interpreted. Gender performativity is visible in posts in which authors express knowledge of a singular ideal of femininity and masculinity to which they conform in their interactions within hook-up culture. Women choose to limit their sexual interactions, while men pursue more, continuing double standards, and expectations of sexual preference. Compulsory heterosexuality is still experienced through social policing and coercive sex articulated by posters.

Of the 128 posts analyzed, eighty-three referenced strict gender roles. Men are expected to adhere to larger cultural expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Heterosexuality is essential to this gender performance and men are taught to convince women to consent to sex by whatever means necessary,

*Guys, there's no such thing as the friend zone. There's two options, being a man and being a little bitch about obsessing over a girl.*

Hegemonic masculinity is glorified in this culture, upholding a gender hierarchy in which the feminine is subordinated. Men's agency is limited severely by these strict roles, inhibiting them from expressing feminine-coded traits, namely vulnerability.

Conversely, women in hook-up culture are expected to take on passive, feminine-coded sexual roles. Like their mothers before them, women are still considered to be the cultural gatekeepers to sex, responsible for ending the hook-up before it 'goes too far,' lest they be labeled a slut. They are considered to be void of their own desire, defined primarily in terms of their relationships with men. Women are forced to take into account the real potential to be culturally devalued through the slut label when determining behavior. These passive roles are problematic because they limit women's ability to make decisions independently of the social script.

Women's bodies are considered to have commodity value, which can be cashed in for anything from favors to committed relationships. Hooking-up with or being in a relationship with a woman of high commodity value can increase male social status. The result is the treatment of women not as people, but as objects. These posts express this idea:

*To all the freshman who use upperclassmen to buy liquor. Fucking tip them, get them drunk or have sex with them. (10/2/13)*

*Yo!!! Party at my place!!! Drunk white women for everybody!!! (10/22/13)*

The consideration of female bodies as objects to be traded is obviously problematic. What is disturbing about these posts is how casually posters reference the dehumanization of women as commodities. This mentality is deeply internalized by participants, and accepted to the extent that it requires no explanation or hesitance. The objectification of female bodies is nothing new, but the perpetuation of these ideas prevents full participation in not only hook-up culture, but in the world at large.

The link between female value and alcohol consumption is particularly disturbing. Many of the posts discuss parties with gendered themes to encourage outrageous drunken behavior and producing potentially coercive drinking environments:

*That golf pros and tennis hoes party was crazy, costumes turn girls into sluts (10/17/13)*

While men at this party dressed like professionals, women dressed like "hoes" showing a clear distinction in gendered value. Other themes in the study were "strippers and tippers," where men wore suits and women wore underwear and heels. Unlike the paid dancers they were imitating, women in this culture willingly present themselves as objects for male desire, for no clear benefit or increase in agency. These posts reflect a larger cultural expectation of female sexuality, teaching women that their value exists primarily in terms of the male gaze, requiring strict adherence to the script of femininity to attract heterosexual partners.

Seven posts presented heavily gendered ideas on masturbation. Some female posters expressed that they are uncomfortable masturbating or having others know that they masturbate. It's viewed as a deviant alternative to the hook-up:

*I'm a girl who masturbates occasionally... whenever I do I feel guilty. (10/1/13)*

This dialogue about masturbation stands in stark contrast to the more open conversation from men, who have no qualms about masturbation, considering it to be a natural practice all men engage in:

*I cut holes in my pockets so I can jerk off in class. (10/23/13)*

Women in hook-up culture do masturbate, but not on par with their male peers, and it is often considered to be more shameful than a casual hook-up. On this website, there is a wealth of posts about casual sex, but the only posts expressing shame are those which deviate from the strict gendered scripts requiring heterosexual participation. While some of the stigmas around casual sex have changed in the modern era, the stigmatization of female pleasure is reminiscent of patriarchal sexual cultures of the past. Through the lens of gender performativity and compulsory heterosexuality, it is clear these stigmas are confining women to passive sexual roles associated with hegemonic femininity. An essential component of this role is the denial of female sexual desire, compelling them to engage in more socially tolerated, heterosexual interactions. This serves to maintain patriarchy by ensuring women's reliance on men as the most visible outlet to pursue pleasure.

