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LOVE IN THE TIME OF CORONA

CHANGES TO OBERLIN HOOKUP CULTURE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Seniors Honors Thesis
Sociology

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Land Acknowledgement

A Land Acknowledgment is a formal statement that recognizes and respects Native peoples as traditional guardians of lands and enduring relationships that exist between Native peoples and their traditional territories. We acknowledge that we gather on the traditional land of the Erie, Haudenosaunee, and Potawatomi Peoples past and present, and honor with gratitude the land itself and the people who have stewarded it throughout the generations. This calls us to commit to continue to learn how to better stewards of the land we inhabit as well.

INTRODUCTION

At Orientation as a first-year, I went to a panel discussion titled “Making the Most of Your Oberlin Experience”. While the panel focused mostly on the importance of taking meaningful classes, exploring a variety of subjects, and finding the best work/life balance for you, there was an equally important yet unspoken theme that ran throughout: always be active. I sincerely doubt that the administrator in charge of that panel was referring at all to hooking up, but it’s an apt analogy nonetheless, to the feeling that permeates campus that if you’re not operating at 110%, then you’re not doing enough, and this includes hookup culture as well.

Starting that very first week, the pressure was on to literally and figuratively make your mark. It was an intense week that felt almost like a moment that decided your social future for the rest of college. But, I remember that it was also an intensely bonding experience, not necessarily to the people we made out with that week, but for the new friendships we were forming. It helped us find out which of our new friends gave the best advice, who had the best stories to tell, who was the best wingman, and who was the one to maybe not trust alone in a room with your crush. There was also a shuffling out of status; whoever could sleep with the most desirable people, became themselves more desirable by association.

This is the kind of hookup culture that has come to dominate the romantic and sexual realms of college campuses across the country (Currier 2013). But what *is* hooking up? The term is as vague as the culture that surrounds it, but it writes off sexual acts as casual encounters between unattached parties. The hookup for many students quoted in the scholarly literature has superseded committed relationships as the place where the majority of sexual exploration happens. And, while many students still choose to enter into relationships, they tend to commit after already being physically intimate with each other in one way or another.

The Coronavirus pandemic that has ripped through the country and has affected the lives of virtually everyone on the planet has removed the ability for the same carefree interactions. Hookups and hookup culture, therefore, took a more serious tone as well as adopted a sense of secrecy due to fear of being asked to leave campus. While Oberlin's COVID-19 case numbers have remained remarkably low, as low as 0 in the last two weeks of February, all of April, and all but one week of March, they have only been so because of student dedication to the safety of the community. Unfortunately, that means that the sexual free-for-all of Fall 2020's orientation week did not occur. Nor are the messy make-outs in the 'Sco, Slow Train coffee dates, or the melodrama of trying to avoid your one-night stand in Mudd. In other words, the hallmarks of Oberlin's hookup scene are gone. Now that the public spaces and social validation of hooking up are gone, the culture that remains vaguely resembles the structures of the before times. It has the same foundation, but it relies more on digital avenues, hard boundaries, and an element of privacy--bordering on secrecy--that is foreign to its predecessor. Hookup culture in college is very much fueled by public opinion, because by definition, hookup culture is about the shared meanings and expectations in a group. Hookups are a way of asserting or obtaining status by associating yourself with people outside of your immediate social circle for status tokens--countable things that can be used to track how status was exchanged in an encounter--like party invites, inside information on departments and organizations, and social renown.

The field of hookup culture research is still relatively new. While there is much of interest to report, there was very little that did not include the overwhelming influence of Greek life on American hookup culture generally. It was also hard to find any sort of article dedicated to the experience of students of color, their experiences were mostly added at the end of a long

paragraph detailing the experience of students at primarily white institutions. There was also very little writing on the experience of how desirability plays into hookup culture, other than through the lens of heterosexuality.

The current literature on hookup culture emphasizes sexual assault (especially for queer and assigned female at birth students), divergence from traditional forms of courtship with heterosexual couplings. The way in which the literature views gender and sexuality is mostly heteronormative and binary, and therefore is not exemplary of Oberlin students and their relationships. This literature review summarizes what is known about hookup culture and applies it to the literature relevant to Oberlin's sexual culture in terms of seeing hookups as an evolution on traditional courtship rituals, prioritizing ways in which hookups can be pleasurable and beneficial rather than dangerous, and supplying a queer perspective. Oberlin has a large queer student population and therefore our hookup culture does not assume heterosexuality, as most do in the literature. This is also true in terms of how approaches to hookups have changed in light of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

So, if the term is intentionally vague, can we define it? In a way, yes. Dr. Lisa Wade, the author of *American Hookup*, defines the term by its vagueness which allows "students to exaggerate or downplay their encounters depending on what they want others to know...It also has to do with how they feel about the person they hooked up with the next morning...Hookups with high-status people may be exaggerated and those with low-status people minimized" (2017:41). This ambiguity has been only really explored in heterosexual pairings and is propagated by people of different genders for different reasons. Dr. Danielle Currier notes that she has found two definitions of a hookup in her interviews, one was negative and the other neutral (2013:707). In this article, Currier suggests that ambiguity is applied in order to preserve

social standing, and is based on gendered ideals of hypersexuality in masculine individuals and “just enough” sexual activity in feminine individuals to steer clear of the prude label (2013:708). Non-penetrative acts, such as oral sex, seem to be more prevalent in these casual cis-heterosexual hookups than penetrative vaginal or anal sex, with more benefit given to the partner with a penis (2013:708-709).

The hookup has not entirely eclipsed the relationship as the socially normative intimacy script for young people, but it has become a convenient option for those who do not wish to enter into committed and potentially long-term relationships during college. Intimacy scripts are the socially reinforced norms for people who are romantically and sexually interested in each other to interact (Gagnon & Simon 1973). Currier notes that many students enter into relationships later in college or after college and the casual relationships still have an element or a desire for emotional connectedness that may or may not be met by these ambiguous partners (2013:708). The problem outlined in this article is that, while students seem to be clear about their relationship wants yet they have difficulty or little desire to communicate those desires to hookup partners or someone they are seeing casually.

In *Sexual Citizens*, the often-uncommunicated desires for any form of a committed relationship are elaborated upon through the concept of sexual projects which “encompasses the reasons that someone might seek a particular sexual interaction or experience” (2020:xiv) and sexual citizenship which “denotes the acknowledgment of one’s own right to sexual self-determination, and, importantly recognizes the equivalent right in others. Sexual citizenship is fostered, and institutionally and culturally supported” (2020:xvi). In some ways, these definitions can be contradictory. There are a few points of commonality, however, which are noted in *Sexual Citizens*: (1) Hookups are transactional, students are exchanging sex for an

increase in status that is gained from intragroup approval. (2) Hookup culture is driven by compulsory heterosexuality, and while parallel queer cultures form, they are formed in reaction to exclusionary practices of the heterosexual hookup culture. (3) Alcohol and other illicit substances are an essential part of hookup culture and therefore whoever has access to these substances is in control of the culture (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015). (4) The balance of power in all hookup scenarios is weighted unevenly towards older students, heterosexual students, white students, and cis men.

If hookups are a form of status transaction, this requires communal knowledge of the planning of the hookup or have the private events brought under public scrutiny after the fact through conversations between students. This research focuses mainly on heterosocial groups and heterosexual people. Students often engage in what has been dubbed “ritual retelling”. This is a concept devised by Carol Auster, Caroline Faulkner, and Hannah Klingenstein in their 2018 article by the same name. What you or I might refer to as merely gossiping, actually serves a social function of maintaining gendered stereotypes around sexual behavior as well as cementing one's reputation as socially desirable and sexually viable (Auster, Faulkner, & Klingenstein, 2018).

Male and female social circles both report on hook-up experiences but in different ways and to different ends. The ritual of retelling for female social spheres has an emphasis on relationships: how long have you known them, will you see them again, and do you see this going somewhere but downplay the role that sex played in the encounter (Auster, Faulkner, & Klingenstein, 2018: 2-4). Male social groups instead emphasize the physicality of the hook-up itself (Auster, Faulkner, & Klingenstein 2018:3). The discourse around alcohol is also gendered in relation to hookups. Women use alcohol as a way to avoid being thought of as overly sexual

and protect their reputations (Auster, Faulkner, & Klingenstein 2018:4). Men instead use alcohol as a way of proving emotional detachment and to explain away their choice of a person who is not seen as socially desirable by their circle (Auster, Faulkner, & Klingenstein 2018:4). In either case, the retelling of certain sexual scripts is gendered in the way that it maintains masculine persons as the pursuer and feminine persons as passive (Auster, Faulkner, & Klingenstein 2018:4).

Due to COVID safety guidelines, these public spaces are no longer accessible to students who choose to engage in hookup culture and the usual markers of status have faded with this loss of spaces for students to casually run into each other, make small talk, and spontaneous plans, and observe each other from afar. These public spaces are known as “see and be seen” locations, which I am using in place of Oldenburg’s “third locations” and are further addressed in chapter 3. There has also been a decline and almost reversal in social status gained from hooking up during this period. So, Tinder and public forums will serve that purpose for this year and in this project.

My two research questions are (1) How has COVID changed the motivations for a hookup given that the social benefits of hooking up have been altered? 2) In what ways are Oberlin students using hookups to fulfill their sexual and social projects during this time? The next sections of this literature review organize hookup literature by dominant themes. Some of the following are not applicable to Oberlin or are only applicable in a limited way. Nevertheless, they are important to the broader study of American hookup culture and to the mentality with which Oberlin students enter college. The main themes in the literature review are Greek life, queerness v. heteronormativity, and the culture of being always busy.

Greek Life:

A prominent feature of all hookup literature, especially the part that's focused on assault, center Greek life. Frats and Sororities are not only institutions that are known for recruiting and accepting the most eligible students on campus, but they also provide the party. Sexual Citizens refers to this concept as “sexual geography” and refers to the importance of the physical spaces where students meet potential hookups and where the hookup takes place (2020). Frats are heterosexual institutions where the brothers control the ratio of men to women, who gets alcohol and how much, and, when combined with gender norms, creates a competitive and predatory dynamic for women.

Oberlin, conversely, does not have Greek life. Our sexual geography is not created around Frat parties, but rather venues like the ‘Sco, house parties, and the Oberlin Student Cooperative Association (OSCA). Alcohol also plays a large role in our hookup culture, but the culture of pregaming--drinking with friends before and arriving already intoxicated to a party--is so ubiquitous that an underclassman with a fake ID or a personal connection to an upperclassman who can supply their friend group with alcohol to be consumed away from the party itself is more of a social boon than an older student providing them with alcohol while at the event itself. The same goes for other substances like cannabis. Therefore, intoxicating substances become tangible items that demonstrate the transference of status. Additionally, willingness to consume these substances in social contexts also signal a certain level of willingness to participate in hookups.

