

**Free(dom)inated:**  
A Feminist Examination of Hookup Culture's  
Sexual Empowerment and Sexual Policing of  
Duke University Undergraduate Women

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# Introduction

“There are free condoms placed in nine different locations around campus and in the snack vending machines in your dorm,” a Duke Wellness Center official announced to the entire female half of the freshman class on the second day of college orientation. Uncomfortable, nervous giggles rippled through the chilly auditorium on a sweltering August afternoon, where the Duke Class of 2017 has been segregated by gender just like a fifth-grade seminar on puberty. Only one day before, my parents had left me to live somewhere without them for the first time in my life. After eighteen years of living in a small, rural town right in the middle of the Bible Belt, I found myself in quite a different political climate. I had always been quite progressive and had never agreed with my community’s abstinence-only outlook, but this was unlike anything I had ever heard before. My high school didn’t teach any form of sexual education. The only mention of sex that was ever heard from an authority figure came from the pastor or the health class coach-teacher: “Don’t do it. It’s a gift for your husband, for your wife. It’s a sin. You’ll get pregnant. You’ll get herpes. Don’t do it.” It never seemed to work, if the astronomical teenage pregnancy rate and prevalence of sexually transmitted infections were any indication. There were no condoms to be had in the school. You couldn’t ask for them from the health instructor, from the nurse, or from the guidance counselor. There were two ways to get them: try to buy them without someone recognizing you and telling your parents or get a “Brown Bag Special.” The affectionately, or perhaps un-affectionately, named “Brown Bag Special” was a paper sack from the local health department that contained some of the worst condoms the underfunded clinic’s money could buy and a sample size pouch of lubricant.

But I wasn’t at a Tennessee public high school anymore; I was now a Duke University first year, where I thought, “Apparently there’s enough sex to justify having condoms in the vending machines.” I was the first person in my family to attend college, and I had no idea what

it would be like once I got there. I certainly don't recall vending machine condoms being a part of my Duke University fantasy. The Wellness Center official continued on about how important it was to use condoms and other forms of contraceptives *each and every* time we had sex with a partner. Each and every? How much sex are we talking here?

As it turns out, we didn't stay on the topic of sex for very long. The sexual education-esque speech very quickly took a dark turn towards sexual assault. For the next forty-five minutes we listened to various strategies for how not to get sexually assaulted by our male peers. "Watch your drink." "Look out for each other." "Help your drunk friends." "Don't walk alone at night." "Don't get too drunk." "Don't go home with someone you don't know." I immediately felt like an animal being stalked. It was as if I were being released into the hunting grounds with a target of femininity on my back. These warnings were followed by ways to report the assaults that would inevitably happen to some of the women sitting in that room. The strategies they recited on that day wouldn't be enough for many of us: in the four years I spent at Duke, I, too, would become a victim of sexual assault. Each of my female-identifying friends would become a victim. Many of my classmates, my peers, my housemates, and the women in the audience whom I would never meet would become victims of sexual assault. If the presenter's statistic that one in every five women in college will be sexually assaulted was accurate, were our male peers who had been taken into a nearby auditorium spending their time learning how to avoid sexual assault? Were they learning how to not to sexually assault women? Were they learning not to pressure women into having sex? Were they learning not to shame women who choose to have sex? The roar of their laughter that could be heard through the walls suggested otherwise.

Shortly after the heteronormative wellness talk ended, I began to hear the buzz of Duke University freshmen discussing Duke's "hookup culture" and the sex scandals at Duke that had,

unbeknownst to me, been splattered across national headlines time and time again. The presentation and the following chatter were my first exposure to the idea of “hookup culture<sup>1</sup>” and what its norms were for women. I had certainly used the term “hookup” in high school to refer to something like someone making out under the bleachers, but I hadn’t heard of “hookup culture.” My immediate immersion into this culture and its accompanying norms would happen quickly as Duke University’s campus became my home, my library, my restaurant, my grocery store, my entertainment. Much like everyone else, I never left it. It became a bubble in which I was constantly contained. Even though I didn’t participate in hookup culture for the first two years of my time at Duke, I was very much affected by it. When I stayed in my room on any given Saturday night, I could still hear the groups of women excitedly getting ready in the community bathroom. I heard them stumble back in drunkenly around 3 A.M., I often heard them getting sick from too much alcohol, and once I even heard a woman from my dorm floor getting removed by a resident assistant from a locked community laundry room where she had been hooking up with a guy she had met at a party. I saw other women experience both the ups and the downs of hookup culture before I began participating. After all I had seen and heard, I still chose to participate during my junior year. I thought it would be fun and sexually liberating, something I first thought was feminist in the most radical way. I decided that I was affected by the culture whether I liked it or not, so I might as well enjoy the benefits of hookup culture’s sexual expression. Like many women I know, I vehemently criticized hookup culture while also wholeheartedly and excitedly participating. My experience and the experiences of my female

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of a “hookup” is understood throughout as sexual activity that occurs without any commitment between the partners. This activity can range from kissing to penetrative sexual intercourse. “Hookup culture” is understood as a system of cultural norms that takes hold where the hookup is the dominant form of sexual relations.

peers that have occurred during my time at Duke, including this orientation to sexual assault on the college campus, has led me to ask: Is hookup culture as sexually empowering for women as it is often made out to be? Does the normalization of sex—that is the re-making of sex to be a non-taboo activity—that accompanies hookup culture really offer freedom for women’s sexuality?

## **Literature Review: Hookup Culture and the Sex Wars**

In the context of today’s campus hookup culture, sexual assault and other male-privileged sexual relations on college campuses have revived feminist debates of the 1970s and 1980s. As law professor Emily Bazelon writes in her 2015 *New York Times Magazine* article, there has been a simmering argument among feminists regarding how to develop university sexual assault policies. Some feminist scholars, who view heteronormative sex as an inherently sexist practice, have encouraged stricter, victim-centered sexual assault policies on campuses, while other feminists worry that this increase in broader policies both endangers accused male perpetrators and discredits female agency by viewing sex only as a source of violence (Bazelon 2015). While clearly centered upon sexual assault, this feminist debate does get at the core of the larger context of theorizing young women’s sexuality and the ways it functions in patriarchal<sup>2</sup> culture on campus. As Bazelon titles her article, “The Return of the Sex Wars” is upon us (2015).

As one of the most basic of human functions, sex has endlessly captivated society, and anthropologists have been no exception (Malinowski 1929; Mead 1935). What hadn’t been widely anthropologically considered until the twentieth century was the differing gendered experiences within sexuality. Following the Euro-American First Wave of Feminism that worked towards greater opportunities for women—primarily white women’s suffrage—was the Second

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout, “patriarchy” refers to a cultural system of male-privileged power relations that is supported by social institutions that also privilege the male.



Wave of Feminism, which began in the 1960s and focused more upon women's bodily liberties. This era brought about awareness and activism centered on the expansion of women's sexual and reproductive rights (Rampton, 2008). The push for women's sexual freedoms garnered interest in feminist writings regarding sexuality. In considering these feminist perspectives on women's sexuality, two major viewpoints emerged in the theoretical literature: anti-pornography and pro-pornography feminism. Although these opposing schools of thought focus specifically upon pornography as their defining characteristic, their writing on such issues can be read as broader views of sexuality and oppression. Each poses pornography as a reflection of larger society and its cultural norms. Two of the most prominent and exemplary scholars in each of these camps that existed within the Feminist Sex Wars are, respectively, Catharine MacKinnon and Gayle Rubin (Nash 1995). Where MacKinnon (1997) argued that all heterosexual sexual activity is inherently violent towards women, Rubin (1984) asserted that it is the policing of sexuality that is oppressive to women and other subjugated groups. The work of both of these scholars became highly influential throughout feminist studies. My own research aims to revisit these prominent frameworks constructed during the Sex Wars and to identify the sexual culture *status quo* inhabited by collegiate women at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

Like many other anti-pornography feminists (Dworkin 1981; Leidholdt 1990; Teish 1980; Dines 2003) MacKinnon (1997) vehemently contends that heterosexual sex itself is an act of violence. It not only perpetuates gender hegemony; it creates it. Male dominance is constructed upon the suppression of female sexuality.<sup>3</sup> The division of the genders, one superior

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<sup>3</sup> Male/female is often used to refer to gender in the literature, but I wish to acknowledge that sex and gender are not interchangeable.

and one inferior,<sup>4</sup> depends upon sexuality as their differentiation. As MacKinnon (1982: 515) states, “Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away.” Marx observes that labor is that which bodies themselves possess until it is exploited by the capitalist, just as female sexuality is possessed by the female body until it is inevitably exploited by the male. Both sexuality and labor are utilized as structures to construct hierarchies of bodily power over others (MacKinnon 1997).

I agree with MacKinnon that heterosexual sex has been largely utilized to exploit the female body for male pleasure, but where I diverge from her is the idea all male-female sex is violent and consists of domination and submission. Certainly, sexual violence is violence in itself, but MacKinnon argues that sexual violence is simply sex on a spectrum of violence. I believe that MacKinnon’s work correctly attributes the origins of gender inequality to sex, but it doesn’t offer women any sexual agency or the ability to negotiate their own sexual pleasure. She offers abstinence as women’s primary rebellion against the domination of men, but maintains it as an ineffective one, leaving women with the option to neither avoid nor enjoy sex (1997). She summarizes her position with the following: “Interpreting female sexuality as an expression of women’s agency and autonomy, as if sexism did not exist, is always denigrating and bizarre and reductive...” (MacKinnon 1997: 172). Surely sexism exists and patriarchal values reign, but in my view, young women are not so helpless as to have no understanding or agency in the matter of sex. Male-female sexual activity that privileges women can be found in university dorms across the country with more and more women negotiating for their own sexual pleasure and

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<sup>4</sup> I use the division of two sexes here to historically discuss the hierarchies between male and female. It is necessary to recognize that neither sex nor gender is a binary as this division may suggest.

demanding the obtainment of their freely given consent. That's not to say that sexual violence isn't an epidemic on college campuses and larger society, but I would argue that it is not every male-female sexual experience that MacKinnon makes it out to be. MacKinnon's camp of feminist thought perceives female sexuality as being simple conditioning brought about by the dominance of males and their sexual needs. By the terms of MacKinnon's version of feminism, female sexuality is imposed upon women, existing only to sustain male sexuality. This is where the true debate amongst the feminist schools of thought exists, and where I enter into a contestation of her position.

This unsatisfactory conceptualization of women's sexual agency leads to the work of Gayle Rubin, whose pro-pornography stance has been shared by many feminist scholars (Vance 1984; Hollinbaugh 1984; Nash 1995; Paglia; 1994; Wolf 1993). Rubin rebuts MacKinnon's work with the following response:

One tendency has criticized the restrictions on women's sexual behavior and denounced the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active. This tradition of female sexual thought has called for sexual liberation that would work for women as well as men. The second tendency has considered sexual liberation to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse (1984: 28).

Rubin makes a strong case that anti-pornography, sex-negative feminism incorrectly portrays acts of sexual expression by only highlighting violent sex and attempting to make it representative of female participation in sex as a whole. These anti-pornography feminists, such as MacKinnon, condemn all female sexual expressions, even those where men are not present.

This perspective can result in shame and distress for women who wish to engage in sexual activity, and Rubin (1984) contests that it isn't very feminist at all.

Gayle Rubin agrees with MacKinnon's strain of feminism in that, "Sex is a vector of oppression" (1984: 22). That being said, she passionately disputes the sex negativity present in MacKinnon's standpoint. Rubin contends, "Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force. Most Christian traditions, following Paul, hold that sex is inherently sinful" (Rubin 1984: 11). This statement by Rubin clearly outlines the associated cultural traditions that share values with anti-sex feminism and its claim that all heterosexual sex is bad sex. If sex is sinful, then it becomes easier for society to deem sexual women—the oppressed gender—as sullied. Following MacKinnon's anti-sex theory, women should be encouraged to abstain from sex to break from male dominance. According to Rubin's view of sex, they—and other sexually subjugated populations—should be emboldened to reject sexual negativity and embrace sexuality as they see fit without a system of oppressive sexual policing.

Living in an actuality that is not based on one theory or another, young women are forced to navigate the realm of sexuality with caution. The existing literature appears to place the sexual culture on contemporary college campuses as being somewhere between what each of the Sex War legions has proposed. Because women's sexuality and how it is judged is dictated by what best serves male sexuality, just as MacKinnon asserts, women are often placed in unfair categories defined by their participation in sexual activity with men: the prudes, who don't have enough sex, and the sluts, who have too much sex. But like Rubin finds, this policing of women's sexuality through sexual politics is used to subjugate them further. Bazelon (2015) explores this framework of feminist thought in respect to sexual assault on the college campus, but a broader look at hookup culture through this lens is still missing from the literature. This

works aims to step towards filling that gap by examining the oppressive and empowering elements of sex for women on the college campus.

## **Literature Review: Hookups on the College Campus**

Historian Beth L. Bailey (1988) finds that hooking up, which she refers to but does not name, is a relational development from the earlier relations systems of “calling” and “dating” that occurred between young men and women in previous generations. Bailey’s history of heterosexual American courtship begins as more private forms of relations between men and women become replaced with the dating system. She writes that dating derives from calling, in which an eligible woman would invite a man to come visit with her in her family’s parlor and enjoy refreshments under the supervision of her parents. This version of male-female relations was a very private matter that occurred entirely in a woman’s family home and required a formal invitation from the woman. It also occurred before the turn of the twentieth century, a time when few women attended universities.

As many couples sought more privacy, more women entered college, and as the automobile became popular in the early twentieth century, women found that public dating and leaving home or the university parlor was more engaging. In this dating system, a man invited a woman and paid for her entertainment on the date. Couples would often go to movies, restaurants, and dances—all public spaces where often they met with other couples. The system of dating also made relations more casual; men and women often went on dates with several partners per month. The competitive and capitalistic nature of dating at the time, in which men paid for dates and expected a return on their investments in women, also meant that women were pressured to “pet” and “neck” with men to remain popular in the dating realm. This sexuality of

dating expanded throughout the 1960s along with the rise of youth culture, until finally the Sexual Revolution and its accompanying sexual liberation emerged. Sex became more freely practiced without the component of dating or even romantic feelings. It became something often practiced for pleasure rather than for intimacy. This transition brought about the concept of the hookup.

By 2000 author and journalist Tom Wolfe—who was born in 1931—had written a condemnation of hookups that was about Duke University. Although few to no studies on hooking up exist before 2000, Wolfe claims that, “hooking up” was a term known in the year 2000 to almost every American child over the age of nine, but to only a relatively small percentage of their parents” (2000: 7). He goes on to chronicle the negative changes he believes have occurred in male-female sexual relations throughout his life time. While the metaphor of baseball bases that he states was used in the twentieth century referred to sexual penetration as the “homerun,” Wolfe goes on to say that, “In the year 2000, in the era of hooking up, ‘first base’ meant deep kissing (‘tongue hockey’), groping, and fondling; ‘second base’ meant oral sex; ‘third base’ meant going all the way; and ‘home plate’ meant learning each others names” (2000: 7). He asserts that women suffer under hookup’s sexually freeing norms as men no longer have to treat them well or spend money on them to receive sexual pleasure.

Other authors like Laura Sessions Stepp (2007) have written critiques of hooking up and how it is damaging for women. Stepp also writes in the context of Duke University as a portion of her research is her observation and interviews of a Duke University senior. She finds that hookup culture is actually an “unhooked” culture in which sex is drained of its intimacy. Stepp portrays young women as having lost their chances at love by hooking up, assuming this is what they actually desire even when the women state that they do not. She writes:

The crucial thing to remember in all of this is that hooking up, in the minds of this generation, carries no commitment. Partners hook up with the understanding that however far they go sexually, neither should become romantically involved in any serious way. Hooking up's defining characteristic is the ability to *unhook* from a partner at any time, just as they might delete any old song on their iPod (2007: 5).

Stepp's purpose in writing this book is clear in her title, *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*. She argues that hookup culture cannot be empowering for women because it removes love and intimacy from their immediate goals. She finds hookup culture to be thoroughly damaging.

