

# 1.

## Hookup Culture

It's eleven o'clock Friday night on a college campus. Students are participating in various forms of recreation after a week full of classes and extracurricular activities. Some are chatting on the quad, taking advantage of the rare warmth of the late-autumn Midwest night. Others are returning from a basketball game. Many of the men are "pregaming" as they get ready to go out for the night. They are playing video games while drinking large quantities of cheap beer that they purchased with fake IDs and then hauled in from the student parking lot in a gym bag. Eventually, they'll change into their party uniform of khaki shorts or pants and a collared shirt. But there are games to play first. And drinking. Always drinking.

The women are also pregameing while getting ready together, taking shots they smuggled onto campus. Of course, hard alcohol has been banned from campus. But if your door is shut, if you're quiet enough, who will know? They're wearing whatever is the fashionable "going-out" outfit. It's a warm night so they

won't need to worry about being too cold as they walk around campus looking for parties.

After eleven thirty, the parties are really starting. Most of the festivities are happening in the male dorm rooms on campus. In very small rooms, the lights are turned off, the music is turned up, and sixty undergraduates gather in a space that is normally too small even for the two people who live there. In a corner are a relatively meager supply of cheap beer and a punch consisting mostly of cheap hard liquor. Few students will need more than this, having achieved optimal drunkenness while pregameing. Those students lucky enough to find an option other than the humid hellscape of dorm parties head to off-campus parties, where there is more space, more alcohol, and less risk of getting in trouble with college authorities.

As the night goes on, these young men and women reach peak drunkenness. Some are making out on the dance floor in a dark corner. Some have left the parties after texting their “friend with benefits” for an evening booty call. Two students have found another room to hook up in and the other partygoers can't believe it's *finally* happening. Many just leave, tired of the drinking, exhausted by the music, and head to a twenty-four-hour eatery to sober up before going to bed. Those who have gone off campus don't have to worry about university rules governing when members of the opposite sex can visit dorm rooms. Their parties extend even later into the night when it is easier to find private rooms for hooking up.

There will be collateral damage. Some men and women who hook up this night will quickly regret the decision in the light of day; they will have cheated on boyfriends and girlfriends either on campus or at home. Some will have had sex for the first time this evening in a drunken stupor, barely able to remember what happened. In the haziness of the night, there will have been sexual assaults—many of which will go unreported. A victim

will step forward and be forced to relive the awful night during various disciplinary hearings. And an email about the assault will go out to the college community in the coming weeks, resounding once more the refrain that sexual assault is an offense often perpetrated by friends and acquaintances.

The next morning (what the rest of us would call early afternoon), the dining halls are full of tales. Tables of men regale each other with details of their evening's conquests. Some brag about their skills as wingmen, about getting three or four of their friends laid. Such claims need not be true as long as they're proclaimed with vigor. Groups of women are also talking about their evening out. But the tone is different because women who spend the night in men's rooms are subject to the "walk of shame"—wearing their party clothes from the evening before in broad daylight on their way home. There is no equivalent of the walk of shame for men, since their hookup is a matter of pride. Women who hook up with many men get reputations for being easy. Men who hook up with lots of women are objects of envy for the citizens of bro-town.

Tonight, there will be more parties. Many of the previous evening's hookups will happen once again as fresh alcohol flows and the music begins to bump. Men and women will become new friends with benefits—a status that will be implicit until one of them has the courage to start a DTR ("defining the relationship") talk. All the while, students will be complaining to one another: Why is there no dating on campus? Why can't I find a guy or girl who wants to commit? Why isn't there romance? When these men and women leave college, moving to Chicago, New York, Portland, or Des Moines, they'll discover that the same endemic behaviors exist in each of these cities. Sure, the dating pool will be larger. But the cities are infected by the same hookup culture that so many of these students seek to leave behind when they graduate.

