

“When we graduate, this is over”: Young Women’s Experiences with Hooking Up and Relationships

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The University of Kansas, a large public university in close proximity to the more metropolitan Kansas City, finds its 30,000 students engaged in a diversity of activities on any given Saturday night. Lawrence, Kansas provides worthy grounds on which to study social life and its constantly changing organization; this college town's Midwestern values coexist with no shortage of places to look for a good time. Greek life, a thriving panorama of downtown bars, the social hubbub surrounding Division One sports, house parties up and down every block of the "student ghetto," and a bevy of options for more sober leisure comprise the social scene for Lawrence's young people. Though the outward appearance of social life has remained much the same, one facet has undergone tremendous evolution throughout the last 50 years – the way students interact sexually.

The Genealogy of Hookup Culture

In the 1960s, the advent of the birth control pill changed the social landscape far more than anyone could have imagined. Access to the pill radically reduced concerns about unwanted pregnancy and allowed women freedom from planning sexual encounters far in advance. The new reproductive autonomy it afforded paved the way for women to surge into universities in record numbers. College enrollment soared – up 78% between 1970 and 2000 with more women than men graduating in 2000 (England et al. 2008). The age at first marriage rose, now 28 years old for those with degrees (Fry 2010). The women's movement had a huge impact on romantic interactions, leading to "reproductive and attitudinal changes" that ushered in "changes in sexual behavior" (Bogle 2008: 21). While in the past, college dating was characterized by pre-arranged activities initiated and paid for by men, college students in the late 1960s began spending time together in larger mixed-gender groups, often consuming alcohol.

Although plenty of college students today date and form committed romantic relationships (71% of students report at least one relationship lasting at least six months), dating is no longer the primary way by which men and women begin relationships (Armstrong, et al. 2010). Instead, according to Armstrong and her colleagues, 72% of college students have participated in at least one casual sexual encounter, widely dubbed a “hookup.” A hookup can involve any sexual activity ranging from making out to sexual intercourse. The current literature defines hookups as sexual events (ranging from making out to oral sex or intercourse) that occur outside of exclusive relationships and involve varying degrees of interest in a relationship. Recent studies have found that 38% of students report having sexual intercourse on their most recent hookup (Armstrong, et al. 2009).

Many journalists have chronicled their fears that by participating in hookup culture, a culture they describe as sex-centric and commitment-light culture, women ultimately lose out. Social scientists are debating if this is the case. Some, like Armstrong and her co-authors, identify several advantages for women participating in hookup culture. They assert that hooking up provides an outlet for sexual desires without a serious time commitment or emotional investment (Armstrong et al. 2010). This affords many college women the opportunity to concentrate on schoolwork and personal development, forming strong personal identities and setting career goals. England surveyed more than 14,000 students from 19 universities about their hookup, dating, and relationship experiences. She found that women without boyfriends touted the ability to form and strengthen friendships on campus (Armstrong et al. 2010). Armstrong and her colleagues report many of the women they interviewed alluding to the isolative nature of relationships, complaining that being in a relationship can make it

difficult to meet people. Avoiding committed relationships also minimizes the likelihood of experiencing the physical and emotional abuse that occurs at a surprising rate; about 22% of the women interviewed by Armstrong and Hamilton reported boyfriends using abuse to keep them in relationships (Armstrong et al. 2010). A feminist argument for hookup culture posits the woman in a greater position of autonomy and control over her body and social relationships.

The Gendered Hookup

Despite the benefits women participating in hookup culture may enjoy, it is in some ways an anti-woman culture, especially in regard to the high risk of sexual victimization for women. Research has found that hooking up very often occurs in the context of heavy drinking at parties or bars, and women often lack the resources to extricate themselves from situations that could lead to sexual victimization. Stompler points out that alcohol is certainly not the cause of this reprehensible behavior on the part of college males; many commonplace features of fraternities, and specifically the overarching narrow conception of masculinity (“competition, athleticism, dominance, winning, conflict, wealth, material possessions, willingness to drink alcohol”), creates an environment that encourages sexual violence (Stompler 434). Date rape and other forms of sexual violence are among the most serious detriments to women attempting to navigate and participate in hookup culture (Luke 2009).

In addition to the physical dangers to safety posed by hookup culture, gender scholars find marked inequality in the rate of men and women’s orgasms in hookup contacts. An examination of rates of orgasm within hookups and relationship contexts finds that women are much less likely to receive cunnilingus in hookups than in

relationships, with the lowest occurrence of cunnilingus in the first hookup (46%) and incidences escalating in repeat encounters (55% in second and third hookups, 59% in repeat hookups, and 68% in relationships). On the other hand, men receive fellatio at a roughly equal rate (about 80%) in hookup and relationship contexts (Armstrong et al. 2010). The authors suggest that these differences stem from the sexual double standard; women feel obligated to give fellatio and men entitled to receive it, where the opposite is not true. On the existence of men's ambivalence about women's pleasure outside of relationships, they write: "Men's lack of respect for women who will have sex outside of a relationship seems to translate into a sense that hookup partners are not owed the same level of sexual reciprocity as girlfriends—both in terms of what sex acts are engaged in (e.g., giving her oral sex) and in the care and attention to her sexual pleasure" (Armstrong et al. 2010: 371). Sexual satisfaction and rate of orgasm is much higher in relationships, suggesting not only that women feel more comfortable communicating their desire and taking responsibility for their satisfaction, but also that men feel more obligated to reciprocate sexually. Some of the women interviewed by Armstrong and her colleagues expressed that unsatisfying sexual experiences within a relationship were definitely grounds to end the relationship.

The sexual double standard is as prevalent within college hookup culture as within wider Western culture. While Western women enjoy high levels of sexual autonomy, they are nonetheless constantly evaluated for their sexual choices. The phenomenon now commonly known as "slut bashing," whereby a woman is ridiculed for any number of facets of her sexuality, is an exemplar of this constant evaluation. An alarming number of women engage in this behavior, perhaps to divert attention away from their own sexuality or attempt to diminish the value of other women in some way.

In her path breaking collection of women's and men's reports about their sexual lives and attitudes, Shere Hite (1992) found that 92% of college men and women agreed the sexual double standard is unfair but practiced it in overwhelming numbers (cited in Tanenbaum 2004). Tanenbaum argues that teenage girls today experience a damning Catch-22 of sexuality with "conflicting pressures to have sex and maintain a 'good' reputation" (Tanenbaum 2004: 405). She suggests that shame is a primary reason for women's insecurity with their sexuality and the feelings of guilt and squeamishness about sex.

There are other gendered aspects of the sexual double standard: "The double standard may also lead women to feel ambivalent about enjoying hookup sex, or not entitled to pleasure within it. While we typically think of the double standard as involving how men and women are differently judged for *participating* in sex, double standards also often involve gendered notions about appropriate degrees of *enthusiasm, pleasure, or initiative*" (England et. al. 2008). Perhaps in an attempt to displace this double standard, "some girls have parlayed their post-feminist assertiveness into 'girl power'... A few think they can achieve equality by imitating guys' behaviors" (Kimmel 2008: 14). The respect and equality these women seek to garner (whether or not they do and consciously and deliberately) will be hard-won, though, utilizing this approach.

