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I'd Rather Be a Slut: An Analysis of Stigmatized Virginity in Contemporary Sexual Culture

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I'd Rather Be a Slut:

An Analysis of Stigmatized Virginity in Contemporary Sexual Culture

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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“Tomorrow, sex will be good again.”

Michel Foucault (1976)

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INTRODUCTION

“Virginity is a social construct that we made up to make women feel bad.”

Audrey jokes that she is a “super virgin” because she is a freshman in college and has only just recently had her first kiss. She is heterosexual, white, and amicably known by her friends as the “Virgin Mary” because of her virgin status and religious upbringing. Her friends have also nicknamed her “Mom” because of her strong sense of responsibility and maternal care for her friends. However, being “Mom” in her friend group also signifies a lack of sexual activity (despite “Mother” inherently implying non-virginity). Although Audrey jokes fondly about her various nicknames, she is bothered by the connotation that “Mom” has no interest in sex and the underlying implication that “no one wants to date Mom.”

Due to Audrey’s religious upbringing in a conservative suburban community, she was taught to think of virginity loss as something special and worth saving. This aligns with traditional conceptualizations of premarital virginity loss as something shameful and discreditable. Now that Audrey attends Bito College¹, a drastically different environment from her hometown, she has started to experience a certain degree of shame about being a virgin at eighteen years old. When I asked her how she felt about this, she responded:

To go completely social warrior, virginity is a social construct that we made up to make women feel bad, and that’s like the bottom line of it. So in the grand scheme of things, it means absolutely nothing, but in social situations.. it has weight.

Audrey was one of the thirty women at Bito College whom I spoke to about virginity loss. Her sense of shame about being a virgin in college was echoed by many other women. In

¹ In order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, the names of all participants and their college are pseudonyms.

fact, all of the women in my study acknowledged the stigmatization of virginity within their own lives and/or within the lives of other women. This unanimous acknowledgment reveals how virginity has evolved into a highly stigmatized identity for young women. Based on my research, I claim that this is representative of a radical shift in contemporary sexual culture.

As Audrey stated, virginity can be understood as, “a social construct that we made up to make women feel bad.” However, the ways in which virginity stigmatizes and shames women have drastically changed in conjunction with a changing sexual culture. Women are no longer expected to be less sexually active and experienced than men; being called a “slut” is no longer the primary label young women seek to avoid. My participant Rachel (bisexual, white, virgin)² explicitly stated: “I’d rather be judged for [being a slut] than being a virgin.” The fact that Rachel would rather be a “slut” than a virgin demonstrates this shift in sexual culture, in which the implications of being a virgin are worse than being a “slut.”

While stigmatized virginity has been acknowledged and briefly discussed in existing research (Orenstein 2016), my research offers new empirical data, comprehensive sociological analyses, and original theoretical insight regarding this phenomenon. I conducted in-depth interviews with 30 young women³ who are currently attending Bito College, i.e. a small, progressive, elite⁴ liberal arts school. My participants were all self-identifying cisgender women⁵, between the ages of 18-22, and were fairly diverse in terms of race, sexual orientation, religion, and class background. My study was particularly focused on young women’s experiences and

² These identity markers were self-identified by my participants.

³ See Appendix A for the demographic breakdown of my participants.

⁴ Bito College’s tuition costs more than \$50,000 and the total cost of one year is over \$65,000.

⁵ Due to time and resource constraints on my study, I decided to limit my population to only cisgender women (cisgender refers to individuals who identify with the gender assigned to them at birth). I will further discuss this decision in the “Methodology” section of this chapter.

attitudes regarding stigmatized virginity. The following questions constituted the framework for my study: How do young women give meaning to virginity in the contemporary sexual landscape? How do these meanings affect subsequent sexual experiences and outlooks? Is there stigma for both virgins and non-virgins? What does this stigma look like and how does it manifest? Which groups of women experience stigma and which do not? What are the consequences of stigma on future sexual behavior? How do women combat or perpetuate stigma around virginity or non-virginity? My study examines these questions and analyzes how young women experience and interpret virginity within a predominantly liberal, elite college environment.

Based on my research, I found that stigmatized virginity is a lens through which one can examine the sexual culture that young women are navigating today. I coined the term “masculinized intimacy” to describe the cultural backdrop to the production and reinforcement of stigmatized virginity. I developed this concept in order to reveal how women are adopting masculine attitudes and behaviors in their sexual lives. This is prominently exemplified by the prevalence of hookup culture on college campuses. Masculinized intimacy also reflects women’s great desire for autonomy and independence, along with the stigmatization of dependency. I argue that contemporary sexual culture reflects how society at large strongly endorses masculinity and fervently devalues femininity. One is valued for performing masculinity, while one is discredited for performing femininity. Although it is more socially acceptable for women to embrace masculine behaviors and attitudes, both men and women alike are not encouraged to endorse femininity. I claim that this does not signify greater gender equality, but rather it represents an even greater gender disparity, as there is an increased devaluation of femininity.

Furthermore, I also found that women themselves are not satisfied, nor fulfilled, by the sexual norms and expectations of sexual culture. This was made evident by the concept of “emotional virginity,” a term introduced by my participants themselves. Emotional virginity loss can be defined as the first time one has an emotional, meaningful, intimate sexual experience. It is the inverse of stigmatized virginity, in that it embodies values associated with feminized intimacy, i.e. emotions, trust, and vulnerability. I claim that emotional virginity serves as a form of resistance within the current culture of masculinized intimacy. Thus, while virginity can be highly oppressive and damaging for many women, there are also opportunities for resistance and reconceptualization within sexual culture.

In order to contextualize my findings, I frame my study within existing sociological research on virginity, women’s sexuality, stigma, and contemporary sexual culture. In this chapter, I discuss the ambiguous nature of defining and conceptualizing virginity. I also explore the literature on contemporary sexual culture in order to highlight how my research connects to current theories and how it offers new insight. I then highlight key sociological theories on stigma and deviance, as stigma is at the core of my analysis. Lastly, I describe my methodological choice to conduct in-depth interviews with my participants. Ultimately, this chapter serves to situate the next three chapters, which contain my empirical and theoretical findings.

DEFINING VIRGINITY

Pop the Cherry

“It can mean whatever it needs to mean.”

The definition of virginity is highly contextual and rooted in various social factors, e.g. culture, sexual orientation, gender, religion, race, class, upbringing, and age. The common thread

across diverse definitions is that “virginity is invariably defined in terms of what it is not... virginity *is* because it ends” (Blank 2007:96-97). Thus, virginity is a perplexing concept to grasp because it is essentially defined and understood by its absence. In other words, when we speak of virginity, we are speaking of virginity *loss*. My participant Emily (heterosexual, white, non-virgin) discussed this idea:

Virginity as a concept is this little packaged thing that’s so neat and tidy, and some guy gets it.. like a physical thing that gets given away, ‘cause that’s how it was always talked about... guys saying “I took her virginity.” It’s even in the language, “I took her virginity” or “I gave him my virginity.”

According to previous studies and surveys, the definition of virginity loss can include: penile-vaginal intercourse, penile-anal intercourse, oral sex, presence of orgasm, genital contact, any sexual contact, or any degree of self-defined sexual intimacy (Averett, Moore, and Price 2014; Carpenter 2001; Carpenter 2005; Trotter and Alderson 2007). Almost all of the women in my study reported having changed their definition and interpretations of virginity over the years. For example, while Audrey grew up thinking that virginity loss was rigidly defined by penile-vaginal intercourse, she now has a more fluid conception. She stated:

I almost think that a good running definition is whatever someone says. If they say they’re a virgin, groovy have fun. If they say they’re not a virgin, cool. But like, it’s so over complicated that I’m gonna have to take people on their word from now on.

Most of my participants struggled to give me a concrete definition for virginity loss, since how they defined their *own* virginity loss usually differed from how they defined it for others. I found that it was common for my participants to hold a rigid heteronormative definition for themselves, while giving a more fluid, subjective definition in regards to other people. This was

exemplified by Olivia (heterosexual, white, non-virgin), who defined her own virginity loss as the first time she had penile-vaginal intercourse. However, she stated:

For anyone, it can mean whatever it needs to mean to them. I think it should be your first experience of whatever you want to consider sex. I think it should be something you can choose. If there's gonna be so much value put into virginity, for a lot of people it should be more up to them what they want to call their virginity.

When defining virginity, Lydia (heterosexual, white, non-virgin) stated: "I had always heard pop the cherry, you know... It's such a physical marker... like you were a virgin until the cherry is popped. It's such a black and white thing." This common definition of virginity loss as "pop the cherry" signifies the breaking of the hymen⁶ via penile-vaginal intercourse. This notion of a broken hymen (or "popped cherry") as a definitive marker for virginity loss is flawed due to the following facts: many people⁷ tear their hymens in ways other than penetration; many people have hymens that change shape all by themselves; and many people have resilient hymens that do not tear at all, despite many years of sexual intercourse. There is even evidence of a woman's hymen growing back after being torn (Blank 2007; *Our Bodies Our Selves* 2008). Over time, the hymen emerged as the medicalized definition of female virginity, although there is still very little scientific knowledge behind its function and physiology⁸. The hymen does not serve a purpose for any other animal species, but it holds immense cultural significance for humans. It is argued that "we became aware of hymens because we are aware of something we call virginity" (Blank 2007:24).

⁶ The hymen is a thin membrane that surrounds the vaginal opening.

⁷ I do not use the word "woman" here because having a hymen is not exclusive to people who identify as women. Men, transgender, and intersex individuals may also have hymens.

⁸ The hymen was not even confirmed to exist until 1544 when anatomist Andreas Vesalius went searching for a reason why some women bleed during intercourse. He dissected the bodies of two women, a nun and a hunchback, whom he assumed were virgins, and discovered the hymen present in both of them. Thus, it was determined that the hymen was physical proof of a woman's virginity (Adios Barbie 2012; Blank 2007).

The flexibility and fluidity within defining virginity in certain societies may signal progressive notions of sex, but it is important to also underline the power and consequences of definitions. Virginity scholar Hanne Blank claims that defining virginity “is an exercise in controlling how people behave, feel, and think, and in some cases, whether they live or die” (2007:9). All around the world, women endure great punishment for breaking social rules and norms regarding their virginity. This is exemplified by the countless forms of physically uncomfortable and painful virginity tests that claim to reveal if a woman is a virgin or not⁹. One of the most prevalent tests is checking the bedsheets for blood (from the “popped cherry”) after a woman’s wedding night with her husband. Failure to pass the virginity test can result in consequences ranging from social ostracization, to physical punishment, to even death (Behrens 2014; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2004). Contrary to notions of virginity testing being outdated and only relevant to certain countries, it is a common practice across the globe and diverse cultures to this day. While virginity is a socially constructed concept, it is real in its consequences. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that although there are many ways of defining and understanding virginity, many women never get the choice to define it for themselves; the definition is socially and culturally imposed upon them.

Scholars and researchers make the claim that virginity has historically served, and continues to serve, as a pertinent form of social control over women (Blank 2007; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2004; Valenti 2009). Virginity is thought to be intrinsically related to women due to the fact that “virginity has never mattered to the way men are valued, or whether

⁹ Some of these tests include: judging the sound and appearance of a woman’s urine, measuring the width of her neck with a string, putting a pencil between her breasts, or pressing a fingertip of earwax to her labia (Blank 2007).

they were considered fit to marry or, indeed, to be permitted to survive” (Blank 2007:10)¹⁰. As Jess (queer, white, non-virgin) stated: “I think about virginity in terms of women, more than in terms of men.” Hence, while it is debatable as to whether virginity greatly affects the way men are valued in society, it is undeniable that virginity has historically impacted women’s value, status, and even their survival.

A Gift, an Act of Worship, a Rite of Passage, and a Stigma

“I’m giving you this gift / I don’t wanna go to Hell / It’s part of every teenager’s life / I just needed to fucking lose it.”

The ambiguity of defining virginity itself is further complicated when discussing its significance and deeper implications. Sociologist Laura Carpenter (2005) offered the first comprehensive study on contemporary American understandings, definitions, and experiences of women’s virginity in light of a changing sociocultural landscape. Based on extensive interviews with diverse men and women, Carpenter created four metaphors that serve as conceptual frameworks for understanding virginity: a gift, an act of worship, a rite of passage, and a stigma. These same metaphors were consistently present throughout my research.

The “gift” metaphor frames virginity loss as a priceless act of love and devotion, signifying that you are giving a part of yourself to someone else¹¹. Emily was one the women in my study who described her virginity loss experience through the gift metaphor:

If I were able to say, “I’ve never had sex with anyone, I’ve waited for someone worth it, and I think you’re worth it,” suddenly it feels like you’re giving them this gift that they can understand. I thought it would be a way to deepen a relationship, solidify feelings, and make something serious and important.

¹⁰ The word “virgin” even comes from the Latin word *virgo*, which means “girl” or “never-married woman” (Blank 2007).

¹¹ In Chapter 4, I will discuss how the gift metaphor connects to the concept of “emotional virginity.”

Choosing the right partner is essential for those who conceptualize virginity as a gift. One's self-worth and value can be devastatingly impacted if the gift of virginity is not appropriately received by one's partner. This was unfortunately true in Emily's case. She recounted:

I really had feelings for the guy I had sex with [for the first time] and he manipulated me. I thought that in having sex with him, he might start caring about me... I had this idea that I'm giving you this gift, you're gonna give me something back, and that didn't happen...

The gift metaphor is also strongly associated with heteronormative gender roles and Christian morality. Most of the people who conceptualized virginity as a gift in Carpenter's study were conservative, heterosexual women with traditional understandings of femininity and masculinity. While Carpenter focused primarily on Christian individuals, I found that the gift metaphor is also relevant to other religions, including Islam and Judaism.

On the other hand, the metaphor of virginity as "an act of worship" is especially prevalent amongst conservative Christians. Although none of the women I interviewed identified as religiously conservative, many came from religious backgrounds. One of whom was Lydia, who was raised Christian. She described her sex education as: "Instead of sex-ed, we had "Jesus-ed." She recounted how her faith complicated her desire to have sex:

I wanted to have sex, I remember being intimate with my first boyfriend and thinking, wow my body wants to have sex. But I'd be stopped by this idea, oh my gosh I have to wait until I am married, I don't wanna go to Hell.

This framework often comes with a great sense of shame and betrayal in regards to losing one's virginity before marriage. Lydia was under the impression that she would go to Hell if she had sex before marriage. This common sentiment is often due to the belief that premarital sex

ruins one's credibility as a devoted Christian. Thus, the act of worship metaphor frames virginity as a way to honor God.

On the other hand, the "rite of passage" metaphor does not frame virginity as a source of pride or shame, but rather as an inevitable, normal step in one's life course. Through this framework, virginity loss is just the initial discovery in a longer process of sexual exploration and learning. A rite of passage can be defined as the "social and cultural acknowledgment of changes that are either in the process of taking place or which have already happened" (Blank 2007:101). Victoria (heterosexual, Hispanic, non-virgin) described this as:

I think as more close friends told me their stories of how they lost their virginites, I think it became more of a realistic thing that could happen. It's something that everyone goes through and it's part of every teenager's life... It's kinda like a rite of passage as a woman to have sex for the first time and see how it feels.

Victoria's statement demonstrates how people convert physical moments into social facts, which entails describing our understandings and feelings about an experience beyond literal, objective reality (Blank 2007). In other words, the metaphor of virginity loss as a rite of passage is constituted more so by the social acknowledgment of first-time sex, rather than the first-time sex itself. Prominent examples of this social acknowledgment include: "the sex talk"¹² with one's parents or guardians, virginity loss stories shared among peers, and media portrayals of virginity loss. Shannon ("not 100% heterosexual," Chinese American, non-virgin) stated: "Virginity in society is traditionally seen as a coming of age thing and it's treated as a really really big deal in movies and TV shows." Hence, the rite of passage metaphor is founded on the social and cultural context of virginity loss.

¹² "The sex talk" is the initial conversation about sex one has with their parents. Not every individual has this talk, nor is it a universal phenomenon.

Lastly, there is the metaphor of stigma, which frames virginity as shameful, embarrassing, and abnormal. The stigma metaphor in regards to women has only recently gained attention as an increasingly prevalent phenomenon, since historically it has been predominantly associated with men. My research centers around the stigma metaphor and builds on Carpenter's research, offering new evidence and interpretations of stigmatized virginity. Unlike the gift metaphor, which emphasizes emotional connection and the value of relationship in regards to virginity loss, the stigma metaphor frames virginity loss as an end in itself. Many of my participants framed virginity as a great burden that one has to "get out of the way" or "just get it over with." Britney (queer, white, non-virgin) described this feeling as: "Losing my virginity felt like this ticking clock, time-bomb thing, where I just needed to *fucking* lose it." Based on my research, I found that virginity as a stigma extends beyond a metaphor, as it has real social consequences and significant sociological implications. In Chapter 2, I discuss the ways in which stigmatized virginity manifests and how women interpret it in their own lives, as well as in sexual culture. While the origins of stigmatized virginity are difficult to trace, they can be attributed to historical shifts in sexual culture, which I will now turn to.

WOMEN AND CONTEMPORARY SEXUAL CULTURE

The Sexual Revolution

"Independence, I do whatever I want."

The sexual culture and sexual norms of a given society constitute the backdrop to how women understand and perceive virginity. Among many radical shifts in the history of America's sexual culture, the sexual revolution in the 1960s and 70s was a particularly consequential

turning point¹³. The increased cultural acceptance of premarital sex during this time was a remarkable shift in social attitudes and perceptions in regards to women's sexuality. It signified greater sexual independence and greater sexual equality alongside men, for whom premarital sex was always socially acceptable and even encouraged (Bogle 2008; Carpenter 2005).¹⁴

Hanne Blank claims that "women's newfound ability to be known as independently sexual is a large part of what has gone into making virginity loss a modern rite of passage all its own" (2007:102). The social acknowledgment of virginity loss as a significant milestone on a woman's sexual journey varies drastically from historical conceptions of virginity loss as being tied to marriage and devotion to a man. Many of my participants discussed feeling "more mature" and "more like an adult" after losing their virginity. This was illustrated by how Maria (queer, Latina, non-virgin) described her virginity loss experience: "It was like an adult thing, like I'm having sex... independence, I do whatever I want. Even if my parents say I can't have sex in their home, I'm having sex in their home." For Maria, her virginity loss was highly connected to her sense of autonomy, in that she was no longer being governed by her parents' rules and restrictions. She felt free to make her own sexual choices, thus she viewed herself as more of an adult. Thus, my research suggests that the sexual revolution contributed to reshaping individuals' understandings of virginity, particularly in regards to independence and agency.

However, sociologist Leslie Bell's (2013) research on 20-something women came to the conclusion that women are not satisfied with the current sexual culture that proclaims to offer more sexual freedom. Instead of feeling more liberated or empowered, women feel more

¹³ During this time period, numerous significant initiatives and cultural shifts occurred: abortion became legal as a result of *Roe v. Wade*, women gained more economic and educational equality, and premarital sex became more acceptable for women to partake in (Bell 2013).

¹⁴ The increased acceptance of premarital sex from the sexual revolution is also thought to have had a major influence on college hookup culture.

frustrated, stigmatized, and confused in regards to sexual norms and their sexual identities. The women in my study reported feeling a lot of pressure and strain to negotiate their desires within their sexual culture, particularly in regards to virginity. This was exemplified by Britney, who had a strong desire to lose her virginity with someone she loved and was in a relationship with. However, because she felt extremely burdened by her stigmatized virginity, she decided to lose her virginity to random guy she did not know or care about. Thus, although the 21st century claims to offer increased sexual freedom and choice for young women, there are myriad cultural and individual constraints that complicate this notion of liberation (Bell 2013; Rose 1999).

The Virgin/Whore Dichotomy

“There’s literally no word for a healthy sexual female.”