While Wolfe (2000) and Stepp (2007) both find hooking up and hookup culture to be destructive, sociology professor Kathleen Bogle (2008) makes a less judgmental examination into hookup culture on contemporary college campus. Bogle does not set out to specifically explore the effects of hookup culture as they pertain to women, but she does conclude that there are potentially harmful effects for them. Her work is perhaps the most important on the subject of hookup culture. Bogle finds that examining hookup culture from a moral stance, which she believes Wolf has done, is too simplistic to fully understand the situation. She cites the media as often also taking the position that hookup culture is a moral problem. Bogle rejects this position and argues that hookup culture has simply changed how men and women form relationships, whether they are sexual or intimate or both.

Kathleen Bogle asserts that the hookup is nothing new; it has been going on for decades. Her ethnographic research also finds that the term "hookup" on college campuses is an ambiguous term that can mean anything from kissing to penetrative sexual intercourse. It often refers to sex, but not always. The ambiguity of this can easily lead students to believe everyone

is having sex. One of Bogle's most important claims throughout *Hooking Up* (2008) is the idea that everyone in the campus community is shaped and affected by hookup culture even if he or she does not choose to participate in it. Each student is subjected to the norms of hookup culture whether or not they are hooking up. College women in particular face a double standard of being expected to participate in hookups but not too many hookups. Bogle finds that women are expected to supply sex to college men, but also are often negatively perceived for their promiscuity.

The most recent ethnographic examination of hookup culture on American college campuses is sociologist Lisa Wade's *American Hookup* (2017). Wade extensively cites Bogle (2008), but adds new conclusions of her own. Wade agrees with masculinities scholar Michael Kimmel (2008) that hookup culture is a patriarchal system that privileges male pleasure. Hookup culture, she says, "Is designed to facilitate men's sexual access to women" (Wade 2017: 218). Wade's view of hookup culture largely focuses upon the role of alcohol, which is ubiquitous on the numerous college campuses which she visited and where she conducted interviews. It is alcohol, she finds, that facilitates hookup culture and normalizes the detached and noncommittal sexual interactions. Like Bogle (2008), Wade concludes that the concept of the hookup is old, but hookup culture is a new phenomenon. The hookup has existed throughout American history, but no college culture before has seen such a pressure to be participating in sexual activity. Universities have become total institutions in that they provide everything students need—a home, food, entertainment, a library, a gym, etc.—and this totality brings about a culture bubble for students who never have to leave campus. Wade finds that this idea of total institution also means that hookup culture and drunkenness have been institutionalized as an unescapable norm—it is most, if not all, of the entertainment available on campus. Wade concludes that



hookups themselves are not necessarily a problem for women, but hookup culture is. She calls for a culture of hooking up that focuses upon both partners, their pleasure, and their feelings. Wade and others like Bogle (2008) and Stepp (2007) have written about their findings on women's experiences in heteronormative hookup culture. However, none have made it a central question in their research while also maintaining a commitment to chronicling the positive and negative elements from within the cultural space. This thesis seeks to do just that—examine the empowering and constraining facets of hookup culture as they are defined by the women themselves.

## **Methods**

All research findings included in this thesis were collected in Durham, North Carolina, on or within five miles of the campus of Duke University. Duke University is a private institution that consistently ranks among the top universities in the United States and in the world and is highly selective with an admissions rate of 9% (Duke University Office of Undergraduate Admissions 2016). It is moderately sized with around 6500 undergraduate students but is predominately a white institution with 46% of its students identifying as Caucasian (Duke Office of News and Communications 2017). The university is also known for the wealth of its students with the average median family income of a student being \$186,700, and 69% of students coming from families in the top 20% of wealth holders in the United States (Aisch, Buchanan, Cox, & Quealy 2017). Hookup culture has been widely reported at Duke University with 70.3% of Duke freshman and 62.5% of Duke seniors stating that they were engaging in hookups in 2008 (Morgan, Shanahan, & Brynildsen 2010).

In the earliest stages of ethnographic fieldwork in August 2016, I thought I might focus upon interviewing Duke University women. I set my interview goal at approximately fifteen women and began publicizing interview sign-ups on official Duke University Facebook groups, which require a Duke email to join. I quickly found that very few women were willing to meet to talk face-to-face, particularly for research that offered no benefits or compensation for participants. I completed five interviews and found myself having hit a wall with finding women who were willing to speak about their experience with hookup culture. I began trying to find other ways to get a broad sample of women involved, and decided to try anonymous surveys through Duke University's Qualtrics survey system. I adapted my longer list of interview questions into shorter and more concise survey questions, but still worried that I would not get the same lengthy and comprehensive responses that often come from interviews. I posted the link to my ten-question survey on the same Duke Facebook groups, where it collected an enormous amount of thorough responses. Over 150 current female undergraduates anonymously responded, and many spent more than forty minutes responding with detailed answers and stories from their time at Duke. Their thoughtful responses largely informed this work.

In addition to interviews and survey data, I also collected data utilizing a participant-observation method. Having been a female undergraduate at Duke University for three years before I officially began this research, I had extensive experience in the field. That being said, the results of my surveys and interviews pointed me towards additional sites to observe. I have taken fieldnotes at parties, athletic events, local bars, the campus union, dorms, classrooms, and other Duke University student spaces. These fieldnotes stretch from August 2016 to January 2017 and supply most of the vignettes throughout this thesis.

I believe it is also necessary to note that the data included in this thesis was collected during the presidential election cycle of 2016, when women's rights were highly contested in mainstream political parties. The victorious candidate was a white male who was recorded praising his own abilities to sexually assault women without consequences and repeatedly referred to women as nasty and disgusting (Cohen 2017). It is possible that widespread media coverage of this campaign influenced women's reflections on their own experiences and perhaps, their responses.

## **Summary of Arguments**

A specifically female experience, and even more so a feminist female perspective that is defined by women themselves, of hookup culture examined through an ethnographic lens is missing from the current literature. This thesis seeks to answer the following central research question: *“How do Duke University undergraduate women actually experience the seemingly sexually empowering norms of hookup culture?”* What this thesis does not attempt to do is make a moral judgment of hookup culture. It does not ask whether hookup culture is good or bad for individual women who choose to participate in it. Such has been done before and would be patently anti-feminist. Instead, *I argue that although hookup culture is seemingly empowering for women's sexuality, the elements of hookup culture that appear to facilitate sexual freedom actually bring about sexual constraints for women through patriarchal norms on Duke University's campus.*

The first chapter broadly looks at Duke's hookup norms and asks if hookup culture's general gendered structure is one that is empowering for women. Here, I argue that women's sexual agency is expanded by the normalization of sex that occurs within hookup culture, but the

greater visibility of women's sexuality allows it to be more easily policed—that is to say, gendered expectations are enforced through social means. Overall, I find that hookup culture enforces norms of constraining sexual policing by the means of a prude-slut dichotomy. After taking a broader view of Duke's hookup culture in Chapter I, Chapter II specifically examines the alcohol-saturated spaces—the local nightclub and the fraternity party—as having a carnivalesque change in cultural norms, even within hookup culture. This chapter argues that alcohol-saturated spaces within hookup culture encourage feelings of empowerment, but also increase the explicit expectations of women's sexuality by pressuring women to objectify or commodify themselves. The final chapter follows a similar format as Chapter II and explores the mobile hookup application Tinder and its role at Duke for undergraduate women. I assert that Tinder, as an altered space that differs from both the bar and the party, has the potential to give women more power to dictate their interactions with men and engage in casual sex more privately, but it also exacerbates women's dehumanization and sexual objectification. Based upon the ethnographic data throughout these three chapters, I conclude that hookup culture appears to be an empowering system for women's sexuality because of cultural elements that promote freer sexual expression, but by normalizing sex and bringing it out into the open, it has made women's sexuality easier to police through patriarchal norms. The structures of patriarchy that exist on Duke University's campus openly constrain women's sexual freedoms by pressuring women and shaming them, often simultaneously.

# Chapter I

## The Double-Edged Phallus: Hookup Culture's Normalization of Women's Participation in Sex and Simultaneous Sexual Policing of the Female Body

## Introduction

Near the end of April each year, Duke University undergraduates count down the days until the annual celebration of debauchery, the Last Day of Classes, affectionately known as LDOC<sup>5</sup>. This event is the closest Duke's main quad ever gets to a Bacchanalian orgy, at least as far as I know. LDOC is a day that is filled with as much drinking and sex as you can possibly fit into twenty-four hours. It means waking up around ten or eleven in the morning and starting your day off with some screwdrivers<sup>6</sup> before you move on to shots of liquor and mystery punch. If you're so tragically unlucky as to have a professor that did not cancel classes for the day and takes attendance, it means pretending you're sober in lecture. If you're a woman, it often means planning your outfit for days or even weeks to get that perfect LDOC look. The day is structured around free concerts of big-name artists who perform on the main quad throughout the afternoon, so it's a bit like a music festival, but one that is only accessible to Duke students. As with most outdoor concerts, there is a certain aesthetic that women are expected to achieve. LDOC is usually a warm, spring day that requires cool attire, which has led to the expectation that women will dress scantily for the events. Cutoff shorts, cropped tops, and short dresses are the conventional female attire for the day. Drunkenness and sexual availability are also expected, which is subtly implied by the free water and condoms widely distributed as preventatives in anticipation of the day's festivities.

I tend to think of LDOC as being exactly what college students would be doing at college if the class part didn't exist—the true essence of collegiate culture. LDOC is the college story

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<sup>5</sup> Pronounced "El-Doc"

<sup>6</sup> An alcoholic drink made by mixing orange juice and vodka.

that every alumna tells while leaving out the late nights in the library and the three to four hour exams. In the past I've drunkenly looked into the crowd of my peers who were dancing to deafening music and sipping from water bottles that contained just about anything but water, and thought that this must be what sexual liberation looks like. LDOC normalizes sex; it's expected that nearly every sexually active student is having sex on LDOC. Women are expected to look like they're ready to be undressed at any moment. You're prepared for a make-out session with a stranger during the concerts or for heading back to an acquaintance's bedroom for an alcohol refill and sexual foreplay. It appeared to be a space where women could act out their sexual desires without the judgment they found in other spheres. All of this seemed sexually empowering to me until I looked back and began to count the times that someone had drunkenly whispered a snide comment to me about another woman: "Why can I see her ass cheeks?" "Is she really going to wear pants to something like this?" "I heard that none of them would sleep with her" "Didn't she sleep with half of that fraternity?" "Oh my God that's like the third guy she's kissed today!" The sly sexual policing was omnipresent, and it wasn't coming from just one person or one group of friends. Even in a space like LDOC, where alcohol and sex were normalized, women just couldn't quite fit the paradoxical expectations laid out for them. The Last Day of Classes festivities are only a small slice of Duke's hookup culture; they are only a day within an entire system that privileges the hookup. Throughout this chapter, I argue that Duke University's hookup culture normalizes heteronormative sexual activity, which can empower some women by providing space to express their sexual agency, but simultaneously, it produces coercive social norms that police women's sexuality by both pressuring them to engage in sexual activity and discouraging their participation in *too much* sex.

## **(S)express Yourself**

Many of the women with whom I spoke throughout my research decried the presence of a hookup culture on Duke's campus; they felt that they were often treated unfairly by men and the standards of sex on campus. That being said, almost all of them admitted that they still participated for the perceived benefits of fun and self-expression. Hookup culture revolves around sex and sexual expression, and its largely "sex-positive" outlook normalizes casual sex with multiple partners. For women who want to engage in this unattached sex, hookup culture can facilitate the empowerment of their sexual options and decisions. One Duke woman put it simply: "[Hookup culture is] toxic, but empowering."<sup>7</sup> This empowerment stems from the way sex is understood in the cultural expectations within campus hookup culture. In this space, casual sex is largely treated as a positive activity—for many it offers pleasure and stress relief that is widely reserved for committed and time-consuming relationships in non-hookup cultures. A woman whom I interviewed stated, "I think Duke University students think of sex as a recreational activity that does not necessarily have to do with romance. Sex is often viewed as a means of expression and stress relief without the expectation of a relationship."<sup>8</sup> Another added, "The majority of Duke students think that sex is a fun way to blow off steam, and it is treated casually by many."<sup>9</sup> It is clear from these statements that many Duke students tend to think of sexual activity as a casual undertaking, and women obtain some benefit from being socially permitted to participate in this normalized casual sex.

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<sup>7</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016



A common stereotype exists in American society that functions upon the belief that women are not interested in casual or unattached sex because they are naturally more emotionally invested in their partners than men (Bogle 2008). This characterization perpetuates the idea that women do not seek out sex specifically; they only want love and relationships, which often then result in sex. This stereotype is untrue for many women (Bogle 2008), and hookup culture provides a space for these women to express their more promiscuous sexual desires without seeming deviant. Some college women—particularly those in such an elite institution with high achieving students like Duke University—do not want to be or do not have time to be in committed and monogamous relationships. As stated by an undergraduate woman at Duke, “Many don't have sex to foster deep connections but more in the sense to just fuck, and many students don't think of the emotional aspect of it or don't want the emotional aspect.”<sup>10</sup> The presence of sex as an ordinary component of collegiate life within hookup culture empowers women to choose attachment-free sex if sex is all they want. My experiences speaking to Duke women support the assertion that sexual agency can be extricated from the norms of hookup culture if a woman desires it.

Additionally, the normalization of sex within hookup culture also facilitates a widespread campus dialogue regarding safe sex practices, consent, and sexual pleasure. The ubiquity of sex on campus makes it a greater priority for administrative actions regarding safety. Duke University freshmen attend a sexual education workshop at mandatory orientation, and the university is host to several official centers—The Women’s Center, The Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, The Wellness Center, and Peer Advocacy for Sexual Health Center—that offer resources and advice regarding sex. Numerous student groups also host a variety of public

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<sup>10</sup> Anonymous interview: November 15, 2016

discussions, lectures, and debates regarding sexual matters. This availability of outlets for dialogues of sexuality can be empowering for women by both providing information for their sexual decision making and further de-stigmatizing sex. The normalization of sex and educational discussions of sex that accompany hookup culture at Duke creates a space for productive dialogue and lessens the repression of sexual expression.

Furthermore, Kathleen Bogle (2008) expands Beth Bailey's (1988) historical progression of courtship to argue that hookup culture is also less structurally oppressive than dating. Bailey found that the dating system of relations between men and women was inherently less equal than the calling system that existed before it. The calling system required a woman's invitation for a man to come visit with her in her household parlor, often under the supervision of her mother. To visit without an invitation was incredibly rude and mostly unheard of. In this system a woman at least held power in initiating a relationship between the two, and the presence of her mother served to protect her against sexual pressures. The dating system, on the other hand, functioned almost entirely on male terms. In this system men called women to invite them out for public dates. Men controlled transportation as the possessors of automobiles, and they also financially controlled the date by being expected to fund it. Men paid for food, movie tickets, gas, dance hall admissions, etc. This systemic control that men exerted over the date often led to their expectation that women owed them kissing or other sorts of sexual activities in return. Bogle (2008) and my ethnographic findings suggest that in most cases, hookup culture, as a systems of relations between men and women, does not operate according to this element of indebtedness<sup>11</sup>. While men still generally initiate hookup encounters, women occasionally do as well. Women also don't generally accept any favors or gifts from men within the hookup culture. There is no

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<sup>11</sup> Not in all cases; see Chapter II.

direct financial cost to hooking up, and transportation is not generally necessary as universities like Duke have student housing on campus. This frees women from the exchange of date entertainment for sex that is so often seen in the dating system of relations.

The hookup system also frees undergraduate women from the burdens of time and commitment that frequently accompany monogamous relationships. As one of the nation's most elite post-secondary institutions, Duke University's student population can be characterized as one that is intensely focused upon work and accomplishments. Duke specifically selects its students for their competitiveness and ability to achieve great feats under pressure. The women who attend Duke are among the nation's most talented, most independent, and most driven. To be in a committed relationship requires time and emotional energy that many Duke women are not willing to sacrifice when that time and energy could be more efficiently spent on their academic and career goals. Furthermore, entering into a serious relationship in colleges poses the possibility of marriage or children in a woman's twenties, which could entirely transform her post-graduation plans. For Duke women who wish to focus on their work, hookup culture allows for an exploration of sexual expression without the commitment and the potential derailment from their own conceptualizations of success.