Hookups, Youthhood, and Anomie

In *Guyland*, an eye opening work filled with fascinating insights on masculinity and the changing landscape of the ambling post-adolescent trajectory toward adulthood, Michael Kimmel delves into the ways hookup culture can abet delaying the

passage into adulthood. He calls this life phase “youthhood,” a term coined by sociologist James Cote to describe the anomic, directionless period between 18 and 29:

“Perhaps the chief characteristic of this stage of life is its indeterminacy. There’s a massive mismatch between the ambitions of this group and their accomplishments. They graduate college filled with ideas about changing the world, making their contribution, and making lots of money, and they enter a job market at the bottom, where work is utterly unfulfilling, boring, and badly paid. Extremely other-directed, they perform to please grown-ups, but exhibit little capacity for self-reflection or internal motivation. They have high self-esteem, but often little self-awareness. Many lack a moral compass to help negotiate their way in the world. For these young people, the world is unstable and uncertain. They drink more than they think they should, take more drugs, and probably get involved in more hookups and bad relationships than they think they should. And they also get more down on themselves, because at this stage they also think they should know better” (Kimmel 2008: 39).

If Kimmel’s astute insights reflect the true social realities of many young adults, frustration and even self-loathing must run high among this group. Often mistakenly believing their efforts would be rewarded in the “real world” following graduation, the obstacles impeding adulthood – career achievement, financial security, marrying and starting a family – seem insurmountable. The changing global economy has irreversibly altered the ways people reach adulthood, and consequently the relationships they participate in along the way.

Understanding the ways in which individuals relate to one another, interact, and make sense of their experiences at the micro level can lead to developments in understanding more about behavior in wider culture. Very few college students escape at least limited exposure to the many nuances and implications of hookup culture on campuses today, and as hookup culture only recently (within the last ten years) began to receive scholarly attention and become the topic of academic inquiry, many people of all ages have unanswered questions about what hookup culture is, how it works, and

how those participating in it feel about their experiences. My Honors thesis seeks to provide some answers to these questions and additionally address a more specific question: Do women appreciate the benefits hookup culture can afford them, risks and inequalities notwithstanding, or are they simply “bargaining with” hookup culture until they have a better set of alternatives?

Methodology

I conducted qualitative interviews with twelve heterosexual female residents of Lawrence, Kansas between April and October 2011. These women are students and alumnae of the University of Kansas ranging in age from 18 to 28 years old. I designed the study to include student and alumnae cohorts because I believed the perspectives of the older women, likely operating in different social worlds within Lawrence, would be instrumental in discovering whether undergraduate women prefer the interactions hookup culture offers. If the alumnae had largely moved away from hooking up as the primary organization of sexual interaction, I could more safely conclude that the college women merely tolerate hookup culture.

I identified ten of the interviewees using snowball sampling, asking friends and acquaintances to refer me to a person outside my social network. I ultimately elected to interview one close friend and one acquaintance because I believed their perspectives would be valuable. The final sample includes six women aged 18 to 21 and six women aged 22 to 28 who graduated between 2009 and 2011, comprising the undergraduate cohort and alumnae cohort respectively (See Table 1). The interviews lasted between 30 and 100 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and coded using standard practices for ethnographic interviewing (Weiss 1994, Sprague 2005, McCracken 1988).

Table 1: information About the Women Comprising the Sample

Alumnae

| Name | Age | Graduation Year | Relationship Status | Previous Relationship ? | Hooked Up? | Isolation | Abuse |
|---------|-----|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------------|------------|-----------|-------|
| Krista | 24 | 2009 | cohabiting/serious | yes | yes | yes | no |
| Bethany | 25 | 2009 | single/"talking" | no | yes | no | no |
| Bryn | 23 | 2010 | single | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Shauna | 28 | 2011 | cohabiting/casual | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Brianna | 23 | 2011 | single/"talking" | yes | no | yes | no |
| Claudia | 22 | 2011 | single | yes | yes | yes | no |

Undergraduates

| Name | Age | Graduation Year | Relationship Status | Previous Relationship ? | Hooked Up? | Isolation | Abuse |
|-----------|-----|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------------|------------|-----------|-------|
| Heather | 21 | 2012 | casual relationship | yes | yes | no | yes |
| Kylie | 21 | 2012 | exclusive but casual | yes | yes | yes | no |
| Victoria | 21 | 2012 | long distance | yes | yes | yes | no |
| Nancy | 20 | 2013 | single/"talking" | no | yes | no | no |
| Elizabeth | 18 | 2015 | single | yes | no | yes | no |
| Sarah | 18 | 2015 | single | yes | yes | yes | yes |

At the outset of the interview, the interviewees already knew my focus was social life in Lawrence, as they all signed the informed consent sheet I drafted for the IRB, which contained some details about my project. In attempting to find out a little about each interviewee's background, educational and career goals, personality, and attempt

to generally establish rapport, I began each interview by instructing the respondent: “Tell me about yourself.” After some discussion of the generalities of the women’s lives, I asked them to describe the last time they “went out.” In cases where the respondents didn’t mention the topic on their own, the prompt was an effective segue into discussion of experiences with and/or perceptions of hooking up, casual relationships, and committed relationships. My belonging to the same cohort could be a double-edged sword in that the women interviewed sometimes fail to invoke the more explicit detail they might otherwise if they didn’t assume that I understand their experiences as a result of my perceived similarity to them (they punctuate their responses with “you know?” innumerable times). I referred to an interview guide (see Appendix A) when the conversation was not flowing or leading to relevant lines of inquiry. Many of the interviewees ultimately reflected on their experiences in Lawrence chronologically, a process that one woman described as “cathartic.”

Through interviewing women about their individual experiences, I gained valuable information about their personal and professional goals, social lives, romances, sexualities, hopes, and disappointments. Several tropes became apparent through their narratives: the isolative nature of exclusive relationships incompatible with the interviewee’s desire to form and cement self-identity during her university years, physical and/or emotional abuse in exclusive relationships, the idea that sex connotes power and should be withheld in many situations, the miscommunication and ambiguity rampant in hookup culture, and women’s unmet hope for fulfilling committed relationships.

The Isolative Nature of Committed Relationships

The college years have come to be regarded by Americans – from working class to ultra wealthy – as a time for young people to acquire knowledge in classrooms as well as to take steps toward adulthood, forming and cementing ideas about self-identity and one's place in the world. Where finding and marrying a mate was once considered a significant part of this experience, many factors, like the invention of the birth control pill and the second wave feminist movement, have interceded to change this. With marriage-minded students now a minority, those who enter committed relationships struggle to reconcile its demands with competing devotions: academic achievement (excelling not only in the classroom but securing internships, studying abroad, studying for post-graduate entrance exams), family commitments, social life and friendships, part or full-time jobs, and citizenship.