My research is situated in the context of existing research on virginity, which primarily focuses on how women are stigmatized and punished for premarital virginity loss. Yet, my research shows that for women in their late teens and early 20s, *being* a virgin is highly stigmatized. Feminist theorist Jessica Valenti (2009) gives an in-depth analysis of virginity in contemporary American society through her concept of the “Purity Myth.” She describes how the connection between virginity and purity has been historically constructed by social, cultural, religious, and political forces that work to reinforce traditional gender norms, which frame women only in relation to men. This is starkly exemplified by the phenomenon of “Purity Balls,” which are grandiose ceremonies for young girls to pledge their virginities to their fathers until marriage (Valenti 2009). Purity Balls receive significant federal funding¹⁵ and are primarily endorsed by white, upper-middle-class, Christian families. This highlights how purity is a deeply

¹⁵ In 2007, Purity Balls were receiving 206 million dollars of federal funding (Zablitz 2007).

racialized and classed concept. Contrary to the idea of keeping little girls “pure,” Purity Balls fetishize (white) girls’ sexuality by construing their virginity as something tangible, highly valuable, and precious. Virginity becomes the defining quality of a woman. It sends the message that a woman without her virginity is valueless; it gives men the power to define a woman’s worth. Valenti argues that, from a very young age, girls’ autonomy and sexual agency are stripped away due to the imposition of heteronormative, patriarchal norms underlying the glorification of moral purity and religious integrity.

While the Purity Myth is still prevalent, especially among religious and/or conservative families, my research focuses on the stigmatization of *being* a virgin. My findings suggest that stigmatized virginity has become a widespread phenomenon in contemporary sexual culture. The coexistence of the Purity Myth and stigmatized virginity reveals a societal paradox in which women are condemned for being too sexual *and* for not being sexual enough. Sociologists and feminist theorists call this double-bind of stigma the “virgin/whore dichotomy” (Durham 2008; Orenstein 2011; Tolman 2005; Valenti 2009). In other words, if a woman does not have sex, she is called a prude; if a woman does have sex, she is called a slut.¹⁶

The virgin/whore dichotomy requires constant navigation and vigilance, since there is a multitude of pitfalls yielding to stigmatization. It is difficult to distinguish the fine line of permissible female sexuality between these two stigmatized identities. Anna (pansexual, white, non-virgin) discussed this idea when describing the sexual culture of her high school: “It was like you couldn’t be cool if you hadn’t done anything [sexual], but then if you do things, then people will say things.” This highlights the immediate social rejection for “girls who step over

¹⁶ The virgin/whore dichotomy is equivalent to the popular saying “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

the ever-shifting invisible line between virgin and whore” (Orenstein 2011:123). Additionally, the absence of language for healthy female sexuality demonstrates the ubiquity of patriarchal sexual norms. This was brought up by Rachel, who expressed: “Both [virgin and slut] are just not true to actual sexuality. They just demonize any sort of female sexuality. There’s literally no word for a healthy sexual female.” This is also discussed in Peggy Orenstein’s book, *Girls & Sex* (2016), in which she claims: “Girls who abstain from sex, once thought of as the ‘good girls,’ are shamed as well, labeled ‘virgins’ (which is not a good thing) or ‘prudes’” (2016:3).

Additionally, developmental psychologist Deborah Tolman claims that the virgin/whore dichotomy enforces the “societal denial of female adolescent sexual desire” (2005:12). Women are not permitted to experience sexual subjectivity¹⁷ within sexual culture. In other words, young women “struggle with the expectation to look sexy but not feel sexual, to provoke desire in others without experiencing it themselves” (Orenstein 2011:123). Beginning in childhood, young girls are exposed to the omnipresence of media images and popular culture that primarily portray women as sexual objects. Additionally, many little girls grow up playing with hypersexualized toys, such as Bratz dolls¹⁸, whose sexuality is emphasized more so than any other quality (Durham 2008; Orenstein 2011). Thus, there are significant social and cultural messages transmitted to women, starting in childhood, that tell them to be passive, sexual objects without any direct ownership or acknowledgment of their subjective sexual desires. Women grow up learning that their worth is contingent on their willingness, or their refusal, to be sexual.

¹⁷ Tolman defines sexual subjectivity as: “a person’s experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being” (2005:6)

¹⁸ Bratz Dolls are American fashion dolls with very accentuated features and promiscuous clothing.

However, while earlier generations of women might have protested against sexual objectification, some women today endorse it as a personal choice, “as an expression rather than an imposition of sexuality” (Orenstein 2016:14)¹⁹. Through this lens, sexiness is associated with liberation and empowerment, rather than with objectification and dehumanization. One of my participants, Imani (heterosexual, African American, non-virgin), expressed this idea. She stated:

I personally don't think objectification is a bad thing, but it's all in how the woman views it, so if the woman likes to be objectified, or likes to feel like a sexual object, if that turns her on, if that's what she likes to do, then she has every right to do that... I don't necessarily think it's wrong to be like, I kind of like the feeling of someone viewing me like that.

Thus, some would claim that self-objectification and sexualization can be forms of personal choice and empowerment, while others would claim that they are tools of the patriarchy. Orenstein (2016) argues that this conceptualization of objectification as empowerment must be contextualized within a sexual culture that determines “hotness” to be the primary indicator of a woman's worth and value. Throughout my study, I discuss this idea of women's empowerment in how it relates to virginity and modern intimacy. I do not intend to delegitimize my participants' feelings of empowerment, but rather I aim to contextualize them and provide a more nuanced analysis of how women respond to the demands of sexual culture. My research suggests that notions of empowerment are based on limited options and the lack of genuine freedom to make sexual decisions. Women who feel empowered by casual sex, or by getting their virginity out of the way, also live in a society that demonizes emotional care and vulnerability. However, women also live in the context of rape culture, where a sense of

¹⁹ Pop star Miley Cyrus embodies this idea of agency and empowerment with her drastic transformation from being good-girl, virgin Hannah Montana to being renowned for her viral twerking performances. While many viewed her rebellious transition as highly upsetting and inappropriate, others viewed it as her way of simply expressing her sexuality and coming of age.

invulnerability can be necessary for self-protection and even survival. Thus, women's empowerment must be situated within a patriarchal society that greatly restricts and hinders women's sexual agency and their subjective sexual desires.

The College Experience

"You hook up, go to parties, get really drunk, sleep with a cute guy."

In her extensive study on hookup culture, sociologist Katherine Bogle (2008) defines hookup culture as the dominant "script" on American college campuses. This signifies that hookup culture dictates the sexual norms students abide by, regardless of whether they actively participate in it or not. Skye (heterosexual, Chinese American, non-virgin) described this as: "I just think here in this social climate at [Bito College], monogamy is seen as overrated." The general definition of a hookup is "a non-romantic encounter with a friend or acquaintance that involves an unspecified degree of sexual interaction" (Wade and Heldman 2012:129). There is no expectation of going on a first date or getting to know one's partner before becoming sexually involved. Kylie (heterosexual, biracial, virgin) described hooking up as: "It's kind of like erasing these old-fashioned views of, oh you need to go through certain stages to have a sexual experience with someone."

A hookup can be defined by any and all kinds of sexual behavior across a wide spectrum of activities, e.g. making out, manual sex, oral sex, vaginal sex, anal sex, etc. The definition is vague and up to various interpretations based on subjective experience. According to sociologist Danielle Currier (2013), the ambiguous nature of defining a hookup serves a specific social purpose. She claims that it allows men and women to protect their gendered social identities; men as masculine and women as feminine. In this case, having a lot of sex is characterized as

masculine, while abstaining from sex is characterized as feminine. In fact, heterosexual men tend to overreport their sexual activities, while heterosexual women tend underreport (Currier 2013). Hence, hookup culture reflects and reinforces gendered sexual behavior. On the other hand, my research suggests that hookup culture is also a way in which men and women alike can gain social status. This idea that sexual experiences translate to increased social status is encompassed by the concept of “sexual capital,” which I discuss in Chapter 2. Rather than reifying gender roles, I claim that hookup culture serves to legitimize men and women as sexual beings.

According to research by hookup experts Lisa Wade and Caroline Heldman (2012), college students who choose to participate in hookup culture are looking for at least one of three things: meaningfulness, empowerment, and/or pleasure. Most of the women in their study reported that they were not getting any of these three things, thus hooking up was not a very rewarding experience for them. Women reported less orgasms and less overall satisfaction than men. I also found this to be true, as very few of the women in my study cited pleasure as a key part of their sexual experiences. This illustrates how the sexual playing field is unequal; men and women do not reap the same benefits, nor experience the same challenges.

Additionally, sociologists Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) present the theory that hookup culture is connected to socioeconomic status. They describe what is called the “self-development imperative” as characteristic of the four-year university experience in America. This is the idea that for socioeconomically privileged women, individual achievement and personal growth take precedence over relationship-building and marriage. In other words: “During college, relational commitments were supposed to take a backseat to self-development” (Hamilton and Armstrong

2009:604). Socioeconomically privileged college women are more focused on their careers, self-identity, and prospect for economic growth than on finding a long-term partner.

Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) present the idea that sex is connected to self-discovery; the idea of discovering oneself in college signifies crafting a new identity based on individuality rather than on relationship-building. This connotes ideas of adulthood and maturity. Fatima (heterosexual, South Asian, virgin) described this as:

It's an experience, it's me being young, it's me living and exploring... it's part of that college experience, you want to have *that* college experience, where you hook up, go to parties, get really drunk, sleep with a cute guy.

Hooking up presents itself as the “sexual solution for the demands of college” (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009:604) because it has a no-strings-attached philosophy that does not hinder women’s personal, academic, or economic pursuits. The desire for independence conflicts with traditional gender norms that direct women to pursue relationships and marriage over a career and self-development. Hookup culture permits privileged women in four-year universities to “play with adult sexualities and interact for purely sexual purposes” (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009:606). Being a sexually and financially independent woman is prioritized over a committed, long-term relationship.

Previous research also suggests that hookup culture comes from Greek life on college campuses (Armstrong et al. 2014; Vida 1999). In these environments, fraternities and sororities often dominate the social scene, thus there is a large incentive to be a part of their communities and abide by their rules. A prominent requirement of being a part of Greek life is performing proper sexual and gendered behavior. Women in sororities are expected to be attractive and sexually desirable to the men in fraternities, while also not being too sexually promiscuous.

Greek life encourages women to participate in hookup culture in order to gain sexual experiences and social status. At the same time, it also holds them accountable to the precarious navigation of the virgin/whore dichotomy. However, there are no fraternities or sororities at Bito College, yet there is still an active hookup culture. Thus, I claim that hookup culture is not contingent upon Greek life. This goes against previous research that underlines the importance of fraternities and sororities in producing and maintaining hookup culture.

My research builds upon the existing literature on hookup culture. Whether they participated or not, all of my participants expressed the idea that hookup culture plays a dominant role in the sexual culture at Bito College. I found that hookup culture contributes to the stigmatization of virginity, due to the fact that most students in college overestimate how much sex other students are having. Britney expressed: “Especially being at [Bito], when hookup culture is so prevalent, I felt really isolated and I became really frustrated with how taboo it was to still be a virgin at 19 years old.” This assumption that everyone is having more sex than they actually are leads to the perception that being a virgin is highly unusual in college. This increases the stigma on virginity since being sexually active is considered the norm. Emily described this as:

The idea of sex becomes a platform for a whole different kind of conversation about intimacy and people’s quirks and it’s just another way of talking about things, so it’s like an avenue of conversation that you have to be literate in.

Sociologist Jodi McAlister describes how the discourse around virginity loss constitutes the “yardstick of social acceptability against which sexual activity should be judged” (2017:116). In other words, the telling and retelling of virginity loss stories plays a key social role in reinforcing sexual norms. She relates this to the Michel Foucault’s theory that the practice of

confessional storytelling is a way of regulating society and producing a normative discourse. Talking about sex is a common social experience, particularly in the context of hookup culture, in which virgins are often unable to participate in, and from which they are thus excluded. Therefore, within hookup culture, the lack of sexual experience transforms into the lack of social status. Many of my participants remarked that this kind of environment can be particularly difficult for virgins and for people who do not want to engage in a lot of sex. In other words, in environments where sex is viewed as the norm, virgins are social outsiders. Hence, this reflects how contemporary sexual culture further stigmatizes and restricts women's sexuality.

STIGMA AND DEVIANCE

My research contributes new findings and theoretical insight to the current literature on stigma and virginity. Existing research on virginity primarily focuses on the expectation for women to uphold virginal purity and on the stigmatization of women who lose their virginity before marriage. In the context of rapidly changing sexual norms since the sexual revolution, I claim that stigmatized virginity is a relatively recent and unresearched phenomenon. Based on my interviews, I found that stigmatized virginity is a product and producer of contemporary sexual culture. Virginity is thought of as a “‘problem to be solved’ (in the post-sexual-revolution hooking-up era)” (Bogle 2008:161). In Peggy Orenstein's (2016) study on girls and sexual culture, many of the women she interviewed felt social pressure to lose their virginity before a certain age or before they went to college. I found this to be true amongst my participants as well, as many stated that they just wanted to “get it out of the way.” The general sentiment expressed throughout Orenstein's study was: “Better to get it over with, have sex with *someone*,

rather than risk being seen as an ‘inexperienced freak’ or, worse, as ‘too ugly to fuck’” (2016:81).

Social theorist Erving Goffman offers a comprehensive theory on stigma. He defines stigma as: “an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (1963:3). Individuals who have a visible stigma, such as a physical deformity, are classified as “discredited.” The visibility of stigma is crucial in how one navigates through society, as it requires constant management. Individuals who have an invisible stigma do not endure the same daily obstacles as discredited individuals do, but they are nevertheless cognizant of their difference and perceived failing. These stigmatized individuals, who believe that others cannot perceive their stigma, are classified as “discreditable.” Being discreditable does not necessitate constant self-awareness and social navigation, but rather entails control and management of information that might reveal their stigma to others.

In describing how discreditable individuals must recognize and adjust to the fact that society does not see their stigma, Goffman gives the following example: “Girls who, having just lost their virginity, examine themselves in the mirror to see if their stigma shows, only slowly coming to believe that in fact they look no different from the way they used to” (1963:80)²⁰. Therefore, no longer being a virgin is classified as a stigma for discreditable individuals. This aligns with the historical perspective of viewing women as less worthy if they were not virgins. This is the inverse of the contemporary stigma on women in my sample for *being* virgins. Referring to those without stigma as “normals,” Goffman argues that stigma is a two-role social process, in which the stigmatized and the “normals” participate in both roles. He conceptualizes

²⁰ While one can “pass” as a virgin or non-virgin before general society and strangers, it is debatable whether or not this applies to close friends and relatives as well.

the discredited/discreditable and the “normals” as perspectives, rather than as actual people. Both perspectives shape each other and exist in the context of common social beliefs and values regarding identity. Therefore, stigmatized individuals uphold conceptions of normality, just as “normals” uphold conceptions of stigma.

This interrelated process is also reflected in how girls slut-shame each other in order to negotiate gendered status hierarchies (Miller 2016). By judging other girls’ sexual behavior, girls set normative definitions of appropriate female sexuality and preserve their own status as “normal” girls. Putting a deviant label on other women establishes a superior social status for themselves. In other words, “women were both potential recipients of sexual stigma and producers of it - simultaneously engaged in both defensive and oppressive othering” (Armstrong et al. 2014:108). Thus, women use slut-shaming to maintain their social status and to hold each other accountable for proper gendered behavior (Miller 2016; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Goffman’s theory that the stigmatized and the non-stigmatized are interconnected perspectives connects to sociologist Howard Becker’s (1963) theory on deviance. Notions of deviance are contingent on social norms, which are always subject to change. The same act or identity considered to be deviant in one sector of society is considered normal in other sectors. There is no universal labeling system that determines social norms, due to the multitude of different societies and cultural variances. Deviance is a product of society; deviants are not intrinsically different or flawed, but rather are socially constructed to be seen as abnormal. Both Goffman and Becker discuss how individuals form communities on the basis of their stigma and/or deviance. Becker writes that deviant group identity is based on the fact that all members “share the label and the experience of being labeled as outsiders” (1963:10). There is

discrepancy within every group, but the shared label and experiences of stigma create a distinguished group of individuals. While different deviant groups may not have similar behaviors or perspectives, their common status as “outsiders” is a significant indicator of what social norms are in place.

Political and economic power are large determinants of who and what is labeled as deviant, viewing that deviance is the product of one group imposing rules on other groups in society (Becker 1963). Feminist sociologist Edwin M. Schur (1984) argues that this theory of deviance as a form of social control particularly pertains to women. Schur describes how sociological studies of deviance have shown a systematic bias against women, in that they primarily represent male perspectives and give insufficient attention to women. Schur claims that being a woman is a deviant status in and of itself due to the overall devaluation of women in society. Stigma reifies women’s inferior social status, upholding female subordination for the purpose of male domination. Stigma and sexual norms “have all contributed to keeping woman in her ‘place’” (Schur 1984:53). The dehumanizing effects of stigma contribute to making women less human than men. Additionally, women face gender and sexual norms that contradict one another, as exemplified by the virgin/whore dichotomy, which intensifies and multiplies the potential for stigmatization. Hence, in a patriarchal culture that devalues women, stigma is another layer that contributes to women’s lack of power and sexual autonomy.

METHODOLOGY

I collected data for my study using the qualitative method of in-depth interviewing. I found the use of in-depth interviews in other sociological studies on virginity to be particularly

engaging and effective (see e.g. Carpenter 2005; Valenti 2009). I wanted to have long, in-depth conversations with my participants in person in order to fully capture and understand their multifaceted experiences, attitudes, and interpretations. In these interviews, I was able to ask for more details, get clarification, and touch upon unforeseen subjects and ideas. Also, interacting with my participants face-to-face offered the additional data of body language, facial expressions, and emotions. For instance, two of my participants cried at one point during their interviews when we were discussing something that was particularly emotional for them. While these women were emotionally triggered, other women had neutral or even positive reactions to the same subject. Thus, in-person reactions constitute valuable qualitative data and lend important insight into how people interpret similar experiences in different ways.

I recruited my interview participants via Facebook, word of mouth, and snowball sampling²¹. I made recruitment posts on various Facebook group pages in order to maximize how many people would see it. I conducted 30 interviews in total, with each ranging from 45 minutes to an hour long²². My interview questions discussed the following topics: messages about virginity from family, friends, and media growing up; past and present definitions of virginity; experiences of social pressure and stigma in regards to losing or keeping virginity; other people's views and perceptions in comparison to their own; and interpretations of contemporary sexual culture²³. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, I used pseudonyms for all my participants' names and their college. I also omitted any personal information that might have made them

²¹ Snowball sampling is a technique in which existing participants recruit future participants from people they know.

²² To my surprise, more women than I had originally expected reached out to me within the first few days after I made my recruitment posts, expressing interest in participating in my study. Thus, I expanded the number of participants I had intended on interviewing from 20 to 30 women, as I did not want to miss out on the opportunity to hear the perspectives of so many diverse women.

²³ See Appendix B for the complete list of interview questions.

identifiable. All recordings and documents related to my research were saved in my password-protected phone and computer. Each participant reviewed and signed a consent form prior to their interview, which explicitly outlined the risks and benefits of participating in the study.

To organize my findings, I divided them into three empirical chapters. In the following chapter, I will further discuss the nature of stigmatized virginity and describe how it manifests in women's everyday lives. I will examine various influences and sources of stigmatization, as perceived and experienced by my participants. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the concept of masculinized intimacy as the cultural script to contemporary sexual life. Next, in Chapter 4, I will discuss the concept of emotional virginity and how it connects to ideas of autonomy, dependence, and resistance. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I will conclude with suggestions for creating change and resistance in today's sexual culture, as well as suggestions for avenues of future research in relation to my study.

It is important to note that all of my participants identify as cisgender women. As much as I would have loved to include perspectives from cisgender men, genderqueer, transgender, and gender non-binary individuals, I decided to focus solely on cisgender women. Unfortunately, studying multiple gender groups was beyond the scope of my study. Studying various populations would be extremely informative and would greatly contribute to the existing sociological literature on virginity, but due to my limited time and resources, I would have been unable to interview representative populations for each gender group. Thus, the study would have offered unreliable and incomplete findings. Each gender group has a unique social experience and is subject to different social forces. That being said, I cannot speak for other

gender groups' experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, it should be noted that throughout this paper I use the words "woman" and "female" to describe my participants. This was not made in an effort to exclude transgender individuals who may not identify with these terms, but rather to reflect how my participants subjectively identify.