### **Damned if You Do and Damned if You Don't**

While potentially sexually empowering, this sex "positivity" and normalization of sexual activity for women can paradoxically also function as a source of sexual policing. Within the space of hookup culture, the choices may seem freer, but many women claimed that strong social pressures constrained those decisions. Many women expressed feelings of expectations that they need to be sexually active to fit into the social culture at Duke. The social scene on campus

focuses upon drinking and partying, both of which facilitate casual sexual activity. As one woman pointed out these activities largely function as means to obtain a partner for casual sex: “Weekends often revolve around partying/drinking behaviors in efforts to find a sexual partner for a night.”<sup>12</sup> In 2008, 70.3% of Duke freshman and 62.5% of Duke seniors reported that they were engaging in hook ups (Morgan, Shanahan, & Brynildsen 2010), but my 2016 ethnographic data showed that Duke women reported that the practice of hooking up felt rather ubiquitous. They said things like, “It feels as if you either go out and need to act available for hookups, or you aren't part of the social culture”<sup>13</sup> and “If you aren't a sexual woman, if you aren't engaging in sexual activities with others, something is wrong with you. You have to explain your situation. Why are you still single? Why aren't you hooking up with someone?”<sup>14</sup> Some women with whom I spoke even offered potential explanations as to why they and other Duke undergraduate women felt that way: “I think Duke University students think more people are having it than actually are. I think some people feel really pressured to have sex by their own expectations of themselves and their assumed expectations of others”<sup>15</sup> and “I think women feel that sex or sexual desirability is a form of status and if you aren't having sex or if people aren't trying to have sex with you that reflects your beauty, value or worth. I believe that women on campus feel pressured to “get experience” by sleeping with different men and being sexually available even if that's not how they enjoy or want to engage in sexual activity.”<sup>16</sup>

These women suggest that sex has a social capital value, such as that described by Beth Bailey in *From Front Porch to Back Seat* (1988). Bailey is specifically referring to World War II

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<sup>12</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous interview: October 20, 2016

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

era dating, which has been replaced by the hookup culture at universities today, when she speaks of social capital and the social competition that exists between young women (1989). Bailey describes the competition between collegiate women to appear the most popular through their relations with men, which at the time consisted of numerous public dates with various men. Even further, Beth Bailey finds that this competition actually functioned upon the notion of conformity—women participated in the same actions as other women because they wanted to create and maintain high levels of popularity (1989), also known as social capital. Women’s popularity grew based on how desirable they were, how many dates they went on, and how attractive their male suitors were. The hookup culture present on Duke University’s campus has replaced this dating competition between women, but the competition has remained. Women feel pressured to participate in hookups because they believe other women are doing it, and believe they must conform to having casual sex to be socially active and socially desirable. They do not want to seem prudish. While it is true that a majority of Duke’s undergraduate women are participating, certainly not all of them are. Kathleen Bogle offers an explanation in *Hooking Up* by arguing that the definition of “hooking up” is highly ambiguous, and thus over-represents the number of women who are having casual sex on college campuses (2008). Many believe “hooking up” to mean engaging in penetrative sex, but Bogle found that many college students often used the term to describe making out, sexual dancing, oral sex, sexual touching, and other intimate acts that did not explicitly refer to penetrative sex (2008). A wide use of the vague term across college campuses, Duke University included, can easily lead to a widespread belief that everyone is having sex when that is not the case. One of my interlocutors was already privy to this notion and confirmed its presence at Duke: “Most students think everyone else is hooking up

all the time, and that they should be hooking up all the time.”<sup>17</sup> Women are socially pressed to participate in sexual activity to avoid the risk of being labeled an undesirable prude. This ubiquitous social pressure to participate in hookup culture to maintain one’s social standing can negatively influence a woman’s sexual decision making and lead her to engage in sexual activity that she does not want.

It can also result in the assumption by men that all Duke women are seeking sexual activity, so all women are available for male sexual pleasure. Almost every woman with whom I spoke characterized Duke’s sexual culture as one marked by sexual assault and rape. During the 2015-2016 academic year, 124 cases of sexual misconduct were reported to Duke University’s Office of Institutional Equity (Dryfoos 2017), and this statistic emerged only a couple of years after the U.S. Department of Justice found that 80% of all sexual assaults go unreported (2014). In the midst of a sexual assault epidemic, sexual pressures that originate directly from men can quickly turn into coercive or nonconsensual sex that entirely strips women of their sexual agency.

As women are pressured to have sex, they are paradoxically pressured to not have *too much* sex. The single most prevalent thing that women reported to me, time and time again, was that they faced a gendered double standard in regards to having sex. While men face little scrutiny for engaging in copious amounts of noncommittal, heterosexual sex—all of which presumably requires a female partner—women stated that they were consistently shamed for having too much sex even while simultaneously being pressured to have sex. Duke women assertively made it clear to me that they were frustrated with this ridiculous standard. Many women expressed strong feelings, such as two women who said, “Duke women feel the

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<sup>17</sup> Anonymous interview: October 30, 2016

dichotomy of either being too sexual or not sexual enough<sup>18</sup>” and “Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Women are expected to walk the fine line of being sexually available but not too available lest they be labeled a slut or prude.”<sup>19</sup>

Duke women also saw their sexual agency damaged by the double standard as they experienced social shaming for engaging in sex. Surprisingly, Duke women insisted that this slut-shaming—making a person feel ashamed for having participated in sexual activity—came mostly from other women. Women concluded that Duke men also participated in slut-shaming by degrading women who had engaged in sexual activity with more than one man in a fraternity or group of friends,<sup>20</sup> but not to the same extent that Duke women inflicted it upon one another. One woman recounted her freshman year experience with female-based slut shaming:

I was slut-shamed really badly as a freshman by upperclassmen girls in a certain sorority, even though I was a virgin and would remain a virgin until my sophomore year...[sic]If anything, I felt discouraged to participate in sexual activity. Slut-shaming is a really destructive and divisive tactic and I think it shames women into denying themselves sexual expression and autonomy as a sexual being.<sup>21</sup>

Slut-shaming functions to oppress women's sexuality by labelling those who participate in any form of sexual activity too willingly or too frequently as sluts. The difficulty in enacting the *correct* amount of sexual involvement to one's friends was commented upon by another woman: “It's almost as if women all encourage each other to ‘go for it’ but then are like ‘oh no wait not that much [sic].’ Women are expected to have lots of sexual experience but somehow achieve

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<sup>18</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous interview: November 20, 2016

this without promiscuity.”<sup>22</sup> To be sexually promiscuous is to lose respectability, and women risk being labeled as slutty when they openly take part in hooking up.

I have continuously watched Duke women slut-shame one another throughout my four years on campus, but one woman’s experience stands out as the most, well, famous. During my freshman year, Duke was front and center in the nation’s headlines for its so-called “porn star.” Belle Knox, which the woman used as her performance pseudonym, spread across global media as the Duke University freshman who claimed to pay her tuition bills with the money she made from starring in online pornography videos. On campus she was just another Duke University undergraduate, but once she was revealed to be a sex worker by a Duke fraternity member, she became the victim of widespread harassment and slut-shaming. Knox’s case was a classic example of the sexual policing experienced within Duke’s hookup culture; she was expected to be sexual, but not as sexual as she chose to be. In telling the story from her own words, Knox wrote of the joy and sexual empowerment she experienced when referring to her sex work:

I can say definitively that I have never felt more empowered or happy doing anything else. In a world where women are so often robbed of their choice, I am completely in control of my sexuality. As a bisexual woman with many sexual quirks, I feel completely accepted. It is freeing, it is empowering, it is wonderful (2014).

While Belle Knox gained sexual agency through her sex work, other women (and some men) at Duke used her participation in porn as justification for slut-shaming her. In the same autobiographical article, she also wrote about the harassment that found her as a result of her work in the adult film industry: “I was called a “Slut who needs to learn the consequences of her actions,” a “Huge fucking whore,” and, perhaps the most offensive, “A little girl who does not

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<sup>22</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016



understand her actions” (Knox 2014). While certainly the most famous incident of slut-shaming on Duke’s campus, Knox herself accused Duke students of having a tendency to stigmatize women’s sexuality and create a “culture of slut-shaming” in general (2014).

Social scientists have posited opposing views as to why slut-shaming is used by women to divide one another. Ringrose and Renold (2012) assert that slut shaming is a female internalization of the gendered double standard that reinforced men’s privileges and sexual power over women, but others disagree. Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, and Lotus Steely (2014) argue for a more complex function of slut-shaming by contending that undergraduate women use slut-shaming to enforce the boundaries of social classes. Based upon a longitudinal ethnographic study, they state that:

High-status women employ slut discourse to assert class advantage, defining their styles of femininity and approaches to sexuality as classy rather than trashy. Low-status women express class resentment—deriding rich, bitchy sluts for their wealth, exclusivity, and participation in casual sexual activity. (Armstrong et al. 2014: 101).

In the case of Belle Knox, it was clear that women were utilizing slut-shaming to differentiate their sexuality from the sexuality of a marginalized and lower-class group—sex workers. Both theories are possible in the context of Duke, where men control the sexual culture, and sorority women, who are members of expensive and exclusive social groups, were cited as the greatest perpetrators of slut-shaming. Regardless of the function, it is clear that slut-shaming oppresses women’s sexual agency and disempowers their sexual choices by imposing social shaming for what is determined to be sexual deviancy.

In an effort to avoid being branded as a slut by the effects of the gendered double standard, women also experienced a loss of agency in negotiating for their sexual pleasure in

hookups. A woman who is too invested in sex might be characterized as dirty and loose, so she must act demurely about her sexual desires to prevent her appearing as too sexually experienced. One interviewee summarized the conflicting outcomes of the double standard for both men and women: “Men who have more sex are better men, while women who have more sex are less respectable women.”<sup>23</sup> To remain socially respectable, a college woman must appear to be sexually available, but not sexually invested. One woman passionately decried the lack of sexual pleasure for women in hookup sex: “I think a lot of Duke students would define sex as ‘when a man cums.’ The clitoris? The female orgasm? Forget about it. I think it's really unbalanced in favor of men: the double standard ensures that they will be praised for their sexuality while women are maligned.”<sup>24</sup> Again, it becomes apparent that men’s sexuality is both freer and superior to women’s within Duke’s hookup culture. Women were alienated from their sexual subjectivity and sexual pleasure, which was made abundantly clear by two different interlocutors who stated, “Women are expected to be sexual objects but not sexual beings”<sup>25</sup> and “For women on this campus, sex isn't seen as something that they choose to have - it's something that happens to them.”<sup>26</sup> In what is an impossible standard to maintain, Duke’s undergraduate women are pressured to engage in enough sex to avoid becoming a prude, but not so much sex that they become a slut. To negotiate for sexual pleasure in this unequal system of sexual expectations is to seem undesirably versed in sexual activity.

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<sup>23</sup> Anonymous interview: October 25, 2016

<sup>24</sup> Anonymous interview: November 20, 2016

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>26</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

## **Women's Intersectional Identities**

While the dominant narrative of women at Duke University is that of the heterosexual white woman, the pressures I have discussed are often experienced differently by women who belong to campus minority groups. The experiences of these women and how they differ from the dominant narrative must be understood through the concept of intersectionality.

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), is a framework in which an individual's many intersecting identities (i.e. race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, ability, etc.) are understood in a system of privileges and oppressions based upon dominating and subjugated social classifications. The intersectional identities of women change the way that they form their subjectivities and also how they are perceived and treated within the hookup culture at Duke University. For example, while they both experience sexual oppression because of their gender, Latinx women, who are a racially oppressed population, experience this oppression differently than white women, who are a racially privileged population, because their gender oppression is also racially charged. This section argues that women who belong to identity groups who are oppressed by race and/or sexual orientation experience hookup culture in ways that are different and more burdensome than women who identify with the dominant narrative of being heterosexual and white.

Perhaps the most obvious change of experience within hookup culture is that of queer women at Duke University. Women consistently characterized Duke's hookup culture as heteronormative. Almost all opportunities for hooking up at Duke—parties, bars, and dating applications—consist of heterosexual encounters between cisgender men and cisgender women. Even the title of this chapter focuses upon the centrality of the phallus in women's experiences with sexual culture, but that is simply not the case for all Duke women.

One woman put the queer experiences of women at Duke University quite bluntly: “My queerness isolates me from sexual culture.”<sup>27</sup> Queerness is a primary influence of one’s experience with sexuality, and queer women continuously reported that they were estranged from Duke’s sexual culture. I interviewed several women identifying within the asexuality spectrum who felt very disconnected from campus culture as a whole because of its enormous focus upon casual sexuality.<sup>28</sup> Even outside of those on the asexual spectrum who found no common ground with hookup culture, bisexual and lesbian women also felt marginalized. They were faced with two common scenarios in their interactions with dominant heterosexual hookup culture: silence or crude, voyeuristic attempts by men. My interlocutors summarized their experiences with being trivialized by the sexual norms of Duke: “Queer women are silenced at Duke. My experience as a queer woman is totally discounted,”<sup>29</sup> “Queer women still feel a stigmatization of their sexuality and a lack of visibility,”<sup>30</sup> and “Queer women on this campus are essentially doomed to a fate of No Sex Ever [sic] - the shrinking community phenomenon is very real for us, particularly because there are so few of us who are happily out.”<sup>31</sup> As anthropologist Gayle Rubin finds in “Thinking Sex,” sex is socially assessed by a hierarchy of respectability with heterosexual, matrimonial, monogamous, procreative sex the most acceptable. Promiscuous homosexual sex, like that practiced by queer women participating in hookup culture, is near the very bottom of the respectability pyramid (1984). Many queer women don’t feel comfortable expressing their sexual desires in public spaces where heteronormative hookups are often initiated because of the associated cultural stigma of homosexual desire. The central focus of

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<sup>27</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

<sup>28</sup> Anonymous interviews: October 19, 2016; October 19, 2016

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous interviews: October 19, 2016

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous interview: October 24, 2016

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous interview: November 13, 2016

heteronormative hookup culture upon man-woman relations leaves little space for queer women to openly engage. On the other hand, some queer women did state that Duke's hookup culture was the first place that they were able to explore their sexuality.<sup>32</sup> The normalization of casual sex and their ability to meet other queer women through on-campus organizations for queer students and location-based mobile dating applications made sexual exploration more accessible, and thus lent a greater feeling of sexual agency.

In what seems like a stark contrast to the suppression of queer women's sexuality is the simultaneous voyeuristic hypersexualization of Duke's queer women by men, but this phenomenon also functions as another form of silencing. During my fieldwork I attended a large outdoor party on Duke's campus. The usual scene was set—blaring music, endless handles of cheap vodka, and dyads of Duke's men and women grinding their bodies upon one another and making out. I was carefully mentally noting the behavior of the partygoers when I noticed many heads had turned towards one spot on the dance floor. The unoccupied men of the party were not-so-subtly staring and whispering to one another over the music. It quickly became apparent that all of this male interest was directed at two Duke women who were dancing with one another and making out. They were paying no attention to the rest of the party attendees, but several men continued to attentively watch them while smiling and laughing in what seemed like disbelief at their good luck. The men grew increasingly bolder as they moved closer to the women for a better view. The women soon left the dance floor to move to a slightly more secluded bench at the party, but were quickly followed by a small pack of men still avidly watching and grinning. The men inched even closer, effectively creating an unwanted audience for the women, who very quickly grew exasperated with being a spectacle for men and left the

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<sup>32</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016

party for a private room. Their discomfort and annoyance was visible. I certainly do not claim to know the sexual orientations of these women, but it was clear that they were engaging in homoerotic behavior for their own pleasure. That homoerotic behavior for the pleasure of women was exploited by male heterosexuality for sexual pleasure. Just as gender studies scholar Jane Garrity found in her essay, “Mediating the Taboo: The Straight Lesbian Gaze,” which focuses upon lesbian representations in film, the hypersexualization of female homosexuality by male heterosexuality de-legitimizes queer female sexuality. Queer women are again silenced by the perceptions of queer sexuality, but through fetishization rather than stigmatization. This party scene was not an isolated incident; numerous queer women at Duke reported that they felt sexually objectified by the voyeurism of heterosexual men: “There’s the huge problem of straight men literally filming queer women who go to Shooters<sup>33</sup> just to have a good time for their own sexual gratification.”<sup>34</sup> Of straight men’s interest in queer women’s sexuality, another interlocutor stated, “When someone learns of my sexuality I get the inevitable questions of whether I’d be down to do a threesome or if the person can watch, but once I say no to those things I am largely ignored.”<sup>35</sup> The voyeurism of male spectatorship denies female sexual agency, and exploits queer sexuality for male heterosexual pleasure. The experience of queer women’s sexuality within Duke hookup culture contains burdens that are not encountered by heterosexual women at Duke.