An element of isolation in committed relationships is far and away the most universal experience the interviewees report. Five of the six women in the older cohort had been in an exclusive relationship lasting at least six months; 100% of these women report feelings of isolation as a result of the relationship. Of the five undergraduate women who had been in similarly serious relationships, four alluded to the isolative nature of these relationships. These women discussed committed relationships interfering with or impeding their attempts to develop a strong sense of self, which they often at least somewhat purposefully cultivated through participation in the activities mentioned above. Isolation from friends after entering a relationship was referenced most often.

For some women, isolation is a vicious cycle; they “cling” to their boyfriends because they do not have friends, but they do not make friends because they are so enmeshed with their boyfriends. Bryn*, a 23-year-old woman pursuing an MA, explicitly refers to the isolation plaguing her first serious relationship, which began the summer after her freshman year:

And because [the relationship] had started out as this like secret thing, it was always us by ourselves kind of.... then we both lost our fake IDs, so we just couldn't go out anymore like at all. So then we just completely isolated ourselves and did that whole “couple who has no friends” thing. And... so we did that the whole fall and then we studied abroad. So, that summer we lived together and that next year we basically stayed together because we started growing up and caring more about school and seeing a future and everything, and that was in stark contrast with our group of friends. So we started just getting so fucking fed up with our friends and so annoyed by them because they were so immature and so selfish and so annoying. ...So it was those things and then it was clinging on to each other again, like our whole relationship was kind of this weird clinging on to each other thing, and in retrospect it probably wasn't very healthy for either of us. (Bryn, class of 2010)

Bryn was open with her then-boyfriend about her willingness to continue the relationship for the sexual benefits and other conveniences after she had “checked out emotionally,” but he was unable to cope with her ultimatum:

I would be like, “When we graduate, this is over. So if you want me back, like, knowing those are the conditions... ball's in your court basically.” ...I just tried not to think about it basically because I was so fucking busy and it was just so nice to have that one person that will always help me when I'm stressed out, will always be there, he didn't really have any friends either and we didn't like the friends we did have, so it was kind of just like... I mean it was practical, honestly. (Bryn, class of 2010)

The “practical” arrangement Bryn and her now ex-boyfriend maintained was unable to weather the brief period of platonic cohabitation the two attempted after breaking up; after several months of “sharing a lease” the former couple severed ties completely.

* Not her real name. All names and identifying details have been changed to protect respondents' identities.

Claudia, a 22-year-old woman who transferred to KU from the University of Indiana, describes the all-consuming nature of her first college relationship:

We literally were inseparable and did everything together, I quit hanging out with my friends from the dorm, and that was because of my boyfriend but also because – we were friends, but they were the first people I met, they weren't my soul mates, they were filling the friend spot but it's not like they were the people that were going to be my lifelong friends. And I think, had I not been in a relationship, they would have fallen away... and I would have met closer friends, but that never really happened because I was with him all the time. It would have been so different had... this happened after a year or two of me establishing myself in Bloomington. It was like, frightening. This was my whole life there; we'd been together since the first weekend of school. (Claudia, class of 2011)

Claudia recognized that she was too isolated to remain in Bloomington as her relationship began to fail in her third semester. Upon moving to Lawrence nearly a year after leaving Bloomington, she planned to “establish” herself – avoiding a committed relationship, though not seeing any problem with more casual ones. Both Claudia and Bryn terminated relationships that left them unsatisfied early in their college careers to experiment with and participate in hookup culture and subsequently enter new relationships.

Before meeting her current boyfriend, Krista recalls that she “had a lot of trouble meeting people” her freshman year because she had a boyfriend in Kansas City. She spoke more positively of her social life and “becoming, like, who I was going to be in Lawrence” following the dissolution of that relationship. Her year of participation in hookup culture ultimately led to the relationship she has been in since 2007, and she reflects on the period of time she was single:

It was *really* short, and I kind of, every once in a while, wish it was longer because I'm absolutely in love with my boyfriend now... and could possibly marry him, so I'm like – there was a short period of time where I was single... When we first started dating, he had dropped out of school like a year before,

so we were both just kind of on this party level where we were just like, you know, “I don’t care about school, let’s just party all the time” but then once we got past that phase, I’d say maybe four or five months after we were exclusive, he was like “I want to go back to school” and I was like “I should really get serious about school,” so yeah it was really helpful to support each other, because he’s really dedicated to school and I wasn’t, and that helped me, because seeing how dedicated he was, I was like “I should be like that.” So he motivated me a lot... my priorities when I was in college shifted over the years, like I said, in the beginning it was more about making a social circle for myself and meeting people, and then junior and senior year my priorities were definitely my artwork and school. And now I think that it just kind of balances itself out because, um, I’m living with my boyfriend and we have a lot of really great friends around town and so that’s... solid for me, like I don’t have to worry about that anymore. (Krista, class of 2009)

Krista is one of the few interviewees who recounted overwhelmingly and unanimously positive experiences with hookup culture, possibly because these experiences culminated in a gratifying relationship. Her description of the ways in which her partnership with her boyfriend helped her excel as a student artist and retain a large social network indicates that both she and her boyfriend actively worked to maintain their friendships alongside their romance. In Krista’s case, timing was also critical; she had several years for “making a social circle” and becoming “who [she] was going to be in Lawrence” before meeting her boyfriend.

Victoria, a senior, also entered her freshman year with a boyfriend, though her relationship was long-distance. Although the relationship did not impede her ability to make friends, both in the dorm and through an intramural sport, she recalls an element of isolation resulting from the constant technological contact and overwhelming feelings of loneliness:

It was definitely hard having a boyfriend. I didn’t tell a lot of guys when I was meeting them that I had a boyfriend just because... I just learned that if you say something right off the bat, even if [men] aren’t looking at you as more than a friend, it just makes them uncomfortable to know what boundaries they can overstep or not. ...I remember being unhappy with it by the end of my freshman year because it was really hard to be apart... We were always,

always in contact. At first, that was really cool and cute, and then eventually it just became a bit too much for me... I came to the realization I missed him so much, like I literally felt sick and incompletely being apart from him and being almost 19 and being in college, I just didn't feel like that was an appropriate feeling to have so I broke up with him. (Victoria, class of 2012)

Victoria's inkling that her relationship could hinder the development of an attractive social life was perceptive. Often being in a relationship limits not only the interactions one can comfortably have with the opposite sex, but also what types of activities female friends feel comfortable engaging in together. Krista reflected on occasionally feeling "really different and outcasted" throughout college when her friends went out looking to meet men.