Additionally, I chose to interview women currently attending Bito College in order to narrow down my population to a specific group of women temporarily living in the same culture. While there is some variation between their thoughts and sexual experiences, they all share the same college environment and thus experience many of the same cultural aspects of Bito College. By studying this population, I am able to situate these women in a specific social context. Moreover, I chose to focus on the women in the age range of 18-22 years old because young adulthood is a significant part of one's life course and sexual development. It is a time of navigation, introspection, and realization. At this age, some women are looking back and reinterpreting the existing foundation of their sexual lives; some are having their first sexual experiences and discovering what it means to be a sexual being; and others are navigating what it means to not have any sexual experiences at all.

Also, it should be noted that the nature of my study entails a certain degree of undersampling and oversampling for certain populations. I unintentionally oversampled non-white²⁴ women in my study. Non-white participants constitute 50% of my total participant population, whereas non-white individuals constitute only 15% of the total Bito College population (Institute of Education Sciences 2016). This represents unintentional oversampling among the student population, but I believe that the diversity of these women is important in

²⁴ Non-white women in my study include: African American, Chinese American, Iranian American, South Asian, Latina, Hispanic, biracial, and multiracial women. My participants self-identified their race, thus these are subjective identity markers.

bringing forth multifaceted perspectives. However, while my participants are racially diverse, they are not very diverse in terms of their political views. They all identified somewhere between “liberal” and “very liberal” on a scale of “very conservative” to “very liberal.” Thus, in light of these confounding factors, my sample does not constitute a representative sample for all cisgender women. However, my participants are representative of 18-22 year-old cisgender women attending progressive, elite liberal arts colleges. Hence, the virtue of this population group is that my research can contribute to the growing body of sociological literature on college students, in addition to the literature on virginity, stigma, and women’s sexuality.

Additionally, women who feel greatly embarrassed or ashamed about being a virgin did not reach out for an interview. When I was snowball sampling for more women who identify as virgins, one of my participants told me that her friend refused to do an interview because: “She hates telling people she's a virgin... she avoids it like the plague.” This example highlights how studies on stigma are inherently challenging due to the very nature of stigma. However, I compensate for this undersampling with the perspectives and experiences from non-virgin women who experienced feelings of shame and embarrassment when they were virgins.²⁵

Overall, despite these various sampling limitations, I claim that my study offers an insightful lens on how young college women understand and experience virginity, sex, and stigma within current sexual culture.

Finally, it is important to note that I am not making a traditionalist argument throughout my study. I am not arguing that women should not have casual sex nor not feel empowered by masculinity, but I am aiming to contextualize women’s endorsement of masculinized intimacy

²⁵ On the other hand, there were women who eagerly reached out for an interview because they felt that they had particularly unique perspectives. Rachel stated: “When I saw the [recruitment] post, I was like, this is gold for this senior project! I have such a unique perspective, or at least I think I do.”

within a culture that strongly devalues femininity and women's pleasure. I am not making an argument for traditional gender roles, but rather I am making an argument for women to be able to *choose* how they live their sexual lives. My research shows how contemporary sexual culture is not more freeing, nor more empowering, for young women than in previous generations. Although women are now permitted, and even encouraged, to uphold masculine attitudes and behaviors, this does not translate to freedom or gender equality. I claim that this guise of freedom actually restricts women in new, unprecedented ways; it obliges women to adopt specific gendered/sexual conduct.

The universal sanctioning of masculinity parallels with the devaluation of femininity. While there is social encouragement for women to embrace masculine behaviors, there is no social encouragement for men *or* women to embrace feminine behaviors. The dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, connoting strength and weakness respectively, is prevalent in all spheres of social life. Thus, I am arguing for a reconfiguration of this dichotomy so that masculinity and femininity can be equally valued and endorsed by men and women alike. I am advocating for a sexual culture that does not oblige or pressure women in any way. I am advocating for women to be able to say *yes and no* to sex and to virginity loss.

2

STIGMATIZED VIRGINITY

“I just want to get rid of this.”

When Britney (queer, white, non-virgin) first came home after losing her virginity, her housemate drew a picture of a newlyweds car with cans coming off of it, but instead of saying “Just Married,” the car said: “Just Lost It.” Britney laughed and hung the picture on her fridge. This celebratory act captured Britney’s great sense of relief and joy about not being a virgin anymore. She described the feeling as: “I was elated, I was really proud, I was just like oh my god finally it’s gone, it’s over, I did it.” Prior to this joyous moment, Britney felt extremely ashamed and frustrated about her virgin status. She expressed:

I had so much shame about it. I just talked about it all the time, how I just wanted to get rid of it, I was like oh my god I just want to have sex with someone, I just want to get rid of this. I felt like it was such a burden... I just felt like it was something that needed to be taken away.

Britney’s sentiment was echoed by many of my participants as they discussed current and past feelings of shame, guilt, frustration, confusion, and anxiety regarding virginity; the common thread between all of these emotions being stigmatization. The women in my study who were heavily impacted by stigmatized virginity expressed a strong desire to lose their virginity for the sake of losing it. About one third of my participants, women of diverse backgrounds, used the same exact phrase: “I just wanted to get it over with.”

Many of my participants received little to no information from their families growing up about virginity, or sex in general. Some were taught to wait until marriage, or at least wait until they were in a serious, monogamous, long-term relationship. But for the majority of my participants, messages about stigmatized virginity came from a variety of different sources, e.g.

the media, immediate social environments, friends, and family. While the stigmatization of virginity has historically been a prevalent issue for men, my research demonstrates that stigmatized virginity is not only pervasive for women, but also highly oppressive and even damaging. This is indicative of a drastic shift in contemporary sexual culture. It shows how the deeply embedded patriarchal roots of society have changed form and presentation over time, becoming more insidious and internalized across cultures and genders.

There were many common ideas and experiences expressed amongst my participants in regards to stigmatized virginity. One significant commonality was a concern about the “right age” to lose it. A few of my participants referred to the national average age for virginity loss as a guide to sexual decision making. Isabella (lesbian, white, non-virgin), at age 15, was worried about being too young to lose her virginity, but her friend reassured her that it was okay because at the time the national average for virginity loss was 14 years old. Additionally, Olive (pansexual, white, non-virgin) recounted how her friend was annoyed that she had *not* lost her virginity by age 17, due to the fact that the national average was 16 years old. These cases illustrate how the national average age is treated as an official yardstick for acceptable sexuality, despite the fact that it is not a fixed number and has progressively increased over time. As of this writing in 2016, the national average age for men and women is 17 years old (Guttmacher Institute 2016). All of my participants had preconceived notions of the “right age” for virginity loss, regardless of whether or not they were aware of the national average. The concept of being “too young” or “too old” to have sex for the first time produces more stigma and shame than it provides a helpful social structure for making sexual decisions. Socially constructed ideas regarding the life course can produce stigmatizing notions of normality. In other words,

perceptions of when significant life events normally occur can influence women to perceive the course of their sexual development in a negative light.

Another common thread amongst my participants was the connection between sex and social status. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), there are three fundamental types of capital that constitute social hierarchies: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital, constituted by money and property, is often thought to be the most prominent signifier of social class. However, Bourdieu makes the argument that social and cultural capital are of equal importance, if not more so. He defines social capital as the sum of resources accrued from social networks and connections. His concept of cultural capital refers to the non-economic, symbolic social assets that can augment one's social status. These elements include skills, tastes, education, mannerisms, and credentials. Cultural capital is instrumental in class reproduction. Building on Bourdieu's theory, I argue that there is another distinct form of capital that also produces class hierarchies: *sexual* capital. Sexual experiences and sexual knowledge are vital forms of sexual capital in modern society, for men and women alike, because they serve as legitimizing social credentials. I also claim that this form of capital extends beyond intimacy into other spheres of social life. Hence, throughout this chapter, I will be referencing this concept of sexual capital in order to highlight how stigma occurs and how women interpret it in their own lives.

Each woman has a different social and cultural background that constitutes if and how she experiences stigmatized virginity; some women are highly impacted, while others hardly even notice its presence. The nuances between how women experience stigma is contingent on various social factors, which include: age, sexual orientation, religion, race,

community, and socioeconomic status. However, despite these differences among women, it is evident that stigmatized virginity is a prevalent aspect of contemporary sexual culture. The shame associated with not being a virgin still exists for many women in various cultures, but the shame associated with *being* a virgin indicates a radical shift in how virginity is conceptualized and experienced.

This chapter discusses how and when women experience stigma in their everyday lives. Based on my research, I delineated three significant ways in which stigma is produced and reinforced. These processes instill salient social norms and greatly contribute to crafting women's sexual identities. I will first describe how the media is a pervasive social force that explicitly and subliminally reflects the social norms in current sexual culture²⁶. Next, I will discuss how my participants' immediate social environments play a significant role in shaping their perceptions and experiences. Lastly, I will show how direct and indirect interactions with peers and close friends contribute to making virginity a stigmatized identity. Throughout this analysis, I aim to highlight the various sources of stigmatization, as well as show how women themselves subjectively experience and interpret this stigma.

Sex on Screen

“What if I’m a 40-Year-Old Virgin... that’ll suck.”

Riley (“mostly heterosexual,” biracial, non-virgin) recalls that the first time she heard the word “virgin” was when the movie “The 40-Year-Old Virgin” came out in theaters²⁷. She was

²⁶ The effects of media on young women's perceptions of gender and sexuality is an immense field of study, thus I give only a brief overview in order to showcase its importance.

²⁷ Out of all the movies and TV shows that discuss and represent virginity loss, “The 40-Year-Old Virgin” was the most mentioned amongst my participants when I asked them about the messages they received from the media in regards to virginity.

only in elementary school and did not understand what being a 40-year-old virgin meant or why it would be socially significant. Later she came to understand the movie's underlying message that being a 40-year-old virgin is shameful, embarrassing, and abnormal. Additionally, since the movie is about a male virgin, it strongly enforces the connection between masculinity and sexual prowess. While this film frames male virginity in a negative, shameful light, its message is equally applicable to female virginity today. Samantha (pansexual, white, virgin) referenced this film when she disclosed that she is worried about losing her virginity soon, but is even more worried about *not* losing her virginity soon. She expressed: "What if I'm a 40-year-old virgin, that'll suck..." Her statement demonstrates how "40-year-old virgin" has become a catchphrase with a strong negative connotation.

The stigmatization of virginity in contemporary society is primarily connected to one's age, rather than one's marital status. This in turn reflects social constructions of adulthood and social ideas regarding the life course. Portrayals of virginity loss in the media are particularly influential, due to how they can produce and reinforce stigma. A few of my participants mentioned the popular TV series *Girls*²⁸ when discussing representations of stigmatized virginity in the media. One of the characters in the show, who is a virgin, gets rejected by a man who does not want to sleep with her solely because of her virgin status. Thus, *Girls* portrays the idea that a 20-year-old virgin is socially abnormal and undesirable (let alone a 40-year-old virgin). Tiana (heterosexual, Hispanic/African American, non-virgin) described this phenomenon as: "I've just seen so many TV shows where people are just like, I need to not be a virgin anymore 'cause people don't wanna fuck virgins."

²⁸ *Girls* is about four 20-something women living in New York City. Prominent themes throughout the show include: sex, sexuality, gender, and coming of age. It is similar to the renowned TV series *Sex and the City*.

A few of my participants also mentioned *Glee*, a TV series about a high school glee club whose members happen to be very sexually active with one another. The show insinuates the idea that the average individual loses their virginity in high school, which leads to the idea that one *should* be having sex in high school. This in turn enforces stigmatized virginity and generates social pressure. Audrey (heterosexual, white, virgin) described this indirect social pressure:

I feel like so many movies today are about a high school girl who finds her guy, and then has a romantic kiss, and like all that kind of stuff. And so if we go to psychology, movies are supposed to tell us what the ideal is for our society, so if they're telling us that doing that kind of stuff in high school for the first time is normal and socially acceptable and ideal, then I'm behind the curve. And so [*sarcastically*] I should step up my game!

Audrey demonstrates that, in addition to insinuating ideas about proper sexual behavior, the media directly and indirectly constructs a guideline for sexual development by reinforcing ideas about the “normal” life course. This was also notably mentioned by women who are somewhat outsiders to American sexual culture. Lucy, who identifies as asexual, discussed how the “hyper-saturation of sex in the media” is a significant influence on sexual culture and behavior. She feels that the media informed her original ideas regarding sex and sexuality, despite the fact that today she feels very comfortable in her asexual identity. She stated:

Various forms of media [and] coming of age stories that end with the person having sex and being all the wiser and more worldly-wise... that kind of fueled my imagination as to what was expected of me sexually... Nobody face-to-face said to me “you need to have sex honey or you've wasted your youth.” Nobody said that directly. It's all sort of media's omnipresence that you can't help but pick up on these messages that it wants to send out there.

The “omnipresence” of the media is a widely studied phenomenon. The media can have long-reaching consequences on developing youth, particularly in regards to gender, sexuality,

and sexual behavior (Durham 2008). When sex is portrayed or discussed in any form of media, it sends an implicit message regarding when and how one should be a sexual being. This is especially prevalent in a sex-saturated culture, in which representations of sex are prolific. Fatima, an international student from South Asia²⁹, suggests that sex-saturated media is a particularly American phenomenon. She stated: “I think the whole world has the impression that Americans are obsessed with sex... it’s a sex-obsessed culture.” Likewise, Kylie, who is an international student from East Asia, stated that American movies and TV shows “make it seem like everyone is always having sex.” Thus, these women offer the idea that American media in particular enforces sex as the norm and virginity as the anomaly.

On the other hand, although the media can produce social pressure and injurious notions of normality, it can also serve as a source of positive influence and inspiration. Skye (heterosexual, Chinese American, non-virgin) was one of the few women I spoke to who had a very positive virginity loss experience with someone whom she was not in a relationship with. Her confidence is partly attributed to portrayals of strong women in the media. She recounted:

I think it’s my personality, watching movies, and watching how some people fall head over heels for a scumbag... and I’m like, I know I’m not gonna do that. I know I’m not gonna be that person. Just reading books about confident women and empowered women who get what they want, I’m like yes this is how I wanna be. I know that this is how I wanna represent myself.

Skye interprets her not falling “head over heels for a scumbag” as a form of empowerment and personal strength³⁰. She never felt any kind of social pressure in regards to her virginity, which was in part due to the particular kind of media she consumed growing up. She claims to have deliberately internalized media messages that she found empowering, while

²⁹ I do not specify the country Fatima is from in order to keep her identity anonymous.

³⁰ I will discuss this idea of dependence versus autonomy further in Chapter 4.

ignoring those that fostered stigma or shame. Although the media can have detrimental effects on young women by constructing narrow parameters around acceptable sexuality, Skye demonstrates how media can also provide empowering representations of sex and gender.

Ultimately, there is no way of determining a causal link between media and perceptions of virginity. However, my research suggests that the copious imagery of stigmatized virginity throughout various media sources does impact young women as they start to form sexual attitudes and have sexual experiences. Representations of sex and virginity loss on screen hold significant social weight, in that they portray rigid notions of acceptable female sexuality and the life course. What is shown on screen can be foundational to one's sexual development, viewing that these media portrayals often serve as an initial introduction to sex and virginity loss. However, while the media can greatly contribute to feelings of stigma and shame, it can also offer alternative ideas of how to be a sexual being.

Sex As Status

"We could talk about things the virgins couldn't talk about."

While the media has an immense scope of influence and greatly contributes to shaping cultural ideas and social norms, it is only one of the many sources of stigma. The majority of my participants proclaimed that their initial awareness and understanding of stigmatized virginity came from high school, their immediate social environment. High school is often extremely impactful in the development of one's preliminary ideas regarding sex, gender, and sexuality. In high school, sex becomes more and more established in everyday discourse as people start to equate sexual experiences with social status.

Shannon is a freshman at Bito College and identifies as “not 100% heterosexual,” Chinese American, and non-virgin. She was one of the many women I spoke to who was highly affected by social pressures to have sex in high school. She described her experience as a virgin in high school as:

I’d get so insecure of being like, I’m so far behind in this... you had the realization like even *that* person’s having sex and I’m not having sex, how is that possible. I think it really does turn into a race and a competition and a game, especially in high school when people are just curious and dumb... I think I just got into a mindset of why can’t I have sex? I thought that people who were socially lower than I was wouldn’t be able to have sex because they’d be so desperate for it, but no one would want them. And I think I got that into my head of being like, why would someone want them but they wouldn’t want me?

Shannon’s shame and frustration regarding her virgin status demonstrate the social value of sex. She compared herself to people she considered to be lower on the social hierarchy, and was therefore upset by the fact that even *they* were having sex. Thus, having sex translates to a certain degree of social superiority; people with higher social status are thought to be more sexually active and desirable. Shannon also described how the other girls in her high school strongly reinforced this idea of sex as status:

I think girls felt that having sex made them feel empowered and made them feel superior to others, but then they were also shamed for it. But I feel like they took the shame as kind of a recognition that they have had sex, and [it] kind of [gave] them attention, so they were feeding into the shaming by being like, oh they’re just jealous of me and sex makes me cool.

This demonstrates how women hold themselves accountable to sexual norms and gender expectations (West and Zimmerman 1987). Although these girls were being actively shamed for their sexual behavior, they interpreted this shame as validation of their sexual identities. Thus, the negative impact of stigmatized virginity outweighed slut-shaming. This indicates a radical shift in how women’s sexual behavior is perceived and judged. Rather than internalizing the

“slut” identity with shame and guilt, the girls in Shannon’s high school reconceptualized it in a positive light. They reinterpreted it in order to legitimize their identities as sexual beings and reaffirm their sexual capital.

Ultimately, Shannon’s feelings of shame and stigma about “being behind” motivated her to pursue sex for the sake of losing her virginity. In her senior year of high school, she lost her virginity at a house party to a boy she vaguely knew. She recounted:

I ended up having sex in his downstairs bathroom on the toilet. I look back at it now and I’m like kinda smiling, but I was extremely drunk and he was extremely sober and so technically it’s constituted as rape and that didn’t really affect me for awhile... I think the whole rape thing didn’t really affect me until probably after summer ended when I finally realized it really truly was rape.

Today, Shannon has a very different perspective on virginity than she did in high school. She now believes that virginity loss should be with a caring partner, rather than with a random stranger to just get it over with. She stated: “I think I completely discredited myself by doing that to myself, of just like getting it over with.” She is currently trying to convince her friend, who is experiencing stigmatized virginity, to wait for someone special and not just “throw it away” like she feels she did. Reflecting on her experiences, Shannon expressed:

I think people who are proud that they’re virgins definitely still feel the social pressure to lose their virginity and they just won’t admit it... I think it’s kind of inevitable that that happens cause I think social pressures really do have an effect on everyone.

Olivia (heterosexual, white, non-virgin) expressed a similar perspective to Shannon. She described her experience with stigmatized virginity in high school as:

It felt a little bit like, oh you should be on this level, join this group of people who can talk about sex, who had sex... And also from friends around my age, it was just sort of like get it over with, be cool, you don’t wanna be a virgin, it’s the biggest insult, like “such a virgin.”

Olivia's statement demonstrates the significance of sexual capital, particularly in the lives of adolescents and young adults. Building sexual capital by having sexual experiences puts one on a different social tier; it is used to bolster one's credibility as an adult, making one seem more mature, desirable, and even worthy. Mia (heterosexual, multiracial, non-virgin) also demonstrated this idea of sex as status-making. She discussed the day after she lost her virginity to her longterm boyfriend:

I just remember taking a selfie the next day and being like, *first selfie after losing my virginity!* Like in my mind, I'm always gonna remember that. And I just felt like I was just more experienced now and I could actually have insight on the things that I had been reading about. I could give advice to people, and yeah I guess there is a certain amount of respect that I feel like I would get from people if they knew.

By having sex, Mia felt that she would get more respect from her peers. Thus, sexual capital is transformed into greater social opportunities and higher social status. Being able to engage in discourse about sex is a strong social asset in a culture where sex is discussed so frequently and pervasively. This was also exemplified by Lydia (heterosexual, white, non-virgin), who stated: "I had friends who had had sex and we could talk about things that the virgins couldn't talk about." This represents a drastic shift from cultures in which talking about sex is taboo and sexual experiences are discrediting to one's overall social capital.