Heterosexuality:

College Hookup culture is inherently heteronormative. This is because hookups are about a transference of status tokens, and many of these tokens are gatekept by cisgender heterosexual men (Hirsch & Kahn, 2020). Being seen as desirable by older students who hold these status tokens is the biggest social boon that an underclassman has. Status tokens are defined as the desire to be desired as posited in *American Hookup* (2017) and in *Sexual Citizens* (2020), is itself a form of social capital that is linked to the culture of the school and also desirability politics that privilege thin, white, straight passing, able-bodied, wealthy, Christian people over everyone else (Bogle, 2008). Because of cultural misogyny, it is often men who control spaces on campus where alcohol is served and hold positions of power in research and clubs. It is no accident that it is in these male-dominated spaces where hookups take place. Status tokens are not measured numerically, but rather by visibility. At a certain, and often vague point, one stops accumulating status tokens and starts dispensing them to lower status people. This does not mean that the original holder of these tokens lowers their own status, however. It is more as if the other person's status is raised, and theirs is frozen.

Hookup culture is also heteronormative in that it centers mens' pleasure, even in encounters that do not directly involve men. Rupp et. al (2014) argues that it is in fact all for men's enjoyment, even in hookups between women occurring in public or in three ways where two of the participants are women. Within the heteronormative framework of hookup culture, women are given the agency to experiment with non-heterosexual identities, but not commit to them (Lamont, Roach, & Kahn 2018). Women kissing is seen as attractive to straight men, and so queer women feel secure in their social statuses if they kiss women occasionally in public (Rupp et al. 2014). However, men are traditionally the ones who have the power to give status to

others, and the label of “lesbian” removes men from them from the equation, which limits these folks’ ability to accumulate status given by men (Lamont et. al 2018). Additionally, there is no status gain for gay men in being out, and therefore they can only gain status through passing as straight or being connected to desirable women (Rupp et al. 2014; Lamont et. al 2018). The pressure to be perceived as desirable, even to people you do not desire is a key feature of hookup culture and what cements hookups as pursuits of status rather than pleasure.

Hookup culture, in general, was pioneered by gay men and queer hookup culture today mostly occurs through apps like Tinder, Grindr, Bumble, and Her. However, queer students are more likely to rely on social networks in addition to these apps than straight students, especially straight men (Lamont et al. 2014). This is due to a lack of gay bars and queer spaces on college campuses (Hirsch & Kahn 2020). College hookup cultures are very heteronormative and the fear of loss of status tokens that come with presumed heterosexuality, especially for gay men (Hirsch & Kahn 2020). The status tokens are not as widely visible as the ones invoked in heterosexual hookup culture, and there is a longer period of time between the first message and the hookup (Rupp et al. 2014). This implies that queer students, especially queer feminine students, spend more time getting to know a potential hookup before they meet them for the first time. This also implies that there is more privacy and secrecy involved in queer hookups because students do not want to risk outing their partner or losing status themselves by straying from the heterosexual norm.

Oberlin’s social culture is more queer-integrated than many of the schools surveyed in these literatures. A large portion of the student body identifies as queer or is open to trying a same-sex hookups. Queerness on campus is also demonstrated by the generalized use of gender pronouns in dating app bios, the public rejection of monogamy, and a normalization of kink and

BDSM. However, heteronormativity is still hegemonic here, as it is everywhere. We have a very active tinder scene on campus, but it is also accented by a nightlife culture that was conducive to approaching others in person for the purpose of hooking up. Hookups have become orchestrated increasingly through dating apps and then use public settings, like the ‘Sco or a house party as a meeting point. Hookup culture saw its beginnings with queer people, and it is queer people who have continued to innovate it, even though they are not represented in the literature. Therefore, we can infer that Oberlin’s hookup culture, because of the high concentration of queer students, will be more progressive and even a little ahead of the literature than peer institutions with fewer queer students.

Busy-ness culture:

The student culture of always being busy with academics, extra-curricular, networking and resume building, and social life leaves very little time for true emotional engagement. Combined with high expectations, newfound sexual freedom, and the peer pressure to sow wild oats, many students experience a clash of desires for emotional intimacy, commitment, and consistency with a more detached and casual mode of interaction that can lead to emotional burnout--where one or both parties feels exhausted from not having their emotional needs met by the other person (Snapp et al. 2014). This can lead to an avoidant attachment style which fosters “their characteristic, defensive self-reliance and desire to maintain an emotional distance from others may lead them to use sex to gain social prestige or enhance self-esteem without regard for their partner’s needs or feelings” (Snapp et al. 2014:470). Or, students who have trouble recognizing and fostering real intimacy in their sexual relationships.

Hookups have become ubiquitous on college campuses in part because it allows someone to prioritize their own goals and career paths without the added constraint of planning with a

partner. For female-identifying students, this is especially true. Female students and students who were socialized female dating men also come with the pressure to conform to heteronormative pressures within romantic relationships to prioritize their partner's goals (Hamilton, England, Armstrong 2017). However, one-night stands are unlikely to be as pleasurable for women, as their male partners tend to prioritize their orgasms after there has been some form of commitment (Armstrong 2015; Hirsch & Khan 2020). Casual relationships, as described in *Paying for the Party* by Elizabeth Armstrong and "Queer Women in the Hookup Scene", by Rupp et. al, are a good compromise because they allow women to remain focused on their own goals (Rupp et al. 2014; Armstrong 2015) and experience pleasure in their sexual relationships with men while avoiding or delaying commitment and monogamy (Pham 2016). This point is not often highlighted in the hookup literature, but is increasingly important, especially in reference to elite institutions.

Oberlin is also an elite institution, meaning not only do students work hard while attending, but must demonstrate bolstered resumes while applying. Oberlin students are ambitious, and are focused on mobility and achieving personal goals rather than building romantic relationships with other people. This is especially true when you consider that less than 10% of Oberlin students come from Ohio (College Factual 2020). Unless you are from an area that enrolls a lot of other students: New York, LA, Bay Area, Boston, Chicago, and DC you will probably be spending your breaks in a long-distance relationship, unlike colleges that draw a more local population (Oberlin College Website 2020).

COVID:

Primarily, my study focuses on the Coronavirus pandemic and how it affected sexual life and hookup culture at Oberlin. As there is very little scholarship on this topic, if any, I am

relying on journalistic accounts from the New York Times and other national news sources to provide background rather than strictly academic articles. Many young people are currently living at home with their parents and studying remotely, or are not currently enrolled, or lived with their parents for an extended period of time from March-August and are experiencing both a contraction of freedoms and a lack of contact with peers. One article from the New York times emphasizes that young people, including college students, have been discounted as sexual beings by their colleges and universities (Klass 2020). This has resulted in a prohibition on all close contact with other students. Indeed, the Oberlin community agreement says explicitly that masks are to be worn at all times when not in a “private bedroom with the door closed” (2020). This leaves a gray area for activities like hookups, where you are in a private bedroom with the door closed. However, in an update on the College’s Corona Virus page ObieSafe, Dean Meredith Raimondo clarified that pods--closed groups where students see each other without wearing masks and without social distancing but no one else--was against the college’s rules (Raimondo 2020). This clarified that in-person sex was strictly against the Agreement. This update came in conjunction with the guidelines on how to safely pod put out by ObieReal--the student senate’s initiative for safe and realistic approaches to student life. This abstinence-only approach accomplishes what all abstinence rhetoric does, perverse implantation (Foucault 1978) that makes having sex the gold standard by which to achieve autonomy.

Health departments and student initiatives like Oberlin’s ObieReal and PRSM--an acronym for Preventing and Responding to Sexual Misconduct, is an initiative to reduce sexual assault on campus--have created graphics encouraging students to engage more in sexual activity virtually or on their own than with a partner in real life (IRL) (Parker-Pope 2020). Since pods or family groups are not allowed, even among students who share living spaces (Oberlin

Community Agreement 2020), physical encounters, as well as hookup culture itself, have gone underground and behind closed doors.

Methods:

When I originally proposed this project, I had planned on conducting a series of five or six focus groups with students from various sectors of student life and then choosing one or two individuals from each group with whom to have a more in-depth interview. The IRB reported that I as a researcher had an obligation under the Community Agreement to report any student who disclosed a violation of policy, which included any hookup. I opted instead for the IRB-recommended method of an entirely anonymous survey to protect both my participants and myself.

My survey was created through Qualtrics—a survey engine used by the college and the Psychology Department to create anonymous surveys—and consists of 63 questions. The survey took about 45 minutes to complete. The first two questions determine a participant's eligibility to participate in the survey itself. After that, I request an alias from each participant. The rest of the questions are formulated in both multiple choice and short answer form. Participants were asked to choose aliases and will be addressed only by those names. I did not ask for the respondent's personal pronouns, and I will, therefore, address each respondent with gender neutral they/them pronouns unless they specified other pronouns to be used. All participants were asked to define Oberlin's hook-up culture before COVID-19 both to other students and to someone who does not attend Oberlin, or an institution similar to it. Participants were also asked to give a personal account of their hook-ups since March 2020--including why they did or did not seek a hook-up opportunity and their dating app usage.

The following topics were discussed in the survey, but participants only gave answers for categories relevant to their personal experiences:

1. Being immunocompromised
2. Open relationships
3. Being a Second or Third year
4. Being a remote student
5. Living in Village or Off-Campus housing

I chose to investigate these topics because they capture both the experience of the pandemic for Oberlin students and I wanted to be sure to include the experiences of students with roommates.

All universities had to redesign their plans for the 2020-2021 academic year. Oberlin decided to allow students to continue to study remotely--to de-densify campus. Also part of this effort, the College decided that the year would be split into three semesters. Sophomores and juniors would not be enrolled in one of the two primary semesters: sophomores enrolled in the fall and juniors in the spring. They would both be enrolled in the summer semester while freshmen were on their summer break, and seniors had graduated. Lastly, to reduce the spread of the virus, the College ruled that all open double rooms and most divided rooms would be occupied by a single student. However, this is not true of most apartments and houses in the village housing pool and students who were granted off-campus permission. I received funding from the Jerome Davis Fund to provide a \$5 incentive to up to 60 participants. I uploaded the incentive to the survey using a program called Tango Card, which acts as a trackable gift card. All participants were only allowed to take the survey once. I released the survey on December 28th via social media: class Facebook pages, Instagram, and Twitter. I received 90 responses over the course of 2 months. 75 of these responses were viable and informed this study. Despite the anonymity of the survey,

some students still worried about their responses leading to their dismissal from campus. One respondent reached out via email and asked if there would be consequences to admitting they had been sexually active on campus after March. I suspect that students with the most information to share did not answer the survey at all. All participants were Oberlin students in their second, third, fourth, and fifth years and all were over the age of 18.

In addition to the survey, I had intended to interview students who had created virtual events for students centered around dating either through student organizations or on their own. These included the Grape Blind Dates, The Cat in the Cream's Date My Friend Night, Oberlin Love is Blind, and a Virtual Queer Nightclub. Unfortunately, despite reaching out four separate times to 5 participants of these 4 discrete events, of the 5 potential participants from whom I requested an interview, none responded to my invitation to participate.

I analyzed my data using Adobe PDF reader. Unfortunately, I was unable to access a more all-encompassing software due to COVID and technological restrictions. I coded using each transcript using different color highlighters that corresponded to a different key term or concept. There were 36 code colors in total.