Kylie describes her relationship with a man four years her senior as "casual;" the fact that she resides in Lawrence with a handful of her sorority sisters while her boyfriend lives in Kansas City undoubtedly helps her avoid the isolation in college relationships described by the women in the older cohort:

I feel like the age difference isn't like, I'm 21 and he's 25, it's that I'm in college and he's not. Because when I'm with him it's not like "oh, I'm with a 25-year-old." Like it seems so old but it's just that we're in different lifestyles right now, so it's still pretty casual. Like he's focusing on work and stuff and I'm enjoying my senior year. So that's kind of nice, to just have fun right now. (Kylie, class of 2012)

Like Krista, Kylie had the advantage of experience when entering this relationship; she escapes the isolation plaguing many other relationships perhaps in part because she learned what to avoid from a prior relationship that was much less conducive to enjoying her social life and forming her identity.

Sarah and Elizabeth, both 18-year-old freshmen, repeatedly returned to the theme of the seclusion that accompanies relationships and their ardent desire to avoid both. A month after arriving in Lawrence, Sarah ended a 10-month-long relationship

that began in high school. She expressed that she ultimately decided to terminate the relationship to facilitate the formation of her identity and expansion of her social network:

There are so many other fish in the sea at the University of Kansas, and being 18 is not the time to be like “this is the man I want to marry for the rest of my life.” I want to meet new people; I want to enjoy myself. Because going along the lines of identity, finding myself, he didn’t let me go out with my friends, like if I was going to a party, he was like...”I have to come with you...Girls who have boyfriends don’t go to parties by themselves.” (Sarah, class of 2015)

The decision to end the relationship quickly proved to be in her best interest; in the subsequent section on abuse, you will read about the tactics Sarah’s ex employs to attempt to coerce her to reunite with him.

None of the women in the older cohort alluded to any aspect of isolation in their current relationships but nearly all pointed to isolation as a prominent trend in their university years. Though these women had their share of bad experiences in relationships, many of them expressed feeling that they acquired valuable knowledge to avoid these situations in the future. Both of the coupled women described relationships that seem nurturing, while the unattached women expressed a desire for committed relationships at some point, but did not seem fixated on bringing that desire to fruition immediately.

The younger women have more mixed romantic goals than the alumnae; still navigating the murky shallows of dating and hooking up in the larger context of campus life, most indicated no rush to find or enter a committed relationship. They reveal their ambivalence about the possibility of entering exclusive relationships, but indicate a fierce desire to avoid the isolation that is too often par for the course in an exclusive relationship.

“Having fun” is a common euphemism for avoiding serious commitment and seems to be the objective of most undergraduates, especially those in their first two years of study. Hookup culture can serve as a viable recourse for women looking to avoid the pitfalls of committed relationships, like isolation. When they do participate in relationships, the phenomenon of isolation seems to be an occurrence that women identify and learn from in real-time, eager to escape from isolation as they recognize it and to avoid repeating the decisions that led to these situations in the future. However, the women from both cohorts are also generally willing to give relationships a chance, armed with the knowledge gleaned from previous experiences, when a promising new romantic liaison presents itself.

The Frequency of Abuse in Committed Relationships

Less common than the all but universal isolation marking relationships during the university years, instances of emotional and physical abuse are also alarmingly common, reported by two women in each cohort. In the cases of three of the four women (two alumnae, one undergraduate) reporting abuse, the abuser’s intention was to keep the woman in the relationship, as it often is (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, et al. 2000).

Shauna, a 28-year-old woman who completed her degree in May, recounted the most outright instance of abuse I learned of; the tactics her former boyfriend employed to control her and coerce her to remain in the relationship included physical abuse, property damage, and stalking. On ending her first serious relationship at the age of 20 upon recognizing a pattern of abuse, she said:

So it was just a process of me trying to get out of there, but he had been kind of emotionally and psychologically abusive, so I was still kind of attached in that way; I couldn't quite let go. And it got to the point where I had a place to go, but there were no screens on the windows and I had a cat, and they were putting those in and I ended up having to stay back at the apartment [one night]. And we were both drunk and I just couldn't keep my mouth shut one night, kind of thing, and he was trying to get a rise out of me and so he tried to throw the cat against the wall is basically what he tried to do. And then I kind of went after him too, and I told him I was going to call the cops and he took my phone and he broke it in half, and then I was trying to stop him some more and he just turned and started hitting me instead. And I eventually got away, but the cops had come and they found me somewhere else in the neighborhood, you know. But I didn't end up reporting it because I was more embarrassed than anything, you know. (Shauna, class of 2011)

In an incident following their breakup, Shauna's sister's car sustained "over \$3000 of damage, he was charged with a felony, felony property damage." He has continued to attempt to contact Shauna for the better part of a decade following their breakup; following which, Shauna describes a period of several years:

just trying to figure everything out, and I just had learned to be kind of distrustful of guys too, and just trying to deal with a casual relationship at that point was not... good for me, and I knew that. (Shauna, class of 2011)

She recently entered her first exclusive relationship since the aforementioned abusive relationship ended in 2003. On the new relationship, Shauna repeatedly emphasized, "the reason [my current relationship] works out so well with us is that we constantly communicate with each other." Like Shauna, Bryn moved on to a new relationship some time after ending her first serious one and quickly realized that she had made a mistake in "rushing into that":

I don't think he's smart enough even to like calculate any kind of manipulation thing, but it was pretty much a pattern of abuse – an abusive pattern. Because he would never do anything that I said, never do anything that I asked him to do, didn't respect anything that I asked him to do ever – just took and took and took and gave relatively nothing, and then, you know, just treated me like a piece of shit basically. And then the second that I would start standing up for myself and be like "No, get out of here, we're breaking up" he would fucking throw himself on the floor crying like "You can't leave

me,” you know, and just turn it around on me like *I* was doing something wrong. And he’s like “You can’t leave me, I’ll do anything” and I’m like “Well *I’ll* do anything to get you to stop doing what you’re doing right now, so if that means not breaking up, okay.” Like, it became that – (laughs) I’m talking less than a month in. Like, I tried to break up with him three weeks in. (Bryn, class of 2010)

Bryn acknowledges her emotional “unavailability” and went on to discuss the criticism of this trait directed at her by friends and boyfriends alike. She agrees with their assessments that her detachment makes forming and sustaining intimate relationships – platonic and romantic – more difficult, but admits that it’s not an aspect of her personality she seeks to change. As Bryn sees it, her ability to compartmentalize her feelings has contributed to her academic success; she does not think it is a coincidence that she is a star student who will earn a Masters degree before her 24th birthday and that men and romance do not occupy much of her energy.

Sarah, the 18-year-old woman who ended an exclusive relationship a month after beginning college, described the difficulties she has encountered and the emotional abuse she has sustained in establishing boundaries following her breakup:

...Both living on campus and everything makes it really difficult ‘cause he’s *right there*. But he knows my schedule front and back... he’s been sitting out on Wescoe beach waiting for me to get done with a class, and it makes it really difficult, but I’m not going to change my schedule or my pattern of life just so I can avoid him at all times.

So has anything he’s done to react to the breakup...ranged on kind of abusive or a little bit crazy?