However, the desire for sexual capital also engenders stigma and social pressure. Olivia felt that her liberal high school unintentionally contributed to the social pressure that many students felt about having sex. She described this as:

I think there was, to some degree, sexual pressure [in high school]. Like you should be free and open about your sexuality because it's such a hippie, nice place and I think that translated for the 14, 15 year olds in the freshman class to: you should be having sex, like why are you not having sex. And that was a weird mix because the intent was good. The intent was to let kids have this open, communicative environment and there's always free condoms in the nurse's

office. But I think the way some younger kids can interpret that can turn into more of a pressurized environment.

As Olivia's school attempted to create a shame-free environment in regards to sexual activity, it inadvertently generated a new kind of stigma. Definitions of "sex positivity" are generally focused on the normalization of sex in education, current culture, and everyday discourse. Being able to talk about sex and engage in sex are large constituents of what it means to be sex-positive. Sex-positive environments typically have the manifest function³¹ of normalizing sex and promoting safe sexual practices, but they also have the latent function of stigmatizing virginity and the lack of sexual experiences (Merton 1967). In other words, although this decreases the stigmatization of sex, it simultaneously increases the stigmatization of virginity. The idea that one cannot be sex-positive without sexual experience creates a divide between those who are sexually active and those who are not.

Due to preconceived notions of stigmatized virginity, Shannon and Olivia both wanted to lose their virginities before going to college. They had both internalized the idea that beginning college as a virgin was highly embarrassing and abnormal. Olivia described the message she received whilst growing up:

You don't want to go to college a virgin, or if you are don't tell anyone 'cause guys will take that and run with it... I think there's a lot of women who will put getting it over with over above actually when they want to do it... I think there's just this idea of there's somehow a safety attached to having lost your virginity before you leave home... I was never explicitly told, it was just sort of one of those things where it was like, it's *right* to get it done at this point, this is when you're meant to have sex.

³¹ Sociologist Robert Merton coined "manifest and latent functions" as conceptual tools in understanding the multifaceted nature of social events and their consequences. Manifest functions are those that are intentional and have a positive effect, whereas latent functions are those that are unintentional and have a negative effect (Merton 1967).

For many of my participants, going to college greatly intensified their perceptions and/or experiences of stigmatized virginity. Bito College is commonly described as a very progressive, sex-positive school with a very active sexual culture, which is predominantly due to the perception of there being a prevalent hookup culture. Sexual behavior in the context of Bito's hookup culture consists of engaging in sexual activities with acquaintances and/or complete strangers. Although Bito College is a very small school, with a population of less than 2,500 students, the hookup culture on campus is very similar to other colleges that are larger, more conservative, and/or have a prominent Greek life (Bogle 2008; Wade and Heldman 2012). According to my participants, hookup culture serves as the dominant cultural script. Having sex is imperative to having "the college experience." Jess (queer, white, non-virgin) described this as:

There's definitely a perception that having sex is a part of what your college experience should be like. And for some reason if you haven't had someone who would want to have sex with you, or like you haven't for whatever reason, there's a perception that you've missed out on some essential part of college, or some essential part of life, even if you're not in college.

While hookup culture is not limited to college campuses, most of my participants reported first participating in, or becoming aware of, hookup culture in college, rather than in high school. The majority of women I spoke to described hookup culture as a prominent aspect of Bito College and "the college experience" in general. However, Isabella offered a contrary perspective:

I don't think people are nearly as sexual as they pretend to be. I don't think people are having as much sex as they pretend to be. I don't think there's as big of a hookup culture as we pretend there is. But I do think people talk about it a lot and people give off the image a lot. So I can imagine that it would be hard to be a virgin here because you would feel that *everybody* is having sex.

This discrepancy between perception and reality was found in other studies on hookup culture (Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013). A pervasive hookup culture does not equate to an extremely sexually active population. However, the perception of an active, widespread hookup culture is more than enough to stigmatize college virgins. Britney (queer, white, non-virgin) particularly struggled with her virginity in the context of hookup culture at Bito College. She stated:

I just wanted to be able to identify with these other experiences that my friends were having and be able to talk about it... It was a lot of anxiety for me, like still having my virginity and not being able to engage with those experiences, cause at this point I am so sex-positive, I'm so into it and wanna be able to have all these sexual experiences, and I was just really frustrated that it wasn't happening.

Britney's concept of "sex positivity" meant having a lot of shame-free sexual experiences, which was similar to the philosophy of Olivia's high school. Although this definition of sex-positivity deconstructs the taboo and guilt around having sex, it leaves no room for the *absence* of sex. Britney felt like a social outsider and believed that something was wrong with her because of her virgin status. She draws a direct connection between her feelings of frustration and shame to Bito's sexual culture. She stated:

I felt that if I was approaching someone and wanted to hang out with them, and was physically attracted to them, if that was more in the vein of, ok [Bito] College we go out on dates and we like court people, you know, that would totally change the way that I would approach the other person and where that sexual expectation would be... I would have just had a lot more confidence to just be with another person and not feel the pressure to [have sex]. I just felt inhibited from hitting on anyone because that's not the expectation.

The sexual expectations of a given social environment manifest in both overt and subtle ways. Britney's statement frames hookup culture as the dominant code of sexual conduct and additionally calls attention to the lack of dating culture at Bito College. Although hookup culture generated great shame and frustration for her, she did not express a desire to change the sexual

culture. Rather, she wanted to participate in it and become an active sexual being alongside her peers. Britney later lost her virginity to someone she met on Tinder, a very dating popular app³², and was very thankful for the experience. She explained that after she lost her virginity, she became more confident in pursuing people and felt that she could have sex with them if she wanted to. Hookup culture thus served as a convenient way for her to lose her stigmatized virginity and gain sexual capital. This idea that hookup culture enables one to easily lose their virginity was explicitly expressed by Fatima (heterosexual, South Asian, virgin):

I think hookup culture makes it so easily accessible to lose your virginity... In hookup culture, it's very normal to meet someone at a party and lose your virginity to them... it normalizes it... I think it doesn't matter what you look like even, there's someone out there in college for everyone.

Therefore, while hookup culture can produce and perpetuate stigmatized virginity, it can also be the way in which one gets rid of stigma. Conversely, women who want to lose their virginity in the context of a long-term, loving, monogamous relationship perceive the prevalence of hookup culture as a significant barrier. Paige (pansexual, white, virgin) partly attributes her current virgin status to not having downloaded Tinder³³ and not having participated in hookup culture. Paige emphasized how she felt more stigmatized for never having had a boyfriend or girlfriend, than she did for never having had sex. Thus, hookup culture is not the most desirable route for women who prioritize a relationship over the social benefits of sex, despite it being seen as a practical and easy way to lose one's virginity.

³² Tinder is a dating/hookup app in which one swipes right (yes) or left (no) on people's profiles to indicate an attraction or interest. Each profile consists of a few photos and a short blurb. If both individuals swipe right on each other, it is "a match." You can only send messages to your matches within the app.

³³ Paige described the way people use Tinder at Bito College as: "People were getting Tinder and they were making all these matches and they were really proud when they got to a hundred matches, showing me different guys they matched with, or who they were swiping on."

Overall, building sexual capital is a tumultuous process for many individuals, as they navigate various social environments. I argue that stigmatized virginity is driven by the concept of sex as status. Educational institutions and hookup culture are just two of the primary arenas in which status-making occurs. My research suggests that one's social environment and the processes of status-making are tightly interwoven, both contributing to stigmatized virginity.

Sleepovers, Sexy Jenga, and Never Have I Ever

"I was having sex to impress other people."

Anna (pansexual, white, non-virgin) grew up in an extremely rural town with no Internet or paved roads. In her high school, gaining sexual experience was a competitive race. Since there were only seven people in her entire grade, everyone knew everything about one other. Anna's peer group was responsible for the direct and indirect social pressure she experienced. She described her experience as: "It was weird. It was very much like there were other people closely involved in my sex life." Her peers were involved in her sex life to the extent that when she was 14 years old, they locked her and a boy in a closet together and told them to "go have sex." Anna did not have sex with him then and there, as she was furious at her friends, but she ultimately decided to lose her virginity to him two weeks later. She recounted:

It was just sort of this thing that we both knew we had to do and all of our friends knew about it and they were like two doors down so they knew exactly what was going on and were like making jokes and stuff before and after and it was just very uncomfortable.

Anna felt trapped by the direct bullying and constant pressure from her peers. She had internalized the idea that she *had* to be sexually active in order to be socially accepted. Not having sex was not an option for her. Reflecting upon this, she said:

I know that the first time I had sex was entirely to be cool and because I was feeling behind... It was very much a pressure situation where I guess it was like I didn't think outside of the box I was in.

Kylie (heterosexual, biracial, virgin) also experienced this kind of explicit and deliberate social pressure from one of her peers. She described how her friend constantly brought up the fact that Kylie was a virgin and wanted to talk about it in very public places:

It felt like it was that one really *big* thing that she felt like she was superior to me because she's had sex and I haven't... it's just kind of gross the way she talked about it and I didn't really appreciate it because when I think about myself as a person, I don't really think about myself as a virgin. I feel like there are a lot of other things that make up me, maybe [my virginity is] a part of me, but she made it seem like that's the biggest thing about me.

The remark by Kylie's friend reflects how one's virgin status can be seen as an identity in and of itself, bearing social weight. This is demonstrative of symbolic interactionism, which entails that one develops their concept of self-identity through social interactions. In other words, people develop understandings of themselves through their interpersonal relationships with others. Sociologist Charles Cooley (1902) described this concept as "the looking-glass self," which signifies that the self is constructed by how we think others perceive us; other individuals serve as "mirrors" to how we see ourselves. Individuals are thus significant perpetrators of stigma alongside the media, educational institutions, and hookup culture. Kylie does not feel a great degree of shame regarding her current virgin status, but she feels that this incident with her friend was particularly hurtful. Unlike Anna or Shannon, Kylie pushes back against stigmatized virginity by refusing to let social pressure from her peers define her worth and self-identity. Her virgin status does not dictate her construction of selfhood. In other words, her identity as a virgin does not take precedence over the numerous other ways by which she defines herself.

While both Anna and Kylie experienced stigmatization directly from their peers, many of my participants discussed how their peers *indirectly* contributed to their stigma. This process can be accomplished by seemingly innocuous group activities. Jess recounted the time when she went on a trip with her school sports team and they all decided to play “Sexy Jenga³⁴.” In this version of Jenga, each block had a personal question regarding one’s sexual experiences that each player had to answer when they pulled it out of the tower. At the time, Jess identified as a virgin. She reflected on that group activity with vivid disgust: “I just couldn’t participate in that activity at all and that was the one time I felt really bad about being a virgin.”

Another group activity that can reinforce stigmatized virginity is the popular game, “Never Have I Ever³⁵.” Samantha (pansexual, white, virgin) told me that she hates this game because she always feels embarrassed and less interesting due to her lack of sexual experiences. Exasperated, she expressed:

In a large group setting, it always feels like the more interesting, eclectic, experienced, bizarre experiences, including sexual experiences, are always *whoa* that’s so cool! That’s interesting! Wow!... I think the point of games like that is to [share] fun, interesting, weird experiences, like “share your crazy stories!” Which turn into being about sex and glorifying all the interesting stories.

Intimate games, such as these, reinforce the concept of sexual experiences as sexual capital. While they seem to be innocuous, these games help to produce social status and social hierarchies within the group setting. Additionally, Maria (queer, Latina, non-virgin) spoke about sexual experiences as sexual capital in the context of high school sleepovers. She described how

³⁴ Normally, Jenga is a game in which crisscrossed blocks are stacked up in a large tower and players take turns removing one block at a time without knocking down the whole tower.

³⁵ “Never Have I Ever” is a game in which people go around in a circle and one at a time state things that they have never done. If someone has done the thing, they have to clap and make it known to the group. One version of this game is that every player starts out with ten fingers and with each thing that one has done, they have to put down one finger. Although it is stated that the person with the most fingers at the end of the game “wins,” it is often an underlying, unspoken goal to be the first person without any fingers left.

sex is considered cool in the sleepover circle, in that everyone wants to hear intimate details about each other's sex lives. These experiences are thus more valuable and credible than others because of the social benefits one has to gain. Maria described this as: "I was having sex to change something, like I was having sex to impress other people."

In addition to group activities, stigma arises through peer interactions in other indirect ways. For example, people's surprised reactions upon learning that someone is a virgin can be highly stigmatizing and indicative of the social norms in place. This reaction is almost always indirect and unintentional, but it has the same stigmatizing effects all the while. Samantha expressed:

Their surprise makes me think it's a bad thing, like even if they're just telling me it's good [that I am a virgin], the moment I can tell that they're surprised, I was like ooh you had this expectation of me and now I let you down... if they have any kind of "oh really" reaction I will immediately read that as, you think I'm supposed to have had sex.

Additionally, Samantha described how her friends would attempt to make her feel better about being a virgin by overcompensating with enthusiastic support. This however, in Samantha's perspective, translated to pity and further stigmatization. She described:

Friends reassuring me that being a virgin is okay lead to really weird kind of fucked up emotional manipulation, being like I'm gonna remind you why it's okay, I'm gonna tell you it's okay, and me telling you it's okay makes it more okay.

Although Samantha's friends were supposedly just trying to express support and comfort, their avid reassurance reinforced her stigmatized virginity. The fact that Samantha described this as "emotional manipulation" is reflective of the power dynamic between virgins and non-virgins. Samantha's friends have more social status and credibility as non-virgins due to their greater sexual capital. Regardless of if they were aware of this unequal balance of power, Samantha's

feeling of being emotionally manipulated underlines how her friends used their statuses as non-virgins against her, despite their good intentions.

This power dynamic, based on unequal sexual capital, can be even more accentuated between sexual partners. Direct and/or indirect social pressure from sexual partners is a prominent source of stigma and fear for virgins. Almost all of the women who experienced stigmatized virginity spoke about their fear of a man rejecting them because of their virgin status. This fear of a complicated situation arising can produce stigma. Kylie described this as:

I've heard a lot of negative things where girls will tell a guy [she's a virgin] and they'll be like, oh well if you're a virgin I feel like maybe you should get that emotional experience done with someone else and then maybe you can come back to me.

This experience is represented in popular culture by various media representations, such as the show *Girls*³⁶, and is discussed amongst peers for whom it occurs, thus making it a more ingrained aspect of sexual culture. Thus, virginity is seen as a barrier to experiencing casual sex, or sex outside of a serious relationship, because of this idea that virginity loss comes with emotional baggage that a non-committed partner would not want to carry. Anna described this phenomenon as:

I guess there's this expectation that that first person [you have sex with] is significant in your life and... I think a lot of people at [Bito College], and our age, don't want responsibility towards someone else that's like anything more than a few hours at a time.

Emotional responsibility carries a strong negative connotation that contributes to women desiring emotional invulnerability through meaningless sex³⁷. Thus, romantic and sexual partners have considerable influence and power over the construction of the sexual self. Overall, the ways

³⁶ As mentioned earlier, there is a scene in *Girls* in which a 20-year-old woman gets rejected by a sexual partner because of her virgin status. He refuses to sleep with her once he learns that she is a virgin.

³⁷ I will discuss this separation of emotion and sex as a form of masculinized intimacy in Chapter 3.

in which peers and sexual partners treat one another highly affect how stigma is produced. Peers reinforce stigmatized virginity due to how they produce the looking-glass self (Cooley 1902). We interpret our social world by interpreting other people, thus peers have a very significant impact on our concepts of self-identity and self-image. Peers also greatly influence how one learns and internalizes social norms and sexual expectations. The quest to build sexual capital is also a quest to affirm social status and credibility amongst one's peers. It is thus important to recognize how everyday interactions and supposedly harmless group activities can produce shame and stigma.

Stigmatized Non-Virginity

"I never felt like I was different from the ones who were sexually active."

While not all of my participants have directly experienced stigmatized virginity, I found that they all recognized stigmatized virginity as a prevalent aspect of current sexual culture. There is ample literature on stigmatized non-virginity in comparison to stigmatized virginity, due to its sustained presence throughout history (Blank 2007; Valenti 2009). While my argument is centered around stigmatized virginity, I will briefly discuss its inverse in order to give context and perspective for why and how stigma does not manifest for some women. I will be mainly discussing the influence of religion and race on stigmatized non-virginity.

Danielle (heterosexual, African American, non-virgin) has never experienced stigmatized virginity. She attributes this to her strong religious background of being Muslim. She stated: "I was at peace with myself cause I was like, I'm a virgin cause I'm religious and that's what my religion tells me.. my religion tells me it's okay to be a virgin." Danielle felt that her religion protected her from any kind of social pressure to lose her virginity. While many women look to

the media and their peers for guidance in determining acceptable and appropriate sexual behavior, Danielle's faith served as her primary source of direction. However, while her religion comforted her, it also created a sense of guilt and shame when she started to become interested in exploring sex. She would scold herself for being attracted to someone and would try to suppress her sexual desires. However, her attitude towards sex and virginity loss drastically changed when she came to Bito College. She became exposed to a sex-positive culture, in which sex was normalized and encouraged. She describes this experience as: "I just realized that these people are not bad people." Thus, Bito's sexual culture shifted her views and reduced her internalized shame about sex and virginity loss. Danielle recently lost her virginity to her boyfriend, even though it was against the rules of her religion.

Natalie (heterosexual, African American, non-virgin) was in a similar position as Danielle, in that her strong Christian faith advocated waiting for sex until marriage. While Danielle felt relatively neutral about her virginity, Natalie felt a sense of pride in the fact that she was saving her virginity until marriage. She recounted:

Especially my freshman year of high school, I even felt better because I was a virgin, like yeah they're having sex, but when it's time to get married, what's gonna happen? I'm gonna be desirable because I'm pure... It's like an achievement.. many women fall short of the glory and you're able to uphold that and wait for your husband.

Despite her pride in being a virgin, she felt somewhat conflicted due to the lack of sexual attention she received from men growing up. She described this as:

It was a confusing time, cause you're not really desirable at this moment cause guys are paying attention to all the women who are actually having sex, but then you also have this pressure where if you think about ten years from now, you're gonna have a bad stigma on you, the mark of the beast, and no one's gonna wanna be with you. It was a really tug-and-pull situation. You wanted to be a cute, desirable person but you also wanted to be I guess, holy.

These strong convictions about gendered purity guided Natalie while growing up, but today she feels ashamed about her previous mindset and acknowledges how hurtful these ideas were to her. Due to her fear of getting the “mark of the beast,” Natalie did not lose her virginity to her long-term boyfriend for many years until she reconceptualized her faith in connection to her sexuality. She recognized the patriarchal underpinnings of virginal purity and how that informed the weight she put on virginity loss. Natalie felt very free after losing her virginity, similar to the women who experienced stigmatized virginity, but under a different kind of circumstance. Rather than feeling social pressure to lose it, she had felt social pressure to keep it.

Additionally, Tiana (heterosexual, Hispanic/African American, non-virgin) was also raised to think of sex as something worth waiting for. She has been attending church since she was seven years old. However, she expressed feeling no social pressure to keep or lose her virginity. She stated:

It was a decision I made for myself, informed, talked to lots of people, made it for myself. There was no outside influence at all, and I’m really proud of that... I was proud to be a virgin, I was proud to not be a virgin.

Tiana also described how many of her beautiful Black friends are still virgins and have never had boyfriends. Rather than attributing this to religion, she drew a connection between virginity and race. She expressed:

I think that’s sort of a testament to how women of color are treated in this society... I think that’s been really hard for all of us, cause we live in very much a big-boobed, white girl, blonde world and we’re not that. We’re big-buttred, dark-haired, Black girls... You want to be wanted, but you also recognize that society doesn’t want you and doesn’t really want to invest in your sexuality the same way that it does with white girls with big boobs. I think societally, our virginity might be a little bit less of a question.