In addition to queerness, race and ethnicity also play an enormous role in how Duke University women experience hookup culture differently from white, heterosexual women. Like queer women, women of color also reported feelings of both de-sexualization and

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<sup>33</sup> Duke’s local dance club. See Chapter II.

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous interview: November 13, 2016

<sup>35</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016

hypersexualization based upon their identity: "There's a huge problem with simultaneously desexualizing and hyper-sexualizing women of color both in the "real world" and on this campus - i.e., if you can be written off as "exotically beautiful," you're golden, but if you're a WoC<sup>36</sup> who doesn't fit into either European beauty standards or colonialized beauty standards, good luck."<sup>37</sup> With a little more than half of Duke's undergraduate population identifying as white (Duke University Office of Undergraduate Admissions 2013), the parties and nights at Shooters I attended during my fieldwork were almost entirely white spaces. Men seek out women who fit the ideal standards of beauty, which focus upon white, Eurocentric beauty norms. These notions of beauty often exclude women of color, particularly black women, and results in their often being less desirable to the white men who make up the majority (Robinson-Moore 2008). This racially-charged devaluation of women of color's beauty leads to their being sexually ignored in many cases. As one interviewee stated, "Women of color are also silenced and devalued—I think men see women of color as not worthy of their time and not sexually appealing."<sup>38</sup> These value judgments based upon Eurocentric beauty standards can also be internalized and foster self-hatred (Robinson-Moore 2008) that further decreases a sense of sexual agency.

Concurrently, women of color also find themselves fetishized and hypersexualized by the white men who exert social power over hookup culture. This furthers the pressure to hook up. One black student wrote, "As a black woman, men (especially white men) feel like they have unlimited access to my body. It's so awful. Rape culture, enabled by male entitlement to women's bodies, creates this type of culture where pressure to have sex with men is the norm."<sup>39</sup> Another

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<sup>36</sup> Woman of color

<sup>37</sup> Anonymous interview: November 13, 2016

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

<sup>39</sup> Anonymous interview: November 20, 2016

woman of color theorized that the portrayal of women of color's objectification that was specific to their race originated from images of these women:

Minority women are highly more sexualized than their white counterparts. A man might have an ideal of a cute, blonde-haired woman but from what I've seen they can also separate a blonde woman from her sexual appeal. Asian women, though, are seen as exotic and submissive. Black women have to be curvy and sexual no matter the situation. It's harder for people to separate minority women from their sexualized images because sexual images of them are more abundant than media depicting them as otherwise. And that's just based on race.<sup>40</sup>

This idea of controlling images of women of color stems from the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who finds that these images and stereotypes of women of color are reproduced through culture to maintain a sexual and reproductive power over them. Collins' work focuses upon the historical specificity of black women but can be extrapolated to broadly include other women of color within their respective historical contexts. One of the pertinent examples Collins provides is that of the image of the Jezebel, who is the black whore. She is hypersexual and deviant. The Jezebel as a controlling image originated within slavery to justify and normalize sexual assault of slave women by white men (Collins 1990), but the image is still perpetuated today in the hypersexualization and fetishization of women of color by white men on Duke University's campus. It serves to sexualize the brown female body, and thus justify the sexual pressuring of women of color by supporting the idea that women of color want more sex and are easier to sexually subdue. The threatening nature of this oppressive phenomenon is felt through one woman of color's comment during an interview: "As a WoC, I've often felt fetishized by white

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<sup>40</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016



men and it's made me really untrusting of white men in general. I'm suspicious as soon as they start to hit on me.”<sup>41</sup> The additional burden faced by women of color in hookup culture is blatantly visible. In her review of black feminist literature, Jennifer Nash emphasizes that many black feminist authors find that this sexual fetishizing of women of color is linked to a white male desire to intersectionally wound the black and female body, but she finds in her own research that there is room for sexual agency (2014). Nash writes that black women are able to find sexual ecstasy even in sexual-racial fetishization; it creates a space for black pleasure that has become more acceptable. She finds that it normalizes black, female sexual subjectivity through unapologetic expressions of sexuality that stem from black women’s being expected to be more sexual (Nash 2014). Both women of color and queer women possess sexual agency within Duke University sexual culture, but as I have argued, their experiences in hookup culture frequently differ from that of cisgendered, heterosexual white women and are indicative of a disproportionate burden of sexual policing being placed upon them.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter I have argued that hookup culture normalizes sex in a way that both increases women’s sexual agency and also constrains that agency by exploiting it to impose restrictive sexual norms. These norms function to pressure women into engaging in sexual activity to feel involved in the social scene at Duke, but simultaneously shame women for engaging in what is deemed to be too much sex. With collegiate men exempt from the slut-shaming, this gendered double standard perpetuates policing of women’s sexuality and denies a sense of agency to negotiate for sexual pleasure within sexual activity. As one Duke University

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<sup>41</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016

undergraduate woman summarized the pressure faced by women in Duke's hookup culture: "There's a feminist undercurrent telling women to reclaim their sexuality but having that exist at the same time as a culture that shames women's sexuality makes expectations confusing to navigate."<sup>42</sup> In relation to these sexual pressures, I have also argued that Duke women who belong to minority identity groups—queer women and women of color—experience the sexual constraints and empowerments of hookup culture somewhat differently from women who are members of the dominant narrative and face further oppression through their other marginalized identities of race and sexual orientation. Many Duke women of all intersectional identities are struggling to navigate hookup culture's paradoxical social norms and achieve a greater sense of sexual empowerment.

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<sup>42</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016

## Chapter II

### Alcohol-Lubricated Spaces: The Sexually Empowering Norms of Bars and Parties and Their Objectification and Commodification of Female Sexuality

## Introduction

Around midnight on a cold, fall night in Durham, I walked—not my usual careful stumble—up to the “21 AND OVER” entrance at Shooters. It was my first-ever sober venture to the nightclub, and the familiar toasty quality of Bacardi rum was not there to keep me warm in my short skirt and cropped top. This time I was going out in the name of ethnography—and maybe a little post-midterms dancing. Luckily, the usual line with a fifteen-to-thirty-minute wait to enter hadn’t formed yet. I was met by the large, middle-aged, male bouncer at the door, who took my driver’s license to check my age. I was taken aback by how long he stared at my face; I immediately became self-conscious and concerned that maybe he thought something was wrong with my identification. He then turned his glance to my boyfriend<sup>43</sup>, who was directly behind me in line. “Man, is this your girlfriend?” the bouncer asked. “Uh...yeah?” “Well, I was gonna tell her, but since you’re her boyfriend, I’ll tell you. She’s really beautiful, bro. Way to go.” “Um...yeah,” my boyfriend responded with an uncomfortable laugh and knowing look at me as we continued towards the cashier. I was even more uncomfortable. I felt like a dog at a dog show, as if I had just unwillingly been put on display. It was as if someone had just thanked my owner for the fine specimen he brought with him to exhibit today. A man had been congratulated for simply “possessing” me. I tried to shake this disgusting feeling off while the pounding bass of the music grew louder. We finished paying, received our wristbands that signified we were old enough to buy drinks, and headed into the building.

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<sup>43</sup> I entered a monogamous relationship with a man during the summer before my senior year, and it has changed the way I experience these spaces that privilege the noncommittal hookup and a woman’s availability for male pleasure. A further exploration of this is outside the scope of this work.

We immediately encountered a strange blend of Duke University and Western-themed paraphernalia on the walls. There were autographed Duke jerseys and Duke banners, but also taxidermied animals and wagon wheels. My senses were quickly assaulted by flashing strobe lights, the smell of spilled beer and sweat, and the deafening blast of the latest hip-hop hit—a classic Shooters combination. I stuck close by my boyfriend, with my hand tightly intertwined in his. I’ve learned all too well from previous adventures that to be a lone woman in Shooters is to be trapped prey. We passed the three ground-floor bars and the dance floor and headed up to the second-level balcony, which hosts a fourth bar and plenty of men sitting around and viewing the show below. The balcony directly overlooks the dance floor and also gives a view of the suspended dancing cage and the mechanical bull. Two giant projector screens top the central dance floor, showing music videos and the occasional sporting event. Between them a giant sign reminds college students that this space is the “WILD WILD WEST,” a not-so-subtle hint that the rules are different here.

I sat down on the balcony and watched the enormous mob—about three-hundred Duke students—that was packed onto the dance floor. My eyes were immediately drawn to the amount of visible skin, but only that of women. It was barely over forty degrees Fahrenheit outside, but almost all of the women were wearing shorts or short skirts and sleeveless tops with exposed midriffs. Meanwhile, men were dressed in what was almost business casual—long-sleeve, button-down shirts, dark jeans, a tie here and there, and even a couple of suits. Across the dance floor, young adults moved to the pounding bass of the DJ’s latest song. Many carried beers, and nearly all were swaying and sloshing drunkenly or yelling at one another over the sound of speakers. Those that were in groups—almost exclusively small groups of women—bounced along to the music together. Those who had partnered up with another grinded their bodies on

each other in syncopation. Countless couples were making out, and several were feeling up and down each other's bodies. It only took a few minutes for me to see one of my female peers run her tongue up the entire length of a man's face on the dance floor in what I can only guess was a drunken attempt at seduction. This is certainly not what I see in the classroom or even in the dormitories. What is it about this space that makes it so different from others on campus?

Previously, I have argued that sex is normalized in hookup culture, but that the cultural norms within this system also produce a policing of female sexuality. Throughout this chapter, I argue that Shooters and fraternity parties, as alcohol-lubricated spaces within hookup culture, undergo a change in cultural norms that redefine socially permissible female expressions of sexuality. These spaces further normalize sex for women in hookup culture, but also objectify and commodify their sexuality for men. This transformation of sexual mores occurs as a part of the phenomenon that Mikhail Bakhtin (1997) calls the carnivalesque. The change in norms at Shooters serves as a source of sexual liberation for women, but here, female sexuality is objectified for male viewing pleasure. Similarly, the fraternity party is a carnivalesque space that encourages drunkenness and sex, but it is a space that operates upon a system of exchange and sexual expectation. Men provide the alcohol, entertainment, and party venue, and it is assumed that women will provide sexual pleasure in return. The fraternity party commodifies the female body into a source of sex for men, which leads to the pressuring of women to engage in sexual activity because of the "debts" they have incurred. In both cases of alcohol-lubricated spaces that encourage hooking up, female sexuality is further normalized, but simultaneously exploited for male pleasure.

## Shooters as the Carnival

On any given Saturday night, Shooters II Saloon<sup>44</sup>, as it is officially named, is the setting of a contemporary Bacchanalia. Alcohol, careless ecstasy, and sexual pleasure are blatantly present. As the only college dance club in Durham and a half-mile walk from campus, Shooters is inhabited almost exclusively by Duke University undergraduates, who swarm the establishment on Wednesday<sup>45</sup> and Saturday nights for a break from academia. For the majority of Duke students, Shooters is a key characteristic of Duke University culture. There is always a party at Shootz, as its affectionately called, and you can be sure it is going to be packed full after any major sporting event win or university holiday. The bar also has an added benefit of allowing eighteen-year-old students into the space, so the entire Duke student body is invited. Most bars require patrons to be of legal drinking age, but Shooters only requires a Duke identification card to enter if you are under twenty-one. Underage Duke students simply receive Xs on their hands drawn with a black permanent marker, regardless of how drunk they are when they arrive. For a \$5 entrance fee, any Duke student can purchase admission into a space where everyday norms are abandoned. The charge to enter is a costly \$11 without a Duke University identification card, which encourages the space to be Duke exclusive. Shooters is the epicenter of Duke University hookup culture; many students go there for specific purpose of finding a random sexual partner for the night.

Duke women whom I interviewed repeatedly emphasized this hookup facilitation when speaking about Shooters: “Most social activities after dark seem to have the sole purpose of

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<sup>44</sup> Shooters I burned down before I came to Duke.

<sup>45</sup> No one really knows why Wednesday night is a major Shooters night at Duke. It’s been that way since before I came to Duke. I would hypothesize that it’s a nice break during the stressful weeks.

uniting sexual partners. Everyone is attempting to flirt and hook up with someone. Or at least that is what is assumed.”<sup>46</sup> While Duke’s usual norms often shame women for being too sexual, the expectations at Shooters are different. As one of my interlocutors said, “Places that are intended for hookups like Shooters definitely change the gaze with which women are viewed and the way that they feel they need to react.”<sup>47</sup> At the bar Duke’s women are encouraged and expected to be sexual and enticing to others. Interviewees stated, “Shooters is the one place where it’s a lot more acceptable to be overly sexual because everybody is pretty drunk,”<sup>48</sup> and “Shooters is a place where sexual expression by women becomes a little more acceptable.”<sup>49</sup> One woman identified what she believes is the root of this change in behavioral expectations for women: “Shooters: somehow both the best place in the world and the worst. Alcohol *absolutely* plays a role—women here [at Duke] are expected to be ‘slutty’ while drunk and innocent while sober.”<sup>50</sup> This interviewee pointed to alcohol as the mediator of the cultural change in the space contained within Shooters, as did numerous others:

Alcohol plays a role in the cultural shift [at Shooters]. Our [Duke’s] “Work hard; play hard” culture is taken very seriously...you get in that environment [Shooters], and everyone’s goal—it seems like—is to get laid. And you do what you have to do to achieve that goal. Alcohol is absolutely a social lubricant for it.<sup>51</sup>

This combination of increased sexual interest and alcohol consumption, particularly in women, drives a change in behavior and the actions that are deemed appropriate. There’s a common

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<sup>46</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016

<sup>47</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Anonymous interview: November 13, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Anonymous interview: October 26, 2016



mantra at Duke that, “You can’t go to Shooters sober.” Before every night out at Shooters, there are “pregames,” in which friends gather at a dorm room or apartment and get drunk before they leave for the bar. Being drunk upon arrival prevents students from having to pay for more expensive alcohol that is sold within the building. It also allows those who are underage to get older students to buy alcohol for them and drink illegally in private spaces without the risk of being punished. Various types of alcohol are available for sale at Shooters at the multiple bars, but these are largely only purchased by those who need to maintain their drunkenness for several hours on the dance floor, are celebrating a special occasion, or have extra money to spend. Drinks at the bar are relatively costly for full-time students at around \$3 for a beer and \$5 for a shot of liquor, especially considering that alcohol on campus can be obtained for free at a party or purchased with Duke meal plan points. This encourages students to show up to Shooters drunk enough to remain intoxicated the entire time that they are there to avoid paying more. The oversaturation of alcohol at Shooters changes the space. One Duke woman stated, “People tend to see events involving alcohol as freeing, though, and those kinds of events are havens where latent thoughts about sex and sexuality come to light. There’s a stark difference between daytime Duke and Duke on the weekends.”<sup>52</sup> The so-called freedom here refers to a potentially empowering change in the way that Duke students can express their sexuality in the space.

Another interlocutor reiterated this same belief:

Alcohol allows men and women to be more confident and carefree in approaching each other. Frankly I have used alcohol as a way to be brave and meet guys, and it has been

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<sup>52</sup> Anonymous interview: November 13, 2016.

rewarding for me. I have not regretted my use of alcohol to meet and engage sexually with males.<sup>53</sup>

Alcohol is continually cited by Duke's women as an important influence in how Shooters is different from their lives elsewhere on campus. As seen here, the women at Duke University with whom I have spoken conveyed that this use of alcohol that changes what is acceptable behavior is also connected to increased appropriateness of sexual expression by women. In connection with this, author Alison Mackiewicz asserts that alcohol consumption is characterized as a predominantly male activity (2015). Consuming large quantities of alcohol is associated with masculinity and defies the cultural norms of femininity in day-to-day life, but within the context of the bar it becomes normalized for women as well. The same is true of sexual mores—being blatantly sexual is associated with men and maleness. But the normalization of alcohol present in this space changes things. “Women are expected to be sexual when alcohol is present,”<sup>54</sup> one interviewee told me. This refers to the tendency of alcohol-lubricated spaces to often be hyper-sexualized (Mackiewicz 2015). This shift in what is “normal,” or even socially permitted, for women to do occurs within the boundaries of Shooters II Saloon as it exists as carnivalesque space in terms of the cultural norms it allows Duke women.