Um... I’d say it’s a little bit crazy and a little bit abusive. He likes to tell me how terrible of a person I am, that I am “such a slut” and that all I want to do is go out and have sex with lots and lots of guys, and that I don’t know what’s good for me and that I have problems and issues and “need help” ... And I would definitely say that’s abusive; that’s definitely verbal abuse. (Sarah, class of 2015)

Sarah’s traumatic experiences throughout her first serious relationship and the hardships she has encountered in extricating herself from it have made her weary of

pursuing a future relationship. Though her ex-boyfriend's suspicion that she wants to explore her sexuality outside of their relationship is not unfounded, his reaction - sexist language and paternalistic treatment – is troubling and seemingly common. The experience of Heather, the subject of similar ridicule regarding her sexuality, illustrates why many women might feel compelled to misrepresent or lie about their sexual histories:

This last boyfriend that I had that I broke up with in October, we dated for like a year and a half, and there was like a phase in our relationship where he, like, didn't want to have sex with me. So after a week he was like, "okay I'll just say it: I feel weird that you've had sex with so many people" ... And he was like 'I just hate that you've fucked two of my friends.'" And I was like "Are you kidding me? That's before we even knew each other, like what do you want me to do about it?" And so there was just this phase where I just felt like really bad. I felt like I was damaged goods or something. (Heather, class of 2012)

Though my sample size is not large enough to draw generalizable conclusions, abuse took place more frequently during the university years than after graduation (three of the four abusive relationships or instances). Of the four women reporting abuse, three have not been involved in subsequent committed relationships and one, Shauna, began a relationship with much trepidation after many years. The other three women have enjoyed more casual relationships and hooking up in the wake of experiencing abuse. For women, this type of emotional abuse serves to reinforce the attitude widely held by men and women alike that the college years are not the time to be bound up and weighed down by an exclusive relationship.

Sex as Currency – “worth it”

Though the majority of the interviewees were happy to “hook up” outside of an exclusive relationship, several either expressed reticence or refusal to have intercourse with a man they are romantically interested in without this type of commitment. They do not believe that the benefits of having sex will outweigh the perceived risks – loss of power or control over their partner, the social discomfort of subsequent encounters with a previous hookup partner, loss of his respect, the health risks that always accompany intercourse, and other perceived risks. Others do not believe that as women, they must act as “gatekeepers,” but convey that in their opinion or experience, beginning a committed relationship sexually is not ideal. And morality aside, many of the women who have acquiesced to the enticement of hookup culture have found that the sex is not even particularly good.

Upon leaving her first serious relationship, Bryn was eager to explore her sexuality with new people. After gaining sexual experience and confidence inside the margins of a committed relationship, Bryn was disappointed when satisfying sex did not transpire as naturally as it may have seemed to with her ex-boyfriend:

We’d been having classes together, you know, scoping each other out for like two years and then finally started... it was more like that “finally,” I guess kind of thing. But yeah, that backfired, and then he came in like 60 seconds and I was like “I’m gonna fucking kill myself, this is so not worth it.” And then it was so awkward because he was my friend, sort of. I bang my, like, sort-of friends, so then if it’s horrible, it doesn’t really matter. (Bryn, class of 2010)

Here, Bryn implies that the less than satisfactory sexual experience was not “worth” the awkwardness she expected to encounter when subsequently seeing this acquaintance.

Many women expressed that they are not the “type of girl” or “type of person” to have sex outside a relationship and indicated their belief that every girl is different and that the mores governing this depend upon “how she was raised.” Despite this

widespread belief that intercourse is off-limits with hookup partners, five of six alumnae and five of six undergraduates directly or indirectly conveyed their (past or present) willingness to engage in non-intercourse sexual acts in hookup contexts. Bryn reflected on her observation of this phenomenon in her sorority:

Was hooking up spoken about openly in the sorority house even though there was such a diversity of beliefs and behaviors?

Oh yeah. Because even the ones who won't fuck give, like, mad blowjobs. *A lot of girls seem to have a very well defined division in their minds between oral sex and actual sexual intercourse. Is that something that has definitely been the case in your experience?*

Oh, for other people for sure. The girl I met from the sorority who befriended me was the type who, like, gave tons of blowjobs but... you know, had some weird guilt complex about like, actually doing it... (Bryn, class of 2010)

Bryn's perception that "even the [women] who won't fuck give, like, mad blowjobs" suggests that women might believe they must be somewhat sexually available to a man before he will consider a relationship with her. This expectation seems to change for both men and women as they leave college and progress through their young adult years:

...I think when you get older, you kind of realize that, you know, getting drunk and like waking up with someone that you don't know the next morning probably isn't such a good idea, you know? And that you maybe need to start heading in, like, a certain direction, even with you own life. (Bethany, class of 2009)

The nebulous nature of hookup culture compounds all of the confusions inherent to any type of intimate human relationship; both women and men often learn how these interactions work without a rulebook. According to *Unhooked*, "Hookups are very scripted. You're supposed to know what to do and how to do it and how to feel during and afterward. You learn to turn everything off except your body and make yourself emotionally invulnerable" (Stepp 2007: 243). As one might expect, the process of

making oneself “emotionally invulnerable” is far from easy and in many cases, requires the dehumanization of others. After Heather’s ex-boyfriend shared his evaluations of her perceived promiscuity, she recounts seeing her sexual choices and behaviors differently and altering them accordingly:

...Because before [my ex-boyfriend expressed his discomfort at the number of men I’d slept with] I never felt like I’d had sex with too many people or been too promiscuous – I think in some ways it was good because I have realized that I don’t think it’s worth having sex with someone unless there’s something more, because I think that sex should be a little more intimate and special. And I mean it’s risky...and I don’t think it’s worth it to... and I think there’s also a level of emotional connection that kind of biologically comes with it. ...If I’m interested in pursuing a relationship with [someone], I would want to wait to have sex.

How long do you normally, ideally want to wait once you’re spending time with someone on a regular basis?

I don’t think I could probably wait more than a week or two.

Long enough to make sure you can enjoy each other’s company?

Yeah, that it’s worth it. Because I hate seeing those guys around that I had little flings with, I hate seeing them around now and being like “God, I fucked you, what the fuck!” (laughs) Ugh. You know? And I feel like there’s this certain way that they look at you too. It’s like “fuck you!”

Can you describe it at all?

I feel like they feel like they’ve possessed me in some weird way or something. (Heather, class of 2012)

Though her actions do not always align with her new mentality that there should be “something more,” Heather does not see casual sex as “worth” the severity of the potential repercussions. In addition to judgment from her boyfriend, she also voiced her uneasiness when encountering men she had previously slept with. The very definition of a hookup indicates no expectations of future commitment, and many respondents described discomfort similar to Heather’s when subsequently seeing or interacting with a man they had hooked up with. The hookup “script” did not prepare Heather for future experiences with these men, and her reliance on profanities to explain the emotions stemming from their unkindness and indifference might indicate her acknowledgement that culture does not legitimate these experiences (Jay 2009). Despite the ostensibly

casual nature of hookup culture, it is important to acknowledge that this can be a façade; hookups frequently have lingering consequences, feelings, and emotions.