Imani (heterosexual, African American, non-virgin) also expressed this idea of Black women's sexuality being of lesser value than white women's sexuality. She stated: "Implicitly, we've been taught these ideas that our Blackness doesn't make us as worthy as white women. You kinda get stuck in that trap, feeling like we're not as good." Imani also discussed how virginity is closely connected to whiteness and notions of purity:

[For Black women] unless you're in a very religious-based home, I don't think there's a large emphasis on your virginity as pure... I don't think it's like, you should save yourself, stay pure. Whereas, in white communities, I think that's more emphasized. I think that idea of purity, and things like that, is more of a thing in the white community because of the media... the idea of whiteness and purity and then Blackness and being non-pure, these are the ideas that are put in our heads.

Black women's sexuality has been historically viewed as "dirty, unnatural, sick, and sinful" (Collins 2000:129). The hypersexualization and objectification of Black women is still highly prevalent today. This contrasts with white women, whose sexuality has been historically valued and prized more so than any other race (Blank 2007). This is exemplified by the modern phenomenon of "Purity Balls," which are primarily for white, religious, upper-middle-class girls (Valenti 2009). Thus, the socially-constructed value of a woman's sexuality is in part determined by race, which in turn affects perceptions and experiences of stigmatization. In other words, stigmatized virginity is more relevant to white women and women who have not been socialized to feel that their sexuality is less valuable than white women's.

It is important to note that religion and race are only two factors that contribute to stigmatized non-virginity. Experiences of stigmatization are also extremely different for women who lose their virginites in the context of a long-term, monogamous relationship. Virginity loss in the context of a relationship holds different meanings, due to the fact that it is less centered

around status-making, and more around the relationship. However, while status-making is less central to those in relationships, the desire for sexual experience to become a legitimate sexual being is still relevant. Although these women do not face the same social pressures as women who lose their virginites in the context of hookup culture, they all expressed an awareness of stigmatized virginity. This awareness is significant in showing how stigmatized virginity is a prevalent, recognizable social phenomenon in contemporary sexual culture.

Conclusion

Virginity has historically reflected patriarchal gender norms that oppress women. However, the ways in which virginity contributes to upholding gender hierarchies have shifted in conjunction with society's sexual norms. Stigmatized virginity enforces the virgin/whore dichotomy by pressuring women to sexually behave more like men, but while staying within the parameters of acceptable femininity. Messages about stigma and the virgin/whore dichotomy are communicated to young women in a multitude of ways, which include: the media, high school, college hookup culture, and peers. I found that, for many women, the pursuit of sex is not for pleasure, but rather for status, power, and social mobility. Thus, losing one's stigmatized virginity is entangled with the desire to gain sexual capital. I claim that stigmatized virginity is yet another way to regulate, punish, and shame woman for not being "properly" sexual. Navigating the virgin/whore dichotomy presents significant challenges for young women as they strive for social status and legitimacy as sexual beings. I will now turn to how stigmatized virginity is a reflection of changing gender norms, notions of womanhood, and ideas of intimacy.

3

MASCULINIZED INTIMACY

“I didn’t care about him at all.”

Leela was taught to wait until marriage before losing her virginity. She identifies as heterosexual, South Asian, and Muslim. Throughout high school and the beginning of her college years, she was called a “snowflake” by her peers because she was considered to still be “pure.” Leela’s friends at Bito College advised her to wait until she found someone special because they regretted losing their own virginites to people they did not care about, too early in life. Despite her friends and family encouraging her to wait, Leela decided to have sex for the first time with someone she was casually hooking up with at Bito. She described the experience as: “It was purely just to have sex, nothing more than that. So that’s where the judgment came in from my friend groups here and back home... [but] whatever, I don’t care [*laughs*].”

Leela expressed that she was motivated to lose her virginity with this person, whom she was not in a relationship with, because she wanted to gain sexual experience. She did not view it as an intimate interaction, but rather as physical practice for future sexual experiences. She expressed:

This is gonna sound fucked up, but because I wanted to get comfortable with sex, technically speaking, knowing how hard it is to have sex for girls, especially for the first few times... I basically used this opportunity with him to get it over with... [It’s] fucked up, because I didn’t care about him at all, but he did [care about me]... I still used this as a way for me to benefit.

Leela does not regret losing her virginity, nor does she feel guilty about it, but she still feels that it was “fucked up” that she did not care at all about her partner. This was in part due to her religious upbringing, sexually conservative community back home, and her fellow peers

who wanted her to remain a “snowflake.” The concept of being a “snowflake” connects to traditional gender/sexual roles, in which women are expected to be emotionally invested and connected to their partner. However, despite these conflicting factors, Leela was still motivated to lose her virginity. Overall, she felt that she benefitted from the experience because she gained useful sexual skills and experience.

Leela’s perspective on sex and virginity loss is indicative of a significant shift in sexual culture, which I call: “masculinized intimacy.” Changing gender and sexual norms are reflective of a culture that privileges the “male rules of love” (Hochschild 2003). The term “masculinized intimacy” signifies the idea that sexual culture is primarily characterized by masculinity. I found that, in intimate life³⁸, women embrace masculine attitudes and behaviors in order to achieve womanhood. I conceptualize masculinity as the representations, embodiments, and features of male dominance, which include: a desire for power, superior social status, and invulnerability (FJaer, Pederson, and Sandberg 2015; Pascoe 2012). Masculinity is also defined by sexual prowess, high sexual desire, and heterosexuality (Pascoe 2012). There is no emphasis on women’s pleasure in the realm of masculinized intimacy; the desire for social status and power takes precedence.

Masculinized intimacy is particularly connected to emotional invulnerability; the inverse of emotional vulnerability, which is a traditionally feminized value. Feminized notions of intimacy can be defined by emotions, relationships, and vulnerability. These traditional values are characterized as weak and undesirable in a sexual culture that venerates masculinity. According to gender theorists, masculinity and femininity are relational to one another on a

³⁸ I define intimacy as the realm of romantic and sexual interactions that are distinct from platonic relationships.

polarized binary: “doing femininity still often means reacting to men and cultural definitions of masculinity” (Currier 2013:723). Thus, the reverence of masculinity is intrinsically linked to the devaluation of femininity. Masculinized intimacy requires one to reject feminized intimacy.

In this chapter, I will further discuss the nature of masculinized intimacy and how it affects young women in their sexual lives. I describe how stigmatized virginity is both a product and a producer of masculinized intimacy. I also discuss hookup culture as a key site for masculinized intimacy, in which casual sex is framed as women’s empowerment. Lastly, in connection to how masculinized intimacy encourages women to act more like men, I highlight how virginity is a strict, heteronormative concept that further binds women to men.

The Male Rules of Love

“Dude, you could literally probably be anyone.”

Imani (heterosexual, African American, non-virgin) has a very nonchalant attitude towards virginity, and sex in general. She completely refutes the idea that virgins become emotionally attached after having sex for the first time. She stated: “I’m just not a fan of people being like, you’re gonna catch feelings for that person because that’s your *first*. Like sure, they’re in my mind as my first, but... I would not say I loved the guy that I had my first sexual experience with, like so far from it.”

Imani had sex for the first time the summer after her freshman year of college with a boy she was not in a relationship with. Laughing, she described her experience:

The guy I was with was so concerned about me falling in love with him [*laughs*] and I was just like dude, you could literally probably be anyone, I’m still gonna [have sex] right now. I want to experience the act, it’s not so much the person I’m doing it with.

Imani's statement reflects a strong differentiation between sex and emotions, which I claim is characteristic of masculinized intimacy. She speaks of emotional connection and love in a disparaging way, indicating a lack of care towards her partner. Similar to Imani, Skye (heterosexual, Chinese American, non-virgin) had little feelings for the boy she had sex with for the first time. She lost her virginity in the context of college hookup culture. She recounted:

I felt different after I had sex. I felt like I had finally experienced something that adults experience and I felt that I had actually stepped into adulthood at that moment. I was like okay now I'm an adult, I have had sex, I have done things, I'm ready for the world. But other than that, I didn't really pine over the guy.

When describing her experience, Skye did not put emphasis on the relationship between her and her partner. Rather, she emphasized the effect it had on her as an individual person. Both Imani and Skye framed their virginity loss experiences in very individualistic terms. They both expressed feeling somewhat detached from their partner, having no desire to become closer to them or develop an emotional connection. Thus, both of these women demonstrate masculinized intimacy.

My concept of masculinized intimacy is closely related to sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's idea of "cultural cooling" (2003). In her analysis of women's self-help books, she categorizes the advice into two distinct groups: traditional and modern. The traditional books advise women to invest their emotional energy into their relationships by caring for their husbands and prioritizing family above all. This aligns with traditional gender norms where women take care of the private, domestic sphere while men work in the public sphere. The "traditional" woman relies on men for security, happiness, and general well-being. On the other hand, the "modern" woman rejects traditional, feminized ideals of caring for others and being cared for. She detaches herself from feminized intimacy and dependence on others in order to be

fully autonomous. “The emotion work that matters is control of the feelings of fear, vulnerability, and the desire to be comforted. The ideal self doesn’t need much, and what it does need it can get for itself” (Hochschild 2003:24). The modern woman is also often characterized as feminist, in that she does not prioritize men or depend on them for her sense of self-worth.

However, although traditional values are more patriarchal than modern values, Hochschild argues that they are also *warm*. This warmth acknowledges that we are social beings, interconnected and interdependent on one another. Yet, warmth is also characterized as disempowering for women due to the devaluation of femininity throughout society. Rather than equalizing gender relations, modern women assimilate to men’s behavior. “Women are encouraged to be cooler while men are not urged to become warmer” (Hochschild 2003:24). This serves as a distinct, gendered social framework across all spheres of society. While cultural cooling indicates a broad cultural shift across various aspects of social life, masculinized intimacy is localized to intimate life.

Moreover, I found that the women in my study gained status by performing masculinity. Therefore, notions of “proper” womanhood and femininity have to be negotiated with masculinized intimacy. This idea was demonstrated by Samira (heterosexual, South Asian, non-virgin), who lost her virginity to a boy she did not really care about in the backseat of a car a few months prior to our interview.

AJA: Did you feel any different after you lost your virginity? Did you have an identity shift, like wow I’m not a virgin anymore?

SAMIRA: I think I felt more like a woman, ‘cause for me woman also has a lot to do with sex, that’s what I relate to, and I like femininity, but I also have some masculine qualities in me as well.

According to traditional gender roles, men take on the active role of pursuing and desiring sex, while women take on the passive role of putting off sex and not fully desiring it. Thus, women like Samira, who enjoy and desire sex, perceive themselves as having masculine qualities. Similar to how Samira conceptualizes desiring sex as a masculine quality that defines her womanhood, Lydia (heterosexual, white, non-virgin) reported a similar experience. She described how she felt after she lost her virginity: “I felt as though people saw me as more grown up, or more of a woman even. More of a woman, yeah, not a girl cause I had *done that* and I knew about that realm of the world.” Lydia’s identity shift after losing her virginity illustrates the interconnectedness of virginity loss and womanhood. The common metaphor of virginity loss as a rite of passage indicates a coming of age as an adult woman (Carpenter 2005). Lydia felt proud and confident after her virginity loss because she no longer perceived of herself as a girl, but rather as a woman. She described how she felt the day after she lost her virginity:

I looked at myself in the mirror for awhile, [and] I was like, *oh my god look at me, I’m a woman now!* I was thinking, I can handle this wow... like the emotional weight of sex. I am a woman, I have had sex. I have done the deed.

She conceptualizes the experience as foundational to her womanhood, yet her descriptions of virginity loss as “doing the deed” and “being able to handle it” have strong masculine connotations of accomplishment, self-fulfillment, and power. Thus, her perception of coming into womanhood is cast in a masculine framework.

As mentioned before in Chapter 1, sexual behavior is socially constructed to be an indicator of who someone is as a person and used to define what it means to be a “normal” girl (Miller 2016). Being a “normal” girl thus requires one to demonstrate appropriate sexual behavior and gender conduct, which are contingent on the norms of sexual culture. The

masculine imperative to be a credible sexual being in society places an additional burden on women, in that their sexuality is bound by the virgin/whore dichotomy, the restrictive double-bind on acceptable female sexuality (Valenti 2009). While women gain respect for being sexually active, they can also easily lose that respect by being *too* sexually active. Both virgins and “whores” are viewed as less valuable and less legitimate, since they do not meet society’s criteria for being properly sexual women.

In Leela’s case, she discussed how her succeeding sexual partners and peers shamed her for losing her virginity with someone she did not care about. She even lied to her next partner that she was still a virgin. She recounted: “I had to break the news later. I had to lie about it because I was scared of their judgment knowing that it wasn’t someone who I was in a relationship with.” This shows that although women are encouraged to partake in masculinized intimacy, they are also punished for it in gender-specific ways. In other words, masculinized intimacy does not offer women more sexual opportunity, but rather it enforces the virgin/whore dichotomy.

Additionally, various women in my study described their experiences and/or desires for masculinized intimacy in terms of empowerment and liberation, which frames the devaluation of femininity in a very positive light. While I do not wish to make assumptions or claims about false consciousness, I do claim that women’s notions of empowerment need to be contextualized within a sexual culture that privileges masculinized intimacy and restricts acceptable female sexuality to strict, narrow parameters. In this context, women’s empowerment is based on the lack of options and the lack of genuine freedom to be subjective sexual beings.

Becca (queer, white, non-virgin) exemplifies how masculinized intimacy can be interpreted as women's empowerment. She lost her virginity at age 14, the beginning of her freshman year of high school, to a boy she was not in a relationship with. She had the preconception that everyone would be having sex in high school, therefore she wanted to get it over with so she would be free of any social pressure later on. Thus, just by being aware of stigmatized virginity and by anticipating that social ostracization, she was motivated to have sex. Her first time was very uncomfortable and painful, but afterwards she still claimed to be a strong advocate for casual sex. However, she expressed that this was not due to her genuine desire to have casual sex, nor was it reflective of a pleasurable experience. She recounted: "As much as I was still like "yeah casual sex is so great!" - It was much more from a feminist "embrace your sexuality" perspective than it was from me actually really feeling like that."

Becca interpreted casual sex as a way of embracing her sexuality, even though her initial desire to have casual sex stemmed from her desire to lose her virginity before it became stigmatized. I argue that the common practice of getting virginity out of the way is indicative of masculinized intimacy, in that it is more about status-making than it is about genuine pleasure or sexual desire. Becca did not experience pleasure when she lost her virginity, nor when she started to have more casual sex later on. She liked the concept of being sexual more so than the actual sexual experience.

However, I do not wish to flatten masculinized intimacy into a singular narrative. It is not inherently negative, as it also has the potential to benefit and protect women. Due to the prevalence of gender-based violence and sexual assault within society, being in control and being invulnerable can be highly desirable and even necessary. Skye exemplified this perspective when

she discussed how she lost her virginity with a friend of hers. She was one of the very few women in my study to claim that her virginity loss was a very positive experience overall. She described:

I felt more empowered because I felt like I had sex on my terms, it wasn't something where the guy was like, "can I put it in you, can I put it in you," and I was finally like, "yeah"... I felt empowered in the sense that I had made the rational decision that yes, I'm gonna have sex with this guy. And I felt more confident after the fact because I felt like I had control over my body and I had control over the situation.

Skye perceives of her virginity loss experience in a positive light based on the fact that she was able to have control over her body and the situation. This idea of being in control is connected to masculinized intimacy because it necessitates invulnerability. Skye perceives of sex as something that can weaken women and take away their sense of agency. Thus, she embraces masculinized intimacy as a way of protecting herself. She feels empowered by being in control and being invulnerable. She does not frame her virginity loss in terms of pleasure or enjoyment, but rather by the fact that she was not coerced to have sex. By comparing her experience to women who are coerced by their partners to have sex for the first time, Skye is suggesting that this is the standard sexual experience for women. In other words, the bar for being empowered is not being assaulted or raped. This idea was brought up again when Skye described how her friends reacted to the news of her virginity loss. She recounted:

I talked to my friends about it and they were like, "okay cool, you lost your virginity, how did that make you feel?" And then they asked me the normal questions like: "Did he force you? Did you feel pressure?" And I was like no, not at all, it was very okay.

According to Skye, questions about sexual assault are the "normal" questions. Thus, her perspective on sex and virginity loss is situated in regards to rape culture, in which women have

a lack of control and bodily autonomy. Thus, masculinized intimacy can serve as a form of self-protection within a culture where violence against women is common and perceived as the normal sexual experience. Therefore, notions of empowerment, in conjunction with masculinized intimacy, also need to be situated within patriarchal sexual culture.

Masculinized intimacy is further complicated by gender-specific fears. Rachel (bisexual, white, virgin) has a lot of resentment, frustration, and fear regarding her current virgin status. She resents the fact that she is perceived as less of a sexual being because she has not had penile-vaginal intercourse, despite having had a multitude of other sexual experiences. She is greatly frustrated by the fact that she is a 20-year-old virgin, but the prospect of getting it out of the way is complicated by her numerous fears. She is scared of many aspects of virginity loss, including the physical act of penetration. She stated: “It’s really the idea of something going in and not having control over it... thinking about a dick going in or something *really* freaks me out.” Media representations of unpleasant, painful virginity loss narratives have only increased her fear of penetration. Kylie (heterosexual, biracial, virgin) expressed: “I don’t like that losing your virginity term... I feel like a lot of times it sounds super scary and I’ve definitely felt very scared because of the way people talk about it.”

Although Rachel’s fear of penetration has subsided, she still has significant trepidation in regards to the meaning and consequences of virginity loss. While she is worried about potential sexual partners judging and rejecting her for being a virgin, she is even more worried about the inverse situation. She stated:

I’m more worried about the, “oh she’s a virgin, I’m gonna see if I can change that”... I’m also just generally worried that a guy would be like, “oh I’m gonna hook up with her a few times and just see if she’ll let me be the one” - like that really gross, weird, kinda almost infantilization, like “she’s pure and I’m gonna change that.”

This fear of fetishization and infantilization reflects the historical conceptualization of virginity as something precious and pure; something worthwhile for men to attain in order to reaffirm and showcase their masculinity (Blank 2007; Valenti 2009). Kylie also has this fear of men fetishizing her virginity, due to an experience she had with one of her peers who had recently learned of her virgin status. She described this incident as:

It was one of those gross moments where he was like, oh you know a girl like you, and you're a virgin, that's very rare - he like fetishized it in a way. He was like "[you're] almost like a gem".... It just made me feel really uncomfortable honestly... how people still think it's weirdly appealing that someone's a virgin.

The fetishization of female virgins is a gender-specific phenomenon that illustrates how gender inequality manifests in sexual culture, creating an uneven playing field for women to navigate. This complicates the social imperative to adopt masculinized intimacy. These fears, expressed by Rachel and Kylie, indicate that sexual culture does not hold the same criteria for men and women alike; sexual norms are grounded in a patriarchal ideology that benefits men.

Hookup Culture

"Sleeping with someone then walking out like they're strangers."

As discussed in Chapter 2, Anna (pansexual, white, non-virgin) lost her virginity to a boy she did not care about because she felt extremely pressured by her peers to have sex. She recounted: "Basically my first time was a hookup and we weren't expected to care about each other." Anna's experience and perspective demonstrates how hookup culture is a key site for masculinized intimacy. While hookup culture exists in various social spheres, it is the dominant sexual script on college campuses (Bogle 2008). It endorses the idea that college is the time for

sexual exploration and self-development without the burden of a relationship. Hookup culture strongly mandates the lack of emotional care and attachment. Anna described this as:

Everybody somehow knows how to hook up and there's sort of a base level of knowledge about what is supposed to happen, like sort of the etiquette around hooking up and not falling for someone... hookups are supposed to be like, oh we can hook up and never happen again.. pretend nothing happened.

While this idea of "pretend nothing happened" can be construed as empowering and gender-bending, my research suggests that it also contributes to stigmatized virginity and perpetuates the devaluation of feminized intimacy. However, although Anna "knows how to hook up," she does not frame her virginity loss as a casual, meaningless experience.

I cannot forget his name and will never forget about [the experience]. It will never just be some casual thing that happened... It might be totally possible for people to hook up with someone as their first time and like be completely happy about it and not have a problem, but I just can't imagine that because that didn't happen to me.