Of carnival, as a cultural concept, Mikhail Bakhtin states:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of the ordinary, that is non-carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any

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<sup>53</sup> Anonymous interview: October 20, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016.

other form of inequality among people. All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people...*”

(1997: 251, emphasis in original).

Bakhtin goes on to add, “The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions defining them totally in non-carnival life, and thus from the vantage point of non-carnival life become eccentric and inappropriate” (1997: 251). His conceptualization of the carnival space is critical in developing the overturn of gender norms as they pertain to sex in Shooters. In non-carnival life, Duke women are held to standards that highly police their sexuality and discourage them from being too sexual. Non-carnival life dictates that young women are recipients of sexual advances from men; they must be the passive partner or risk being slut shamed. On the contrary, in the carnival of Shooters, women are expected to be sexual, and sometimes even the initiators of sexual contact. Bakhtin’s carnival phenomenon demands that a social hierarchy be overthrown (1997), and in this case, it is the order of gendered sexual mores that is ousted for a short time. It is key that the carnival and its connected change of norms only lasts for a particular time period in a particular place, or it would be an entire overthrow of cultural norms. For Shooters, this is only from 10pm to 2am on Wednesday and Saturday nights within the confines of the property, which is both off-campus and after all classes ends. It is the limit of the space and time itself that makes it a carnival space and not just a space within the “normal” culture. During the daylight hours, Shooters is just an odd-looking building on Morgan Street. It is the creation of carnivalesque norms that transforms it into a space of carnival where the gender hierarchy of sexual expression is overpowered.

## **Women's Sexuality at a Carnavalesque Shooters: Dress**

This change in norms in the carnival space is visually apparent before even entering Shooters. A glance at the entrance highlights that within the Shooters space, women are expected to show up to the establishment while following a certain, unspoken dress code. The standard of dress is based upon a show of skin from short skirts and cropped tops or a show of one's body through tight dresses and blouses. Mackiewicz asserts that women must be dressed a certain way to participate in spaces of intoxication. Women are expected to perform an appearance of sexual availability in the bar, which is a traditionally male space (2015). In entering the bar space women must maintain a certain appearance as sexually available, while men have a much wider range of what attire is acceptable. This situation offers a sort of female empowerment in that women are socially permitted to show their bodies in ways that are not deemed appropriate in most other spaces. Women are able to express their sexuality through dress or simply wear something revealing for their own pleasure without being socially shamed for their choices.

On the other hand, this is simultaneously a policing of the female body by expecting women to reveal their skin or bodily figures for viewership, making them literally exposed and more vulnerable to gazes. In a male-dominated society, it is men who create and socially enforce these assumptions that women will dress in a sexually provocative manner. This expectation of women, that they should objectify their bodies for the consumption of men, is maintained by who receives attention at Shooters. In reference to the bar, one woman said, "Women are also expected to look a certain way at these events. While men can get away with a Polo shirt and shorts, women are expected to wear heels and tight dresses. Women simply aren't viewed as sexually appealing unless they dress in a sexualized manner."<sup>55</sup> Women who are not dressed to

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<sup>55</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016.

the standards are not acknowledged by men. Women that entered the space to find a sexual partner to hookup with will likely not receive any male attention if they do not appear sexual through their choice in clothing. Author Beth L. Bailey finds that to appeal to the attention of men, a woman must make herself “a scarce commodity” or desirable commodity (1988: 56). She must be visibly and competitively attractive, even more so than the other women around her, to pique his interest. This is accomplished by presenting oneself as sexually desirable through an appearance that can be enhanced with sexually provocative clothing. This exchange of sexual dress for male attention maintains the status quo of men’s expectations that women who enter the space should appear in as little clothing as possible.

### **Women’s Sexuality at a Carnavalesque Shooters: Grinding**

These expectations to present oneself as sexual are also seen in the dancing that occurs at Shooters. Women generally arrive at Shooters with a small group of other women, all of whom are usually visibly intoxicated. A group of women tends to carve out a space on the floor, so that they can stick together and dance in close proximity to each other. Across the dance floor, groups of undergraduate women can be seen dancing near each other and sometimes laughing and singing together. Men, on the other hand, generally arrive in small groups of drunken friends, but either spread throughout the dance floor alone or simply stand together and watch women from the outskirts of the dance floor. They are clearly searching for suitable and available women with whom they hope to dance. Watching the dance floor from the Shooters balcony looks almost like a gender-bent script of the mating ritual of New Guinea’s birds of paradise that is often shown on National Geographic. The males of these species clear out a space on the forest floor and begin dancing and flashing their eye-catching plumes in hopes of attracting a mate. When a suitable

female comes along, the male dances provocatively, so that he might catch her attention and procure her interest as a potential mate. She either accepts the offer to mate if pleased with his appearance or declines and moves on to find a new partner (Cornell Ornithology Laboratory, 2013).

This is rather similar to the scene at Shooters on any given Saturday night, but with the genders reversed. Women are seen in groups, provocatively dancing close to each other, but not so close that they are unavailable to men—unless they intend to be. This goes on until a woman is noticed by a man who desires her appearance and her erotic dance moves. Both men and women largely rely on body language as signifiers that the other is interested. A woman who is interested in being danced with maintains a bit a space while dancing near her friends. She often performs a sort of sexualized, solitary dance that emphasizes her hips to demonstrate her interest. This grouped, yet independent dancing of women functions to display the women as sexual for a male view (Ronen 2010).

Women almost never initiate dancing with a man at Shooters. Shelly Ronen's research on sexualized dancing at college parties found that college students believed women "Should desire grinding [dancing] initiations, but they should be objects rather than agents" (2010: 366). It is socially inappropriate for woman to initiate such an erotic dance. Many view initiation of a sexual act too aggressively sexual for a woman; Ronan found that it was a turnoff for men (2010). If a woman sees a man in whom she is interested, she attempts to exchange eye contact, hold it for a few seconds, and then smile. If the man expresses his interest by smiling back, he often comes over to her and whispers something to her. This regularly results in women letting out a giggle before the man spins her around to dance with her. More often than this, men approach women from behind, giving them no opportunity to express interest or consent before

physical contact is made. Without speaking to her, a man edges closer and closer to see if a woman will dance on him. Some women turn around to inspect the man before engaging in dance, but many women rely on their friends who can see the man to tell them whether or not they should dance with him. In an act of female agency, women with men dancing close behind them can be seen mouthing to their friends in question of whether the man is suitably attractive. Their friends reply with a subtle decision in hopes of persuading her one way or another. If the woman accepts and rubs her buttocks against the man's pelvis provocatively, the man often escalates the sexual nature of the dance by gripping the woman's hips and thrusting against her with more force. If a woman denies the man's physical request to dance, she quickly swings towards her group of friends and either moves away or begins dancing with one of them. Shelly Ronen's work asserts that this is an attempt at politeness and an avoidance of blatant refusal from women (2010). Even if rejected men act offended or frustrated, the disinterested woman attempts to move away from him, rather than to engage with him.

This erotic dancing is often called grinding because for a heterosexual pair, the woman grinds her buttocks into a man's pelvis and genitals. Shelly Ronen describes the dancing based upon her own participant-observation research: "Grinding, as it appeared at these parties, generally involved a woman rubbing her buttocks into a man's groin and her back against his torso in a repetitive motion to the beat of the music" (2010: 361). This dancing can quickly turn into fondling of breasts, butts, and genitals and then making out. As Ronen found, there is a script to grinding that is largely adhered to by college students, and intimate touching often occurs before kissing. After an hour or so of consistent dancing, a quick whisper into the ear of the other, usually the man to the woman, is predictably a question of whether or not she would like to leave with him to further their sexual interaction. Male-female pairs who leave Shooters

together are presumed by everyone to be going back to one of their bedrooms and having some sort of sexual intercourse. Ronen's work finds that grinding is a type of socially salient sexual signaling in college communities. It is a mimicry of sexual intercourse, and often signals interest for engaging in sexual intercourse to each of the dance partners (2010). One interlocutor established that this is largely the case at Shooters where, "Women are expected to 'put out' [have sex] if they start getting physical with a male."<sup>56</sup> Women who grind with and make out with men on the dance floor are expected to go home with their partner.

All of this erotic expression occurs on the public dance floor. Anywhere else these actions would be considered wildly inappropriate, but because they occur in a carnivalesque space, they are socially permitted. Women would be shamed for the immorality of these expressions in almost any other social context at Duke. The norms of carnival in Shooters permit women to be more sexual than in other spaces. Alcohol facilitates social lubrication for sexual expression at Shooters. Because of these altered cultural norms, women are permitted the agency in this setting to dress and dance erotically if they choose to. They can express their sexuality in ways that would not be acceptable elsewhere. Even those who come to Shooters to have fun with their friends, rather than find a sexual partner are freer to engage in sexually-connoted actions.

That being said, women are also further objectified in these spaces, and their expressions of sexual agency have the potential to contribute to this. While some people celebrate young women's participation in alcohol saturated spaces as a form of exerting agency over their own pleasure, "Others point out that this 'freedom,' accompanied by an increased hypersexualisation of girls, also works to re-inscribe young women within the disciplinary power of gender subordination" (Mackiewicz 2015: 70). Women who choose to participate in the hookup culture

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<sup>56</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14, 2016.



that is enacted at Shooters must sexually objectify themselves to receive male attention, which is necessary to secure a random sexual partner. They are expected to wear revealing clothing and display themselves as sexual manner in order to entertain the view of men. Women are expected to provide enjoyment for men at Shooters, even if they only come to have a fun night for themselves. One Duke undergrad summarized this feeling that many of the women with whom I spoke admitted to feeling: “Shooters is basically a picking ground. Women at Shooters are expected to be drunk, hot and horny. You can’t come to Shooters if you don’t want to get hit or grinded on.”<sup>57</sup> This assumption that women are objects for the view and entertainment of men in the space of carnivalesque Shooters reinforces gender inequality in non-carnival life.

### **The Frat Party as a Sexual Marketplace**

After receiving a late-night invitation from a fraternity brother, I walked into the old, green, Alpha Beta<sup>58</sup> fraternity house on a street close to Duke’s campus. There are a few men standing together on their front porch drunkenly talking with one another, but you would never guess what was actually going on inside. The windows are blacked out and the music can only be heard once the door is opened and you are welcomed in by a brother of the fraternity. One step inside assaults you with the vibrations of the bass and the steamy humidity that only occurs when too many sweaty bodies are packed into an enclosed space. As I enter, the strobe lights flash and bounce off of the hundreds of plastic red cups held by party guests. The first room you encounter is the pseudo-bar, where one of the youngest fraternity brothers is making drinks. Women and a few men line up to tell him what drink they want—punch made from fruit juice and a witch’s

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<sup>57</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> The name of the fraternity has been changed, and details of the location have been omitted to maintain anonymity.

brew of cheap liquor, a bottom-shelf beer, or a rum and soda. He pours the free drinks behind a sticky table for the entire course of the party. Once you've grabbed your drink, you move on to either of the next two rooms—the dance floor or the beer pong arena. This particular party is luau-themed, with women wearing bikini tops and floral-print skirts that almost match the party's décor. Men, however, seem almost immune to the theme as they squeeze through the crowd in blazers, khakis, and the occasional floral-print, buttoned shirt. In the room with the speakers and the fraternity brother controlling the music, people are milling about and dancing with one another. Multiple couples, containing men I immediately recognize as members of the fraternity, are making out in the cramped space with their dance partners. The party is limited to the transformed space downstairs, but several of the fraternity brothers live upstairs, and all of them have access to the bedrooms there. There is little room for misinterpretation when a brother is seen leading a woman up the creaky, wooden staircase.

In terms of hookup facilitation, second only to Shooters is the Duke fraternity party.<sup>59</sup> Duke University hosts seventeen Interfraternity Council-recognized fraternity chapters with nearly thirty percent of Duke undergraduate men belonging to a fraternity (Duke University Student Affairs 2015); Duke fraternity culture intricately intertwines with Duke culture, particularly hookup culture. The fraternity chapters are most well known for their on-campus parties. Duke frat (fraternity) parties are organized into various categories based upon exclusivity and locations, but all are entirely saturated with alcohol and its accompanying carnivalesque norms of sexuality. These parties are occasionally open to the entire student body, but more often

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<sup>59</sup> Duke University also hosts co-ed, selective living groups (SLGs), which are similar in structure to Greek organizations and also host parties with alcohol present. These organizations and their gender dynamic are outside the scope of this research, but it is important to acknowledge their presence as an influence in the Duke community and its party culture.

than not, they require an invitation from a brother of the fraternity and are reserved for Duke's sorority women, who make up almost forty percent of the Duke population (Duke University Student Affairs 2015). I will focus upon those that require an invitation as they are the most common that occur on campus.

While frat parties are much like Shooters in regards to the alcohol-lubricated expressions of female sexuality that are socially permitted in the space, they have a much more explicit component of male power. Where Shooters objectifies women's sexuality for male viewership, the fraternity party both objectifies and commodifies women's sexuality for male pleasure. The explicit male power at the fraternity party stems from a system of antiquated policies that originate in the national Greek organizations and govern each fraternity and sorority chapter in the U.S. According to these national organizations' rules, sororities, which are Greek organizations made up only of women, are forbidden from serving alcohol at events they host in their housing (Kingkade 2015). On the contrary, fraternities, Greek organizations made up of men, have no such rule; they are freely permitted to host parties with alcohol. This has enormous implications in the control of the party culture at Duke University, where fraternity men hold the power of the on-campus party spaces and the alcohol contained in them. All of the Greek parties that feature alcohol are hosted by fraternities, so Greek women are forced to choose between entering the fraternity space or breaking the rules and risking their chapter's existence.

Parties in fraternity housing are aesthetically much the same as Shooters. They feature booming music, neon lights, and the smell of spilled liquor, but where Shooters is a neutral space that neither Duke men nor Duke women fully control, Duke University fraternity parties are male dominated. Primarily, men control the invitations that are required for entry to the party. This is one of the first "debts" that a woman incurs to a man when she attends a fraternity party.

By accepting an invitation, she is given a scarce and highly valued item from a fraternity brother, particularly so if that brother is a member of a socially high-ranking fraternity chapter. Much like Shooters, women who participate in frat parties are expected to be sexual and dress provocatively in tight and revealing clothing. This dress usually conforms to some theme, one that is of course chosen by the fraternity. Examples of these themes include angels and demons, prep school, hot and cold, casino night, and sports night, and all of these have a sexual connotation for women's dress, but not men's. No one would expect a woman to wear an actual school uniform to a prep school-themed party; she would be expected to dress as the promiscuous schoolgirl stereotype in tall socks and a short, plaid skirt. Again, these parties can be a way for a woman to express her sexual agency by openly expressing her interest in sex if she chooses or wearing clothing that she likes but may be "too revealing" or "too sexual" for other spaces. That being said, not everyone feels free to deny the pressure of the sexualized dress expectations if they don't want to take part.

Women are not necessarily turned away from a party if they don't dress according to fraternity standards of female sexuality, but they are often socially shunned at the event. They receive little attention from men for disregarding their expectations of dress. Many women mentioned this specifically in interviews including one who reflected on why women might choose to participate in the dress codes: "[There are] Party themes at fraternity parties where women are encouraged to dress in a specific type of 'sexy' clothing. If a woman chooses to wear this, awesome. That's her choice. But I wonder sometimes if it really is a choice. To 'belong' to a group, which is something all college students want—a sense of belonging—I feel that sometimes women are pressured to look and act a certain way."<sup>60</sup> Women expressed that they

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<sup>60</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016.

wanted to feel included in the groups of women who were receiving attention from men who may be potentially desirable sex partners. Dressing the part is just an element of belonging to those who are desired by socially powerful men in socially powerful organizations. Other women expressed their apparent annoyance with the pressures of appearances at fraternity parties: “[At] Frat parties, women are expected to be down for anything. They’re expected to dress and act to suit men’s expectations of a ‘college party;’”<sup>61</sup> “Darties<sup>62</sup> where women are supposed to wear bikinis or other parties where it is the norm to wear more low cut/crop tops and short shorts, and if you break that norm, that gets frowned upon.”<sup>63</sup> It is clear through the experiences of all of these different Duke women that the fraternity culture at Duke imposes a standard of sexual dress and desirability for its female visitors to adhere to or suffer social consequences. Women want to feel like they fit in within the socially powerful group, so they dress the part (Bogle 2008). That being said, it’s made important by male expectations for them to both fit in and stand out. While fitting into the dress expectations, women must also be competitively sexually attractive to receive male attention and evoke desire.