Some women like Nancy, a 20-year-old student athlete, struggle to eke out arrangements with men reluctant to agree to a committed relationship. After twice unsuccessfully attempting to translate repeat hookups into relationships, she has resolved to withhold intercourse from the man she is currently “talking” to until he succumbs to her definition of commitment. Given that both of her past partners as well as her current love interest are athletes – high status men who “can literally hook up with a different girl every night” – procuring this commitment is likely an even greater struggle than for women interested in more “average” college men:

Like, I’m not hooking up with you until you are either committed to me or you claim me when you’re out – you know, holding hands, like a kiss on the cheek. Like, I’m not a clingy girl at all. But I just want reassurance that, you know, you’re proud to be by my side. You know what I mean, like, for someone that didn’t know us, to be like, “oh you know, they must be together” type thing. That’s all I want. Especially if, like sex gets involved. Like I told him... I just kinda, gave him rules, you know what I mean, like, “I’m not having sex with you until like this is happening. Like, I’ve heard you are talking to other girls and that’s fine, we aren’t anything, we’re just starting to get to know each other, but that better stop and I better stop hearing about it if you want to [have sex],” you know what I mean? And, like, I feel like it’s working, because, I feel like... like I have so much control over it and it’s going so well. And I feel like I have control over this boy until I have sex with him. And then I lose my control because it’s like, “Does he want me or does he not? Does he want me just for [sex]? Does he like me?” (Nancy, class of 2013)

Nancy’s conflict is a familiar one for many women. How can she foster a committed relationship with a man who has access to sex with countless women? It is not difficult to see why she believes withholding sex can serve as a tool to differentiate herself from the other “easy” women her love interest has slept with and for whom he has indicated his lack of “respect” (demonstrated verbally to Nancy and undoubtedly to the “easy”

women through his actions). Sex clearly has currency value when it's withheld and can diminish a woman's status or "value" when it's relinquished, illuminating one of the most troubling gendered aspects of hookup culture: withholding sex has little to no currency for most men.

My conversations with the 12 respondents revealed a troubling affirmation of Shere Hite's findings from nearly two decades ago: people of both genders internalize and reproduce the pervasive sexual double standard. Even women who hook up frequently and ostensibly enjoy sex without imposing society's Madonna/whore dichotomy upon themselves described other women as "whores" and "sluts." Women widely condemn others' practice of hooking up in subtle ways, but this has not translated to their complete abstinence from the practice. Elizabeth, 18, was the only undergraduate I spoke with who professed no experience with hooking up and no interest in doing so:

In my sorority, it's really different. Like, everybody is so different. There are those girls that, like, shack up with like different frat guys and I think that's disgusting.

When you say "shack up" do you mean just have sex –

Er, like, kind of like a one night stand. It doesn't always have to be sex, you know, just like –

Do you think that girls who hook up, and especially girls who hook up with different men frequently, are subject to open judgment?

Yeah, I definitely think so, but that's just kind of like human nature. You know? But you say that about them or whatever but that doesn't make you like them any less. You judge them on how they [act] to you. But the fact that they do that, you might not agree with it. You know, just like, I'm sure from another point of view it's like "oh my god that girl doesn't hook up with guys, like what's wrong with her?" But like, you still like her. It's not something that makes or breaks a friendship. (Elizabeth, class of 2015)

Both cohorts have varied ideas about sex and in what contexts they engage in it, though the actuality does not always align with their idealized notions; several women described having sex with men they likely would not have chosen had they been sober.

Though most women will engage in some level of physicality with men who are not their boyfriends, sex occurs at different points in different contexts. Some simply require that they “feel comfortable” with a man regardless of their relationship status. For some, the more romantically interested they are in a man, the longer they prefer or intend to “wait” to have sex with him, while other women reject having sex outside of a relationship in all circumstances.

The decision to have sex outside of a committed relationship can have a variety of social outcomes for women: a relationship (as was the case for Krista and Claudia as undergraduates), stigma and judgment from both men and women, no change in their status quo, or a repeat hookup, described below.

The Ambiguity of Hooking Up

Both cohorts recollect instances of miscommunication in the overwhelming majority of hookups and casual relationships. Open communication is perceived to be one of the most positive aspects of an exclusive, committed relationship while miscommunication or utter lack of communication is universally perceived to be one of the most considerable drawbacks of participation in hookup culture. Two key areas that seem to be universally fraught with confusion include determining precisely when committed relationships began and ended and a lack of universality in meaning of specific terms: hooking up, talking, dating, friends with benefits.

Krista, the 24-year-old woman who reflected happily on her participation in hookup culture, described her involvement in several casual relationships during that time:

Would you say that it was normally that you were seeing or dating one boy at a time, or maybe you had some "friends with benefits" situations?

Yeah, I've never been one to have multiple boys in my life at once. Um, I've definitely surrounded myself with guy friends, like I definitely hang out with guys a lot and have attractions to them and connections with them, but it's never been like, a "friends with benefits" thing.

After realizing that her descriptions of the relationships seemed to belie the claim she had made a few moments earlier, I asked:

Would you call those situations between the ex-boyfriend and the current boyfriend sort of like "friends with benefits" situations or was that more like dating.... There was always a romantic element to it?

Um... I don't know how to answer that. (laughs) Like we would start out as just friends, you know, and then as we hung out more we would get attracted to each other and I guess fool around every once in awhile, but we would never like officially be exclusive or dating so I guess you could call it "friends with benefits", I just like, never thought of it like that. (Krista, class of 2009)

When Krista stated that she had not been involved in a "friends with benefits" relationship, she had no intentions of dishonesty or misrepresenting her experiences, she simply had not conceptualized her liaisons in those terms. She was content to enjoy the benefits of these arrangements and did not feel compelled to ascertain the terms of the relationship with any of these men because she was not seeking commitment from them. However, in some cases women avoid defining their relationships for a different reason: the fear that pushing too hard on the men in their lives by probing for commitment will have the opposite effect and lead to the present arrangement's dissolution.

Throughout the five-year break in her education at KU, Shauna became involved in an ongoing repeated hookup situation that in many ways typifies the confusion and ambiguity resulting from a lack of communication:

Um, there was this other guy; we had this on-again/off-again relationship for like six years. And when it started he was actually seeing someone and it got to the point where he was trying to tell me he was going to break up with her and stuff. But I actually was smart enough to know better that if he did break

up with her, they'd just end up getting back together. We kind of kept things going for longer than we should, kind of thing, and he would really confide in me in a lot of stuff and he'd want to come over and watch movies and hang out. And, you know, it was a strange relationship in that it didn't fit into any neat category, and I think that that was a huge miscommunication between us. It was just like, you know, "if you want to come and hang out and watch movies and stuff, are we dating or not?" You know? And the thing is, we never talked about it, so it was just a huge miscommunication in that regard – absolutely no communication.