We can see that heterosexuality is the standard interaction because it doesn't require explanation; students describing their interactions without explicitly describing them as "gay" or "lesbian" are describing heterosexual interactions. The dominant pairing in hook-up culture is that of a feminine female and a masculine male, through other pairings exist, they deviate from the script. For example, in this post,

*me and my boyfriend snuck into a study room and had sex (10/13/13)*

We can assume that the author is female. Conversely, posts about deviant behaviors are described in relation to the heterosexual norm. This post articulates the few existing spaces for non-heterosexual persons to discuss their interactions:

*Well, I'm a soccer player who really likes other men... I am just glad that there is somewhere where we can post this stuff. (10/14/13)*

Only nine posts discuss non-heterosexual interactions, enforcing compulsory heterosexuality through invisibility. There were mixed responses to these posts, showing the social policing of non-conformist behavior and as well as the presence and underrepresentation of non-heterosexual students in this culture. Three posts were openly hateful towards gay people and one post expressed trans-phobic sentiments directed toward a specific transgender student, enforcing heterosexuality through fears of physical violence. One post articulated an experience of rape, physically imposing heterosexuality. Overwhelmingly, the hook-ups discussed are straight, provoked by alcohol, and representative of miscommunication and disproportionate power dynamics between men and women. This poster points out the dilemma of straight, privileged hook-up culture:

*when straight guys ask how lesbian sex works i feel really bad for their girlfriends because if you don't understand how to have sex with a girl in any way other than repeatedly putting your dick in her you are having some really bad sex (10/30/13)*

Students might not be having enjoyable sex, but alternative options are limited, ensuring continued participation. There are no defined barriers, but the power of hook-up culture lies in its pervasiveness. Participants take the path of least resistance when they participate in the dominant, hetero-gendered script. Other paths require internal work to self-determine goals and communication with potential partners. For most participants, this work of critiquing the expectations of these scripts seems difficult if not impossible.

The dominance of hook-up culture on campus was apparent in posts expressing an inability to imagine alternatives to pursuing intimacy without hooking-up. To many, even dating seems like a forgotten concept:

*I've been talking to this really gorgeous girl [...] I really wanna try to hang out with her but I just don't really know what to do. Any help? (10/29/13)*

The reader doesn't even understand the word date as it has been replaced by hang out. Unlike dates, hanging out is expected to happen naturally, without a clear expression of romantic interest. This shows how the pervasiveness of the hook-up script inhibits students from imagining alternatives. While in a dating culture, one might openly express romantic interest, hyper-masculinity in hook-up culture doesn't allow for open communication that could potentially unveil vulnerability and lead to rejection.

While hooking-up is the behavioral norm, not all students are participating. To the individuals within the group, it appears as though everyone is hooking-up. The stigmatization of communication leads to false perceptions of the norm and participants adjust their behavior to fit.

*Am I the only freshmen girl who hasn't hooked up with a guy? [...] Any tips from my fellow peers? -Sincerely the girl who needs to get laid. (10/25/13)*

The option to abstain from participation was seemingly invisible as people who choose to avoid hook-up culture entirely are rare. In this new environment, hooking-up is the primary vehicle for socialization and to abstain is to be excluded from peer camaraderie. Only three posters described making the choice to avoid hooking-up. Posts about opting out of hook-up culture articulated the isolation felt by non-participants emerged in this culture:

*Am I the only straight guy on campus who is not asexual and yet doesn't care about having sex? Honestly, it's a couple seconds of ecstasy followed by a whole bunch of hurt feelings and complications, and possibly STDs and unexpected pregnancies. I think kissing is a hell of a lot better: I'd seriously take a single heartfelt, passionate kiss over a week of sex every night. (10/14/13)*

Insistence upon participation in a largely heterosexual culture upholds the power structure of compulsory heterosexuality through peer policing. There are examples of both men and women who are unhappy with this new behavioral norm, but their experiences are gendered. The fact that participants must justify their non-participation shows how dominant hook-up culture has become, and how lonely it can be to experience this exclusion. Non-participants are rare because most students are coerced into adopting hegemonic behaviors through peer policing and the invisibility of alternative communities. This finding supported those of Bogle, England, Heldman and Wade, conveying the overpowering nature of this culture. Unlike earlier scholars, I find this dominance to be the most problematic aspect of hook-up culture.