Thus, although hookup culture is founded on and characterized by masculinized intimacy, women such as Anna reject the social imperative to not care and not be affected by one's sexual experiences, especially virginity loss. She demonstrates the difficulty in embracing masculinized masculinity and following the social norms in sexual culture.

There is considerable sociological literature on hookup culture that discusses how it enforces gender inequality and the devaluation of femininity (Bogle 2008; England 2016; Freitas 2013; Wade and Heldman 2012). Existing research claims that hookup culture benefits men more so than women due to the fact that, "hookups occur within the gendered context of an ongoing sexual double standard" (Reid, Elliott, and Webber 2011:548). This is the idea that men can engage freely in casual sex, while women cannot do the same without facing social

stigmatization. Men's desires and needs take social precedence over women's. In other words, women are made the sexual gatekeepers who must be desirable, but not desiring.

On the contrary, there is also the argument that hookup culture provides a context in which women's sexual activity is more permissible and even encouraged (Reid et al. 2011). Women are granted more freedom and sexual agency in hookup culture than in traditional dating, which has stronger heteronormative guidelines and constraints. However, this also implies that women need more of a justification to pursue their sexual desires, since alcohol³⁹ and relative anonymity are key components of hookup culture. Rather than not having any sexual desire at all, women are now expected to "be desirable but not *too* desiring" (Reid et al. 2011:564). This virgin/whore dichotomy increases the possibility of stigmatization, which decreases overall sexual agency for women.

My research builds off this claim that women are no longer the sexual gatekeepers and suggests that now women are held to the same sexual expectations as men, but while still in the context of gender inequality and double standards. In other words, they are expected to act sexually more like men, but within the boundaries of acceptable female sexuality. Those of my participants who lost their virginities in the context of hookup culture reported that they were happy because they had finally gotten rid of their stigma and gained sexual capital; they were not happy because it was a pleasurable or enjoyable experience. Fatima (heterosexual, South Asian,

³⁹ Alcohol often plays a key role in hookup culture because it serves as liquid courage. My participant Yasmin (queer-ish, Iranian American, non-virgin) partly attributes not losing her virginity earlier on in life to the fact that she does not drink. She stated: "Me not drinking [was] a huge factor to me not kissing somebody, or even losing my virginity I think. So many of my friends needed the alcohol to have sex, or even their first kiss, and they were excited when it happened cause they just wanted to get it over with."

virgin) described how she thinks women experience and perceive virginity loss in the context of college hookup culture.

For all my friends who did lose their virginites, they legit didn't care about it and a lot of them lost it to guys who they slept with once or twice and that was it, like never again... I think a lot of people come to college and lose their virginity [through hookup culture] I think now it's just a checklist, a rite of passage, you know... Sure, a girl would love it if you put out candles, but do they care if you do? Are they not gonna sleep with you if you don't? Like, no.

Fatima expresses the idea that women care more about the social mandate to lose their virginity than they do about the actual sexual experience. The notion of putting out candles signifies romance and a sense of care. Fatima's statement signifies that women do not care about the candles, or their partners. None of the women in my study reported pleasure as a significant aspect of their virginity loss experience. This demonstrates sociologist Paula England's claim that: "Women manage to summon up just enough masculinity to keep things casual, but not nearly enough to push for their own pleasure" (2016:59).

Sociologists Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) argue that women with more socioeconomic privilege are more willing and interested in embracing gender nonconforming behavior, but I found this to be the case for the lower-class and lower-middle-class women in my study as well⁴⁰. Also, of all the women in my study who identified as middle to upper-middle class, many expressed a distaste in hookup culture, calling it undesirable and/or unsatisfactory. For example, Paige (pansexual, white, virgin), who identifies as middle class, expressed a strong distaste for hookup culture. She stated: "Doing a quick hookup or something casual, I don't think I could handle that as a person personally." She also stated: "I feel like a lot of my friends aren't into the hookup culture [at Bito College]." Fatima, who identifies as upper-middle class, holds a

⁴⁰ My participants self-identified their class backgrounds, thus these are highly subjective measurements and not precisely calculated.

similar perspective. She described her culture shock when she first encountered hookup culture at Bito College:

I was just shocked to see people at parties making out because that never happens back home, you don't make out, it's something you do behind closed doors... Also sleeping with someone then walking out like they're strangers, I feel like that's so dehumanizing. I feel like [when] I talk to people who [hook up], it affects them. I don't think [hooking up] is natural... I think it's been made natural... I think that's traumatizing.

Conversely, Imani, who identifies as lower-middle class, stated: "I kind of accept hookup culture because it makes it easier for me to get the thing that I want." Hence, Imani has a relatively positive outlook on hookup culture because it allows her to have various sexual experiences. These women demonstrate that higher socioeconomic status is not the sole factor in determining social status or cultural values. In a related study on hookup culture and slut-shaming, researchers did not classify women into groups based on socioeconomic status, but rather determined "high-status" women to be those with the most *peer* status (Armstrong et al. 2014). This peer status was derived from participation in the Greek party scene, which happened to follow class lines, but not entirely. High-status women were described as those who "exhibited a particular style of femininity valued in sororities" (Armstrong et al. 2014:106). This mainly included an attractive physical appearance, an attractive personality, and modest sexual behavior. Although Bito College does not have a Greek life, it does demonstrate this idea that high-status can come from one's gender performance (Butler 1988)⁴¹, rather than just from one's class background.

⁴¹ Gender theorist Judith Butler claims that, "gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (1988:520). In other words, we constantly perform gender in order to maintain our social identities.

In her book on the negative effects of hookup culture, Donna Freitas states, “without sex, a person would be rather lost socially” (2013:71). Although many women in my study expressed an avid disapproval of hookup culture, they still felt obligated to participate because they felt that there were no other alternatives. This in turn caused them to internalize masculinized intimacy as the sexual norm within hookup culture and believe that it was what they genuinely wanted. This was not for the pursuit of pleasure, but rather for the pursuit of being a “normal” college student and sexual being. Thus women’s perceptions of their own sexual desires were greatly influenced by the perceived prevalence of hookup culture. This demonstrates the socially-constructed nature of desire; it is strongly connected to what is perceivably attainable in one’s social environment.

Constructing the Heteronormative Self

“I’m queer, and for me it still felt like I needed to be penetrated.”

Samantha (pansexual, white) is uncertain about her virgin status. While she has not had penetrative sex, she *has* had oral sex with a man. Her understanding of virginity is conflicted by the rigid, heteronormative definition of sex. She expressed that she does not know what her own definition of virginity loss is, but she is aware of the fact that penile-vaginal intercourse holds immense social weight. She stated:

I’ve definitely gotten the impression from the world, life, I don’t even know exactly from where, that having sex with a penis is supposed to “change” me somehow or like, make me “get” sex, *then* I’ll know everything, then I’ll have no new milestones related to sex.

Samantha’s sentiment demonstrates how different sexual acts carry different social weight (Rubin 1993). This socialization process is not always self-evident, as it can manifest unconsciously. Samantha does not know where she got the idea that penile-vaginal intercourse

holds more social weight than other sexual acts, but she understands its significance and feels its social consequences in her own life.

Feminist scholar Adrienne Rich (1980) coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality” to describe how women’s heterosexuality is assumed and enforced by society. People are socially mandated to embrace heteronormativity, or otherwise face great stigmatization and be labeled as deviant. The institutionalization of heterosexuality reinforces gender inequality by perpetuating male dominance. In other words, the unquestionable assumption that heterosexuality is normal and innate to all humans distributes more power to men, while disempowering women. Gender theorist Gayle Rubin (1993) similarly claimed that heterosexual sex is institutionalized and contributes to a patriarchal system of power. She created the concept of “The Charmed Circle” to represent the socially-constructed hierarchy of different sexual acts. It is portrayed as two circular rings of attitudes, beliefs, and practices related to sex. The inner ring represents what is normative and socially-acceptable, e.g. heterosexuality, monogamy, vanilla sex. The outer ring represents what is considered abnormal, unnatural, and immoral, e.g. homosexuality, promiscuity, pornography. The values in the circle change according to shifting gender and sexual norms, thus the original Charmed Circle would differ from one made in the present-day. This sexual hierarchy consistently privileges heteronormativity, which essentially entails male dominance and lack of female agency.

I found that the patriarchal underpinnings to virginity were made most evident by the women in my study who did not identify as heterosexual. Although their sexual orientations and desires are non-conforming, their social beliefs and perceptions regarding virginity are still

deeply instilled with patriarchal, heteronormative ideology. Rachel (bisexual, white, virgin) described this contradiction of thought and practice:

I have a very problematic definition [of virginity], and I know that, but it's the one in my head. In my mind, if I were to lose my virginity first to a woman, in a sense I would not feel like I lost my virginity until I had sex with a man.

Many women spoke of completely reconceptualizing virginity during college after being exposed to gender and sexuality classes, a liberal sexual environment, and peers who engaged in open, sex-positive discourse. However, despite claiming to reject the heteronormative, constraining definition of virginity, they still held themselves personally accountable to it. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Britney (queer, white, non-virgin) described herself as “so sex-positive,” which she felt contradicted her virgin status at the time. However, before she had penile-vaginal intercourse with a man, she *had* had oral sex with a woman. Thus, even though she had already had her first sexual experience, it did not constitute her virginity loss or hold the same social weight as penile-vaginal intercourse with a man. She expressed:

I had had sex with a woman, and I'm queer, and for me it still felt like I needed to be penetrated - even in order to enjoy this full range of different sexual dynamics that I could have with women... I felt like that was important and it was hard for me to reckon with that as a queer person and being like, well I have had sex with someone, but I *really* didn't feel like that was necessarily sex though.

Although Britney does not identify as heterosexual, she strongly abides by compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Her heteronormative conceptualization of sex ultimately prevails over the progressive, “sex-positive” notion that sex can be whatever one wants it to be. This is made evident by the fact that she could not conceive of herself as a full-fledged sexual being, even with female partners, without having had sex with a man. The act of penile penetration by a man serves as the definitive key to unlocking female agency and sexual desire.

Becca and Skye recounted similar stories of having their first sexual experiences with women, but not losing their virginites until they had sex with men. Becca had a threesome with two girls two months before she had intercourse with a boy for the first time. She does not consider that first sexual experience with women as her virginity loss, nor does she even attribute much meaning to it. In fact, she neglected to mention that experience entirely until midway through her interview when she suddenly remembered that it had even occurred. Part of the reason for her ambivalence was because she felt that she was less participatory in that first sexual experience with women than when she had sex with a man for the first time. Other non-heterosexual women shared this view that sex with a woman had blurred guidelines and definitions, while penetrative sex with a man always constituted virginity loss and/or sex, no matter how participatory one was or wasn't. Today, Becca has a very different attitude towards virginity than she did at the time when she lost hers. When giving a definition for virginity loss, she stated:

I think that it is just about how the individual interprets the experience... I think that that should be more of a key defining factor, like what you take away from the experience and what you feel after.

However, despite her more lenient, progressive conceptualization of virginity, she still struggles to unlearn what she has internalized over the years.

I wish I could unlearn the structure in my head where the automatic response [to whom I lost my virginity to] is that guy... cause I think as much as I wanna be like, this doesn't matter, like whatever.. it's strange that that is still what I jump to.

Thus, Becca's personal definition of virginity loss is still strongly defined by penile-vaginal intercourse with a man, despite her desire to reconceptualize it.

Skye also almost forgot that her first sexual experience had occurred. She recounted how she had sex with a girl when she was 12 years old, but characterized it as a naive sexual exploration rather than a meaningful virginity loss. However, while she does not perceive of her initial sexual experience with a woman as constitutive of her ultimate virginity loss, she does lend some significance to it. She expressed:

I think in terms of my own virginity loss, I pinpoint it to.. when I had sex with a guy for the first time, but I also think about when I saw a naked woman for the first time and I'm like, ok this is also something new.. that was my emotional virginity loss. And then my physical virginity loss, where I'm like ok I *actually* lose my virginity.. was when I was with a man.

In Skye's case, she equates emotional virginity⁴² with the loss of innocence, but not with "actual" virginity loss, as she stated. Thus, sexual experiences with women do not have the same amount of significance or the same consequences as sexual experiences with men. Although Skye offers a somewhat multifaceted understanding of virginity loss by conceptualizing it as different levels of sexual development, she ultimately still restricts her definition to penile-vaginal intercourse with a man. Hence, both Becca and Skye discounted their first sexual experiences with women because they did not fit the rigid, heteronormative definition of virginity loss.

This was a prevalent pattern amongst my participants. Every woman in my study, regardless of sexual orientation, defined virginity loss for themselves as penile-vaginal intercourse. The only exception was when Isabella (lesbian, white, non-virgin) told me that her current girlfriend has never had sex with a man and thinks of her virginity loss as the first time she had sex with a woman. Isabella was the only woman in my study to identify as a lesbian. She

⁴² I will discuss this idea of "emotional virginity loss" in a different context in the next chapter, as this term was used by numerous participants in various ways.

is a devoted feminist, strong political activist, and highly-versed in gender and sexuality theory.

She explicitly discussed compulsory heterosexuality when defining virginity loss:

I think most lesbians have sex with men, or at least have sex with a man once before they don't [anymore]... The development of women's sexuality is the development of women's *heterosexuality*. Like, to develop a homosexuality or a queer sexuality is an act deviating from the heterosexuality that you just develop because it's what's given to you. So like I don't know if I would have ever known I was gay if I didn't have a straight relationship... And I think it's just because heterosexuality is such the default and our conceptions of what sex are are so deeply heterosexual that it's really hard to opt out of heterosexuality, especially at a young age.

Isabella has an acute knowledge of institutionalized heteronormativity and how this affects women's sexuality. Since she started having sex with women, she defines sex on a much broader spectrum of sexual activity, encapsulating much more than penile penetration. However, despite her current understandings of sex and her lesbian identity, she still conceptualizes her own virginity loss as her first time having intercourse with a man.

Virginity loss has a static narrative that is very difficult to reconceptualize due to how deeply it is connected with institutionalized heterosexuality. This highlights the sharp distinction between virginity and sex; the definition for sex can be fluid and non-ubiquitous, while the definition for virginity loss has been fixed and invariable since its origination. This also highlights how entrenched the patriarchal roots of virginity are throughout society and culture. Even though many of the women in my study expressed a desire to reconceptualize virginity loss, they ultimately maintained a strict, heteronormative definition for themselves.

Conclusion: The personal is (not so) political

Since the 1960s, women's lives have changed much faster and more drastically than men's (England 2010). Some of these changes include: women's employment and college graduation rates have increased; more women get professional degrees in law, medicine, and business; and gender discrimination in employment and education is now illegal. While these changes are referred to as the "gender revolution," they do not signify a shift in gender norms across all spheres of life. These changes have primarily occurred in worklife, as women have gained access to men's spaces and traditionally male-dominated occupations⁴³. However, this gender revolution is not a two-way street, as men do not benefit from being in traditionally female-dominated spaces or occupations. As Hochschild (2003) would put it, women are cooling, but men are not warming. Sociologist Paula England (2010) argues that while gendered features of paid work have changed, the personal realm has not. The majority of women still take their husband's name, men are still expected to propose, and women are still judged more harshly than men for partaking in casual sex. The feminist rallying call from the 1960s, "The personal is political" was intended to urge women to "demand equality in private as well as public life" (England 2010:7), but it is evident decades later that the personal realm has still not been revolutionized. Romantic and sexual norms still uphold gender inequality and patriarchal ideals.

However, contrary to England's (2010) claim that romantic and sexual norms have remained static, my research shows that they *have* changed in certain ways. They have changed in the sense that women conceptualize and experience sex in more masculine ways, as shown by

⁴³ Traditionally male-dominated occupations include business, marketing, and accounting. Traditionally female-dominated occupations include education, social work, and nursing (England 2010).

their participation in hookup culture and the stigmatization of their virginity. Thus, in today's society, both the workplace *and* the sexual sphere actively devalue femininity, while sanctioning masculinity for men and women alike. In other words, women strive to behave more like men both professionally and sexually. This would appear to be a form of gender equality, if not for the fact that men do not strive to embrace femininity. Men are given even more value and credency due to these masculinized notions of intimacy and womanhood. Thus, the gender binary is not weakened or challenged by this so-called gender revolution.

In this chapter, I have shown how masculinized intimacy serves as the dominant script in sexual culture via young women's perceptions of sex, definitions of virginity loss, and participation in hookup culture. Despite having liberal notions of gender and sexuality, young women still feel bound by the rigid heteronormative parameters around sex and virginity loss. Thus, I claim that the current sexual culture is not more progressive, nor more feminist, than in the past. However, women are not merely helpless victims to an oppressive, patriarchal society. Women do not always embrace the social norms and expectations of masculinized intimacy within hookup culture. In the next chapter, I will further discuss this idea of resisting and rejecting masculinized intimacy. I will also describe how virginity contributes to constructing self-identity and personal autonomy.

4

EMOTIONAL VIRGINITY

“That’s the thing worth saving.”

Unlike the many women I spoke to who expressed that being a virgin in college is highly undesirable and embarrassing, Elizabeth (heterosexual, white, virgin) is unashamed and unbothered by her virgin status. At 19 years old, she has no problem telling peers and sexual partners alike that she is a virgin. She is actively involved in the hookup culture on Bito’s campus and sees herself as a fairly sexual person, consistently hooking up or dating someone. She frequently engages in oral sex with her sexual partners, but draws a strict line at intercourse, which she defines as virginity loss. By holding onto her virginity, she feels a sense of empowerment and liberation. She described this as:

In a certain way, I feel more free than other people... like, this is me owning my body, owning my experience with other people and making it my own, really being adamant about what I want, and what I want in the relationship.

Elizabeth’s self-assured attitude towards her virginity reflects one way in which young women can navigate a sexual culture that defines sexual agency and desire according to masculinized intimacy. The way in which Elizabeth constructs an autonomous sexual identity is by maintaining strict parameters around her sexual behavior. She views her desire to keep her virginity as a form of sexual agency. It is her form of resistance to stigmatized virginity and masculinized intimacy. I claim that she represents one way in which women use virginity itself to fight back against its stigmatization. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003) would classify her as the “modern” woman who strives to construct her own independent self-identity without depending on men or a committed relationship. Additionally, while Elizabeth describes

her virginity as a way of establishing ownership of her body and her sexuality, she also frames it in connection to her fear of dependence and loss of personal autonomy. She stated:

In a certain way, having sex is scary for me because not having it gives me these parameters around it... and like having sex with someone sort of feels like I'm giving them everything... Like there's nothing that is completely mine anymore, like I share my whole self with someone else, which is scary.

For Elizabeth, virginity loss signifies a complete loss of self-identity. However, while this idea of giving her "whole self" to someone is frightening and intimidating to her, it is also highly desirable. She values her individual autonomy, but she also values the idea of merging with someone else. She stated: "Sex feels like a spiritual thing in a certain way - I mean I know it's fun and great obviously, but it's also like being connected to someone in a way you can't be in any other way." Thus, her fear of a close attachment is closely related to her deep desire for a meaningful connection. She has imbued sex with meaning, thus she wants it to be a positive experience. Until she finds the right person to develop a close bond with, she is not ready to lose her virginity. Thus, her virginity serves as a protective shield from emotional vulnerability and dependence on a man.

Dependency is a term applicable to various aspects of social life, which include: the economy, politics, legal affairs, and gender relations. Sociologists Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1997) track the genealogy of "dependency" by examining the history of the U.S. welfare system. The meaning and significance of dependency has shifted throughout history, going from a neutral descriptor to a highly undesirable, stigmatized, and gendered label. Originally, dependency did not signify subordination or inferiority. It began as an objective label for those who were at an incomplete stage in life and thus needed to depend on others. However, it evolved into a gendered concept in the industrial era when wage labor became the cultural

imperative to independence. “Thus, for wage labor to create (white-male) independence, (white) female economic dependence was required. Women were thus transformed ‘from partners to parasites’” (Fraser and Gordon 1997:129). When industrial society introduced changing gender norms, which included having more women in the workplace, the male breadwinner and female homemaker model broke down. Subsequently, dependency became even more stigmatized due to the new social expectation that everyone should be self-sustaining and independent, or else be labeled as deviant. Additionally, the American Revolution signified a surge in the valorization of independence, which further emphasized the stigmatization of dependency and its connotation of powerlessness.