So you really didn't understand what the relationship was and he was uninterested in addressing it, or neither of you made any effort to address it? Yeah, it was pretty much neither of us made any effort to address it, and when we did, it was just kind of like, you know, I would try to ask him questions about stuff and he would shut down. ...I think that, you know, people – even if they know what the answer to the question is going to be – they still don't want to ask it, kind of thing, because they're afraid of "what if it's not that" kind of thing. (Shauna, class of 2011)

Kylie, a senior studying Communications, did not explicitly express confusion; rather, her confusion became apparent to me as she described the process of entering into her current relationship:

Um, it is [stressful to define the parameters of a relationship] to me, more so me than [my boyfriend] because...my friends are always like "oh you're gonna go see him? Like, are you guys dating?" And so, my friends, they're wanting me to take him to date parties, stuff like that. And it's like, I'm not gonna make him do anything he doesn't want to do, like if he doesn't want to, like, officially call me his girlfriend but doesn't want to be with anybody [else], like, I don't really care, you know? But...I felt like, pressure from my friends – *To define the relationship?* To define, yeah. (Kylie, class of 2012)

Kylie relates the stress of the ambiguous, purgatory-like sphere existing between "dating" and a relationship and the coexistent stress of attempting to secure the verbal commitment and accompanying behaviors assumed to follow. Later in the interview, Kylie disclosed that she does not enter a sexual relationship without first discussing and ensuring monogamy – for her, acknowledgement and implications of a serious, committed relationship were of relative unimportance but the sexual exclusivity was non-negotiable. At least for her, the expectation of an ensuing emotional commitment seemed implicit. Though she and her now-boyfriend at some point conferred about the

official status of their relationship, she seemed uncertain about which conversation or event might have marked the beginning of their emotional commitment and proclaimed status as a couple. When Kylie initially began describing her relationship, I asked, “So how long have you two been together?” to which she responded with hesitation, “Um.... probably since February. January, February.” A few minutes later, when describing another aspect of their relationship, said “So we didn’t really get serious until – I mean I guess we’re still not really that serious, but you know – didn’t really start dating until April, May.”

Because the blurry distinction between repeat hookups and the initial phases of a committed relationship often lies in the emotional value assigned to the interactions by one or both parties, the interviewees often struggled to isolate when these relationships began, especially because the change in relationship status does not necessarily alter the actual relationship immediately.

None of the single alumnae described sexual relationships that meet the description of a repeat hookup, though two women described occasional sexual encounters that have been ongoing since high school. Nancy was the lone undergraduate to detail a current repeat hookup relationship – the one she hopes to channel into a committed relationship.

Hope for Committed Relationships and Hooking Up as a Pathway Into Them

Gender and sexuality scholars write that hookups not only substitute for committed relationships, but also serve as the inroads to them (Armstrong, et al. 2009). As a result of the ambiguity and confusion detailed above, both parties of a repeat hookup may often experience confusion about what kind of relationship they are

participating in and whether it will evolve into a relationship. As described in the section on ambiguity and confusion, many women feel hesitant to broach the topic of monogamy or exclusivity with a hookup partner for fear of upsetting the present arrangement.

Shauna did not describe any concern or urgency about conferring with a man she has recently begun to refer to as her boyfriend during the initial phases of their relationship because of anxiety about his reaction, though she was perhaps hesitant to enter her first committed relationship following the abusive relationship she left several years ago. Her present relationship began as a repeat hookup:

I mean, we definitely had a great time talking to each other and I knew that, but I was just like “Whatever. I don’t know about this guy.” ...And toward graduation time, we had started to hang out more, and then a week or two after graduation, we’d been hanging out a whole bunch and I ended up letting him come home with me one night, you know. Because the way he would talk about stuff and the way I would talk about stuff, it’s like, “well, I know we work together, but maybe we can just have fun and do whatever.” And, it was, you know at first we both didn’t know what we wanted. And we kind of talked about that, like “I don’t know what this is.” I just thought, “well, we’ll just have this fun casual relationship and whatever happens, happens.”
(Shauna, class of 2011)

Claudia’s former relationship began with some similar ambiguity. Determined to remain single but gradually and accidentally falling in love with the son of a family friend, her plans began to change:

It was really frightening and I remember having all these conversations with my sister and not knowing if I could do this. I think it really horrified me and I avoided a lot of things, but when he asked me to hang out I just genuinely wanted to spend time with him, so if you’re going to allow yourself to spend that amount of time with them obviously [a relationship] is going to happen. I was still in the crazy PTSD place, so after the first time we had sex I made a point of being like, “Listen...obviously there are feelings here...but I’m not ever, ever, ever trying to be in a committed relationship.” It was stupid in hindsight and it was just pretending there is any difference, like it’s all in a title. Clearly it was exclusive, clearly it was committed, we weren’t just

hooking up, we were spending lots of time together, but I was still pretending like it wasn't a thing. So one day in March he was like, "Claudia, listen, I know what we are and I know this is committed, so I don't need you to call me your boyfriend, but [my mother] does. For her sanity can we just have the fucking title?" I knew he was being funny and that was half of the truth, but... he needed to know for him. And I was like "yes, Mark, we are boyfriend/girlfriend." (Claudia, class of 2011)

Like Claudia, many women articulated their best-laid plans to steer clear of the myriad complications relationships can present, but related the coexisting lure of exploring the possibility of a relationship when someone special comes along. Bethany, now working in retail, shared her impressions of this phenomenon:

I feel like when people say they're not looking, I feel like that's not true. I feel like nobody's ever not looking, it's just if it's not you, it's not you. Because if someone really knocks you off your feet, you're not going to let them get away. (Bethany, class of 2009)

Krista is an artist now cohabiting in a sustaining and positive relationship that began as a "hookup" and illustrates Bethany's perceptions of relationship formation:

And like, we were really casual about it at first, we would like get really wasted together all the time and like, have sex and stuff and it wasn't until maybe, like, a couple months after we were doing that that I was like "we should just date" because he was like, the best guy that I had hung out with. (Krista, class of 2009)

Victoria, the woman now in a long-distance relationship, disclosed that her only completely random, unanticipated hookup (with a member of her intramural sports team) left her feeling confused:

We were all out for someone's birthday one night and he was there and he was dancing...randomly he kissed me and I was like, "Oh! That's strange." I spent the night there and we didn't have sex, we just made out. That was basically it. We were kind of in contact after, but it was more of...it ended up just being like more of a drunk thing. I think maybe I was expecting more from it just because I was looking for something local...it ended up not being that, so it was fine.

What were your subsequent interactions, how did you sort of realize that nothing was going to come of it?

Just like any attempt I made to get in touch with him was just kind of met

with silence or it was just awkward, it was awkward when we were sober. I was like “if we can’t be sober around each other then maybe I don’t want this to turn into anything.” [After a semester abroad] I had to throw this massive tournament and party and it was a huge undertaking... we slept together the night of the tournament.

And you both had been drinking?