The male poster feels compelled to define himself in opposition to homosexuality, as if opting out of hook-up culture makes him attracted to men. The female poster describing opting out also experiences isolation, but she defines herself in opposition to the girl she sees as promiscuous and desperate:

*I'm a Virgin. I lied to my friends and told them I wasn't. They all have had a lot of sex since we've been here and they are always talking about it. I have to sit there and listen about all of the guys they are having sex with and how it doesn't mean anything to them. I don't want that. I would rather be a virgin than a girl throwing herself at every guy she meets. I have no problem talking to guys but I've just met so many that suggest having sex with them before I even actually know their name. Please tell me there are guys that care more about the girl rather than if she is going to have sex with him or not. Is it ok that I've waited this long? (10/23/13)*

These posts express engendered understandings of deviance. The male posters consider being called gay to be the deepest insult, the female poster thinks the worst thing she can be is a slut. These separate stigmas show how hook-up culture has maintained oppressive ideologies of gender and sexuality. Men are glorified for behavior that would earn a woman the slut label. Conversely, the greatest insult directed toward a man is to call him gay, while women are encouraged to hook-up with each other for the viewing pleasure of men.

*I am so sick and tired of people treating my sexual orientation as something to gain from. me being a raging lesbian has nothing to do with you getting your dick hard (10/16/13)*

Despite obvious inequalities, 47% of posts described positive experiences within hook-up culture. In reality these scripts offer new opportunities for exploration through relaxed expectations of monogamy and the uncoupling of sex from love. While the tolerance of non-heterosexual interactions (at least for women) seems to be increasing in hook-up culture, challenging expectations of heterosexuality, the space for these interactions has been made within the gender system. In upholding, and in some ways contributing to, hegemonic gender roles, hook-up culture has failed to produce significant changes to the agency of participants. Like previous cultures, there is little space to self-determine identity. There is a huge diversity of experiences within hook-up culture and no singular theory can predict individual satisfaction. I have organized posts by relationship to sexual partner to better understand the role of compulsory heterosexuality and gender performativity in different contexts.

25% of the relationships described by posters were long-term monogamous relationships. These relationships are typically initiated through casual hook-ups and increase in emotional commitment over time. 54% of posters portrayed these relationships positively.

To pursue a relationship, a participant in hook-up culture will typically hook-up with their romantic interest and, over a period of time, increase emotional commitment.<sup>xviii</sup> In a dating script, participants would typically go on dates with their romantic interest, increase emotional commitment and then have sex. In reality, hooking-up is not so different from dating culture of previous generations. Just like a dating dynamic, some interactions are casual, while others lead to long-term monogamous relationships and even marriage. Just as in a dating dynamic, there are strict scripts with gendered roles and harsh double standards.

Participants in college hook-up culture often avoid relationships, describing them as wastes of time:

*Coming to college when you're in a long distance relationship is absolutely lame...who does that? Best years of your life, you're 18-19 yrs old, and you're committed? (10/31/13)*

The posts condemning relationships came from both men and women, who often view college relationships as unnecessary and even inconsistent with long term goals requiring significant time commitments to school and work. Many participants see the short-term non-monogamous hook-up as a solution to the inconvenience of dating:

*I miss freshman year. The chicks were more down to just hook up. Now you have to take them for dinner and relationships. (10/21/13)*

However, there are major social reasons for women to pursue relationships. In hook-up culture, men are rewarded for having sex with lots of women. We also know that women are stigmatized for having sex with multiple men. Through the lens of gender performativity, we can see how men and women respond to this system of rewards and consequences by altering their behavior to gain privilege. Both men and women adopt heterosexual behaviors and hegemonic gender roles, repeating the appearance of gender as a singular experience. Women in hook-up culture are encouraged to adhere to gendered double standards by pursuing relationships with men in order to save their reputations and their status as respect-worthy.

Situated from the position of having a boyfriend, one post reflects a woman's self-righteous need to explain to her peers what they are doing wrong, and how their "trashy" choices limit their ability to obtain a man:

*Dating an upperclassman is the best thing that could have ever happened to me. [...] Girls, if you want to attract a gentleman, maybe you should try acting like a lady. Because that's what a true gentleman would want. Keep it classy not trashy! (10/16/13)*

Her post reflects the idea of gender performativity by perpetuating stories of women being awarded for closely adhering to hegemonic notions of femininity. Additionally, it encourages heterosexuality by presenting attracting men as the most valuable pursuit for women.