However, in today’s post-industrial society, dependency is primarily understood as a stigmatized moral/psychological character trait, which no longer has a social-structural basis. In other words, there is an unquestioned assumption that dependency is an inherent psychological state, rather than a constructed social condition. The 1980s even brought about a cultural panic in regards to dependency, with the American Psychiatric Association determining it to be a psychiatric disorder.⁴⁴ In present-day society, dependency is no longer perceived as a mere descriptor for a person, nor as a result of unequal economic status, but rather it is viewed as a highly stigmatized, abnormal human condition. It essentially becomes the fault of individuals if they are dependent on anyone, or anything, besides themselves.

It should be noted that the idea of dependency is also highly racialized. White women are characterized as overly dependent on men, whereas Black women are characterized as overly

⁴⁴ “Dependent Personality Disorder” (DPD) is an official psychopathology. The definition states that it is more common and diagnosed more frequently among (white) females (Fraser and Gordon 1997).

independent from men⁴⁵. Black women have historically been expected to take care of their families and support themselves, which creates the stereotype of Black women being intensely strong and independent (Collins 2000; Goodkind 2009). On the other hand, white women are assumed to need more help and support from men.

Sociologist Kathleen Gerson (2010) in her book, *The Unfinished Revolution*, conducted a survey among various men and women to ask about their ideal partner relationship and their fallback partner relationship if the former fell through. The majority of both men and women reported that their ideal partner relationship would be egalitarian, in which both partners had equal responsibility. However, in terms of a fallback plan, the majority of men reported wanting a neotraditional relationship (the breadwinner-homemaker arrangement) while the majority of women reported wanting complete self-reliance. Thus, according to Gerson's study, women would prefer to be completely independent rather than to revert back to traditional gender roles, which entail being dependent on a man. This is indicative of how women in particular are rejecting dependency and embracing "cultural cooling" (Hochschild 2003).

Additionally, the stigmatization of dependency connects to the Foucauldian concept of self-responsibilization, in which individuals become self-governing due to insidious, indirect, overarching systems of power (Cruikshank 1999; Rose 1999). Sociologist Nikolas Rose describes how this "binds subjects to a subjection that is the more profound because it appears as a matter of our freedom" (1990:256). In other words, individuals are not governed by higher powers restricting their freedom, but rather they are governed by the guise of freedom itself. This is demonstrated by the contemporary shift in patriarchal ideas. Traditional notions of patriarchy

⁴⁵ While Black women are viewed as independent in regards to men, they are viewed as excessively dependent on the state. The image of the "Black, unmarried, teenaged, welfare-dependent mother" (Fraser and Gordon 1997:139) signifies stereotypes that cast Black women as the ultimate dependents.

entail repressing and restricting women's freedom, while contemporary notions of patriarchy *mandate* women's freedom via the social imperative to have sex. Hence, in current sexual culture, women are obliged to be free and autonomous. This sense of obligation contradicts with genuine freedom, thus it highlights how women are still tightly bound by patriarchal ideology, but under the illusion of liberation. Additionally, sociologist Barbara Cruikshank builds on this theory of false freedom with her claim that governance is a matter *self-governance*, as exemplified by society's emphasis on self-esteem and empowerment. Rather than attributing blame to unequal and unjust social conditions, individuals become responsible for their own oppression. Cruikshank states that, "self-esteem as a social movement links subjectivity and power in a way that confounds any neat separation of the "empowered" from the powerful" (1999:103). Thus, empowerment comes from subjection, rather than from autonomy or resistance.

While my participants expressed their fear and distaste for dependency, they also expressed their dissatisfaction with the idea of complete independence. In this chapter, I discuss the idea of "emotional virginity" as reflective of this desire to experience meaningful, emotional attachments. Shannon ("not 100% heterosexual," Chinese American, non-virgin) offered the following definition: "When you can finally make love is when you finally lose your emotional virginity." According to Shannon, "making love" encompasses traditionally feminized values of love, emotion, and deep connection. Losing one's emotional virginity signifies bridging the physical experience of sex with a strong emotional connection. This indicates how sex and making love are two distinct concepts with different consequences; one loses their stigmatized virginity via sex, while one loses their emotional virginity via making love.

In a sexual culture characterized by masculinized intimacy, the values associated with making love have been construed as disempowering, weak, and oppressive. They are rejected by the modern discourse of “every woman for herself,” which is also often interpreted to be the empowered “feminist” perspective (Hochschild 2003). However, the concept of emotional virginity itself demonstrates a desire to embrace emotional connection, vulnerability, and even dependence. Emotional virginity can also be understood by the “gift” metaphor (Carpenter 2005), as discussed in Chapter 1. Emily (heterosexual, white, non-virgin) described virginity as: “It felt like something that was a gift that you were born with and then you had to protect.” While Emily’s statement was in regards to her physical virginity loss, her sentiment can also be applied to the concept of emotional virginity loss. The idea of emotional virginity also connects to sociologist Leslie Bell’s claim that:

Sexual desire isn't all about being a powerful she devil but it is a vulnerable experience on multiple levels. Being sexually desiring does not always involve feeling in control. In fact it often involves feeling out of control, subject to strong and deeply felt yearnings that may not always be satisfied or received positively by others (2013:87).

My research suggests that the stigmatization of dependency extends into sexual culture in new, unprecedented ways. In this chapter, I further discuss emotional virginity and what it means to young women who are ambivalent or dissatisfied with the culture of masculinized intimacy. I describe the ways in which the women in my study feel obligated to abide by masculinized intimacy, while also holding onto their emotional virginity. I also discuss my participants’ attempted pathways of direct and indirect resistance, as they strive to construct a sense of self-identity and personal autonomy. Overall, the concept of emotional virginity presents a

counterclaim to the idea that women feel genuinely satisfied and fulfilled in a culture characterized by masculinized intimacy.

Masculinized Intimacy vs. Emotional Virginity

“You can like plaintively have sex with someone, but you can also give yourself to someone.”

While Elizabeth does not want to get too emotionally attached to someone, she also really values emotional bonds and meaningful relationships. Expressing care is important to her. She does not disregard or discard her sexual partners, even one-night stands, which runs counter to the culture of masculinized intimacy. By directly telling her sexual partners that she is a virgin and that she does not want to have sex with them, Elizabeth feels that she is showing care. She described this as:

This is me caring about being intimate with our bodies together and I put a lot of thought into that and I want to communicate to the person that I’m with that what I’m doing with them is meaningful, whether I wanna be their girlfriend or not. So in that way, I like to talk about [being a virgin] with them because even if I’m saying I don’t want to have sex with you, it’s saying that I’ve put thought into this and I am thoughtful about this, about you, and care about you and this relationship in a certain way.

Elizabeth was the only woman in my study who discussed giving intentional acts of emotional care during casual sex. In this aspect, she is an anomaly in my study. Hookup culture is founded upon masculinized intimacy, but there are ways in which one can incorporate feminized intimacy. Thus, hookup culture and masculinized intimacy are not always interconnected. It is difficult to embrace feminized intimacy in a culture that determines vulnerability and care to be signs of weakness and dependence. I claim that in a sexual culture that fervently devalues femininity, showing genuine care and connection is an act of resistance.

Elizabeth demonstrates that it is possible to bend the rules and reshape the confines around stigmatized virginity, hookup culture, and masculinized intimacy.

Tiana (heterosexual, Hispanic/African American, non-virgin) is similar to Elizabeth, in that she strongly embodies both masculinized and feminized intimacy. She is a very charismatic, confident, self-assured woman who makes very deliberate sexual decisions. She wanted her virginity loss to be special and meaningful, thus she waited until she was in a serious, long-term, loving relationship at age 18. Unlike most of the women in my study, she experienced no social pressure in regards to her virginity, nor did she understand why other women felt stigmatized. She partly attributes her lack of stigmatization to her Blackness⁴⁶, but also to the idea of wanting autonomy and self-control. She expressed:

I just don't have a lot of control over things in my life, but I do have a lot of control over my body, like that's the illusion that I have for myself so it was really important for me to have something that someone couldn't take from me.. even though that is an illusion 'cause we live in rape culture.

For Tiana, similar to Elizabeth, keeping her virginity until she was in love with someone was a way of affirming her independence and bodily autonomy. This was reflected by Tiana's statement: "It was something I really need to own emotionally before I could own it physically." She needed emotional control and physical control before feeling comfortable to have sex for the first time. Virginity is often conceptualized as a tangible thing to "lose" or to "give away," but as Tiana demonstrates, it is also thought of as something to "own." This ownership is empowering for women who live in rape culture; a culture that denies women sexual agency and choice. As discussed in Chapter 3, masculinized intimacy is not a singular narrative that is intrinsically

⁴⁶ In Chapter 2 Tiana described how Black women's virginity is given less value and importance (thus less stigma) throughout society due to historical, racist notions of Black women's sexuality being dirty and impure.

negative. In the context of rape culture, a sense of control and invulnerability is highly desirable and even necessary in many situations.

Today, Tiana frequently participates in Bito College's hookup culture and takes pride in being a "fully-fledged sexual partner now." She has sex once or twice a week on average and is not currently in a relationship. On the surface level, one could draw the conclusion that Tiana has a very different approach to sex today than she had when she lost her virginity. She no longer needs emotional security before having sex. In fact, she does not desire emotional sex at all. Her mindset of focusing on emotions before physicality has reverted to embracing physicality without the emotions. Tiana has adapted to the social norms of masculinized intimacy by restricting her sexual interactions solely to casual, emotionless sex in the context of hookup culture. However, Tiana makes a sharp distinction between the physical sex she is currently having to the emotional sex she is still waiting for. She stated:

Sometimes I feel like I have a really weird perspective on sex. Like yeah, I can have sex all the time, but still really emotionally feel like I'm saving myself for someone that matters. I can show someone a good time, we can have fun, but there's *just* a difference, there's just a difference between fucking someone that you have a good time with and fucking someone you're in love with and want to spend the rest of your life with.

Before Tiana lost her virginity, she was very enthusiastic about the idea of waiting to lose her virginity in order to give it to someone special. She even wanted to get a purity ring⁴⁷. Although she has had many sexual experiences since losing her virginity, her mentality about wearing a purity ring and waiting for sex has not changed.

I still feel like I could wear [a purity ring] because I'm saving my purity, all of what it means to have an intimate, meaningful sexual experience with me for someone. I don't share that with everyone, it's not the same thing. There's just a lot of layers to what sex is and you can plaintively have sex with someone, but

⁴⁷ A purity ring is a type of promise ring worn as a symbol of chastity.

you can also *give* yourself to someone and that's the thing that's worth saving, that's the thing worth saving for someone... Even though I wouldn't describe myself as a virgin, like by any standard, I would definitely say that yeah I'm saving myself for someone special.

There is a stark contrast between Tiana's mindset about sex and her actual sexual behavior. While she frequently engages in casual, emotionless sex, she holds onto the idea that sex can be intimate and meaningful. Although Tiana and Elizabeth may seem to be very different people on the surface level, they actually share many commonalities in regards to virginity and intimacy. Although Elizabeth identifies as a virgin and Tiana does not, they both claim to still have their emotional virginites. They both feel empowered by keeping their emotional virginites, despite differences in their sexual behavior. They also both conceptualize emotional virginity loss as a gift, signifying that one shares their most vulnerable, intimate self with someone else. Viewing that they both actively participate in hookup culture, the most pertinent difference between these two women is that Elizabeth shares a certain degree of care and emotional intimacy with her sexual partners, while Tiana sharply distinguishes sex from emotions. Elizabeth feels protected by her virginity, while Tiana feels protected by casual, emotionless sex. They represent two ways in which women can maintain a sense of autonomy.

This emphasis on independent selves is reflected in sociologist Sara Goodkind's (2009) research on gender-specific rehabilitation centers for girls. She found that these rehabilitative programs were built on the premise of "commercialized feminism," which is characterized by "the individual, self-reliance, and personal responsibility for change" (2009:397). The girls in these rehabilitation centers are told that if they just improve themselves, all of their problems will be fixed. Hence, this signifies "a shift in the location of the problem to be addressed from outside of the self (e.g., patriarchal society) to within the self (e.g., low self-esteem)" (2009:401). This

rhetoric of independence is framed as “feminist” because it supposedly gives more individual agency and personal choice to women. However, Goodkind claims that this “feminist face” is dangerous because it negates social context and perpetuates unequal social hierarchies, particularly in the case of marginalized girls. Although these women may claim to be empowered by their choices and sense of independence, they are simultaneously holding themselves responsible for socially-created systems of oppression. Just as the women in Goodkind’s study were coached to avoid dependency by various rehabilitation centers, I argue that current sexual culture at large socializes women to avoid dependency in similar ways.

There were numerous other women in my study who shared similar perspectives to Elizabeth and Tiana, but were not as confident in expressing it. Many were embarrassed or ashamed to admit that they wanted to care about their sexual partner and have meaningful, emotional sex. One of these women was Olive (pansexual, white, non-virgin), who had a horrible, non-consensual virginity loss experience. She was 14 at the time, while her long-term boyfriend was 18. She decided to have sex with him so “things would just be easier and he would stop being mad.” She compared her virginity loss to the experience of drinking something nasty: taking a deep breath and bracing oneself, but ultimately still not being fully prepared. Confused and frightened, she cried the whole time they had sex. The experience was highly impactful on her outlook towards sex and intimacy. She stated:

I’ve found myself sort of wishing that I still had that new feeling about things, which is kind of interesting cause it doesn’t feel like a natural thing to want. I don’t know, it’s a weird thing where you feel like you wish you could be excited about intimacy and sex like it was the first time, cause it feels like it should be more meaningful that way... I’ve had a lot of looking for being excited and trying to make things meaningful... because I feel that I never really had that, ‘oh I’m losing my virginity and it’s wonderful’ kind of experience.

The fact that Olive does not view her desire for emotional intimacy as a “natural thing to want” is highly indicative of masculinized intimacy as the prevalent social norm. It is hegemonic in the sense that women do not see any alternatives in sexual culture. Olive feels ashamed that she is still seeking a meaningful sexual encounter that can override her traumatic virginity loss experience. Similarly, Shannon, who lost her virginity drunk on a toilet seat at a party, expressed a desire for more meaningful sexual experiences:

I did use sex as just a physical virginity and there was no emotional virginity, none of that. And I think as I have gotten older, and have finally had sex, and have been having sex, I now kind of view emotional virginity as something completely cherished.. I do think a person should cherish their emotional virginity.

While penile-vaginal intercourse is the most prevalent definition for physical virginity loss, it is not the only definition for emotional virginity loss. Lydia (heterosexual, white, non-virgin) discussed how, for her, giving oral sex to a partner is the ultimate demonstration of care, trust, and comfortability. It is her personal definition of emotional virginity loss. She stated:

The value that a lot of people put on sex, or losing their virginity, is the same value that I put on oral sex... It makes me feel kind of powerless, which is weird cause I know a lot of people feel like they are empowered. A part of me wants to save doing that for the person I can really trust... that I'm doing it for them and not for any weird, ulterior motive... It's so vulnerable for me and I can't imagine doing that and knowing that I was being vulnerable and knowing that I didn't have any intentions of being with that person for a really long time.

Lydia acknowledges that many women feel empowered by giving oral sex, which she interprets as an “ulterior” motive. In this case, oral sex is not given for the purpose of mutual satisfaction, but given in order to create a power dynamic; this can feel empowering or extremely vulnerable. Elizabeth echoed Lydia’s sentiment about vulnerability, but in regards to intercourse:

Virginity and sex [are] equated with having the ability to get more hurt than otherwise in a relationship, like if you're with someone in that way then you're

much more vulnerable than otherwise. So not doing that with someone is like putting distance between you and not letting them hurt you as much.

While Lydia feels powerless giving oral sex but very comfortable having intercourse, Elizabeth has the opposite mindset. She feels powerless about the idea of penetrative sex, but she feels very comfortable giving oral sex. Thus, emotional virginity is tied to the sexual act in which one feels the most vulnerable and connected to their partner. It is not intrinsically linked to penile-vaginal intercourse, unlike one's physical virginity loss. Lydia views the pinnacle of trust and emotional intimacy as oral sex, whereas Elizabeth views it as penetration.

Participating in masculinized intimacy is equivalent to protecting oneself from extreme vulnerability, whereas saving one's emotional virginity is reflective of a desire and fear to experience that vulnerability with someone. Therefore, emotional virginity and masculinized intimacy are not contingent on specific sexual acts, as much as they are determined by vulnerability and invulnerability.

Pathways of Resistance

"I'm not as independent as one might think."

Many of my participants expressed a great desire to reshape notions of virginity loss and deconstruct sexual norms, but they ultimately could not apply this way of thinking to their own lives. For instance, Shannon stated: "I think I always thought it's okay to be a virgin at any age, but for me *personally* I thought I had to lose my virginity sooner rather than later." Shannon's internalization of stigmatized virginity made it impossible for her to apply her progressive ideas to her own life. Dissonance between thought and action was presented again and again by women proclaiming to support more liberal, inclusive conceptualizations of virginity. As I

discussed in Chapter 2, women of diverse sexual orientations consistently defined virginity loss as penile-vaginal intercourse with a man, despite their desire to reframe this way of thinking. However, I found that numerous women explicitly and implicitly discussed the ways in which they resist stigmatized virginity and masculinized intimacy in their own lives.

One way in which women attempt to construct autonomy and sexual agency was exemplified by Rachel (bisexual, white, virgin), who discussed feeling very frustrated by her current virgin status and her associated fears. As a way of self-consolation, she frequently reminds herself of all the past opportunities when she *could* have had sex with men if she had wanted to. She stated:

It actually really helps to point out all the guys I could just settle for, especially ones that I don't like. Like if I wanted to have sex, I could have sex with you, you, you, and you and I know none of you would say no to me. And I'm not doing that *on purpose* because I'm being kind to myself and waiting for when I actually want to, and that actually really helps me.

Rachel is conflicted by her own values regarding virginity amidst the social pressures she experiences. She wants a meaningful sexual experience with a partner she really likes and trusts, but she feels as though she has to justify this desire for a certain degree of emotional intimacy. She is acutely aware of the social imperative to just "get it over with," thus the acknowledgment that she *could* have sex with someone if she wanted to makes her feel like she has more sexual agency. In other words, because she struggles to feel secure and confident about her virgin status, she frames her virginity as a deliberate personal choice on her part. She interprets it to be a form of self-empowerment and self-respect. However, her attempt to resist stigmatized virginity is constituted by affirming her desirability to men, which is reflective of heteronormative, patriarchal sexual culture. Her form of resistance and empowerment is molded by the social

norms of masculinized intimacy, which give power and credence to those with sexual experience and to those who are sexually desirable. While Rachel resists the idea that a woman's self-identity and sense of sexual autonomy is based on men, she also inadvertently acquiesces to it.

Thus, as Rachel demonstrates, it very challenging for women to carve a pathway of resistance in current sexual culture. However, unlike Rachel, there are some women who do not view dependence on men as something negative or disempowering. Paige (pansexual, white, virgin) has never been romantically or sexually involved with a man, but she does not view herself as an autonomous woman who is completely detached from men. She stated:

One of my friends said that I'm the most independent person she knows 'cause I never have a boyfriend and it's just like... I never have a boyfriend, but I always have some man just around, like my best friend on campus is a man and that's just my go-to person... I don't have a boyfriend, but I always have a person around so I'm not as independent as one might think.

This highlights how the reliance on men to define women's self-identities and sense of autonomy is prevalent outside the realm of intimacy as well. Paige does not express shame or embarrassment regarding her dependence on men, but rather embraces it and defines herself by it. She does not strive to conceptualize herself as an empowered, independent woman, unlike Rachel, but rather acknowledges that men are an important part of her life and she feels very connected to them. She does not feel a need to resist this merging of identities. This can be interpreted as a backlash against masculinized intimacy and cultural cooling (Hochschild 2003).