## The Sexual Market

The stark account above compiles various stories I've heard from undergraduates over the years at Boston College, Notre Dame, and Newman Centers or college campus ministries throughout the country. Obviously, this apocalyptic scene of alcohol-fueled partying is not the normative experience of every student. Many Catholic students avoid this scene altogether, finding alternative ways to spend Friday and Saturday nights. Some of my nonreligious students quickly find a boyfriend or a girlfriend, delighting in normal dating practices like making dinner together and then watching a movie. Some navigate the hookup culture without too many wounds, making out on a dance floor just once before learning from the regret. The idea that colleges are places where everyone is hooking up all the time is an exaggeration perpetuated by marketers who know that sex sells.

The problem with hookup culture isn't so much that everyone is participating in it. It's that it becomes the cultural liturgy by which young adults learn to think about both dating and mating. Recall what I said about a cultural liturgy in the introduction to this book. A cultural liturgy is a series of socially acceptable practices that form us into a way of life. It tells us a story about what we're supposed to do with our bodies. In order to understand what a hookup is, it's necessary for us to examine the practice of the hookup, where it comes from, and what kind of stories the hookup culture tells about dating, love, and ultimately marriage.

Donna Freitas characterizes a hookup as consisting of three dimensions: it includes some form of sexual intimacy, it is brief, and it is purely physical and thus lacking significant communication.<sup>1</sup> The absence of communication in the hookup is particularly troubling. As Freitas writes:

The brevity of a hookup also serves to show how casual a person is about his or her partner. Many students believe they are supposed to regard the hookup as casual—short, and useful, like an afternoon snack for warding off hunger or a workout for staying in shape. Extreme brevity gets sex off one’s “To Do” list, and for men, means faster gains in the numbers. Sleepovers and walks of shame are still practiced a fair amount, but the goal remains to avoid any morning interaction. A student leaves before the person wakes up, ideally, so the social contract of not caring about one’s partner can be more easily maintained.<sup>2</sup>

The hookup is characterized by a live-and-let-live attitude toward romance, dating, and sexuality in general. In private settings, students may bemoan the lack of seriousness in romance. But in public, they’re careful to avoid looking like they care too much. Sexuality and romance are to be treated lightly, as if both are not that big of a deal.

Sociologist Mark Regnerus has argued persuasively that over the last several decades there has been a transformation of both the dating market and the marriage market due to the cheapening of sex. For Regnerus, we can look at sexual activity as an economy of sorts. For the most part, he writes, men value sex more highly than women. This claim does not mean that women shun sex. It simply means that men are more likely to engage in sex if it is offered, even if such sex occurs outside a committed relationship. Summarizing a study in their work *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marriage*, Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker write:

Researchers oversaw a unique experiment in which attractive young male and female researchers separately approached other-sex strangers on a college campus, expressed their attraction to them, and then made one of three randomly selected requests: would you go out with me tonight, would

you come over to my apartment tonight, or would you go to bed with me tonight? Fully 75 percent of men—but not a single woman—agreed to the last of these, the invitation to casual sex.<sup>3</sup>

Among those currently in a heterosexual relationship, 52 percent of men claim that they would like more sex in their relationship, while only 29 percent of women make the same claim.<sup>4</sup> When *ashleymadison.com* (the website that connects married men and women to have affairs) was hacked, journalists discovered that 1,492 women had opened their mailboxes to read a received message compared to 20 million men.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, Regnerus argues, women have been the sexual gatekeepers for men. This argument makes sense. For women, the cost of sex has traditionally been quite high: the possibility of pregnancy. Among men, sex meant a moment of sexual delight with few repercussions if one used protection to avoid sexually transmitted diseases. For women, cheap sex might well have meant the responsibility of raising a child. For this reason, most women and their families ensured that significant commitment was secured from the man—namely, marriage and the responsibilities of fatherhood—before women would engage in sex. Dating itself was considered an innovation in the 1920s, one where women rather than their families were tasked with enforcing male commitment. As author Caitlin Flanagan comments, “it was the girls’ responsibility to set and enforce the standards of how much sexual activity should take place on each date.”<sup>6</sup> Much of the courtship ritual was intended for the woman to test the commitment of the man, assessing whether he could be a responsible father—someone capable of holding down a job, someone worth spending the rest of her life with.