In the chapters to come, I will be looking at three key features: Oberlin's structure and COVID-19 policies for the 2020-2021 school year, sexual projects, and status tokens.

In my next chapter, I will examine the role of the college's three-semester plan on students as well as how pods have affected hookup culture. Then, in my third chapter, I will look at how the alignment of sexual projects and communication of those projects can play a large role in determining the pleasurability of a hookup both during and after. Next, in my fourth chapter, I will look into ritual retelling and how status is accumulated from a hookup, and how that has changed since the pandemic. Lastly, in my conclusion, I will make a call for future

research, as well as a few suggestions on how to practically incorporate my findings into the hookup education curriculum at Oberlin.

CHAPTER 1

“COVID Makes Anything to Do With Other People Unsafe”

COVID, the Three-Semester Plan, and Pods

The goal of this chapter is to detail how student life was affected by the College’s COVID plan as well as by COVID itself. This chapter will be broken down into three sections: the three-semester plan, living with roommates, and pods/family groups. Each of these sections approaches the question of “what does Oberlin’s social world look like in COVID”. The first section, the three-semester plan, focuses on which student populations are on campus. The second section homes in on the senior experience, and that of select students in other years. And the third, addresses how students are attending to their own social needs and creating a COVID safe environment for themselves outside of the purview of the college, that allow for emotional and mental needs to be met more readily. I would like to note that “podding” or being unmasked with a closed group of 10 people or fewer is explicitly prohibited by the college. This chapter is not meant to be biased in favor of pods and disobeying the college’s COVID-19 policy but, as an account of what is occurring on campus this year. I aim to create a meaningful account of Oberlin’s social landscape in the first two semesters of the 2020-2021 school year.

THREE-SEMESTER PLAN:

In the summer of 2020, the college announced that they would be attempting to limit the possible exposure to COVID-19 by restricting the number of students on campus by year. The academic year was divided into three semesters: fall, spring, and summer. During the fall semester, which lasted from late August until mid-December, only first year, second year, and fourth year students were enrolled. In the spring, February to mid-May, the first, third, and fourth

year classes were enrolled on campus. Lastly, second and third years will complete their academic year over the summer: from May to the end of September. In addition to staggering who was on campus, the college also decided that a majority of the doubles on campus would be converted into singles with only students in Village housing or living off-campus sharing a space with other students.

An appealing claim that the college makes on its admissions tours is that during your time here your friendships will transcend class year and through involvement in various activities on campus, you will have friends in all years. I would say that for the most part, excluding maybe senior/first-year friendships, this is true. Student organizations are open to students of all years, parties do not bar first years from entrance, and even the Student Senate is open to second semester first years. This openness makes for an environment where students of varying maturity and familiarity with Oberlin are always awash in the same milieu: doing the same activities and in various levels of leadership that are not necessarily correlated to seniority in the organization or on campus. I remember feeling mentored and chosen by older students in my second year, almost hand-picked both by seniors taking a special interest in my friendship as well as in me romantically. This gave me both feelings of social security and superiority over my peers. And the upperclassmen knew it. “I would say that the hookup scene here is often dictated by power dynamics: ie the “hipster elite,” the social capital of older students/athletes/people who work in highly visible positions on or off-campus (wilder desk, circ desk, slow train, the local, etc)” says Catparent, a pan/demisexual Senior. But, Oberlin students are, on a whole, very aware of the role that positionality plays in their hookups--at least when it comes to obvious and superficial things like job title and year. However, Catparent also brings forth the idea that there is an “elite” group of students who have more of a draw to them than other students, which can make their position

as upperclassmen more precarious with underclassmen when dealing with underclassmen than a student without that moniker.

The de-densification of campus has altered the way in which students approach social life in general. So, while students do hook up with people outside of their year, there is still a stigma around older students pursuing and hooking up with second-years and first-years are off-limits with a capital O. Without the opportunity for social interaction outside of class or club settings, students miss the chance to bond with students outside of their friend group and year and there has been an increased social distancing between classes.

This created an interesting paradox for older students, especially during the first semester. Many seniors reported that they felt uncomfortable approaching second-year students because of the inherent power difference afforded by their age, and because the second years had less time on campus than in a non-pandemic year. Eddie McPop summarized this experience by saying, “I’m a senior so I find it strange to have sex with underclassmen. Juniors not being on campus definitely shrunk the tinder pool.” Another senior, Em, who also identifies as queer, elaborated that on top of not really being interested in younger students they were “not that interested in handling logistics.” In a non-pandemic year, the logistics of hooking up was limited to your place or mine, and if you would stay in touch after the end of the semester or graduation. But, with COVID, the details of coordinating a hookup become less about the personal details between the people directly involved, and more about the groups with which each person socializes and their level of COVID safety.

Logistics is a keyword when it comes to the three-semester plan. It is one thing to figure out how to pack and store just enough belongings for a single semester. That in itself is tough enough. But, having to do that with all of your relationships as well can be trying on already

fragile or blossoming connections. Milo, a bisexual second year, says that “I am a second-year. So, I left this November and am not back until late May, and I met someone I'd like to talk to more in October and texting is hard so we had to put a pin in our developing relationship until May, which was tough.” Milo was not alone in this feeling. If this person had been a senior or a first-year then the wait to see each other again would have been even longer if not infinite. Anastasia, also a bisexual second-year, commented that, “I believe being a sophomore was also one, being on campus and then leaving and then coming back definitely affected my experience. I didn't want to start anything with anyone because we would just end up leaving for six months and that would open it up to like the need for a whole long-distance conversation, etc.” Anastasia describes a feeling of limbo where they were not able to fully immerse themselves in the Oberlin community because they knew they would be leaving for a long period of time.

Second-year students described the feeling akin to going to summer camp. There, for a few weeks, and then waiting a year to return and in the meantime hoping that your crush would still be available and interested when you're finally back together. On the other extreme, the Junior experience was more akin to that of remote students. They had only as much autonomy as was allowed to them by whatever structure they had put in place for themselves, either their parents or the needs of friends they moved in with. Yet, not having the college policies over their heads made this logistical element of hooking up seem more manageable for some.

Some Juniors, like Lilac, who identified as straight, were able to develop relationships more fully than they would have been able to had they been in school. “I was able to focus more on our relationship without school getting in the way. This will definitely change this year because I will be on campus and taking classes from February to August and then my entire senior year after that if that is normal and starts in September and ends in May. I will have less

time to talk to him and I won't be able to see him physically for many many months.” For the Juniors, the logistical challenge is the exact opposite of that of the Sophomores. For them, it is about maintaining both independence and connections to the outside world, which also feels in line with descriptions of their phase of college.

And then there is the ultimate challenge posed by this plan and the pandemic itself. The possibility that each partner will be on-campus for different semesters. Emily, a Junior, says that “I was able to safely visit my partner during the fall semester because I was living at home, but I will have to be at Oberlin this summer when my partner will not be in school. So, our schedules won't really line up which is difficult.” Emily’s expression of difficulty to maintain their relationship is due to unique challenges presented by the structure of this year. This sentiment was also echoed by Claire Foster, a bisexual second-year, when she recounted that “many people who I had ‘things’ with didn't return to campus, either because they were on a different schedule or because they had taken time off from in-person school.” For Claire, the switch from being on a campus where students of different classes to relationships being more isolated to your class year was a bigger change than they had first expected. The largest barrier to socialization that this plan has created against hooking up presented by the three-semester plan is the logistical element. Students who had taken a semester off, for any reason including studying away but not with college approval, were counted with the cohort below them. This also loosened the sense of community within each class. However, the dynamics at play between years and between people in a variety of living situations widely varied depending on how much time students had had at Oberlin prior to the pandemic.

Isolated Together:

Oberlin is a residential college that requires all of its students to live in residential housing for the first three years--or six semesters--of their time here. Gradually, students move from dorm situations to Village housing, which, according to the college's website, houses approximately 422 students each year in apartments and houses with 2+ bedrooms (Oberlin College 2021). The college decided that, while students in the dorms would be living alone, students in Village housing would be allowed to live together, provided that they follow the same guidelines of wearing a mask in any space that was not a private bedroom with the door closed (Oberlin College 2021). This was also expected of students who had been granted off-campus exemptions. The number of houses available to students either living off-campus or in Village housing means that a large number of the senior class is living with roommates.

Many of these students have decided to form house groups or pods, exposing themselves to just their housemates or their housemates and one other house group to lessen the feelings of isolation from campus life that seniors are prone to feel in a normal year. Exposure to housemates is also a practical matter as it makes living situations more comfortable—especially for apartments and houses with only one bathroom. Being unmasked within 6 feet of other people, however, means shouldering their risk and making all additional exposure decisions together. Maggie, a straight Senior living off-campus wrote that:

My living situation has made it both easier and more difficult to find an intimate partner. By living off-campus, the college has less control over my actions (my roommates and I don't wear masks 24/7 in our home, we don't have to wear masks while using the bathroom, etc). If I were to invite an intimate partner over, other students/my RA wouldn't necessarily know, and I doubt anyone would report me. However, because I am

off campus, I am in a pod with another house. This means that, if I chose to have an intimate partner, I would have to approve the partner with my entire pod, and by exposing myself to a new person I could put everyone else in my pod at risk.

Living off campus allowed Maggie to feel a sense of independence that is unique from students living in college housing. I would like to pull attention to two parts of this quotation. First, the ability to be physically proximate to campus but ultimately removed from its systems of surveillance have enabled students living off-campus to create social structures which blend the freedom of living with roommates outside of Oberlin's bubble, with the need to maintain strict COVID procedures both for their own safety. Additionally because they are still in Oberlin's testing system and have a desire to protect their community as well as avoid being put in isolation in the hotel. Secondly, unlike students who live alone, Maggie cannot become romantically involved with someone without first consulting their housemate, and because they are podded with another housing group, the second house as well. Closing the pod is vital because, if she decided to become involved with someone in her year who also lived with roommates, then the potential risk would grow exponentially if those housemates are also involved with other people. Mo Charles, a lesbian-leaning senior commented on a similar situation:

I live with 5 other people with varying covid needs, so our house has strict covid policies and communicates a lot about what we are comfortable and uncomfortable with covid-wise. We are currently seeing all of each other unmasked and sharing food, pipes, etc. so risk from one person definitely translates to the rest of us. Last semester we podded with one of my friends' partners' house and this semester a different friend is getting to have a hookup with another person. It feels like one person is probably the max

that can be hooking up or having a relationship in person at a time since podding with more than one other house would start to become excessive and impossible. I am basically assuming that I won't be seeing anyone else at Oberlin.

Mo Charles and their house have had to make choices that sacrifice their own pleasure and desires in order to maintain the stability of their living situation, however this is a choice not made by all in Mo Charles's position. Seniors, especially in the fall semester, as stated in the previous section, were mostly interested in other seniors. Because a majority of seniors are living with roommates and have formed these house groups, their opportunity to have an intimate partner is limited or entirely eliminated.