Many participants in hook-up culture desire relationships and pursue them for their various benefits. Heldman and Wade found 75% of participants expressed a desire for "meaningful" sexual interactions, such as those within a relationship.<sup>xxvii</sup> Most participants in this study, both male and female, enjoyed their experiences with traditional relationships and considered them to be valuable expenditures of time. Expressions of these interactions on a confessions website are limited because these encounters are at the top of the hierarchy of sexual experiences and not considered behavior to which one must confess.

18% of the relationships described by posters were long-term non-monogamous relationships, colloquially known as friends with benefits or fuck buddies, which allow for consistent sexual interaction with no expectation of love or commitment. 50% of posters portrayed these relationships positively. These interactions represent the wide range of pairings between the one-night stand and the relationship.

These interactions require communicated interest between sexual partners to have regular, low-risk sex outside of a romantic relationship.<sup>xxviii</sup> They meet the common participant desire for effortless sex, conducive with busy class schedules. Both men and women can benefit from this contract because it offers sex with someone you trust while requiring minimal effort on either end. These sexual encounters often occur while both parties are sober and able to offer clear consent between trusted parties.<sup>xxviii</sup> Communication isn't as stigmatized, allowing for greater degrees of emotional and physical satisfaction than the one-night stand. Unlike the one-night stand, potential social repercussions are minimal. Women might choose these relationships to decrease sexual partners and limit "slutty" shorter-term hook-ups.<sup>xxviii</sup> This reflects the idea of gender performativity because we can see women altering their behaviors to fit hegemonic standards of femininity associated with chastity. Additionally, it presents attracting men as the most valuable pursuit for women, encouraging heterosexuality. It makes sense for women to seek out relationships in order to limit new sexual partners and preserve their cultural value. But hook-up culture awards men the power to define relationships as exclusive.<sup>xxviii</sup> Each poster who expressed dissatisfaction with this contract described frustration over conflicting desires of sexual partners. This post shows one woman's struggle to find her place in a script, which presents her with few options:

*i feel like just a booty call now a days. I like sex and what not, but I want a relationship too. Me and this dude only sleep with each other but he just doesn't want to make it go anywhere else like I do. Do I let him go and find someone who does? or do I stay with being able to have sex whenever I want. decisions...decisions... (10/13/13)*

There is a trend of women being devalued in hook-up culture for their very participation. Unfortunately for this poster, because of our cultural beliefs about inherent gender expressions, she does not have the privilege of defining her relationship as emotionally committed.

*I've been sleeping with my best friend. She's gorgeous smart and the sex is great and the best part is we can just chill and play video games but i can also talk to her about anything. But lately she's been acting distant and doesn't hit me up as often as she used to. We still hang out in groups and she still acts interested in me but doesnt follow through with anything. Did I do something wrong? As far*

*as I know she isn't seeing anyone else, but I don't know how to bring it up because part of the greatness of us fucking was that it was nothing serious or obligatory or relationship-esque.. How do I talk to her about it without seeming clingy? (10/24/13)*

Though they have more power to define relationships, to express the desire for an emotional commitment would be to express vulnerability, requiring them to deviate from the script and face potential social stigmatization. So even men, who are assigned privilege, find their behavior limited to the narrow confines of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality, expecting them to have sex with lots of women regardless of their individual desires.

57% of posts described hooking up with people who they had no relationship with previous to the sexual encounter. Unlike the other relationship categories, a minority of 32% of posters portrayed these encounters positively, while 44% expressed dissatisfaction and 24% were neutral. Existing literature has found orgasm inequality to be most rampant within the first time hook-up. To reiterate, in first time hook-ups, men are three times as likely to have an orgasm as their female partners.<sup>xxix</sup> Several female participants in my study expressed dissatisfaction with their partners:

*Gentlemen, There's this thing called foreplay. If you use it, we might be more willing to forgive you when you finish in two minutes. Thank you, Unsatisfied Women (10/24/13)*

None of the posts from male authors expressed an inability to have an orgasm in a first time hook-up. The reality of unequal satisfaction in hook-ups can be linked back to foundational ideas of gender and the insistence of participating in heterosexual sex, regardless of whether or not women are actually experiencing pleasure. Existing research has uncovered new trends of oral sex, finding that women today are more likely to perform fellatio, while men are actually less likely to perform cunnilingus than their dating culture counterparts. The stigmatization of male performance of oral sex contributes to the high rates of orgasm inequality<sup>xxx</sup>.