Yeah, I mean that was a huge thing with us, anything that happened with us was under the influence of alcohol, so it was just like...I didn’t feel dirty or weird about it, but it just was like this is not really what I would have done had I been thinking straight. After that, I was just like this is silly, I’m just trying to find other people to replace this person... (Victoria, class of 2012)

Victoria learned much more quickly than many other women that she is wholly uninterested in pursuing these types of uncommitted liaisons. She recognized immediately that she did not like the way these encounters made her feel and has since avoided them in favor of exclusive relationships.

Unlike Victoria, some women appreciate what hookups can offer in certain contexts. Sarah has no qualms about participating in hookups with certain men, but indicated that she does not foresee the possibility for a committed relationships with these men:

So do you think most people see hooking up as a “just for fun” kind of thing or more as a pathway into a relationship?

I think here, it’s both. You ask me, and I’d say... for me it’s just for fun. When I start a relationship, I don’t want to start it with having sex with somebody. That’s never good. That’s how my ex-boyfriend and I started ours, and obviously you can see how that worked out. Whereas like the guys that I’m talking to and hanging out with now, that I’m like “I don’t have to have sex with you” it’s like, if they like me for who I am without the physical aspect, then maybe later on we can add that in and we can work toward something greater. Which, I know it’s a little hypocritical of me to be like “yeah, I’m okay with hooking up with a random guy but keeping other guys on the side” but that’s just... (laughs) (Sarah, class of 2015)

Though Sarah seems to have a clear idea of what she wants and expects in her intimate relationships, other college women frequently lack experience in negotiating and advocating for themselves in intimate relationships. They also may lack the

emotional resources, like self-esteem and communication skills, to clearly convey what they want. Additionally, these women may find themselves in the same unsatisfactory hookup situations repeatedly because they believe that they do not have any desirable alternatives; unfortunately this assessment often seems accurate. Nancy describes her perceptions of her peers' unfulfilled desire for committed relationships:

I don't think they're afraid to admit that [they want boyfriends]... I think they don't give themselves enough credit and they don't want to wait. But I have to kind of slow my roll too sometimes, 'cause I know what I want, I want it so fast, and I'm so impatient about it. So like, a month is fine, "alright, let's do it and let's be boyfriend and girlfriend." But like, good things take time. And I don't think people really realize that and I think that's where the hooking up thing comes into play so fast. Like, girls do want boyfriends, like, girls want to feel special, and be wanted. At least the ones I talk to about it, like the ones that are in that like hookup group, like they want [relationships]. They're looking for that so bad and they want to be wanted so bad that [hooking up's] what they do. And the consequence for not being patient...so, no, I do think that girls want that. (Nancy, class of 2013)

The binds and predicaments in mining hookup culture for relationships reveal serious gender disparity. Especially as they gain experience and solidify their "selfhood" (as Claudia called it), women discuss wanting committed relationships in overwhelming numbers. However, college women seldom feel empowered to take initiative in defining the terms of a relationship and appear to largely understand and accept this element of hookup culture as sexist.

Of the four single alumnae, none described any hookup relationships. Two indicated their vehement opposition to hooking up and are currently "talking" to men in hopes of forming relationships. Of the three single undergraduate women, one explicitly acknowledged her desire to convert a repeat hookup into a relationship and one coyly conveyed that she is "seeing" (but not having sex with) several men and would consider a relationship with one of them at a later time. Another, whose parents met at KU,

indicated that she anticipates meeting and forming a relationship with a man who is “marriage material” at some point in college, but intends to avoid commitment in the immediate future.

Post graduation, women don’t suddenly develop an aversion to the casual nature of hooking up, but perhaps cease to see hooking up as a viable route to relationships. Hookup culture might in some ways lay the foundation for not seeing committed relationships as an ultimate goal. Like Bethany said, women become more interested in “taking a certain direction” that does not include the compromises, bargains, and ambiguities of hookup culture but also does not fixate upon entering a committed relationship. Undergraduate women still enmeshed in hookup culture (seemingly the only game on campus) cut their own deals with it and sometimes decline to participate altogether.

Conclusions

In many ways, hookup culture pushes gender equality further out of reach: pandering to a male definition of pleasure, exposing women to greater risk of sexual violence, ingraining the sexual double standard deeper into the cultural fiber, and ultimately leaving no desirable alternative for college women who would rather opt out of hooking up. Both the current literature and my observations confirm that women participate in markedly fewer hookups following graduation; one interviewee recounted that “even by the end of college”, she saw her friends “hooking up on a more mature level.” Though casual sex certainly does not cease altogether, hookup culture’s implications for absolutely no commitment do not generally characterize these interactions.

Hooking up represents what sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti termed a patriarchal bargain. “Like all terms coined to convey a complex concept, the term *patriarchal bargain* represents a difficult compromise. It is intended to indicate the existence of set rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated” (Kandiyoti 1988). For women enmeshed in hookup culture, the ostensible equality of the arrangement can obfuscate the fact that in this bargain, men get the better deal. The anomie and ambiguity characterizing this institution largely prevent communication at the micro level and impede our ability to collectively move toward an organization of sexual relationships reflecting and embracing gender parity. The task is difficult: conceptualizing a system of sexual relationships that enables men and women to focus on developing identities and goals in a benevolent space that neither necessitates the devaluation and dehumanization of the very people with whom they are shared, nor mandates that sex occur exclusively in the context of monogamous, emotionally committed relationships.

In the wake of the sexual revolution of the 1960's, Western women have progressed toward sexual equality in a multitude of ways. In our personal lives, some have seemingly sailed into harmonious arrangements that accommodate needs, while some have floundered, unsure how to harness their newly won power. While every woman's solutions, concessions, and negotiations will ultimately look different, it seems that very few would choose the relationships hooking up offers (especially beyond graduation).

Hookup culture reflects little evolution since Elizabeth Janeway's assessment of the society's sexual situation in 1980: “The ‘casual’ sex of today is much deplored, but

it seems to be that if we could be *truly* casual about it – enjoying self and other, noting trauma, rejecting it, and choosing pleasure – we might be on the road to getting over both the binding chastity of Mary and the excesses of Eve. Then the female self, the ego-person who has never figured in past paradigms, might be able to find her way to a valid sexuality that would grow from herself and her own needs and urges” (Janeway 1980). Her vision of a female sexuality that accounts for and encompasses women’s needs (in the case of college women, the need to form personal and sexual identities while striving and achieving academically) can be realized only when men and women reach a bargain of benevolence, respect, and communication, leaving hookup culture’s patriarchal bargains in the past.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

- Tell me about yourself. (how serious a student is she, what are her career goals, how committed)
- What are your educational and career goals?
- Describe your social life in Lawrence (probe for: alcohol use, casual sex, expectations)
- Describe the last time you went out
- Are you in a relationship? Tell me about it.
- Hook ups and friends/peers: expectations. "Do you have any friends who hook up? Would you ever do that?"

-Describe any subsequent interactions with men you have hooked up with.

-Facebook: what is its role in facilitating hookups/dating?