While there is no question that living with others during this extended quarantine is favorable to living alone, the social dynamics are not so easily managed. Outside of safety, students have to choose between fulfilling their desires and sexual projects and allowing their housemates to do so. And, because housemates in many cases were selected before the pandemic really began, the criteria for a good living situation may have looked very different than it does now, particularly regarding the relationship statuses of different housemates. Hoobnoob a pansexual/queer Senior wrote that, "I am committed to COVID safety for my housemate's partner and their housemate's sake, instead of just my own and my housemate's. Being that I don't have a partner of my own, that gets frustrating at times." While they did not comment on if they would have altered their living arrangements based on the feasibility of being able to also have an intimate partner, or not, but it does beg the question, as do the questions from Maggie and Mo Charles.

It also becomes harder to meet people in organic ways, where outside of dating apps like Tinder there is not always an obvious intention for the connection or relationship. Anastasia, who

is also immunocompromised wrote that “when you live in a dorm you meet people in the lounge/kitchen all the time but with Covid and with living in an apartment I don't go into a lounge or interact with anyone who lives in the building with me.” And so the intent behind actively seeking a hookup through Tinder or another means could be less about sexual gratification and more about building in ways to get to know new people, as it is during a normal year.

Pods:

Podding is not only a matter of convenience for students living with other people during this time. For those living alone, podding is also a way that students can maintain intimacy within friends and romantic relationships while mitigating the risks of exposure to COVID-19. In August 2020, Oberlin’s Student Senate—led by Student Chair Henry Hicks—launched an initiative to help students returning to campus manage the social elements of life at Oberlin during the pandemic. In an article published in the Oberlin Review, Student Senator Ilana Fogle commented on the motivation behind the initiative that, “the truth is, students are going to hook up. Students are going to smoke weed. Students are going to party in their own way. They’re going to drink. And so what we can do as student leaders is create the campaign and compile the information in one place, so students know how to do it safely to minimize the risk as much as possible” (Luczkow, 2020). I include this quotation, not to highlight that students are disobeying college policy, but to instead focus on how well students have been able to care for Oberlin’s community well-being even while not following policy with full integrity. This is in large part due to the Oberlin community culture created before the pandemic and initiatives spearheaded by predominantly BIPOC leadership of organizations like Student Senate.

Dean Raimondo, while maintaining in an article she wrote on the College's position on pods, also commented that "I love that Senate is trying to think about, 'How do you have a college social life that reduces the risk of COVID transmission as much as possible?' I think that is critical" (2020). However, the College, despite their understanding of student's need for socializing and the inevitability of students podding with each other, has not been lenient with students who have been reported for forming pods on their own. According to the Assistant Dean of Students, Thom Julian, during the fall and spring semesters, 100 formal warnings were issued but only 18 students were asked to leave campus. All violations that resulted in dismissal from campus were related to potential super-spreader events and students hosting overnight guests. Dean Julian also emphasized that for minor incidents, the Office of Student Conduct has taken an educational approach rather than penal whenever possible. Despite the risk of being kicked off campus, 44 percent of my total respondents stated that they were in a pod, and 77 percent of entirely filled surveys mentioned pods. Those surveys that did not mention pods, were responses from students who have not been on campus this year.

For some students like Em their living situation made their pod for them. Because they live with roommates, they had less of a chance to build hooking up into that mix. Em also doesn't "really engage with hookup culture now bc I have a long distance partner and even though we are open i don't want to risk expanding our pod," Their reason was not necessarily lack of interest but because "I care a lot more about my roommates meeting people so am willing to not date this year." While Em is electing to not expand their pod by bringing in an intimate partner, the logistics of keeping their pod hidden from the college's purview becomes much easier because they all live together.

The opposite is true for students living in the dorms. They aren't coming as packaged deals in the form of houses. Therefore, they have more say in who they all individually pod with, even within a friend group. However, they have to be more careful of getting caught, because of the expanded role of Residential Assistants (RAs) in reporting unmasked people. Dill Doe, a second year who identifies as lesbian-ish, wrote that "My girlfriend and I were a pod (we didn't keep distance from each other) but it was still more difficult because we often had to be worried about snitches seeing one of us with the other one in the same room, or sitting together outside." Dill Doe explains that the vigilance that they needed to keep while spending time with their girlfriend put stress on their relationship.

Outside of relationships like Em and Dill Doe's that both have set boundaries, students who wanted to engage in casual hookups and relationships with wider boundaries were faced with a decision between podding with friends, remaining unattached in order to safely hookup, or the risky and rarely recommended combination of sleeping with your friends. Claire Foster chose the third option and commented that, "We called ourselves "casual," which in theory meant that we could see other people, we didn't see other people. It was something that we didn't really confront very well. I didn't want to be exclusive because that blurred the lines between dating and hooking up. However, we also made clear to each other that we should keep closed pods of people to avoid Covid risk. It was an awkward and unsaid balance." In normal times, the boundary between dating and hooking up can be the amount of time spent together and exclusivity. However, the usual tactics students employ to distance themselves emotionally from their hookups are less viable during COVID.

Maintaining this balance was exactly what Anastasia was worried about upsetting in their pod. Anastasia wrote that they had been avoiding the possibility of a hookup last semester

because, “I want to be safe and I can't risk getting COVID so I have been avoiding exposure. Maybe on a subconscious level I am also scared of actually engaging in a hookup with someone...Also I don't want to mess with the beauty of my platonic friendships so I would never hook up with any of my friends in my pod”. Students in pods have limited choice in who they hookup with, and if they wish to not disrupt the dynamics of their friend group, they may choose to not engage at all.

The concept of students having to choose between intimacy with their friends and intimacy with new people is unprecedented in this way. Before COVID, there was the conundrum of a friend going MIA because they spend all their time with their new significant other, but now the same can be said even of casual relationships. I don't mean to equate types of physical intimacy, but in a way, being maskless with anyone is a testament to the intimacy of the relationship because it is an act of intense vulnerability whether that vulnerability leads to sex or not. Oberlin's hookup culture has been greatly affected by the adoption of a pod system because students have lost the ability to have privacy and distance between their friends and their intimate partners. April, a bisexual senior lamented that, “part of me also misses the under-the-radar part of hooking up with someone. I don't like for people to know my hookup business, so I also liked before that I could be more secretive about who I was seeing.” Oberlin is a very tight knit community, but one of the drawbacks of this is the lack of privacy for students to explore their own feelings before their relationships become public domain for conversation.

This “under-the-radar” element of Oberlin's hookup culture is necessary on a campus this small. April also elaborated that, “Oberlin Hookup culture is pretty casual and there are a lot of things unspoken in a casual intimate interaction. Sometimes we joke that everyone at Oberlin who participates in hookup culture is connected to everyone else based on who has kissed who,

with only a few degrees of separation.” The assumption that revealing the identity of your intimate partner to your circle is vital, especially for students who are exploring their sexuality.

Along with privacy, it appears that casual encounters are also off the table. Charles Weasley, a straight Senior, summarized the plight of singles on campus this year by saying that, “now, it’s frowned upon and all the single people just have to be lonely or be condemned. It’s frustrating because COVID took its toll on a lot of relationships, so a lot of people needed a fresh start. There was no guarantee as to who was being safe though, so sexuality and sexploits were less discussed or, if they were, there was more room for criticism than there ever was pre-COVID.” The frustration Charles Weasley expresses is not just about the disruption of the social norm of single people being able to freely pursue their options, but also that their personal lives are viable topics of conversation for people they do not know well. And, fellow Senior G, who identifies as bi-curious, wrote that, “Covid makes anything to do with other people unsafe. My boyfriend and I went the first three weeks of our relationship without getting within six feet of one another, until we got negative test results back and knew it was ok to begin a bubble. I wouldn’t have any confidence in a hookup.” G reinforces that trusting your partner not only within the sexual dynamic but with the choices they make regarding COVID safety has become a deterrent to casual hookups.

The factor of being able to trust that a person has if not your best interest then at least your safety in mind rather than their own pleasure has become the most important determining factor in deciding whether or not students choose to hookup with someone. Not taking COVID safety seriously enough was the most cited reason for a left swipe on a dating app. This fear that your hookup would not be honest with you is restated by Catparent, a pan and demi-sexual Senior who wrote that, “hookup culture at Oberlin honestly just became more deceptive than

before because people didn't want to give up sexual validation despite the personal health risks and the risks to the rest of the community.”

So, as G said, even if someone is upfront about their COVID precautions, within the construction of Oberlin's hookup culture pre-pandemic, there is no guarantee that your pod will remain closed without some conversation about exclusivity. Celeste Holden, a straight Senior, summarized that “Since COVID, it's not so easy since there are more strings attached now (as they should be) because of health concerns.” And so many students who are choosing to engage in hookups are faced with challenges similar to Claire Foster's. However, even with blurred lines, the student consensus remains that you are only dating someone after a conversation that sets the terms of the relationship.

In the next chapter, I will explore the role of sexual projects and how students are ensuring that their projects align via communication while they exist in this gray zone between “friends with benefits” and romantic partners.

CHAPTER 2

“I Wanted a Relationship But Everyone I Met Wanted a Hookup”

Hook up Culture & Sexual Projects Before & During Covid

This chapter has two main goals. The first is to draw a comparison between Oberlin’s hookup culture of the pre-pandemic age, to that of the 2020-2021 school year. The second is to demonstrate how the alignment of sexual projects and communication of these goals is the defining feature of a good or bad experience in regards to a hookup. This chapter will also be broken down into three sections: hookup culture pre-covid, students’ definitions of terms, and personal sexual projects and communication of these projects. The first section will focus on first-hand accounts of how students experienced hookup culture at Oberlin before March 20th, 2020. This chapter also aims to demonstrate a contrast with the literature on hookup cultures at American colleges and universities generally and how. The second section will focus on how Oberlin students define the act of a hookup, a hookup/casual relationship, and “dating”. I will also use materials from my literature review to explain why the definitions of these terms vary so widely. The final section is dedicated to exploring the concept of sexual projects, as put forth by Hirsch & Kahn in *Sexual Citizens* (2020). In each section, I will discuss how communal attitudes before COVID regarding hookups and dating either helped or hindered students’ ability and willingness to fulfill their own sexual projects, and I will elaborate on the preceding section and chapter while discussing how students either did or did not feel able to express their sexual projects to potential partners, and if so, at what point in the relationship.

Hookup Pre-COVID:

When I asked respondents to my survey how they would describe Oberlin's hookup culture to someone who doesn't go here, their answers varied, but not dramatically. When the responses were broken down, the three most prevalent themes in students' answers were partying, dating, and status. I will address the element of status further in the next chapter and devote this section to it. Other notable features of Oberlin's hookup culture are its prevalence despite the school's small size and the high percentage of queer students and normalization of queer culture. As J.H., a queer senior, summarizes it, Oberlin's hookup scene is "queer". This is corroborated by fellow seniors Em and W.