This account of dating may sound old-fashioned, but it was precisely the “old-fashioned” nature of dating that made sex costly. For example, my father-in-law’s first date with my

mother-in-law was an icon of this old-fashioned courtship. Early in the morning on the day of the Notre Dame–USC football game in 1969, he trekked from his dorm, Lyon’s Hall, on the Notre Dame campus to Saint Mary’s College—a twenty-five minute walk—to pick up the woman who would be his wife for their first date. They went to a party in Lyon’s Hall and then headed out to watch the Irish tie Southern Cal 14–14. Following the game, they went to dinner, after which my father-in-law walked my mother-in-law back to her dorm. He then walked back that evening to walk her back and forth to Notre Dame for a concert. Consider how much walking—and thus talking—was required for my father-in-law to express his interest in my mother-in-law (he definitely got his steps in that day!). Think about how public this act of dating was. The courtship rituals surrounding dating, although perhaps archaic, elevated the cost of both romance and sex. A guy couldn’t just text a woman in the middle of the night, ask her to come over, and wait to see what happened.

What led to cheaper sex? The introduction of widely available hormonal contraception changed the dating market, making it far easier for men and women alike to have sex whenever they wanted. Regnerus writes:

Since pregnancy can be easily prevented now—a reality we take for granted today, but one that was unimaginable not so long ago—having sex and thinking about or committing to marry are two very different things today. Now we have a split mating market, one corner of which is for people primarily looking and hoping for sex with no strings attached (NSA) and the other corner of which is for people interested in making the strongest of commitments (marriage), with a rather large territory in between comprised of significant relationships of varying commitment and duration. Marriage is still widely considered to be expensive, by which I mean that it is . . . not entered into lightly, and is costly in terms of fidelity,

time, finances, and personal investment. Sex, meanwhile, has become comparatively cheap. Not that hard to get.<sup>7</sup>

The hookup culture has further lowered the cost of sex. The first sexual encounter between couples who do not hook up during their first meeting tends to occur within the first two to six weeks. In 2001–2002, the results of a longitudinal study related to the sexual health of young adults concluded. In these survey results, it was determined that among unmarried eighteen- to twenty-three-year-old men, 38.5 percent had had five or more sexual partners; 36.6 percent of women claimed the same number.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, this same survey determined that fewer than 6 percent of men and women would approach the altar as virgins.<sup>9</sup> We might well surmise that the first numbers noted here have continued to increase.

Even those who do not participate in the hookup culture are still affected by the cheapening of sex in the dating market. They grow up watching television and films in which it is normative for young, attractive men and women to engage in sex soon after meeting. They hear about friends who have participated in drunken hookups and who have parlayed such hookups into long-term relationships. And when they go out on a date, it is likely that the person on the other side of the table expects easy access to sex early in the relationship. A friend of mine recently heard on a date: “We don’t have to have sex on the third date.”

The decline of the old courtship rituals means that even if you’re not interested in hooking up, you’re still trying to date men and women who do not know how to communicate interest. Hooking up in the end isn’t really just about sensual desire. Rather, it is destructive because it leads to the weakening of communication and to the decline of intimacy whereby we learn to know and to love the other person face-to-face.

## Tinder, Cheap Sex, and the End of Communication

The hookup is thus a symptom of a larger problem—the exchange of authentic communion for immediate sexual intimacy. The cheapening of sex has been facilitated by the rising popularity of online dating and apps like Tinder. In a 2015 *Vanity Fair* article, Nancy Jo Sales describes a Manhattan bar in the rough-and-tumble age of electronically facilitated cheap sex:

It's a balmy night in Manhattan's financial district, and at a sports bar called Stout, everyone is Tindering. The tables are filled with young women and men who've been chasing money and deals on Wall Street all day, and now they're out looking for hookups. Everyone is drinking, peering into their screens and swiping on the faces of strangers they may have sex with later that evening.<sup>10</sup>

Tinder deforms romance into a quick glance at another person's body on a screen. If the user of the app finds the person attractive, they swipe right. If they find them unattractive, left. When two people both swipe right on each other, it's a match. There will be few romantic comedies about the short-term relationships that are initiated on Tinder.