Once a woman enters the space that has been paid for by the fraternity either as rent or venue costs, her next debt to the frat often comes in the form of alcohol. Fraternities purchase and provide alcohol for the women who attend their parties, but that also means they control it. In general, men buy, mix, and serve the alcohol at these parties. This presents a certain risk to women, who sometimes do not know what is in their drink. It is important to note that there are women who exert their own agency in this system by bringing their own drinks or pressuring fraternities to allow women to mix their own drinks, but many women still face the possibility

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<sup>61</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> An abbreviation for “Day parties,” which are hosted by fraternities.

<sup>63</sup> Anonymous interview: November 15, 2016.

that their drink could contain drugs or a higher dose of alcohol than they can consume safely. One interviewee stated a concern for this power dynamic at fraternities that is not so prevalent at other alcohol-lubricated spaces like Shooters: “I feel that alcohol plays an interesting role. At a fraternity party, the control of the alcohol and subsequent sexual interactions tends to rest with the males of the fraternity. In a space like Shooters, where alcohol is not male-controlled, the consumption of alcohol does not result in a male expectation of sexual reward for providing that alcohol.”<sup>64</sup>

In regards to sexuality, alcohol performs a dual-role in the context of a fraternity party. Alcohol and the related sexual norms of the carnival increase the expectations that women should behave sexually for the entertainment of men, and intoxication lowers a woman’s ability to make consensual decisions regarding sex and sexual activities. In addition, the provision of alcohol from a fraternity to a visiting woman creates a debt, for which fraternity men often expect sexual activity in return. As one Duke undergraduate said, “I think that women are culturally expected to be more sexual at parties, especially fraternity parties, where alcohol is involved and people’s bedrooms are nearby.”<sup>65</sup> This highlights the common assumption that female party attendees will grind with or make out with fraternity brothers. Many brothers often also anticipate that the women who have benefitted from the fraternity party will return to their bedrooms with them to engage in hookups. For women who attended the party to find a sexual partner with whom they want to hookup, this can be an exertion of female sexual freedom in a space that encourages it. This, however, is not the case for many women, who are not particularly willing to have sex. Primarily, this presents an enormous risk for sexual assault.

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<sup>64</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Anonymous interview: November 14 2016.

Women who have been drinking heavily and are unable to consent are often still deemed acceptable by men to have sex, which without consent is male-dominated rape. Even if women are able to consent, they often feel socially pressured to engage in sex with brothers because they accepted their party experience, and indirectly, their money.

Historian Beth L. Bailey understands this indebtedness that women incur in their interactions with men as a system of consumption and exchange that has occurred throughout history in the United States (1988). As courtship transitioned towards dating, Bailey writes that, “Dating was an unequal relationship: the man paid for everything and the woman was thus indebted to him. According to many, boys and men were entitled to sexual favors as payment for that debt” (1988: 81). Much like the dating culture of the U.S. described by Bailey, men’s money is at the center of the party culture of Duke University. It purchases the venues, the décor, and the alcohol. Through the membership fees of the fraternity, it even purchases the male privilege of hosting an alcohol-filled party. Women partake in all of these goods that men have financially provided, and feel a pressure of indebtedness to the men. Bailey finds that a woman has only her company to exchange for these things in the realm of courtship (1988), but in the alcohol-lubricated world of frat parties, a woman is encouraged to exchange her sexual body for them.

Not only are the women at fraternity parties often objectified through their dance and dress and beauty, they are also commodified in a system of exchange. Psychologist Roy F. Baumeister and economist Kathleen D. Vohs noted in their joint work that, “A heterosexual community can be analyzed as a marketplace in which men seek to acquire sex from women by offering other resources in exchange. Societies will therefore define gender roles as if women are sellers and men buyers of sex” (2004: 339). In the case of the Duke University fraternity party, men utilize their privileges to supply alcohol and socially-valued forms of entertainment in

exchange for pleasure that they expect from women, even when women don't expect to provide it. Because sex is normalized for women in the alcohol-lubricated carnivalesque space of the fraternity, sex is the assumed form of repayment from women. Their bodies are made into exchanged commodities of pleasure. In this dominantly heterosexual system of hooking up, sociologist Michael Kimmel's study of college men found that, "Guys believe that they are entitled to women's bodies, entitled to sex" (2008: 227). Duke women reported that a very similar entitlement was found in Duke fraternity men: "I think women are definitely expected to be very sexual at open parties hosted by fraternities, especially if the parties are invite only. This usually gives the impression that they are inviting a woman because they think she is attractive and will want to hook up with a man in the fraternity,"<sup>66</sup> and "If a woman attends a formal<sup>67</sup> for a fraternity, if she doesn't have sex with the male who invited her, it's considered rude. I think alcohol definitely plays a role in what men expect."<sup>68</sup> Women whom I interview portrayed fraternity parties as very transactional. Men provided the money, which largely goes towards the purchase of alcohol, and women are expected to provide the bodies for men to have sex. One woman made it clear how it felt to be on the subordinate side of this transaction: "Frat parties—they're male dominant. We [women] are just pretty things for them to look at and sometimes grab."<sup>69</sup> This acts as a means of sexual oppression for women, who lose some of their consensual agency in the pressures to be sexually desirable objects that can be exchanged for goods.

In this transaction, men receive not only sex, but also extract a confirmation of their masculinity from the sexuality in front of their male peers. In citing Peggy Sunday (1990),

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<sup>66</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> A formal is a vacation party, often at the beach, that lasts an entire weekend and is quite expensive. Fraternity men fund the entire event, including transportation and accommodations.

<sup>68</sup> Anonymous interview October 24, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016.



anthropologist Anne Allison writes, “Women are therefore central to the construction of manliness as the means to an end, if you will. A women’s value to the [fraternity] brothers is strictly sexual. If she enters the fraternity’s premises for a party, she is fair game” (1994: 169). Throughout Allison’s work on Japanese hostess clubs, she finds that the hostesses, paid for their objectification in a way that is not so different from fraternity parties’ female attendees, are sexualized by groups of powerful men who seek to share in the masculine bonding that comes from dominating women. As Allison summarizes the job of the hostess, she also summarizes the intended role of the woman invited to a fraternity party: “The role of the hostess is to make a man ‘feel like a man” (1994: 8). Like the fraternity party, the hostess clubs serve to entertain groups of powerful, upper-middle class men. They share in their objectification and sexualization of the hostesses’ bodies, even if they don’t usually partake in actual sexual intercourse with them. The men pay to drink and be entertained by the hostesses, who are paid to offer sexual dialogue and ego-boosting conversation for the men. They serve a very similar, if more explicit and consensual, role as the women who are invited to fraternity parties. Their bodies are objectified in the name of male pleasure.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter I have argued that the social lubrication of alcohol creates a carnivalesque space within the university setting that serves to provide sexual liberation for women, but also sexual disempowerment. The two most prominent alcohol-lubricated carnivalesque spaces at Duke University are Shooters II Saloon and fraternity parties. The presence of alcohol in both of these spaces provides a brief overthrow of the usual sexual mores for women, increasing the normalization of sex within the spaces. Where women would usually

be slut-shamed for their overtly sexual behavior in other contexts, they are encouraged to dress provocatively and dance erotically at these places. This provides a sense of sexual agency to women who wish to express their sexuality through clothing, dance, or hooking up with a random sexual partner. At the same time, the norms of these spaces also hypersexualize women and objectify them as sources of desire for the view and entertainment of men. While Shooters is a more equal space where men are not fully in control of the alcohol, fraternity parties often have an added element of transactional exchange because fraternity men purchase and control the alcohol. This pressures women to feel a sense of indebtedness to the men for financially providing the party, which, when combined with the normalization of sex in the carnivalesque space, is used to encourage a feeling of obligation to hookup with the brothers of the fraternity. Where Shooters objectifies female sexuality for male viewership, the fraternity party objectifies and then commodifies female sexuality for male pleasure. In both instances, the objectification and commodification of the female body strips away some of the female agency in a woman's sexual decision making.

# Chapter III

## Love Me, Tinder

Tinder's Liminal and Playful Qualities and How  
They Influence Women's Experiences with  
Hookup Culture

## Introduction

I first downloaded the red-and-white-flame logo onto my iPhone home screen during the summer of 2014. I was nineteen and living on a college campus in Seattle with fifteen other Duke University undergraduates as we interned in the city together. Tinder—a location-based, dating application (app) for smartphones—had really just taken off, and it was the talk of the collegiate scene. My suitemates and I decided it would be a fun game to play. We thought we would compare the men the app would show us as potential matches and laugh about the ridiculous things they would say in the application’s messenger, just as we had seen others doing online. Each of us carefully selected profile pictures and crafted what we thought were witty biographies for our Tinder profiles, which the app would show to our potential matches. What we all quickly found is that Tinder was not just the fun game we thought it was; it became apparent that it is also highly addictive and self-validating. Our own profiles created, we sifted through those of the other users nearby who identified with the gender and age each of us had requested. If we saw someone who interested us, we could swipe right; if not, swipe left. If both parties swiped right, we received a notification that we had matched, which gave us the ability to privately message one another within the application. The message capabilities of Tinder promised us opportunities for whatever we wanted—dating, casual sex, finding friends, or just talking to interesting people.

This setup immediately hooked my friends and me. In a large community of young adults, you could quite literally play the Tinder game all day long without growing bored. By using the app, you got small glimpses into the lives and personalities of hundreds of people per day. It was like an endless adventure of people-watching, but privately contained in your hand. We were all absorbed into Tinder throughout the summer, and each of us ended up actually

considering meeting another user in person. We began simply using the app for the excitement of the swipes, but found the allure in interacting with men on terms that differed from what we were used to at parties and bars. I deleted the app once I left Seattle and returned to Duke University for the fall semester—but not for long. After seeing almost all of my other friends now using Tinder to facilitate hookups at Duke and meet partners in person, I began to understand its draw as a way to meet men on campus.

Once again, Tinder found a way to hook me. I would swipe on the bus, in the classroom before lecture, during homework breaks, and at social events. It was captivating to see what my peers included on their profiles. Additionally, I got to see who was interested in me without any risk. No one would know I thought that they were attractive unless they liked me back. Of course the greatest motivation was the Tinder notification of “It’s a Match! You and \_\_\_\_\_ have liked each other.” The instant pang of excitement was always followed by a quick twinge of guilt. Did it feel good to receive cellphone notifications that men I found desirable also desired me? Sure. Did it feel good to be a woman and know that this excitement explicitly stemmed from external validation at the fingertips of men? Maybe not. Did it feel good to receive the occasional misogynist slurs and unsolicited sexual advances? Absolutely not. It is within this personal conflict of using Tinder that I became interested in what other Duke women thought about the application’s intersections with hookup culture.

Based upon ethnographic data and existing literature regarding the app’s history and social impact, I argue that Tinder is a virtual tool existing within hookup culture that has elements, such as liminality and qualities of play, that may serve as a means of sexual empowerment, but often these same elements create norms that further gendered sexual constraints for young women. Where alcohol-lubricated spaces that exist within hookup culture

undergo a public change in cultural norms, Tinder alters the relationship that occurs privately between its users. Throughout this chapter, I also explore how women interact with Tinder's qualities of presenting a liminal space within which to sexually play. I argue that the existence of Tinder between actual and online reality creates a unique virtual space that allows Duke women to exert control over men's interactions with them, but it also dehumanizes these female users and encourages online abuse. Ultimately, I contend that Tinder is an enjoyable and playful means for women to engage in hookup culture while somewhat avoiding slut shaming; however, this game-like nature of Tinder also promotes women's self-objectification and the reproduction of misogynistic norms.

## **Fanning the Flame**

There are many mobile, location-based dating applications, such as Hinge, Bumble, and OkCupid, but none of these have attained quite the level of success and name recognition as Tinder. No others have incited such a critical response as "The Dawn of the Dating Apocalypse," as argued by some in the media (Sales 2015). Many, such as Nick Bilton of the *New York Times* (2014) and Bianca Bosker of *The Huffington Post* (2013), have celebrated its great success as a brand, but certainly nothing else but Tinder has been so inflammatory that it induced the following statement from a *Vanity Fair* writer: "Hookup culture, which has been percolating for about a hundred years, has collided with dating apps, which have acted like a wayward meteor on the now dinosaur-like rituals of courtship" (Sales 2015).

These reactions go back to Tinder's early history, when users began to utilize it as a tool for finding casual sex, rather than finding potential dates. Tinder's origins themselves stem from the evolution of various location-based applications designed by Tinder CEO Sean Rad. In 2012,

Rad and co-founders Justin Mateen and Jonathan Badeen released Tinder on the Apple App Store. The application was first launched at the University of Southern California and soon exploded onto college campuses across the nation with ninety percent of the first Tinder users being between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four (Stampler 2014). While its demographics have changed somewhat since, college-aged users still made up fifty percent of users as of February 2014 (Stampler 2014). With an estimated membership of over fifty million active users, that is a substantial number of college students (Bilton 2014).

While Tinder's founders do recognize that the app was originally targeted towards college students, they assert that it was never intended to be a tool for finding casual sex (Mills 2014). The legacy of Tinder continues to maintain its purpose as an application for dating and meeting new people. Despite those claims, Duke University women report that Tinder is best defined as an application that is used to facilitate hookups. In interviews with women, I found that Tinder is a widely used application for women on Duke's campus. Even women who stated that they had never used the app reported that they had seen their friends use it or were aware of its widespread use among Duke women for finding hookups or even a long-term relationship—although much more rarely the latter. Tinder is certainly not something every woman at Duke wants to engage in, but it seems to be a useful tool for those who are interested in using it to find available partners.

And why would it not? Tinder seems to be perfectly designed for the college hookup culture. The application is free and easy to download to any smartphone. The user can shrink her location radius to a mile or two while filtering her interests to college-aged users and swipe almost exclusively on those who live on her own campus. By swiping through Tinder profiles, she can quickly find out who is interested in her from a much larger population than the number

of single men she might encounter on any given day. Additionally, her potential matches are all located nearby, so a woman can easily meet up with someone if she wishes. As one interlocutor put it, “Tinder is very common amongst women at Duke, and it provides a way of meeting people quickly without much physical effort.”<sup>70</sup> In the world of stress that thrives at an elite college such as Duke University, a decrease in the lack of effort and time required can be very valuable. Besides the obvious benefit of convenience, Tinder influences the way Duke University women experience sexual culture in a variety of ways.

### **Hooked: Liminality and Liberation**

Perhaps simple name recognition or the promise of convenient fun is what gets college women to download Tinder, but what keeps them using it? Again and again I have heard how addictive the app is throughout my research, and I certainly experienced it myself during my use of the application. In a 2014 *New York Times* piece on Tinder, writer Nick Bilton found that, “The company said that, on average, people log into the app 11 times a day. Women spend as much as 8.5 minutes swiping left and right during a single session; men spend 7.2 minutes. All of this can add up to 90 minutes each day.” These short bursts of consistent use indicate that users are swiping on Tinder regularly throughout their day, whenever they have a few moments of free time. This was certainly the case for my female friends and me. The flexibility of the application easily fits into the rhythm of a college student’s day. Any small bits of time between classes or papers or club meetings would be spent on Tinder, while also messaging photos of our matches to each other. It is also what I constantly saw and heard while on the bus or sitting in the library. Even when you are not trying to peek or eavesdrop, it is hard to miss the flash of the Tinder logo

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<sup>70</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016



across a smartphone or the mention of a new match. What is it about this space that was so intriguing and endlessly fascinating for women's use? What made it different from the bars and parties we already had the option to attend?