Parties:

While Oberlin hosts many alternatives to house parties, they are still the main event of many students' weekends. Parties and events involving intoxication such as Splitchers--a themed club night at the 'Sco on Wednesday nights-- or Long Island (iced tea) night at the Feve serve as the meeting point for a large portion of hookups reported in the survey I conducted. Alison, a bisexual senior, wrote that, "hookup culture at Oberlin is very intimately connected to alcohol and partying. People drink, go to a party, and then hookup with a relative stranger. Going out feels almost synonymous with hooking up." As Armstrong and Hamilton write in *Paying for the Party*, Alcohol and other illicit substances are an essential part of hookup culture and therefore whoever has access to these substances is in control of the culture (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015). Alcohol is notorious for lowering inhibitions and helping people bypass their better judgement and even their own value systems (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). It is also cited frequently in *Sexual Citizens* (Hirsch & Kahn) and *Ritual Retelling* (Auster, Faulkner, & Klingenstein) as accompanying hookup culture because it enables students who might otherwise be disinterested

in anonymous encounters to override their need for an emotional attachment or sober preference for at least some acquaintance with the person involved in order to hookup with them.

Dating:

When asked to describe hookup culture, respondents alluded to a dynamic between hooking up and dating. This relates to Luff, Hoffman, and Berntson's theory that hooking up, for many students, is viewed as a stepping stone to solidified relationships as opposed to its own entity entirely, in that students commonly sleep with people they are interested in pursuing a relationship with, before those intentions are discussed. However, many students also sleep with each other without intending to have a relationship that is more involved than on the physical level. Milo, a bisexual second year, made a quick summary in their response that encapsulates Oberlin students' attitude towards hooking up on campus. They said that, "When things start to exist between the spectrum of hooking up and dating but is still just viewed as hooking up." Dating here is defined not as the period between first date and established relationship, but after the relationship has been decided. This was the definition of the term provided by most student respondents. "Dating" was determined by a conversation in which the people involved "define the relationship" or decide on a label. The space between purely physical relationship and commitment has come to be called a "situationship". A situationship, as defined by Urban Dictionary is "a form of relationship where neither party is completely sure of "what they are"; The period before DTR (defining the relationship)." And, I would argue that based on the results from the survey I conducted, situationships were the most prevalent type of sexual/romantic relationship on campus.

However, I think that is more a question of terminology than it is actual fact. Wade and Bogle both state that the term “hook up” is left intentionally vague in order to protect the reputations of the people participating in the act. For perceived masculine people, it protects their masculinity by leaving space for people to assume that they had sex. And, for perceived feminine people, the term protects them by allowing them to deny that they had sex. This research has been done primarily on straight pairings, and so, has little to say about how it protects queer people other than by maintaining their privacy.

The culture of hooking up varies from campus to campus and is largely dependent on the students creating it. Since the word that we use to define the actual relationships or events which occur between the people involved is left vague, then it makes sense that the culture surrounding it would also remain vague. April, a bi/pansexual senior corroborates this by saying, “I would say based on my experience, Oberlin Hookup culture is pretty casual and there are a lot of things unspoken in a casual intimate interaction.” The unspoken part of these connections seemed to be a definition of the relationship--either as purely sexual, sexual and friendly, or romantic. Anastasia, who we met in Chapter 1, outlined that “most students prefer to hook up or be friends with benefits. Finding an actual relationship is difficult; you'll more likely end up hooking up with all of your friends and your friends' friends. Everyone is super nice and cool and you'll probably like people but everyone just wants to hook up. I think we're all too emotionally stunted for real relationships.” The desire to be always open to new possibilities for students who prefer monogamous relationships can also be expressed as a fear of commitment or a fear of limiting these possibilities during their college experience.

While Anastasia argues that it is emotional immaturity that prevents students from solidifying their romantic relationships, the larger picture is less cut and dry. It is not necessarily

emotional stunting, but a lack of desire to be in a relationship or the social pressure to not want to be in a relationship that is often a barrier to commitment at Oberlin. The ethos of the campus, as Greta, a bisexual senior, puts it that “monogamous dating is kind of looked down upon and to be cool you should have casual hookups with lots of people who you then avoid eye contact with forever, after your period of hooking up ends. It’s kind of like a distortion or extreme version of free love and sexual liberation where instead of having the freedom to do what you want and choose to hook up or not, it’s like if you aren’t constantly hooking up, then you aren’t really free because you must be repressed if you don’t want to be sharing your body and sexuality with everyone.” Being liberated sexually means breaking away from traditional forms of intimate partnership. Students at Oberlin promote positive attitudes towards sex, which is sometimes to the detriment of students who do not wish to be engaging in sex outside of a monogamous and defined relationship. Anne Martin, a senior who defines their sexuality as fluid, remarks that “the myth that hooking up is a central part of college for everyone is still really pervasive.” The topic of sex is so casually and frequently floated that it can be both easy to forget that not everyone is having sex, however they choose to define it, and that those who are not having sex can feel a sense of shame about their own choices to abstain.

Even if it is a myth that everyone is hooking up and doing so in semi-attached relationships or one-night stands, that is still the dominant culture with which they all have to contend. And, so, in order to appear “cool” or fit the mold--especially for younger students--casual hookups are the norm. However, as I will expand upon in the next chapter, while that is our publicly agreed-upon norm, it is not aligned with the individual goals and values of many if not most of the students on campus.

Status:

An important part of every intimate relationship and encounter is to define the terms and set the boundaries. As we established in the section above, “hookup” is an intentionally vague term that can incorporate a variety of acts. Additionally, there does not seem to be a definition of the term that is agreed upon across Oberlin. Ana, a straight senior, says a hookup can be “anything from making out to having sex.” But, Liverpool, also a straight senior, disagrees and says a hookup is only “having sexual intercourse whether that be oral or a form of penetration oftentimes defaulting to penetration. Kissing is not hooking up.” And then for even some others, a hookup is “having a sexual encounter without a sustained commitment or emotional connection” (Anne Martin, fluid, 4th). There also was no consensus among LGBTQ+ versus heterosexual students, although students who identified themselves as queer were more likely to define the element of sex broadly and focused more on nature of the relationship or the tone. We see this clearly in Catparent’s, from Chapter 1, statement: “for me, probably anything from having casual sex with someone i connected with at a party to a tinder meetup that results in sex (one time or many times—so long as it’s not romantic).” Here we see that the line for hooking up is the detached way in which you approach the situation, as duration of the relationship does not seem to alter the label on the relationship.

It is as Em, who we also met in the last chapter, says, at Oberlin, the “lines between hooking up and dating/seeing someone are often blurred (ie. i might hang out with the other person outside of hooking up) but anything from making out to sex.” This harkens back to the first chapter where I established that students are spending more time with people they are hooking up with outside of the bedroom. Students are spending more time with their hookups in

non-sexual contexts, which blurs the lines between sexual and romantic relationships. This leaves many students in the middle ground of a “situationship” which I defined above.

Definitions:

While there is more of a consensus on that, students’ definitions differed from the public nature of the relationship. For some students like Charles Weasley, Liverpool, T-rexy, and Greta--all straight seniors--there was an emphasis on sharing an activity outside of a dorm room. You were not “dating” someone unless you were going “on dates instead of just going to a place to hook up or if the two of you decide to label it as dating” (Greta). For Charles Weasley, “dates are just numbers. If you’ve gone on multiple dates, you’re dating, but dating does not mean exclusivity.” Yet for Liverpool, “dating is when you’re spending time with someone (doing activities etc) to gauge compatibility. So, after three or more dates that would, to me, be dating; but, not a relationship nor an exclusive relationship.” And T-Rexy, a straight senior, said that you are only dating someone “when both parties are consenting to a public, and exclusive relationship (both emotionally and physically).” For Liverpool, the question of intention is tied back into the conversation, whereas Charles Weasley, T-Rexy, and Greta were more focused on going on dates, your willingness to be publicly associated with the other person or people, and the number of dates you have been on.

For other students, publicly appearing in places together was not as much of a milestone as a conversation to define the boundaries and decide on a label. Sally, a fourth-year questioning their sexuality, said that at Oberlin, “I don't think you can just assume you are dating someone just because you are ‘exclusive’. Even if it may seem like you basically are dating.” This conversation is a type of definition of relationship, but it does not establish a romantic

relationship. Exclusivity pertains more to sexual health, and now COVID safety, than it does to romantic feelings. It determines only that you will not be sexually intimate with another person, but there is an implication that if one person finds someone else they would rather be with, then the exclusive situation will be over without the complication of a breakup from a serious relationship. Alice, a queer second year added that “I think you know don't know something like that until there has been a talk or an established label. To me, dating someone exclusively or becoming someone's girlfriend/boyfriend has to be prompted by an "official" conversation. Expectations have to be the same on both sides, and they have to be understood.” The match up of intentions and expectations between partners desiring a relationship is the only way that students agree that they know for certain that they are in a relationship.

Sexual Projects:

In their book *Sexual Citizens*, Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan introduce the concept of sexual projects as “the reasons why anyone might seek a particular sexual interaction or experience” (2020). While this term was coined to explain how sexual encounters can feel validating to one party and violating to another, it has been integral to my research as I am approaching this project through the paradigm of motivation for hookups among students in general, and especially during the pandemic. Sexual projects range based on person and can be divided into long term and short term projects. Short term goals are the ones accomplished in a night, and are more easily clarified for one's self and expressed to others. Some shorter term goals might look like wanting to have sex, having a threeway, kissing your crush, or trying a new position. Long term goals are more complicated because they also intersect with life goals. If someone has trouble knowing what they want in life, they will have difficulty defining their long

term projects for themselves and almost an impossible time expressing these goals to their sexual partners. A few examples of long term projects could be wanting to be in a relationship, wanting a consistent but casual partner, desire to explore one's sexuality, or even not wanting to engage in sexual activities at all. There is an assumption that these projects would differ by gender identity, however the data I collected stratified projects more by experience level and how sexually active and how many partners students desire. This may also be because I identify as a cis-woman and respondents were aware of my identity when they answered the survey.

These projects are rarely as clearly articulated to students' potential partners. This is due in part to social pressures to conform to Oberlin's sexual culture, which can prevent students from admitting sexual projects to themselves that deviate from this norm. Senior Maggie commented that, for her:

The most frustrating element of Oberlin's hookup culture pre-COVID was a lack of directness with other students regarding dating/hookups. Many of my former romantic interests did not communicate what they wanted out of the hookup/relationship, making it easy for them to ghost me/suddenly lose interest without any negative impact on their part.

There is an element of selfishness and protection in not communicating sexual projects. It can feel easier to convince yourself that you do not owe your casual fling the energy and attention that you would give a romantic partner if there is less communication overall.

The key to this understanding of sexual projects is that they are inherently self centered, meaning that communicating these projects to partners is not an integral part of fulfilling them. Even during COVID, when communication with people you will potentially unmask around is so important, some students have put fulfilling their desires over their partner's by not

communicating with them. This removes their partner's ability to consent fully to the situation at hand. April recounts an experience that illustrates this: "I was hooking up with someone who did not tell me she was seeing another person more officially, and she should have told me that piece of crucial information. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have decided to see her." April's project was to see one person exclusively but their partner did not share this desire. However, neither party communicated their respective desires, and both assumed that the other person shared their view of the situation.