Many women are choosing to take advantage of these changing trends and interpret hook-up culture as providing an outlet for sexual desires that would otherwise be stigmatized.

*I love giving head. Simple. As. That. (10/6/13)*

This poster enjoys performing fellatio and actually benefits from the increasing acceptance of casual oral sex. These posts offer consideration of the agency female participants have to self-define their experiences as empowering or disempowering. It is important to consider that her decision is not as "simple" as she thinks it is; her behavior is acceptable in this culture because it fits into the assignment of female value based on relationships with men.

Many women in hook-up culture adopt the behaviors of hegemonic masculinity, challenging the notion of a singular way of performing femininity. This is the most common challenge to the sex/gender/sexuality system visible in my research. These women reclaim desire and often reject feminine coded expressions of emotion. This post shows the space available for women to take on traditionally masculine roles:

*Nothing wrong with being a lady and pimping on some men. Sometimes you just [sic] gata get some. (10/6/13)*

Like many aspects of Western culture, the female adoption of masculine roles is generally considered to be acceptable form of gender deviance. While this creation of space is important, it fails to challenge the problematic glorification of masculinity and perpetuates the subordination of the feminine. To enhance agency, we must critique the separation of the masculine and feminine into separate roles and recognize the complexity of human identity existing outside of these narrow categories.

Typically, gendered social roles stand at odds, creating a system of manipulation rather than a dialogue of consent.<sup>xxxx</sup> As previous research has explored, women within hook-up culture are expected to be gatekeepers to sex, just as they were in dating culture. Women stand at a position in which hooking-up is the only visible option for socialization, yet to engage in a hook-up is to risk being discarded by partners, who are taught to de-value women who give in too soon.

*Already regretting sleeping with a guy because now he's lost interest. (10/8/13)*

Communication is stigmatized in the first time hook-up, minimizing the ability of participants to express, or even recognize, what they want out of a sexual encounter.

*Romance seems to be fueled by alcohol. Guys only tell me their feelings when they are drunk... then either we have a sloppy hook up, or they forget they ever said it... its kind of an awkward bummer.... (10/1/13)*

The burden is placed upon women to stop the hook-up before it leads to sex, often resulting in unwanted sexual encounters.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Within the hook-up culture, many participants go to parties with the expectation of hooking up. There is rarely verbally expressed consent between parties. The burden is placed upon women to stop the interaction before it leads to sex. When they do, they risk angered responses like this one:

*Don't come on to me and tell me you're horny then reject my offer to get together and take care of it...if you're not interested then don't make a move. (10/23/13)*

At it's worst, hook-up culture increases women's sexual availability to men and creates dynamics conducive with rape. It fails to challenge larger cultural ideals of hyper-masculinity responsible for the tolerance of mentalities like the one expressed by the poster above. It fails to challenge the idea that women exist for the sexual gratification of men. Until we start having a conversation about sexuality that recognizes women as people with thoughts, feelings, experiences and desires, we will be fighting an uphill battle to end oppression in all forms.

To fully understand modern hook-up culture, it is important to consider the connection some researchers have drawn to rape. Rape is disturbingly prevalent on college campuses and some argue this is the direct result of the practices and values of hook-up culture. Unfortunately, my research confirmed the prevalence of rape. This post articulated one women's experience:

*To the scum bag in West, Let me just make this clear: A movie does not mean sex. What you did was incredibly messed up. No means no (10/17/13)*

It is worth noting that this poster doesn't use the word rape. She has clearly been affected by campaigns to end sexual assault on campus, parroting the phrase "no means no" but doesn't go as far as to describe her own experience as rape. The perpetrator is a "scum bag" but she isn't at the point of calling him what he is, a rapist. Her choice to avoid this language is grounded in the social reality of rape culture, which blames the victim for their attacks. In this culture, sympathy is offered to the victim, but blame is still placed on her to the extent that we stop before actually holding the perpetrator accountable. When consensual sexual encounters within hook-up culture rely on coercive scripts, unequal power dynamics and stigmatized communication, it is easy to see how a woman who has been the victim of rape might struggle to understand her experience as rape. If we are to end this, we have to reject the coercive, gendered scripts dictating sexual agency in this culture.