Tinder is the ideal technological tool for facilitating hookups. There is no romance before meeting up, no exchange of messages containing at least the pretense of flirtation. The swipe right sends out a wordless digital signal meaning “You're hot.” Sometimes, as Sales describes in her article, there is a message sent: “Wanna F\*&\$?”

By now many, if not most, of us have either heard of or experienced success in the world of online dating. Nonetheless, we should examine more closely the kinds of habits that are formed through such online forums. When I was dating in

college, there was a limited number of human beings I could actually meet. I was restricted to very specific geographic places like Notre Dame, Indiana, or Knoxville, Tennessee. Online dating and apps like Tinder end that limitation. Now, there is a seemingly infinite number of possible partners only a swipe or click away. In some sense, this is a good. It means that people can meet one another who otherwise wouldn't—like a colleague's son and his wife who met on Catholic Match. But the near-endless supply of potential mates entices men and women struggling in their relationships to wonder if the grass is greener elsewhere. When a relationship ends, there is always someone else to click or swipe on.

But of course, those swiping or clicking may not be pursuing a long-term relationship at all. They may be hoping for no-strings-attached sex. As Regnerus comments on sexual economics in the age of Tinder: “The most relevant thing about online dating is not its ability to match preferences before you meet but rather that it enables people to sort through sexual and romantic ‘options’ more efficiently.”<sup>11</sup> Online dating and Tinder make it easier to objectify a partner, turning them into an avatar linked to our own desires. For many, this desire will be fulfilled in a cheap sexual encounter, a hookup with no strings attached. The men that Sales highlights in her article in *Vanity Fair* appreciate that apps like Tinder enable them to proposition not one or two women per night but fifteen or twenty. Notice that it's not the particular person who matters in the sexual encounter. It's simply her availability as a sexual partner.

The tendency toward no-strings-attached sex is not the only problem with online dating. Remember that the hookup is marked fundamentally by the refusal to communicate; it requires ambiguity as well as a refusal to recognize the other person as anything more than a source of physical pleasure. Before the advent of dating apps, the text message served as an efficient

invitation for the hookup because it could say just enough without saying too much. The late-night booty call, no longer requiring voice-to-voice contact, could be initiated through as few as three words: “Hey! You awake?”

But the text message required at least some knowledge of the other person. It presumed enough of a relationship that one had the other person’s phone number on hand. At some point in time, the interested party had to get to know the other person well enough to ask, “Could I have your number?” Among those Tindering, this last trace of intimacy is eliminated. All that remains is the expression of desire for the other, a furtive glance across a bar now accomplished through packets of data communicated through cell tower or wireless network to receiver. There is no face-to-face contact—only the thrill of being the object of an unknown person’s desire. Whether or not the liaison works out, there are more swipes to be accomplished in the future.

We have to admit the possibility that this severing of authentic communication in dating will have long-term effects on some young adults who do not gaze upon the face of a potential beloved but instead see only an avatar, an image constructed by the Tinder user. My female friends who have used Catholic Match have suffered from a different, though similarly objectifying, approach to dating, one in which men are not looking for an encounter with a woman but seeking to examine her doctrinal orthodoxy before they’ve asked where she grew up. Love doesn’t typically begin through either an anonymous sexual encounter or the Inquisition.

In neither case do we romance the other person. We don’t meet them first for coffee, discovering a beauty that is communicated through their living presence. Dating becomes marketing a brand rather than communicating with another human being. And this confusion wreaks havoc on human relationships. After all, no matter how much we love our MacBook, we don’t