On the other hand, communication between potential partners has also increased. Some students like Jane Doe, a straight fifth-year, "think people are much more likely to actually communicate during hookups now [in COVID] than before. Plus, it's less likely that people are just hooking up for the sake of hooking up." Many students have either had enough fear of COVID exposure to ask more questions of potential partners, or their pod mates place pressure on them to find out more details before they collectively approve the hookup. This is almost entirely due to health concerns presented by COVID-19. Charles Weasley commented that "after COVID, everyone asked for both negative COVID and STI tests, and to be involved in hookup culture was more frowned upon than celebrated. Overlap was scary because of possible COVID exposure." Overlap here refers to students hooking up with multiple people from different pods concurrently. They also added that they and their hookup "explicitly discussed exclusivity because of consideration for COVID safety." Exclusivity discussions before COVID were more likely to occur after a month of consistently hooking up, if at all. This default of exclusivity due to safety concerns has led to students needing to assert their sexual projects of desiring more casual connections.

For other students whose projects were to explore their sexualities or to meet new people, COVID has limited them in accomplishing their sexual projects with other people physically—digital methods of fulfilment have not been hindered by the pandemic. Hoobnoob, a pansexual/queer senior, writes about their frustration with the blocks towards fulfilling their sexual project of entering a monogamous and committed relationship:

Now, the most frustrating element is finding someone I like enough to be sexually monogamous with. It takes a while for me to get to know someone intimately. When I was having sex with several different people each month, I could explore these relationships simultaneously. Now, I'm only having sex with one person at a time, and the process goes more slowly. I am currently very dissatisfied with my sexual and romantic status quo.

Here, their frustration with the “status quo” is that it interferes with their project of exploring several casual relationships at a time. This new norm may work better for someone else who prefers to explore a single relationship at a time, but because of a difference in sexual project, Hoobnoob feels stunted and frustrated.

As mentioned in the above, exchanging information about long-term sexual projects is rare and the lack of this exchange often leads to feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, and confusion. Short term projects are easier to communicate for students and are often connected to a larger project. Liza, a bisexual senior, gives us an example of this:

I went to one [party] knowing that I wanted to have sex with this guy. In retrospect I really don't know why, because he's not cute and I found him vaguely unpleasant at the time, but I was going through a rough patch after a breakup and it is what it is. So I'm at this party, and I've had probably the most alcohol I've ever had, and this kid gets there. I

go up to him and I say something like "what's your goal for the night" (I don't know why, it wasn't intended to be a leading question) and he says "to get laid".

This is an excellent example because Liza explicitly asks the guy in question exactly what his goal is. Their mutual goal of having sex, or in his words "getting laid" was easy to communicate and necessary to communicate as a part of obtaining consent. However, the long term sexual project of recovering from Liza's breakup is not explicitly stated even to me.

Other students, like Maggie, discover their partners' long term sexual projects only after they have already hooked up. "He had suddenly expressed interest in me after one of our job meetings, and we started texting. We would hang out, but he never seemed like he wanted to make a move. I ended up directly asking him via text what his intentions were, and he said he simply wanted a hookup, and that he didn't have time." Maggie read their hookup's expression of interest as a profession of his sexual project to enter into a relationship with her. Since they did not have a further conversation about their projects until after they had already begun to see each other, Maggie continued to believe that they shared an intention to explore a relationship, and her hookup continued to believe that they were just hooking up. While we only have Maggie's side of the story, we can infer that neither of them walked away from the situation feeling satisfied.

But all sexual projects are subject to change. G a queer/bisexual, demisexual, second year wrote that "I guess I spend more time thinking about relationships when I'm not as busy with classes or activities, but I'm pretty busy. It wasn't until after finals I downloaded a dating app." According to Hamilton & Armstrong in *Paying for the Party*, hooking up has partially become embraced by college students because this casual mode of intimacy enables students to explore relationships and physical intimacy while being able to also prioritize their own growth, both emotionally and career-wise. This is especially true for women dating men, since there is a

cultural expectation that they will follow their partner after graduation to a new location, even to the detriment of their own career. For other students, it prevents them from struggling with long distance relationships during breaks or after one partner is no longer at Oberlin. Liverpool, a straight senior, illustrates this in saying that, “I think if anything it’s made me more likely to hookup with people since 1. I’m graduating 2. Most of my friends/acquaintances either were or were not on campus so I was forced into meeting new people/reconnecting with old friends.” Liverpool here demonstrates a very clear breakdown of a sexual project—to hook up—and two clear reasons for this project.

Long term projects become even more difficult to communicate when they go against the cultural norm. At Oberlin monogamous and long term relationships are looked down upon as being “normie”, or repressed—especially among cisgender heterosexual people. Anastasia explained that “I wanted a relationship but everyone I met wanted to hookup. I felt a bit left out, like I wanted something no one else did and I would never find anyone who did. It definitely made me think more about my priorities and what I wanted.” And as Ms. Crouton, a gay man and senior, says:

Before coming to Oberlin, I'd viewed hookups as being more of a temporary situation--you either hookup until you start dating, or you call it quits when you realize it isn't going anywhere. However, being on a more sex-positive campus, my perspective quickly changed, as I think a hookup can certainly be a long-term thing and can be a very intentional choice for what a relationship looks like.

There are many ways to be connected to others at Oberlin, that don't take on the traditional form of monogamous and long term relationships.

The pushback on monogamy at Oberlin does not diminish many students' desire for it. A common theme in the survey, especially among female identified participants, was to assume that if they communicated their long term projects more directly and or earlier on in their situationship, then they would be more fulfilled. Claudia, a bisexual second year, describes how conversations about romantic entanglements go amongst her female friends. "They often lament how it'd be easier just to date someone, as well as wishing they were better with communicating what they want." Women are expected societally to desire more committed relationships than their male counterparts, and so they may feel more pressure to deny that sexual project for themselves or not communicate that desire to others, so that they are not perceived as not being "cool" (Lamont et. al 2018). But, what's "cool" also differs by friend group and along the college/conservatory divide.

Ethical non-monogamy has also been a prominent feature of the Oberlin dating scene, especially in the college. However because of COVID-19, this has changed single students' willingness to hookup with students in these relationships, and students in these relationships to hook up at all. Hoobnoob says that they are more likely to swipe left, or reject someone, on Tinder if "they have group photos on their profile or say they're polygamous I'll swipe left. Neither of these things would have mattered pre-COVID." The fact that Hoobnoob, who stated their project earlier as looking to explore casual relationships en route to a long-term monogamous one, was willing to hookup with someone in an open or polyamorous relationship is a testament to how normalized polyamory was at Oberlin before the COVID-19 pandemic. Em, a queer senior in an open relationship also writes about being less willing to hookup now. "I don't really engage with hookup culture now because I have a long distance partner and even though we are open, I don't want to risk expanding our pod. also no privacy!!!" Em has decided

that even though the form of their relationship with their partner allows them to seek hookups outside of the partnership, they are prioritizing their single friends in their pod. They also write that there is no privacy. This harkens back to Chapter 1: students prefer to keep their sex and dating lives private from their friends until they have decided on a form for their relationship, but with the pod system, they cannot explore these relationships physically without group approval.

Because casual hookups are believed to be so ubiquitous and normative at Oberlin, students who do enter into monogamous relationships or come to college with a partner feel like they are missing out on part of their college experience. T-Rexy, a straight senior, looks back on their time at Oberlin and wrote that they had enjoyed “feeling comfortable and secure with myself with such a wide variety of people, with so many different interests. (Both sexually and from an actual interests standpoint)...But I never really got to experience the full potential of that at Oberlin.” The term “full potential” is loaded with the expectation that students are always hooking up and should expect themselves to be hooking up or pursuing sexual relationships with other people.

Hookups then become an extra-curricular. As I will discuss in the next chapter, sex had outside of a consistent relationship, situationship, or “thing” is used as a social resumé builder in a similar way to the way in which friend groups network amongst each other for on campus jobs and club leadership positions.

CHAPTER 3

“Strictly Heterosexual Unfortunately” Ritual Retelling and Status

In this chapter, I will explain how desire for increased social status both within a friends group and within the larger Oberlin circle contributed significantly to Oberlin’s hookup culture, because hookups function as a way to network both socially and professionally. This chapter will be divided into three sections focusing on different manifestations of status awareness within Oberlin’s hookup culture. The first section will focus generally on status tokens that can be exchanged through hookups. A status token, as defined as countable things that can be used to track how status was exchanged in an encounter. This is in alignment with Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural capital. The second section will focus on the role that recounting hookup experiences to friends plays into status accumulation. In this section, I will be using the concept of ritual retelling. Ritual retelling, as devised by Lisa Wade, is the conversation with friends after a hookup “during which college students ‘fill their friends in on blurry memories, reassuring one another of that they didn’t act too crazy, stroke the egos of disappointed friends, and brag’” (Wade 2017:104). Finally, the third section will highlight how COVID has altered the way students talk about their hookups, the tokens they are transferring in a hookup, and the importance of status in hookups in the altered social climate.

Status Tokens:

Oberlin’s location creates a bubble not just physically but socially. During the pandemic, this has enabled the college to retain an exceptionally low case count, and prior to the pandemic the bubble effect created a social world that placed students always under each others’ gazes in professional and academic settings as well as social and sexual. This created an environment

where different areas of life easily blended together and made socializing with co-worker and friends inseparable from social networking. These networks are not only definitions of friend groups, but departments, and extracurriculars, since all students live and work together on campus and in town, social success at Oberlin depends on social networks created between these students (Crossley 2008). Clubs, ExCos, campus jobs, classes, and studios are just as valid a way to meet potential hookups and romantic partners as parties and apps like Tinder—the campus’s favorite swipe app.

The ability to meet a stranger or relative stranger in a location that is not your home or your place of work is heavily emphasized in dating literature. These locations are referred to as “third places”, coined by Ray Oldenburg, and are used to classify your cafés, bars, libraries, and the student union. These are places where socialization happens spontaneously. On campus the distinction between home, school, and work is less clear and so this concept is not perfectly transferable. Instead, I introduce the concept of “see and be seen” (SBS). These are particular places identified by students as places to meet others outside of your major or dorm situation. The campus’s small size and relative isolation leave a few hyper public locations where students mingle often and frequently, not only to meet for coffee or to study, but also to observe and be observed. A SBS, for short, is a place where people gather to observe other people and be observed in turn. The SBS’s at Oberlin range based on students’ social circles, but the most commonly mentioned were Mudd library, the ‘Sco, the Cat in the Cream, Slow Train, the Local, and Wilder. Sally Seal, a senior questioning their sexuality, writes of the culture of observation, the way in which social life at Oberlin is built around being “visible” to others, at these locations that, “the drama and who’s doing what at the moment is always fun to talk about/witness. Who’s flirting with who...who people are attracted to because they like how they look that night...who’s

dancing with who etc. It was surely entertaining for those who partook and didn't partake in hookup culture.” The key features of these locations are the centrality to campus and to student life. Visibility equates memorability on campus, and the most memorable students often have the most “clout” or social status that they use as currency to exchange for real world tokens such as invitations to parties and job referrals.