While it is certainly entertaining, Tinder feels like a very strange world. Back when I was playing what was essentially a hookup game on my phone, photographs of people I knew or had seen on campus would often appear on my screen. I would have to choose if I were interested in this virtual representation of a person, but with the simultaneous realization that the person existed in my actual life and could have an impact on my day-to-day activities. It was a very strange blend of realities to say the least. An interlocutor described the ways that Tinder's unique space differs from the party or the nightclub:

Tinder influences sexual culture by simplifying the process of getting to know people who may want to engage in sexual activity. What's more, it is easy to part ways after the fact by not creating an interpersonal relationship. Tinder gives women an opportunity to deny or accept a male prior to meeting them in person rather than the pressure that might occur in a first meeting [in person].<sup>71</sup>

These implications for hooking up through Tinder draw attention to the fact that the application actually exists in quite a peculiar space. Users swipe left and right on profiles of actual people who are located near them geographically, but the swiping itself occurs in a sort of *virtual world* that follows different norms from actual reality. In his renowned ethnographic work on the online world of Second Life, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff defines virtual worlds as, "Places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet" (2008: 17). Similar to Boellstorff's fieldsite, Tinder creates its own space in the online world with a population that

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<sup>71</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

possesses its own cultural norms. Where many digital games have a user create a character or alter ego (called an “avatar”) to play in the virtual interface, Tinder blends realities by making you your own avatar. Using the app is thus an odd hybridization of virtual and actual realities. Tinder appears to exist in a space of *liminality*, a term coined by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and later expanded by Victor Turner (1979). Liminality is a transitory space that exists between two other spaces. Turner and van Gennep both used the idea of liminality to describe the rites of passage through which a person progresses during the stages of life. The individual separates from one space within life, exists in a state of liminality in-between, and then assimilates into a new space of life (Turner 1979). This cultural phenomenon is best exemplified through the transition from girlhood to womanhood, with puberty being the liminal space between the two.

In relation to Tinder and its virtual reality, Turner’s liminality can be thought in terms of Boellstorff’s conceptualization of the digital (2012). Digitality forms, “The gap between the virtual and the actual” (Boellstorff 2012: 40), where the virtual is online and the actual is the physical or offline reality. Where puberty would be the liminal space between girlhood and womanhood in Turner’s conceptualization, Tinder can be seen as the digital liminality between actual reality and virtual reality. As Turner might say, Tinder is a place that is “betwixt and between” (2008: 234) the online world and actual world; it exists within the digital. We can think of Tinder as both a virtual reality and a digital space. This state of in-between creates a special space that changes the norms of sexual culture that Duke University women encounter at campus parties and bars.

When asking women’s opinions of Tinder, I received the following response and several similar to it:

I think it might be good because it adds a more explicit component to the culture. It's less consensual for other online stuff because you have people messaging people unwanted, you know. On Tinder, two people are interested in one another. It's a more structured component of hook-up culture that I think is a positive.<sup>72</sup>

As this interviewee alludes to, Tinder's application design has particular constraints that dictate the way cultural norms function in its virtual world and the communications between two people. These explicit regulations in the functions of Tinder can make it a safer space for women to consent to sexual discussions and activities. The most obvious of these is the fact that only the two users who have expressed bidirectional interest in one another by swiping right are permitted to interact through the messaging tool. If a woman does not want to connect with any given man, she can swipe left on his profile, and he will not appear in her messages or have the ability to contact her.

This is certainly not to say that swiping right on someone is giving them absolute consent to say or do whatever they please. The liminality of Tinder between the actual and the online world can also allow men to dehumanize women more easily because their interaction with one another exists within a virtual world. Male users do not have to physically encounter the women on the other side of the screen, making them seem less human. On the application women only appear as digital profiles, not fleshed human beings; they appear less real. This dehumanization can quite easily lead to verbal abuse that may not have occurred as easily in a space within actual reality. Media studies scholar Shaka McGlotten (2013) claims that online, location-based hookup applications have the added benefit of some degree of anonymity, which often allows users to hide behind the virtual world of Tinder while abusing others. "The setup [of Tinder] gives people

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<sup>72</sup> Anonymous interview: October 22, 2016

an ability to message hateful things if the person does not behave in a way that one desires,”<sup>73</sup> said one woman, who was referring to women who didn’t meet the expectations of men. Just in my own experience, I’ve been called a “cold-hearted bitch,” a “fucking slut,” and a “feminist whore” and many other misogynistic slurs while using Tinder, but I can only count once or twice that anyone has said something like that to my face. I am not an outlier in this regard; other Duke women reported receiving sexist slurs, unwanted and profane sexual advances, and sexually explicit threats in messages from men on Tinder. Researchers Aaron Hess and Carlos Flores (2016), who have studied the popular website “Tinder Nightmares,” which showcases bad male behavior on Tinder, seek to explain this blatant misogyny by hypothesizing that it is the result of men losing a bit of their control in the Tinder world. Men, who largely are in control of hookups and flirting in the actual world, enter into a virtual world where both users have equal power to immediately leave the conversation as the previous two interlocutors cited. Hess and Flores assert that men can feel threatened by their loss of superiority in the situation and react by attempting to assert their dominance and aggressiveness through toxic masculinity that manifests as name calling and threats that women reported (2016).

While it certainly is no remedy to the psychological traumas that can result from sexual misconduct on Tinder, women do have a greater agency to combat these abuses than in an actual party setting. If a woman is threatened or violated in the actual world, she may not be able to identify the perpetrator, escape the danger, or feel as if she can report the culprit to authorities. However, if another user offends or harasses a woman on Tinder, she can easily “unmatch” the user with the tap of a button. Once unmatched, that user can no longer contact her through the application unless she chooses to match with him or her again. This tactic can remove all contact

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<sup>73</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

with a user, provided that the women had not given out any other forms of contact, such as her phone number or email address. For more severe offenses women also have options to “block” users, which bans them from appearing in her potential matches or messages again, and “report” users, which launches a Tinder investigation of the reported complaint. These features can increase agency and safety by restricting their connections with others to the virtual world until a woman makes the choice to meet a “match” in the actual world.

On the other hand, the liminality of Tinder can also be potentially dangerous for women. Without the direct observability that is present in actual reality, which is of course also somewhat fallible, it becomes simple to tailor a projected identity to suit a particular purpose. Existing in a state of liminality, like the space of Tinder’s virtual world, often comes with a sense of unsureness (Turner 1979). Tinder’s setup can create a sense of uncertainty regarding the identity of the person with whom you are interacting. The inherent characteristics of being in a virtual world can make it easier for users to misrepresent themselves and their intentions. Tinder has profile regulations through the social media platform Facebook to serve as barriers to this behavior, but this safeguard does not make it impossible or even particularly rare for users to create false profiles. It can be quite easy to create a fake Facebook account and link it to a fake Tinder account with deceptive names, photographs, and identifying information. I have even seen Tinder profiles of fictional characters in the past, so it is difficult to say how many men whose profiles I have seen could have been fake.

For Duke women who don’t use Tinder, becoming a victim of a violent or nonconsensual sexual act upon meeting a match in person was the most prevalent reason given for not downloading the application. Many feared for their safety in a similar fashion that one interviewee expressed her concerns: “Personally, I wouldn’t use it to look for men because the

idea of a random hookup with a man is concerning to me, and I would be concerned about my safety.”<sup>74</sup> One interlocutor also stated that she had been assaulted by a man she had met on Tinder.<sup>75</sup> If the liminal quality of Tinder is ended and an avatar becomes a person when a woman chooses to privately meet and engage with another user, this can become dangerous if the other user has been deceitful. Because Tinder is location-based, the men with whom women interact on Tinder are usually close by, which also increases the risk of running into them unintentionally. It is clear that these fears by women are real and worth addressing if Tinder is to serve as a safer place for collegiate women to participate in expressing their sexuality.

### **Hooked: Play**

“A lot of women seem to use it as a game,” said one interlocutor echoing the opinion of Tinder that was expressed by several others.<sup>76</sup> The application does function much like a mobile video game, but one that clashes with your one’s own reality due to its liminality, as discussed above. Tinder has something else that makes it special in the world of college hookup culture—it is a pleasurable form of play in itself. In his book, *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga argues that play does not exist to serve a biological function; it is a cultural creation that simply produces fun. Of fun Huizinga states, “The fun of playing resists all analysis, all logical interpretation. As a concept, it cannot be reduced to any other category” (1971: 3). This is certainly the case with Tinder. As a former Tinder user myself (I deleted my profile once I entered a monogamous relationship at the end of my junior year), I can personally attest that it is almost endlessly entertaining. I cannot precisely explain why it is fun; it just is. When my suitemates and I played

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<sup>74</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>75</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous interview: November 15, 2016

with Tinder in Seattle, we did it for the fun of the game and the thrill of potentially meeting someone. When I played it as a study break, I did so because I loved the excitement of the possibilities. I found that women who used the app almost always mentioned that it had a quality of fun to it. Even while looking for a potential hookup, Tinder served as its own source of entertainment that could be returned to at any given time when they became bored.

But perhaps it feels like playing a game because that is exactly what it is. Roger Caillois expanded the work by Huizinga by providing a six-part definition of play in his work:

1. Free: in which playing is not obligatory...
2. Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time...
3. Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand...
4. Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth...
5. Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws...
6. Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life (2001: 10).

Following these characteristics outlined by Caillois, it becomes apparent that Tinder is sexually charged play for college women. Women can freely download Tinder onto their phones if they choose and are under no obligation to do so. As mentioned, Tinder also exists in a separate space than reality. Its time limits and space limits are set by each woman who utilizes it. Much of the fun associated with Tinder comes with its quality of uncertainty. You never know if you are one more swipe away from matching with that hot guy from your physics lecture or the star of the basketball team. Your crush could show up next, and you can finally find out if he is interested in you. To keep seeing new users and new potential matches, you have to keep playing. New

knowledge is produced and the potential is created for new connections with each right swipe, but no materials are produced. Even the founders of Tinder admit that it has its beginnings in the idea of gaming and play:

“We always saw Tinder, the interface, as a game,” Rad said. “What you’re doing, the motion, the reaction.” So Rad and Badeen modeled the original stack of potential matches’ faces after a deck of cards. When playing with physical cards for inspiration, their natural urge was to interact with the top card by throwing it to the side. Thus, the iconic Tinder swipe was born (Stampler 2014).

As Rad notes, the game of Tinder is both physical and mental. You feel as if you are playing a game and are simultaneously carrying out motions that we associate with the play of cards, and that can make the app highly addictive.

The virtual play that takes place on Tinder is strikingly similar to that of electronic gambling machines as described by anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll (2012). Like many gambling games described by Schüll (2012), Tinder is a mixture of Roger Caillois’ (2001) *agon*, which is Latin for contest, and *alea*, Latin for a game involving dice. *Agon* is a game based on competition, while *alea* is based entirely upon chance. Tinder’s form of play appears to be based upon both. It is *agon* in that a user strives to create an attractive, interesting, and competitive profile to receive more matches. The play of Tinder is also a game of chance in that once your profile is created to your specifications, the other users’ profiles you are shown are outputs of Tinder’s complex user algorithm (Alba 2016). These outputs are random to the user, as he or she cannot know whose profile will appear at a given time or if the other user will have an interest in her profile. Like gambling machines in casinos, Tinder users cannot be sure if they will win, or if they do, how great their prize will be. Where the casino gambler wagers money, a Tinder user



gambles only with the time she spends on the application. Her victory is a match, and even more so a hookup, with another user, and the magnitude of the victory increases with their mutual attraction to one another. Schüll finds that this enchantment with the gamble is reflective of a type of conditioning studied by psychologist B. F. Skinner in rats. As one of Schüll's interlocutors states:

Slot machines are just 'Skinner Boxes' for people! Simply put, it means that the rewards (pellets) are dispensed on a random schedule—sometimes the rat gets none, sometimes a few, sometimes a lot of pellets (sounding familiar yet?). He never knows when he's going to get a pellet so he keeps pushing that lever, over and over and over and over, even if none come out. The rat becomes—addicted, if you will. THIS, then, is the psychological principle slot machines operate on, and how it operates on you. (2012: 104).

Just as this Skinner Box is rather descriptive of electronic casino gambling, it is reflective of the use of Tinder, too. The very brief amount of time—I probably spent about ten seconds on each profile when I was using the app—it takes to swipe through profiles is conducive to continuing the game with no clear stopping point—even once an attractive match has been made. This addictive nature is particularly true when you don't know how many swipes (level pulls) it could take to get the next hot guy or the next hookup (food pellet). As one of my own interlocutors put it, there's an idea that, "You'll find a connection, a match and a sexual partner at a click."<sup>77</sup>

This idea of pleasure, even the potential sexual pleasure, in finding a match serves to keep users interested and swiping. It certainly is central both to Tinder's capitalistic profit and to the efficiency of finding a partner for the user. As Schüll finds in her work on machine gambling, the addictive nature of the form of play is what makes money for the owner of the game (2012).

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<sup>77</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

If Tinder keeps its users swiping, it gains a higher usage rate and becomes a greater competitor for advertising space. After every fifteen swipes or so on the application, an advertisement appears instead of another user's profile. Additionally, once a Tinder user becomes hooked on the free version of the application, he or she has the opportunity to pay a monthly fee for additional features like unlimited swipes—unlimited potential hookup partners (McAlone 2016). None of the women with whom I spoke admitted to paying for Tinder Plus, but with over one million paid users (McAlone 2016), it seems the option is a strong stream of revenue for the application's executives. It is easily seen that a quality of addictive play is highly beneficial for Tinder as a corporation. Much like the gambling machine, the addiction and gratification of play that comes from Tinder drives up the profit of the capitalist, who receives monetary benefit from the pleasure of the player.

This playful design of Tinder facilitates its use as an enjoyable and addictive form of gaming, while also giving it the potential to be a very useful tool for young women on college campuses. The joy of the game can make it an empowering and pleasurable resource for women in choosing their potential sexual partners without having to do so in the norms of an interaction within the actual reality of parties or bars that pose certain oppressions in themselves (See Chapter II). During my time at Duke, it has become blatantly apparent that men are generally supposed to be the instigators of sexual contact. It is largely, but certainly not always, socially distasteful for women to initiate sex. There seems to be a great deal of discomfort faced by women who wish to initiate sex with a male partner but know that this could lead to their being viewed as slutty or easy. The norms of Tinder, even on the same campus, significantly differ. Where men do the initiating at Shooters and fraternity parties, many men explicitly state in their Tinder "About Me" sections that they want women to message them first and initiate the contact.

While this standard seems to be created and encouraged by male users through their profiles, it can also be viewed as a means of sexual empowerment for women. The standard normalizes female-initiated sexual contact on the application, which can make women more comfortable in asking for what they want from male Tinder users. It also reduces the pressure placed upon women to say yes to men and to accept any sexual contact. As one Duke University woman said, “Tinder gives women an opportunity to deny or accept a male prior to meeting them in person rather than the pressure that might occur in a first meeting.”<sup>78</sup> In addition, the fact that a woman’s right swipe remains anonymous unless the other user also swipes right on her profile permits her a greater freedom in expressing her interest without a great risk for embarrassment. One interviewee expressed the benefits of this: “The anonymity of the matching function allows people who might not be comfortable with approaching in ‘real life’ to make connections.”<sup>79</sup> It is clear that being anonymous relieves some of the social pressure faced by women in initiating sexual contact.

This circumnavigation of uncomfortable personal contact through Tinder is also a way of decreasing your likelihood of being slut shamed. Unlike the publicly visible interactions that take place at parties, Tinder exists in a digital world where all direct communication between users is visible only to them. Without an audience looking on, women are less likely to experience gossip or critiques about their overtly sexual behavior. Women who flirt, kiss, and dance with men at various drunken social events are often whispered about among both male and female Duke students (See Chapter II). Even when other women are not intending to shame their friends, the mere discussion of drunken flirtation can be embarrassing. Instead of making out with a random

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<sup>78</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>79</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

guy on the dance floor of Shooters, taking him home, and hearing her friends joke about it for the next four years, a woman can simply find a consenting man in whom she is interested and discretely meet at her apartment for casual sex. Some women expressed that they utilized Tinder to have sex, but avoid intimate spectacles at public bars and parties. Tinder is an easy way to remove public sexual foreplay and the associated censure of women from the realm of casual sex. Additionally, it also creates a space where women can flirt with many men at once without being labeled as a whore. A Duke woman can be conversing with five or six men at one time while on Tinder, and no one else has to know about it. She can allow the discussion to be as erotic as she wishes without anyone else looking on. Tinder provides a place of virtual escape from the tendency of college hookup culture to be very public, and in doing so allows women to avoid the shaming eyes and ears of others.