## CONCLUSION

In a hook-up, a woman is unlikely to have an orgasm, is subjecting herself to an unequal power dynamic with her partner, and faces the real potential to be ridiculed socially for having sex. What seemed like the exciting solution to patriarchal dating systems now seems at best anti-climactic. While this system does offer new opportunities, it maintains many of the same limitations of dating culture. I reject the idea that women are inherently victimized by casual sex or hook-up culture; such an oversimplification would deny the huge diversity of experiences, many of which are self-defined as empowering. We can see in hook-up culture many of the stigmas around casual sex have been dismantled. This allows for increased exploration, especially for women who have historically been confined to sex within the context of an exclusive relationship. In some contexts, these scripts improve our agency to explore queer identities. Most notably, it allows for the reversal of traditional gender roles by encouraging women to adopt qualities of hegemonic masculinity and pursue casual sex. My study confirms previous findings of inequality and directly relates the scripts of hook-up culture to the theories of gender performativity and compulsory heterosexuality. Additionally, I find the dominance of hook-up culture to restrict the agency of participants to determine their own identities.

Sexual empowerment has been conceptually linked to casual sex. It is incredibly important to have space for sexuality outside the institutional structure of marriage, which privileges upper class heterosexual couples and ritually subordinates women. However, casual sex as the exclusive option for empowerment is incredibly problematic. While the hook-up script might be movement in the right direction, the dominance of this script obscures alternatives to pursue intimacy, depriving participants of real choice to engage. Whereas, in an ideal world, people would be able to express themselves and their sexual preferences without the outside influence of their social structure, this is never the case. This particular structure has been promised as the solution to sexual repression, but in many ways fails to challenge the larger hierarchal systems subordinating women. Hook-up culture, and the casual sex coming with it, isn't inherently problematic, but through the lens of gender performativity and compulsory heterosexuality, it is clear these scripts have maintained problematic inequalities. To pursue sex, and life, consciously, we need to critique these strict gendered narratives limiting our behavior.

To increase women's agency as well as men's, we need to reject the strict narratives limiting our behavior to a singular cis-gendered, heterosexual form. We have a long way to go before we live in a society where people can unapologetically explore their bodies and desires, but

the scripts of hook-up culture offer movement in the right direction. There are new challenges faced by participants in hook-up culture, but the benefit of increased sexual agency means we can never go back.

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- <sup>i</sup> (Wade 11)
- <sup>ii</sup> (Butler 128)
- <sup>iii</sup> (Zajdermann)
- <sup>iv</sup> (Zurbriggen 1)
- <sup>v</sup> (Masters 403)
- <sup>vi</sup> (Masters 400)
- <sup>vii</sup> (Masters 401)
- <sup>viii</sup> (Bogle 5)
- <sup>ix</sup> (Heldman 132)
- <sup>x</sup> (England 302)
- <sup>xi</sup> (Bogle 72)
- <sup>xii</sup> (Bogle 90)
- <sup>xiii</sup> (England 2)
- <sup>xiv</sup> (England 303)
- <sup>xv</sup> (Bogle 69)
- <sup>xvi</sup> (Bogle 6)
- <sup>xvii</sup> (Bogle 183)
- <sup>xviii</sup> (Heldman & Wade 140)
- <sup>xix</sup> (Wade 7)
- <sup>xx</sup> (Bogle 125)
- <sup>xxi</sup> (Bogle 184)
- <sup>xxii</sup> (Colorado 15)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> (England 540)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> (Heldman & Wade 140)
- <sup>xxv</sup> (Wade 4)
- <sup>xxvi</sup> (Wade 4)
- <sup>xxvii</sup> (Bogle 72)
- <sup>xxviii</sup> (Bogle 183)
- <sup>xxix</sup> (Bogle 69)
- <sup>xxx</sup> (Wade 2)
- <sup>xxxi</sup> (Bogle 55)
- <sup>xxxii</sup> (Bogle 111)