Students who frequent these places or work at these locations have a high exposure rate to other students which increases their desirability because they are better known. Catparent, from Chapters 1 and 2 detailed this dynamic in the following comment:

I would say that the hookup scene here is often dictated by power dynamics: ie the “hipster elite,” the social capital of older students/athletes/people who work in highly visible positions on or off campus (wilder desk, [Mudd library] circ desk, slow train, the local, etc). Although many people hook up with individuals outside of those dynamics, there is a constant awareness that who you’re sleeping with might be known by individuals who you are forced to interact with in those extremely visible contexts.

Catparent highlights visibility on campus as a key determining factor in who becomes desirable sexually, and therefore socially, and vice versa.

This constant surveillance and notoriety of certain individuals, which elevates them almost to the level of celebrity, blurs the line between the privacy of students’ intimate relationships and creates a situation where a few students in particular become public domain. Liverpool, from Chapter 2, corroborated that, “if you hooked up with one person everyone automatically knew within a couple of days even if it was with a stranger.” “Everyone” here is a hyperbolic statement, but the use of it here demonstrates the insularity of social networks and how the size of the school does not allow for privacy within the romantic lives of the student

body. This is echoed by Phoebe, a “mostly straight” third year, who writes that Oberlin’s hookup scene is “fairly tinder-based, but also reliant on knowing the person to some extent before swiping/messaging, even if just by sight, since it’s such a small school. It doesn’t feel anonymous, since chances are you have mutual friends, so everything you do could easily get back to other people you know.” Here, Phoebe is illuminating a pro and a con of the small campus hookup scene. On the positive side, there is a familiarity and easily established common ground based on mutual connections. But, on the negative side, there is also pressure to perform well, because there is a chance that a large circle of friends and acquaintances will hear about the hookup.

Catparent mentioned that in addition to students working in “highly visible positions” that there are other power dynamics at play that contribute to the desirability of certain students over others. Class year and race are also major features in Oberlin’s desirability politics. Ms. Crouton, a gay senior from last chapter, writes the following about his experience with race and hookups:

Also, I think that Oberlin being a predominantly white campus, desirability politics certainly are present here. The assumed image of an Oberlin student is a white person--and I think that's what people look for when they look for partners. I certainly know more white people at Oberlin who graduate having dated consistently or who have been in relationships while at Oberlin, than people of color. I've heard from a lot of my peers of color that after a few years at Oberlin, they realize that post-grad is when we'll find opportunities to date, as opposed to dating while on-campus.

Students of color, and especially Black students, have a harder time utilising the social networks available to white students at Oberlin because of the ways racism shapes friendship dynamics.

Ms. Crouton was not the only student to write about whiteness being a determinant of desirability at Oberlin. Hookups are status validation and less about connection. Students of color are seen as less desirable due to sexual racism (C. Winter Han 2021). Kelly, a pansexual senior, also wrote that Oberlin's hookup culture "can be a little toxic. I find a lot of it is entangled in social politics and 'clout' more than other hookup cultures I've seen. Very Tinder oriented. Thin and white people 'do the best' by a large margin." These physical features are determined by societal standards for beauty and are rooted in racism, misogyny, and fatphobia. So, by virtue of whiteness and thinness being markers of desirability these students have more "clout" or social capital, as described above, and therefore are more sought out for hookups than students of color and fat students.

Another factor of desirability is class year. Older students have more visibility and more agency on campus than underclassmen and therefore, are more desirable in hookups where students are seeking to gain status through association. Catparent recounts a story that is emblematic of the dynamics between upper and underclassmen told by various other students in this survey:

My most memorable hookup was probably my sophomore year when I was hooking up with an upperclassman and we left a party early to go and drink tea and listen to music. it was very tender and sweet and I always felt great about those experiences. I definitely felt way more anxious about hooking up with him than I did when I hooked up with people in my own year because I felt intimidated by how confident and well-established he was on campus, but I still look back on those memories very fondly despite the weird power dynamics.

These power dynamics between older and younger students become more apparent as the younger student grows into themselves and begins to consider if they would make the same decision regarding students younger than they are. These hookups hold the expectation of being more socially formative, but less durable. Meaning, that younger students look to hookups for status increase more than they do from hookups than they do hookups within their own class years. They also are more likely to consider students in their year as potential partners for longer term relationships than they do seniors who are graduating. Older students, even a year older, hold more social connections on campus than many younger students. Having a “clouty” older student interested in you has produced feelings akin to an important interview.

For Catparent this was a positive experience despite the feelings of intimidation and anxiety that accompanied the encounter. Other students like Phoebe, a mostly straight third year, and Hoobnoob, from the last chapter, had experiences that were more negative. These experiences also help to demonstrate the power that upperclassmen have over younger students at Oberlin. Phoebe writes that their encounter with an upperclassman began online. They wrote that “it was someone who I wasn’t attracted to but was sort of a big “name” around campus so I was excited to have matched with him on tinder.” Catparent and Phoebe shared the attraction to their hookup’s presence on campus. Hoobnoob met their upperclassmen hookup at their co-op and they were flattered and surprised by the older person’s interest in them, but they also expressed surprise and almost feeling as if they should be grateful for the upperclassman’s attention. Even remembering back to the encounter, Hoobnoob says that “I did not enjoy the experience. I left feeling embarrassed and ashamed. Looking back, I should have revoked my consent once I realized my mistake, but they were older than me and I felt very shy.”

Hoobnoob's desire to hookup with this particular person was motivated purely by how flattered they felt by the older student's attention.

The last status feature that was mentioned was the status of being sexually experienced. Like the term "hookup", "experience" meant something different to different students. Oberlin has a reputation for being not only Queer friendly but Queer normative, or that every member of the student body is or should identify as queer. And while this is a welcome role reversal to the outside world, it can also lead to queer baiting and students intentionally labeling themselves as something other than straight in order to not lose the social currency associated with having a "boring" or "vanilla" sexuality. In my survey I had two instances of students embellishing their label to read as Queer. One student answered the question "how do you describe your sexuality" with "fun and flirty" but later in the survey described themselves as heterosexual. Along similar lines, Phoebe, from earlier in the chapter, identified themselves as "mostly straight" in an attempt to link themselves to queerness even if they are straight passing. Links to queerness are also established by students passively "questioning" their sexuality, even into their senior year. The other student described herself as "strictly heterosexual unfortunately". These are both exemplary of the ways in which even passive queerness is associated with higher status at Oberlin. Phoebe's story that exemplifies both the concept of hooking up in order to have a story worth telling your friends about and feeling pressure to have sexual experiences:

It was my freshman year and I had hooked up with one guy (via tinder) who I hadn't really liked or had a good time with, I just felt like I needed to have a first college hookup. Then I matched with another guy who I thought was way cuter and he had better banter and invited me to his room and IT WAS THE SAME ROOM AS THE OTHER GUY. THEY WERE ROOMMATES. But the first guy had told me he and his roommate

didn't really talk so I went ahead and did it anyway, partly because I liked this guy better and partly because it made such a good story. Both these hookups were penetrative sex but it felt much better with the second one. He'd been chewing mint gum before I got there and tasted nice, which I felt was thoughtful. When I got back to my room he messaged me "did the room look familiar?" me and my roommate absolutely cackled. I never saw either guy again but treasure the story to this day.

In many ways, the insularity of campus is exaggerated in a similar way to the number of students actually participating in hookups. Phoebe's story contradicts earlier points that the campus's small size prevents any sense of privacy. This story also highlights their perceived need to have sexual experience at college in a casual way.

Status and sexuality are also entwined based on adventurousness. Celeste Holden, a straight senior, also recounted a story. Earlier in the survey, they wrote about their limited experience with sex and how they felt, less "cool" because of that. They expressed a perceived need to be more adventurous with the sex they were having in order to avoid the label "vanilla". "My sophomore year I hooked up with a guy in the Carnegie Library. We were exploring the library and realized it was dark and no one was there. It was just fun and chill. I'm not a super adventurous person, so this was a fun one that I remember." This story was in response to being asked to recount their most memorable hookup. "Memorable" was interpreted very differently from person to person, going from incredibly intimate and personal to stories like Celeste and Phoebe's that demonstrated, despite their anonymity, the desire to appear experienced and adventurous.

Along with being adventurous, students also have a pressure to appear willing, even if that disregards their own sexual projects. Greta, from Chapter 2, recounts an experience where

she bulldozed her own boundary in order to maintain her status. “I was in his room helping him pack and he kept coming onto me and I kept avoiding it and saying I didn’t like him like that but he kept pushing and I was feeling sad and lonely so we ended up cuddling and then he told me I was giving him blue balls. I was speechless that someone at Oberlin would say that and I didn’t know how to respond but I didn’t want him to think I was a prude or a tease so I gave him a blowjob.” Despite Greta’s shock, they worried that their status would be harmed by their hookup who had already broken their trust. This demonstrates that loss of status is as much a motivation for a hookup as the desire for pleasure.

Desire can be manifested both physically and socially. In this section, I demonstrated that power dynamics can increase the intrigue of certain people and lessen the appeal of others. In the context of COVID-19, these dynamics have been disrupted by shifting the balance of who is on campus at what points in the year, and intensifying the age gaps between seniors, sophomores, and freshmen during the fall. This status is accumulated not through the hookup itself, but through the story told about the hookup in the days following. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, hooking up casually is seen as a selfish act and so status tokens have become less entwined with hookups, at least for older students with more established social networks.

Ritual Retelling:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Oberlin’s hookup culture placed more importance on the positionality, also known by the folk concept of “clout”, of your partner on campus than it did on your attraction or compatibility. As established in the last chapter, students hookup to accomplish sexual projects, some of which involve enhancing their own social standing. Socially motivated sexual projects end with the employment of a “ritual retelling”, where students share

the events of the night before with friends in an attempt to bring in the group and spread the story around their social circle (Auster et. al 2018). Now, during COVID, hookups are less talked about because students fear retaliation from the college for violating the COVID-19 Community Agreement. This removes a key element of the ritual of hooking up--sharing that experience with friends.

Ritual retelling validates students' actions by affirming their choice of partner and enabling them to feel part of the "in" group of students who engage in hookup culture. This retelling is prevalent in hookup culture, but it also prevalent in other realms of social life at Oberlin that are not connected to sex. It is a tool of status and network building. Hookups are a large part of that, especially on a small and isolated campus like Oberlin. Rather than via external validation, and pressure through friends, I found that during the pandemic, students are gaining this validation by pursuing partners that fulfill their personal sexual projects, which they had previously been suppressing in order to obtain group validation.

Students also reported feeling less inclined to talk to their friends about their interactions with consistent/long-term partners, even before the pandemic. Phoebe writes that "I give more details the less likely I think I am to pursue an actual relationship with the person. We usually talk about who orgasmed, if anything happened, if I'd want it to happen again, if I think they want it to happen again. It's all discussed in a very joking manner, usually. It can feel like you're expected to lightly make fun of the person you hooked up with." Poking fun at someone you made yourself vulnerable to is a tactic to show your friends that you can accomplish the basics of hooking up--remaining emotionally unattached to your partner.