Even with these ways through which Tinder lends power and game-like enjoyment to women in making their sexual decisions, many also expressed ways in which the application could contribute to the policy of female sexuality. The most prominent of these is the way that Tinder use itself is perceived. Although widespread use of the Tinder was reported by the majority of interlocutors, many women also expressed a stigmatization of Tinder users. One interlocutor was angry that I was even asking about “Such a disgusting app.”<sup>80</sup> Another referred to it as “slimy,”<sup>81</sup> and still another implied that Tinder did not have any “Decent human beings.”<sup>82</sup> When asked about Tinder, one interviewee simply gave a thumbs-down gesture paired with a “Never used it; never will.”<sup>83</sup> Even those who enjoyed the application were still shy about

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<sup>80</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

<sup>81</sup> Anonymous interview: October 26, 2016

<sup>82</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>83</sup> Anonymous interview: October 22, 2016

claiming their own use. Others said they only used it off campus to avoid being recognized from the app. Speaking for myself, I am not entirely sure that even I would have admitted to using Tinder were I not so interested in its cultural value. Its clear association with casual sex and hookups mean that there is something a bit delinquent about its use for women. It seems that the stigmatization of Tinder use is an extension of slut shaming on college campuses. By participating in a sexually connoted virtual space, it assumed that a woman is participating in casual sex, which is certainly still immoral in the eyes of some college-aged men and women. Simply put, women's participation in sexuality can be policed by the way she is labeled for her use of Tinder.

“Tinder's greatest influence on campus is making the objectification of women more rampant,” a young woman said to me when I asked what she thought about Tinder's relationship with Duke women.<sup>84</sup> It became obvious throughout my research, that Tinder can certainly be destructive to women's sexual freedom in the ways that it places value upon their bodies. The self becomes reduced to an avatar that must be impressive enough to garner attention. In surveying Tinder users, Ranzini and Lutz (2017) identified a pronounced pattern within Tinder usage motivators that women, much more so than men, use Tinder as a tool of self-validation. Other researchers (de Vries & Peter 2013) have also found that social media often recreates patriarchal objectification of the female body by the means of women's self-objectification through online self-presentation for male pleasure. Through my conversations with Duke University women, I have observed that their excitement of “winning” in Tinder that comes from matching with a male user stems from the validation of one's beauty from a man.

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<sup>84</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

Tinder does not provide much information about its users on their profiles. The game-like qualities of Tinder means that very little time is spent on each profile, and a woman has to immediately grab attention if she wants a match. The application permits an “About Me” section of five hundred characters, a space for the name your university or alma mater, a space for your current job information, and the inclusion of several photographs. The photographs are the clear centerpiece of your profile. Not only do you have a very limited space to include something about yourself, but this written space is also not visible to others unless they click on your profile to explore it in more depth. Essentially, most Tinder swiping is done based entirely on photographs. For women, this means their worthiness of a right swipe is largely based upon their beauty. In surveying Tinder users, Ranzini and Lutz (2017) identified a pronounced pattern within Tinder usage motivators that women, much more so than men, use Tinder as a tool of self-validation. Many Duke women clearly articulated the point that Tinder is “...All based on image and attraction”<sup>85</sup> and “The setup prompts people to make judgments and attributions on appearances.”<sup>86</sup> It was easy to deduce that Duke women believe Tinder success, which is largely defined as getting matches or hookups, is based upon one’s appearance and beauty. A match provides instant gratification of that beauty (Sales 2015). Author Naomi Wolf provides a framework for thinking about this in her widely acclaimed book, *The Beauty Myth*: “Beauty and sexuality are both commonly misunderstood as some transcendent inevitable fact; falsely interlocking the two makes it seem doubling true that a woman must be beautiful to be sexual” (1992: 150). Wolf asserts that there is an extensive belief that beauty is what makes a woman worthy of sexual attention, such as that on Tinder. She also finds that as women gain more social

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<sup>85</sup> Anonymous interview: October 23, 2016

<sup>86</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

power, as is the case in controlling interactions within the virtual world of Tinder, they face more pressures from men to be beautiful, which serves as retaliation against this power. These are some of the many facets of her “Beauty myth,” which she characterizes with the following:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called ‘beauty’ objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men (1992: 12).

As Wolf says, women are socially conditioned to believe they must be beautiful, and that it is the greatest trait that can make them desirable for men. And so, this highly held notion of beauty is reflected in the way women feel about Tinder matches.<sup>87</sup> To receive a match notification means a man has swiped right on you; it means he was pleased with the images of you. He was pleased with your beauty. The false entanglement of beauty and sexuality that Wolf mentions leads us to believe that being beautiful is to be sexually desired. Following the beauty myth, we think that being reassured that we are beautiful is the highest compliment we can receive. Wolf goes on to say, “So the beauty myth sets it up this way. A high rating as an art object is the most valuable tribute a woman can exact from her lover” (1992: 171).

To be viewed as an art object is to literally be objectified, and this objectification can serve as a form of sexual policing. The excitement that originates from a match notification is a paragon of the beauty myth. The fun of the game stems from that very excitement, so Tinder seems to cater to the oppressive urging of women to please men. On the application women are encouraged to commodify themselves as pleasurable objects, as playing cards for their potential matches to shuffle left or right. As anthropologist Akiko Takeyama stated in her 2010 work on

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<sup>87</sup> Women also reported using Tinder as a means to objectify men’s bodies, but it is important to note that this objectification is not supported by a structure of oppressive social norms.

male hosts in Japanese host's clubs, "Intimate—physical and emotional—relations are increasingly commodified in sex-related entertainment and tourism, online dating, 'mail-order brides, and a spectrum of personal and domestic affective labor on a global scale" (223). In the virtual world of Tinder, women and their avatars are the commodities. While Takeyama's work focuses upon male hosts, she states that women must perform as their most "Desirable selves," which are "Sexually attractive women" (2010: 223). This desirable self is created through a consumption-oriented "Ideal subjecthood," which is "An object of desire to be bought and sold" (Takeyama 2010: 223). To use Tinder in a way that receives numerous matches, women must style themselves to the standards of beauty; they must become their desirable selves. The matches within the game can be thought of as an investment a user makes into another. Users invest their swipe and their time into the chance of matching with another. Only women who are desirable are invested in. To the female user, Tinder seems to be a free market of beauty, and she must become a scarce commodity that is worthy of investment and consumption to compete for male sexual attention (Sales 2015). Author Shaka McGlotten refers to this neoliberal view of self-presentation as, "The commodified self-styling and interactive exchanges that express the democratic freedom to produce the self but only in and through fantasies of the market" (2013: 10). Women must become conventionally beautiful objects for the viewing pleasures of men to find and compete for desirable matches. The myth of beauty has women believe that they should be thrilled with the compliment of their beauty that is implied through a match. Desirable women can receive upwards of one hundred matches per day, which provides a constant stream of the affirmation of their beauty (Sales 2015) and the pleasure that comes from it, much like the aforementioned Skinner box. This dwarfs the one or two men that might approach and compliment her on any given night of parties or bars. The game of Tinder appropriates its



excitement of play from its repetitive objectification and commodification of the female body, which perpetuates an inequality in the ways college culture perceives male and female participation in sex. In the case of Tinder, the male is often the sexual consumer of the female body.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike the bars and fraternity parties that make up the foundation of hookup culture, Tinder is an emerging space that is not necessary for hookup culture to exist at Duke. Also different from those alcohol-lubricated spaces, it permits a more private escape for women who are often stuck in the tendency of these other spaces of hookup culture to be very public. I have argued here that Tinder, as a facet of Duke University's hookup culture, is seemingly empowering. Its liminal space has the ability to lend women more control over their hookup encounters, and its fun and convenient nature can allow women further freedom to enjoy sexual expressions. While there are potential benefits of the mobile application, more often these qualities of Tinder can result in the constraint of women's sexual freedoms. Women face dehumanization that is facilitated by Tinder's virtual existence and can sometimes lead to online abuse. They also find themselves objectifying their own bodies and focusing upon using their profiles to gain the approval of men. Throughout this chapter I have found that Tinder is a powerful, and often fun, virtual space within existing collegiate hookup culture, but it is one that contributes to a subtle constriction of sexuality by means of patriarchy in ways that are different from physical spaces on campus.

As one of my interlocutors stated, “I would say that there is a hookup culture (one night stands, casual sex without being in a relationship) here regardless of the influence of Tinder.”<sup>88</sup> Another said, “I think in society, Tinder can influence the sexual culture in promoting hookup culture, but I feel as if the hookup culture was already established here at Duke.”<sup>89</sup> These statements reflect the findings of other Duke undergraduate researchers that Duke University’s hookup culture has existed without Tinder (George, 2016); (Theodosiou-Pisanelli, 2006). Tinder has not necessarily created a hookup culture, but it has changed the way that Duke women experience hooking up and provides a space that differs from other sites of hookup culture.

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<sup>88</sup> Anonymous Interview: November 15, 2016

<sup>89</sup> Anonymous interview: October 19, 2016

# Conclusion

## Hooked

Looking back on Duke University's freshman orientation some three and a half years later feels rather strange. The presentation offered a brief introduction to hookup culture, but only to two prominent elements of it: the pervasiveness of sex on campus and the epidemic of sexual assault. The orientation did not warn me that I would be objectified and commodified as a source of male pleasure. It did not tell me that my social position as a woman would be forced into a dichotomy of being a prude or being a slut. It did not mention that I would become so accustomed to hegemonic masculinity that I would be willing to objectify myself in exchange for the approval of men. It did not caution me that perhaps I would become aware of these effects, but I would continue participating in the policing of my own sexuality because I thought I enjoyed the thrill of the culture. It did not suggest that I would watch most of the women I know experience and struggle with the same things within hookup culture at Duke.

Hookup culture is a system of sexual and gendered norms that permeates universities across the United States, including the gothic "work hard; play hard" campus of Duke University. This research concludes that it is not the act of hooking up that is constraining for women's sexuality; it is the norms within hookup culture that privilege male sexuality. The seemingly ubiquitous nature of the hookup on Duke's campus normalizes participation in casual sexual activity for young women, which makes the culture seem rather sexually empowering. Sexual expression is practiced in ways that would be socially unacceptable in other spaces. It's true that there are potentially freeing elements of hookup culture for women, but through my ethnographic data, it has also become apparent that these seemingly empowering elements can simultaneously be sexually constraining.

In the broader structures of hookup culture, we see that it has the possibility to free women from the debts that are often incurred in dating culture while also making it easier for women to express their sexual desires. Simultaneously, women are forced into a dichotomy that brands them as either a prude or a slut based on how much they participate in casual sex. This burden of the dichotomy is disproportionately born by women of color and queer women, who find themselves often marginalized in hookup culture at Duke.

In the alcohol-saturated and carnivalesque spaces of the nightclub and the fraternity party, women are not only permitted, but encouraged to freely express their heteronormative sexual desires. The spaces are more than accepting of sparse clothing and erotic dancing that many women find fun and expressive, but they are also spaces where women are put on display for male pleasure. In the nightclub and at the fraternity party, women are objectified. The fraternity takes this objectification further and commodifies the female body in return for the entertainment benefits offered by fraternity brothers, who dominate the space in a way that does not occur in the nightclub.

Within the virtual, playful realm of Tinder, women find several apparent benefits for sexual empowerment, but they also find patriarchal abuse. The digital liminality of Tinder gives women more power in controlling their sexual interactions with men while also giving them a space to avoid the slut shaming found elsewhere. That being said, these same qualities of Tinder also dehumanize and self-objectify women. The existence of Tinder in a virtual world means men are less physically connected to the women they interact with on the application, and thus think of them less as people with feelings and emotions. The nature of the space also threatens male power that is found in other hookup spaces, often resulting in men's lashing out or verbally abusing women who reject their advances. Tinder's sense of play and enjoyment also was found

to encourage women to self-objectify their bodies in the Tinder profiles in exchange for the approval of men.

In each of these chapters and throughout my fieldwork, a clear pattern emerged. The norms of hookup culture at Duke University seem empowering for women at first glance. They encourage female sexual expression and find ways for women to seek out casual sex for their own pleasure. These facets of hookup culture are not necessarily untrue, but they hide the subtle—sometimes even blatant—ways that these same norms enact gendered sexual policing. Even in an allegedly freer sexual culture, sex was represented in patriarchal terms. Outwardly, the normalization of women's participation in hooking up made sex seem more free, but ultimately it also made sex further dominated by masculinity.<sup>90</sup> *I conclude that although hookup culture is seemingly empowering for women's sexuality, the elements of hookup culture explored here that appear to facilitate sexual freedom for women actually bring about sexual constraints through patriarchal sexual norms and sexual policing on Duke University's campus.*

## **Broader Implications**

Like both Naomi Wolf (1997) and Laura Session Stepp (2007) have similarly posited before me, I wish to extrapolate from my own data to make a broader claim about women's sexual liberation in general. Wolf (1997) and Stepp (2007) have both concluded that the United States Sexual Revolution and resulting female sexual pseudo-liberation actually produced greater oppressive dichotomies for women's sexuality. In alignment with this, my ethnographic data and resulting analysis points to a similar outcome for the apparent empowerment often associated

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<sup>90</sup> It's worth noting that this research identified many women who were aware of the negative aspects of hookup culture for themselves and other women. Most of these women admitted that they participated anyway because hookup culture is both fun and seemingly ubiquitous.

with hookup culture. I have found that women's sexual empowerment in hookup culture at Duke University occurred under male-privileging social structures and thus, still served patriarchal ideals of sexuality. From this, I pose the idea that sexual empowerment for women that occurs under a greater, hegemonic system of patriarchy cannot be empowering. The resulting pseudo-liberation is one that seeks to placate and simultaneously, perpetuate patriarchal control over female bodily autonomy. It does so by normalizing female sexuality, but normalizing it as a servant of masculine sexuality.

For now, I hope this work has both exposed and properly evidenced the sexual constriction that women are still facing in contemporary hookup culture. I hope that Duke University's administration and student activists will take these findings into consideration and use them as a resource to dismantle the oppressive gender system that is thriving here under a cloak of pseudo-empowerment. These are enormous hopes, so mostly I hope that the women who participated in this research and the women who have discussed this research with me have found it to be both interesting and informative for reflecting upon their own time at Duke.

### **Inquiries for Further Research**

While outside the scope of this thesis, is it necessary to delve further into the "why" of this culture. What is it about Duke University's broader campus culture and its student body that allow these norms of hookup culture to proliferate? I pose that it may be a combination of two things: Duke's selective admission of elite, competitive students who choose to focus upon their academic and career goals and benefit from foregoing committed monogamous relationships and Duke's University's profound privileging of the white, wealthy fraternities that have a strong

monopoly on entertainment and create the standard for masculinity on campus. Further research is needed to examine this hypothesis and related questions.

It is also very much worth noting that this work focused upon a primarily white and heterosexual, cisgendered female voice. This was not necessarily my intent, but the majority of Duke University undergraduate students are both white and heterosexual, and I chose not to manipulate my sample populations. Entire theses, or rather entire books, could have focused upon hookup culture and the marginalized voices of black women, Latinx women, Asian women, mixed race women, gay women, bisexual women, asexual women, transwomen, differently-abled women, poor women, religious minority women, and so forth. I encountered in my fieldwork that being a queer woman, a women of color, or both drastically changed the way in which one experiences hookup culture at Duke. I have included sections pertaining to these perspectives in Chapter I, but these brief sections could never do justice to the stories of these women. Based upon my own findings, I would infer that these women are burdened disproportionately and intersectionally with the sexual policing resulting from a white, cisgendered, heterosexual, patriarchal system of hookup culture. It is impossible to understand the full depth of hookup culture's impact without including the viewpoints and experiences of women who are not included in the majority narrative.

This is not to say that the research related to hookup culture should be confined to women. At every turn of my research, I saw that the toxic forms of masculinity being enacted by Duke University's men had the potential to be destructive for themselves as well. The manifestations of this dangerous masculinity was outside the scope of my research, but authors like Michael Kimmel (2008) have made strides in exploring collegiate hookup culture from a



male student perspective. Further research is needed in this sphere if we are to believe that the gendered oppressions found within hookup culture are to change.

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