The theme of sharing less the more invested in the person you are is prominent among upperclassmen. For Senior Ned Shneebly, who is questioning their sexuality, talking about hookups is a way of bonding not only with friends, but also with new acquaintances:

My friends usually get pretty in depth descriptions of my hookups. Then again, I am a fairly open person and depending on close I am with the person, I tell them more. It's fun to discuss different people on campus we've slept with, especially when there's crossover. However, usually as the relationship gets more serious, I tend to tell them less. I'm not sure why, but it feels more invasive telling my friends intimate details about my partner.

Casual crossover functions similarly to discovering a distant mutual friend. Whereas serious connections are less entertaining stories to tell because the stakes are higher and few people enjoy hearing tales of sexual conquests involving someone they are emotionally involved with, especially if there is a chance those encounters were happening at the same time as their involvement.

The motivation behind recounting tales of recent escapades is to establish common ground with your audience or to gain and exercise increased status. People choose partners for committed and long term relationships based upon different characteristics than they do partners for casual or brief relationships. Entering into long-term relationships does not increase students' status, and therefore they may not feel the need or the desire to recount their sexual activities with these partners. Also, as Ned Shneebly mentioned, there is frequently crossover between students and their sexual partners. Hearing about who else a potential significant other has dated or slept with can feel less like building camaraderie and more like building competition, especially on such a small campus.

The way in which hookup stories are told differed by class year or if the storyteller was an under or upperclassmen. The following paragraph will show two different modes of ritual retelling. Seniors and Juniors shared less than freshmen and sophomores. Claire Foster, from Chapter 2, explained how they speak of their hookups to friends.

Topics usually include: the physical qualities of the person I hooked up with, the quality of the sex, the types of sex acts that we engaged in, where the sex occurred. We talk about hook-ups more vaguely when we're sober and in more detail when we're drunk. We often discuss whether the person was a "top" or a "bottom".

Discussion of the sex itself is almost an advertisement of their hookup's sexual prowess. High frequency in crossover means that there is a good chance at least one person listening to the story will become involved with that person over the course of their time at Oberlin. Being labeled "bad" at sex is also harmful to a person's reputation. We can compare this response with Hoobnoob commenting on their conversations with friends over the last year:

I tell them who I was with, and what they were like. I mention anything funny or odd that might have occurred. I usually speak positively about the person or complement them unless they did something to make me uncomfortable. I'll sometimes talk about whether or not I enjoyed the sexual experience, but only with really close friends. I don't typically discuss details unless it was a sexual milestone for me or someone has hurt me and I need to process that.

These two accounts demonstrate two different modes of retelling. For Claire Foster, who and what seem to be the central questions in the discussion. The focus on sex and if they are dominant/submissive and or a top/bottom is central to the discussion because of the overlap rate. As W, a queer senior says, Oberlin's hookup scene is "a Venn diagram in which half the people I

hook up with have also hooked up with each other.” By fourth year, students are not having as much overlap and so the focus is more directed towards personal experiences. Also, there is a much more personal quality to the discussion of Hoobnoob’s hookup than Claire Foster’s, even though they said that they were more open while drunk.

In addition to differences in conversation by year, students who were in friend groups that had similar levels of hookup and sexual activity shared more details than friend groups where one person engaged in hook ups and or vice versa. Students also reported that they were more open than their friends, generally, when talking about hookups, which may be a self-selection bias of who was willing to take an anonymous survey about their sex lives, among other things. Or, that they would feel more comfortable bringing up their hookups to friends than asking their friends to provide details. Celeste Holden, a straight senior, writes an account of how they they discuss hookups in their friend group:

I usually sit back and let them tell me what they want to tell me about it. A lot of my friends usually go into a decent amount of detail about who the person is, how they know them if they thought the hookup was "good", and if they want to do it again. Past hookups are often referenced when we talk about hookups in general or one of the people is brought up in conversation.

Students were more likely to report a willingness to overshare to their friends than to ask their friends for details that may help them identify the people involved or lead to a loss of that person’s reputation.

Queer students were more selective than straight students in who they talked to about their hookups. Topics they were comfortable disclosing to their friends, queer or straight, varied. For Em, from Chapter 1, they did not want to share private dynamics within their relationships.

They write that, “I’m pretty open about it. used to share a lot more, now it feels pretty redundant or uninteresting. things are much more exciting when they get started. I don’t have many secrets but the emotions are pretty private.” Emotions are not status tokens, and therefore, do not establish “clout”. And for J.H., also a queer senior, what they disclosed was less important than who they disclosed to. Going into a certain amount of “detail into the sexual stuff depends on circumstance. I definitely tell my housemates more than others though. Also don’t talk to all of my friends about this, just some. For people I wouldn’t give details to, I might just say ‘we hooked up’ or something like that.” This employs the protection/deflection method of vagueness described in Chapter 1.

Status and ritual retelling are two halves of the same coin. Casual hookups at Oberlin are a way in which students can solidify their relationships with friends and their reputations on campus. This is not to invalidate the real emotional connections and attachments that students may have or develop with each other, but Oberlin hookup culture is set up to support status-based hookups rather than “love”-matched casual relationships. This imbalance of power where one student gains their status by association with another, probably older, student contributes to the difficulty that students expressed in the previous chapter in feeling comfortable defining the relationship with their partners.

Many at Oberlin like to act like they live in a world that is beyond the hierarchies of high school, but in many ways that is not true. I can distinctly remember moments from my own time at Oberlin when my friends saw that an older student or a student with more “clout” than us was interested in one of us, and then we would try and convince ourselves that this person was more worthy of our attention than others. The idea that we were hooking up with these people to increase our own social standing on campus would not have crossed our minds. I thought that we

had built bonds with the upperclassmen we were involved with, and I only realized that was not the case, when commencement week of my second year rolled around and I was only invited to events at night.

But, this year, we rarely talk about hookups to each other, unless there is a safety concern or someone has reached a milestone with a new person. Maybe we have lost interest in each and every hookup as we matured, or maybe there was nothing to gain from these conversations, since hookups had become so much more personal.

In the next chapter, I will conclude my argument and make suggestions for future research, as well as for how my research can be applied practically here at Oberlin.

CONCLUSION “My Pod or Yours”

In July, students began to return to Oberlin—either finding sublets for the summer or extending their leases for the fall. There was a sense of freedom outside of their parents’ houses and still not yet under the college’s eye. The highly reduced number of students and the good weather around town led to a feeling of safety mingling with others outside of your house. There were fewer logistics to worry about and everyone was desperate to be with peers, both platonically and sexually. At least this is how Violet, a bisexual senior, described her summer.

Violet began hooking up with a fellow senior towards the end of the summer. They were both in the same pod and had known each other from around campus for a few years prior to when they matched on Tinder. Violet said that she would have been happy to keep things casual, but when her roommate arrived at their off-campus house for the start of the semester, both Violet and her hookup felt pressure to define things and decide on “my pod or yours”. They had only been unmasked with each other for about two weeks, but suddenly they were a couple. The pacing was too fast and the relationship did not have the foundation to support the amount of time they spent together and they were speeding through milestones because COVID forced them to make more joint decisions than any couple should at that point. “It would have been nice,” Violet wrote, “if we had been able to spend more time with other people. But, we were only podded with our roommates, and so we would sometimes forget we had other friends. Then when we broke up, everyone else had already settled into their pods and I didn’t have anyone but my roommate to hang out with until the end of the next testing cycle a month later.” COVID intensified all relationships, but, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, drawing a firm line between dating and hooking up became difficult when so much of people’s lives had to merge in order to even explore a casual relationship.

For Violet, this was a confusing situation because her sexual project was not to be in a relationship. Also, she was not spending as much with her friends and engaging in “ritual retelling”, and so the relationship felt more serious to her than it might have otherwise. I mention this story because I think it demonstrates the distortion of hookups during COVID-19. In many ways, COVID has pulled people apart, separating them physically from each other for months. But, in ways like this, COVID has also pushed people together in ways that are intense and often impractical.

In the last three chapters, I discussed how the hookup culture at Oberlin has been altered by COVID-19 and various factors that have contributed to these changes. In the first chapter, I discussed how the changes Oberlin has had to make to its academic year have changed the way in which students of different class years interact with each other. I addressed the additional logistical challenge of living with roommates, and how that affected unmasked socialization with people who were not housemates.

In the next chapter, I approached the concept of sexual projects and situationships. The misalignment of sexual projects and assumption that your hookup shares your same project is detrimental but normalized and results in long-term hookups where only one or none of the people involved are satisfied. I also explored how COVID has both enhanced the communication of sexual projects, leading to more successful and satisfying relationships, and caused people to avoid communication of these projects to hook up partners, depending on the social stigma associated with their project.

Lastly, in the third chapter, I focused on how Oberlin’s social world shapes who presented with opportunities to hook up and with whom. Hookups at small colleges, as demonstrated by previous literature, are motivated more by the potential to enhance personal connections than

they are about finding love or pleasure. The ability to give pleasure and a good story are valid forms of currency that convey you are high status. And, that the value of a hookup is not in the moment with the people in the room, but the next day during the process of “ritual retelling” with your own friend group.

I hope that I have written a thesis that centers the conversation around hookups as one of many ways in which students create senses of community during college and solidify their social ties and social standing rather than on sexual assault. Hooking up is complicated but I aimed to show that they are complicated because of preexisting social conditions and power dynamics like racism, sexism, and hierarchy created by time spent at Oberlin. I was unable to speak more about how queerness factors into the consciousness students have of these dynamics. Future researchers should explore the links between queerness and hookup cultures at schools without greek life.

I set out to write a thesis that would be able to peer into many of the ways in which Oberlin students in particular were affected by this pandemic. However, there were many ways in which the narrative I was able to tell is very narrow. I hope that future researchers will have a chance to investigate how each of the social categories I targeted in my survey was affected by COVID socially individually and with more depth. It would be most beneficial to do this research after life has returned to a sense of normalcy, in order to properly gauge the impact. More research in how students communicate their sexual projects to each other, when they feel comfortable doing so, and what bars them from disclosing these projects or a change in these projects to their sexual partners.

My most impactful finding was this element of sexual projects and the ways in which students either do or do not communicate them with each other. This concept ties into obtaining

consent. Before COVID, consent pertained primarily to the physical acts that occur as part of the hookup. Now, I think that the definition of what requires consent in a sexual situation has broadened, as health risks have also increased. Communicating if you are seeing other people or if you are intending to see other people is now a part of relationships and hooking up that is equally as high stakes as conversations around STI prevention and contraception. Also, as Oberlin is a campus that is receptive to polyamory, these sorts of conversations before entering a relationship are essential.

I hope that this research can be applied practically to the curriculum of initiatives like PRSM in helping students learn how to identify their own sexual projects and effectively communicate them to potential partners. This would create an environment where students feel more in control of their hookups and less at the mercy of their partner to tell them if they are in a relationship or not.

College is a time to develop relationships of all kinds, including that with yourself. I hope that the largest take away from this research is just how much this time of life is defined in relationship to others. And, stands as evidence of Oberlin's strong community.

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