Additionally, Paige often tells jokes about her virginity as a way of relieving the social pressure she sometimes feels. She stated: "Once I could talk about it and find it humorous with myself and make other people find it humorous, then I didn't feel [the pressure] as much." Thus,

Paige uses humor to combat stigmatized virginity. This small form of resistance helps her in her everyday life, relieving the social pressure she feels. Her sexual behavior and sexual attitudes are thus not contingent on the culture of masculinized intimacy and stigmatized virginity.

In a more implicit way, Samantha (pansexual, white, virgin) also demonstrates a backlash against masculinized intimacy and shows a strong desire to fight the internalization of stigmatized virginity. She had a long-term boyfriend throughout high school and the beginning of college. They had various sexual experiences together, including oral sex, but never penetrative sex. In our interview, Samantha expressed a secret regret about not having lost her virginity with him. Emotionally, she recounted:

I haven't really said this thing out loud and it's stupid.. okay, no I'm gonna say it cause it's important... [*tearing up*] part of the reason why I was really upset when the guy I was with ended things was like, ah shit I thought you would be a really good, safe first experience. And I had hoped that that would be my safe, easy out and it wasn't.

Like many other women in my study, Samantha had the desire to get her virginity out of the way. However, unlike other women, she expressed this desire as a guilty confession and was moved to tears when she admitted it aloud. She stated: “[It] feels almost weird and manipulative on my part, even though I didn't act on it so it's not. I don't know... It's gross.” When I asked her if she felt ashamed about feeling that way, she fervently responded: “Yes, totally!” She was an anomalous voice amongst my participants, in that she was the only person to feel shame for wanting to get rid of her stigma. Her sense of shame is indicative of how stigmatized virginity not only hurts women, but also makes women blame themselves for internalizing the stigma. Many other participants casually discussed wanting to get their virginity “out of the way” in the context of both hookup culture and long-term relationships. This nonchalant way of talking about

stigmatized virginity is characteristic of masculinized intimacy. However, Samantha's guilt and regret about having the mere *thought* of using her boyfriend as a way of getting rid of her stigma implies that the internalization of stigmatized virginity does not always include the internalization of masculinized intimacy. She continues to value emotional intimacy and feels ashamed that stigmatized virginity overpowered her value judgment at the time.

Another instance in which one of my participants was moved to tears was in a very different, but equally emotive context. Britney (queer, white, non-virgin) had placed a high value on losing her virginity with someone that she really cared about, but for various reasons she did not have sex with her long-term boyfriend, whom she loved, before they broke up. She teared up when she discussed a significant turning point in her relationship and in the way she conceptualized sex. She described an instance when they were both smoking weed and hooking up. At that point, she really wanted to lose her virginity with him. She recounted:

I was like, fuck me, let's have sex right now... but he stopped everything and he was like, no. And I was like why, why wouldn't you wanna do that right now.. and he was like "because the first time I'm inside of you, I wanna be sober and completely for that experience"... [*tearing up*] Even though we didn't have the greatest physical chemistry, that's a really beautiful thing... that really changed the way I thought about sex, just in this way of, oh my god yeah you would be inside of me and we would be so close and I hadn't really thought about it that way necessarily before, to that extent. That was one of the most beautiful things he ever said to me.

Britney still thinks of sex as an incredibly intimate experience, but she had to let go of that idea when she realized that that was not going to be the case for her virginity loss. She eventually lost her virginity to a stranger she met on Tinder when she became too frustrated and tired of carrying her stigma to wait for the right relationship any longer. Britney's situation with her boyfriend illustrates how emotional intimacy is a powerful experience valued by men and

women alike. On the other hand, her loveless virginity loss shows how, despite a deep desire to honor emotional intimacy, stigmatized virginity ultimately prevails and dictates sexual behavior.

The interpretation of masculinized intimacy as women's empowerment is indicative of how women hold themselves accountable for their own gender subordination. While the college-educated women in my study could easily identify patriarchal systems and discuss feminism extensively, they maintained strict, heteronormative rules for their own sexual lives. Their various forms of minor resistance in regards to stigmatized virginity ultimately connect back to patriarchal ideals that give disproportionate weight to heterosexual sex and masculinized intimacy. This dissonance between thought and action highlights the success of masculinized intimacy in framing the devaluation of femininity as women's empowerment.

Independence, self-esteem, choice, and empowerment all have seemingly positive connotations at face-value, but they take on oppressive qualities when they are used to responsabilize women for their own oppression (Goodkind 2009). Rather than combatting the social structures and barriers that prevent women from having the same social opportunities and privileges as men, this self-regulation method is used to make women blame their inferior social status on themselves. This is reflected in Goodkind's argument: "What began as a problem with men, created by men, is transformed into a problem with women" (2009:400). Men and women do not have equal power in society and they are not socialized into sexual culture in the same ways. The rhetoric of empowerment masks the social conditions that uphold gender inequality. Rather than deconstructing the roots of patriarchal culture, women are taught to believe in their ability to bring forth change in their own lives. While this has the potential to be empowering, it completely shifts the responsibility onto women to fix the problem of patriarchy.

Conclusion

In her book on women navigating the complicated sexual landscape, sociologist Leslie Bell claims that, “twenty-something women contend with a societal-level split between independence and vulnerability, with vulnerability as the denigrated category” (2013:172). My research supports this claim that contemporary sexual culture leaves no room for vulnerability. I argue that the furtive nature in which my participants discussed emotional virginity not only highlights the prevalence of masculinized intimacy in sexual culture, but also how emotional virginity can serve as a quiet form of resistance. It represents the feminized intimacy that many women would not openly admit to wanting. While stigmatized virginity is explicitly and implicitly endorsed by media and various social institutions, emotional virginity is not often openly discussed or promoted by popular culture.

The common desire amongst my participants for an emotional virginity loss illustrates how a drastic emotional separation from men in the pursuit of complete independence is not easily feasible, nor even that favorable. Complete independence would require defining one’s virginity loss differently from penile-vaginal intercourse with a man, which none of the women in my study could do. Paige is an example of someone who does not even desire this independent identity, as she explicitly stated how she “always has some man around.” Additionally, while Tiana feels very independent and has an autonomous sexual identity, she makes a stark distinction between the physical sex she is currently having and the emotional sex she wants to be having one day. The desire for an emotional virginity loss was not boldly proclaimed by many

of my participants. It was expressed in shame, confusion, sadness, and frustration. This was reflected by Olive's sentiment: "It doesn't feel like a natural thing to want."

However, emotional virginity loss indicates the possibility for a future change in sexual culture that is not as radical as cutting off men entirely. Emotional virginity loss highlights the fact that while many women assimilate to a sexual culture characterized by masculinized intimacy, they want more from it. The desire for an emotional virginity loss signifies a desire for reshaping what virginity is and what it means. Beyond the desire for social status and legitimacy as an adult woman, there is a deeper desire for emotional connection and merging of sexual identities. Since women are socialized to see feminized intimacy as a form of weakness, this desire is also laden with fear and resistance.

It is significant to note that neither physical nor emotional virginity is centered around pleasure. The social meanings and the emotional consequences of virginity take precedence. In the next chapter, I suggest how pleasure has the potential to radically shift the conversation on virginity. I argue that in order to truly ameliorate women's positioning in sexual culture, virginity as a concept needs to be entirely reconceptualized, or even completely eradicated.

5

CONCLUSION

“I really want to get to that point where I really enjoy it.”

As she was leaving the room after her interview, Audrey (heterosexual, white, virgin) turned around and made one final comment about virginity. She stated:

It’s something that I have to think about, which is weird because it shouldn’t be... It should be like [*casually*] ‘oh you’re a virgin, cool. You’re not a virgin? Cool.’ Like, just a passing thing. But like I said, virginity is a social construct made to shame women.

Resisting stigmatized virginity and/or masculinized intimacy is an uphill battle for women to fight back. I claim that instead of emphasizing the role of the individual in combatting oppression, the larger social and cultural forces need to be addressed. The masculine rhetoric of self-empowerment and independence often masks the underlying social factors that maintain male dominance. Thus, by understanding the contemporary sexual culture through this critical sociological perspective, one is able to see the pathways of possible resistance through a clearer lens. Rather than perpetuating the self-esteem and self-empowerment rhetoric, sociologist Sara Goodkind suggests that we “need the broader social change in which the social value of all women was enhanced” (2009:410).

To begin, there needs to be a complete reconceptualization of how virginity is defined. The current heteronormative definition of penile-vaginal intercourse has remained static throughout history, but the sexual norms regarding it have shifted, as shown by changing patterns of stigmatization. Thus, it is not impossible to radically change the ways in which virginity is understood and defined. Although the women in my study could not reconfigure their internalized, heteronormative definitions of virginity loss in relation to their past and present

sexual lives, they expressed an avid desire to spread new knowledge and ways of thinking about virginity. Hence, there is the possibility that future generations will be able to redefine what virginity, and sex in general, means to them. Riley (“mostly heterosexual,” biracial, non-virgin) suggested a new way of conceptualizing virginity loss:

I feel like if I could reconstruct the idea of it... I guess it would just be any act that feels sexual... cause if virginity means anything at all, I feel like a lot of other sexual landmarks mean a lot too in terms of being a first time.

Lydia (heterosexual, white, non-virgin) also expressed a desire to make virginity a more subjective experience that is less contingent on penile-vaginal intercourse. She stated:

I wish that virginity... was more subjective and based on when you felt a strong sense of intimacy with a person, rather than a guy’s penis is in you. Like, that’s not fair, why does he get to do that to me, I should be able to control my own virginity.

This desire for “a strong sense of intimacy” is demonstrated by the concept of emotional virginity loss. Emotional virginity signifies a form of feminized intimacy, which places value on the individual’s subjective sexual experience and emphasizes vulnerability, trust, and comfortability. The devaluation of femininity is reflected in all spheres of social life, which include: the workplace, the economy, the family, politics, and sexual culture. While women have historically been stereotyped as wanting more romantic and emotional attachments than men do, this has shifted to neither men nor women desiring feminized intimacy. This masculine behavior has been conflated with women’s empowerment, which in turn contributes to a “cool” (Hochschild 2003) sexual culture characterized by invulnerability and lack of care. This enforces the virgin/whore dichotomy, which binds acceptable female sexuality between rigid parameters. Thus, I do not construe women being able to act more like men as gender equality, but rather as

women's assimilation to a culture dominated by masculinity. I argue that gender equality needs to be framed as the valuation and societal endorsement of masculinity and femininity alike.

However, some women in my study viewed changing sociocultural definitions of virginity as only the first step in reconstructing sexual culture. Isabella (lesbian, white, non-virgin) presented a more radical perspective. She stated:

In my eyes, the most productive thing would be to just eliminate [the term virginity] completely and I think the first step in eliminating it is letting it mean *so* many things that you cannot create one cohesive definition for it and then it means something different to everyone else. It's the first step in making it a totally useless term, 'cause I think it should be. I don't think virginity should exist.

Samantha (pansexual, white, virgin) echoed this sentiment:

I'll still have new experiences in my future, like everyone always has new experiences out there, so like why do we need to label [penile-vaginal intercourse] as *so damn important*. So I would love it if [virginity] didn't exist, I would love it if it wasn't such a loaded word. 'Cause I feel like it's either the best thing or the worst thing.

However, while virginity is largely viewed as an oppressive construct that generates stigmatization and gender inequality, I suggest that eliminating it completely may not be the ultimate solution. I also claim that embracing platonic, romantic, and sexual relationships with men is not inherently oppressive for women, contrary to what many would say in the context of a patriarchal sexual culture distinguished by stigmatized virginity and masculinized intimacy. Instead of eliminating virginity as a concept, I suggest adding more depth to its meaning and significance by focusing on what is missing: women's pleasure.

Overall, the desires to lose one's virginity, have casual sex, and/or participate in hookup culture are not driven by the pursuit of pleasure. Virginity loss is centered around status-making and destigmatization. The lack of discussion on pleasure throughout my interviews is indicative

of this as the prevalent social norm. Even the women who lost their virginities in the context of a serious, long-term relationship did not frame their experience around pleasure. Overall, my participants reported that virginity loss is rarely a pleasurable experience for women. Pleasure is often not even expected by women due to various media narratives that highlight the pain and intensity of virginity loss. Furthermore, even when there *is* an expectation for pleasure, it can quickly turn into shame and frustration. This was exemplified by Britney (queer, white, non-virgin), who described that “there was something wrong” with her because she was not able to be penetrated for a long time. Her first time having penile-vaginal penetration was very painful and to this day she is still worried about the fact that intercourse is not very easy or pleasurable for her. She expressed:

[Sex] still doesn't feel good, it's just kinda like, okay you are inside me. And I love that intimate feeling and I really value that connection you can have with another person in that way, but it doesn't feel good... It doesn't necessarily hurt, but it's very middle of the road feelings about it... I really want to get to that point where I really enjoy it.

There are many social factors that contribute to producing women's anxiety around pleasure, including women's magazines and popular culture that make female orgasms normative and obligatory. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud created the theory of the vaginal orgasm as the more mature, developed, proper response to sexual pleasure. He sharply distinguished it from the clitoral orgasm. If a woman was unable to have a vaginal orgasm, then she was considered “frigid” (Koedt 1970; Psychiatry Talk 2010). This theory established the idea of there being a “normal” orgasm, thus making the lack of, or inability to have, vaginal orgasms “abnormal.” By devaluing the clitoris as a source of pleasure, this idea mandates intercourse as the only “normal” sexual desire. This idea is still prevalent today amongst women, such as

Britney, who feel as though they are not getting the full experience of sex. Intercourse is granted immense importance and value as the ultimate form of sexual engagement, despite evidence that all orgasms are connected to the clitoris, not the vagina (Koedt 1970). This pressure to feel pleasure from intercourse was also expressed by Maria (queer, Latina, non-virgin). Maria described how she thought that her first time would be “mega hot and amazing,” but it turned out to be very lackluster. She felt that this uneventful first time affected the course of her following sexual experiences. She described:

For a long time I thought I was broken, I was like I don't know how to have sex, like I have sex and it doesn't feel good, there was something wrong with me. So it kind of affected my sexuality in that way, 'cause then for a couple years afterwards I was still having terrible sex... Since I felt that it was my fault, like I was the one that was broken, I was like oh they seem to be getting off, but this sucks so I'm just gonna be a pillow princess, I'm just not gonna do anything cause *I'm* the one who doesn't know how to do things.

The fact that Maria blames herself for her lack of pleasure indicates how women hold themselves accountable to the social expectation that they will be sexually satisfied by men via penile-vaginal intercourse. Maria also identifies a direct correlation between her virginity loss and her succeeding sexual experiences. This highlights how the first time having sex can have a significant impact and can serve as the foundation for future sexual behavior and attitudes. Maria's fears about being broken and not being a good sexual partner connect to Freud's theory of frigidity. Thus, while his idea is antiquated, it is still highly influential on women's sexual development and how they perceive themselves as sexual beings. Instead of having a potentially empowering experience where she could have learned more about her body and what felt good to her, Maria held herself personally responsible for not experiencing pleasure. Due to this, she had a very negative relationship to sex for awhile.

I argue that sex education in schools plays a large role in how young women learn to conceptualize and experience sex and virginity loss. The great majority of my participants reported receiving extremely inadequate, and often very inaccurate, sex education in middle and high school. Most of their knowledge about sexual conduct came from the sex-saturated media and their peers, who were struggling to construct social status and self-identity for themselves. This kind of informal, and often inaccurate, sex education contributes to the pervasiveness of stigmatized virginity. Comprehensive sex education that emphasizes pleasure as a vital part of sexual activity could help young women have more fulfilling sexual experiences in the future. They could have sexual experiences in the pursuit of pleasure, rather than in the pursuit of social status and sexual capital.

While my research contributes to the budding sociological literature on virginity, stigma, and contemporary sexual culture, it also leaves room for further research. All of my participants were cisgender women between the ages of 18-22, all attending the same private liberal arts college. I purposefully chose this population in order to provide a distinct, representative lens on how young women in this kind of college environment experience virginity, sex, and sexual culture. Since my study was focused on cisgender women, future research on virginity should focus on transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-binary individuals. Viewing that virginity is so strongly linked to heteronormativity and binary gender norms, it would be very informative and interesting to examine how non-cisgender individuals conceptualize and experience virginity. Additionally, research on cisgender men's experiences and interpretations of virginity would also greatly contribute to the existing literature.

Also, it is important to note that my findings do not represent a universal sexual culture for all colleges, viewing that my participants attend a predominantly liberal, small, elite liberal arts college. However, I maintain that my theories and arguments in relation to hookup culture and the general college experience can be applied to other progressive liberal arts schools in America. Nevertheless, it would be beneficial to examine diverse college environments (i.e. those that are larger, more religious, more urban, or more conservative) in order to analyze the differences amongst their sexual cultures. All of these variables could have a potential impact on sexual culture, sexual attitudes, and conceptualizations of virginity.

Ultimately, due to time and resource constraints, I was only able to study a fraction of the possible populations and variables related to virginity, stigma, and contemporary sexual culture. However, I claim that my population and subsequent findings offer valuable insight into this arena of sociological research. My analyses of stigmatized virginity, masculinized intimacy, and emotional virginity come from my own empirical findings and build on existing sociological theories. These concepts are strongly interrelated and reflect an overall shift in contemporary sexual culture that is characterized by the exaltation of masculinity and the devaluation of femininity. While it is evident that gender inequality is reflected in all spheres of social life, my research on virginity highlights how sexual culture serves to reaffirm patriarchal male dominance and women's subordination. In particular, I have argued that women's sense of empowerment from endorsing masculine behaviors and ideals further perpetuates the patriarchal underpinnings of society. Defying gender norms has the potential to be revolutionary and self-empowering, but in the context of a patriarchal society, women acting more like men translates to assimilation rather than rebellion.

I claim that in order for a genuine gender revolution to occur in sexual culture, there needs to be a reinvigorated social endorsement of feminized intimacy and a focus on women's pleasure. An invulnerable, "cool" sexual culture may be desirable to some, but it also hurts many more. Dependency, merging, and vulnerability are stigmatized across genders. Traditional notions of intimacy are strongly associated with weakness. However, the idea of emotional virginity expressed by my participants indicates a desire to embrace feminized intimacy. A true gender revolution would be a society in which this desire could be expressed without shame or stigma. In the same vein, a true gender revolution would destigmatize all forms of sexual behavior, thus abolishing the virgin/whore dichotomy. It would deconstruct the parameters around acceptable female sexuality, allowing for individual agency and genuine sexual desire to dictate sexual decision-making.

I argue that the weight placed on virginity needs to be removed so that future generations of women will be able to achieve social status, self-identity, and autonomy in ways other than penile-vaginal intercourse. A man may still be a significant part of a woman's sexual journey and coming of age, but he should not be a requirement. However, the steps to reaching this revolutionized society are not easily discernible, nor guaranteed to ameliorate the lives of all individuals. Additionally, all of the other facets of gender inequality throughout society must be addressed. I have made an argument for recentering sex education and cultural discourse around women's pleasure, making women subjective agents in their own sexual lives. This is one step that could generate potential reconceptualization and reconfiguration of sexual culture.

Definitions and perceptions of virginity have changed over time and they continue to change in our ever-evolving society. Although people's thoughts and beliefs can vary across a

huge spectrum, every individual has some sort of relationship to virginity. Whether one identifies as a virgin, not as a virgin, or somewhere in between, we are all connected to this pervasive social construct. It is a highly contested subject entangled with rapidly changing sexual norms, omnipresent heteronormativity, and the underlying contemporary sexual culture. Thus, in light of these complex and multifaceted concepts, virginity makes for a highly compelling sociological investigation. I hope my research will spark future research in order to continue investigating, analyzing, and working to better understand the ever-changing social world we live in. Some would say that the sexual revolution has not yet finished, but I claim that it has not yet begun.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS⁴⁸

Participant ⁴⁹	Virgin?	Age	Race	Sexual Orientation	Religious Orientation	Political Orientation ⁵⁰	Class
Fatima	Yes	21	South Asian	Heterosexual	Muslim	Liberal	Upper-Middle
Emily	No	21	White	Heterosexual	Christian	Very Liberal	Upper-middle
Imani	No	20	African American	Heterosexual	Agnostic	Pretty Liberal	Lower-middle
Kylie	Yes	22	Biracial	Heterosexual	None	Liberal	Middle
Leela	No	21	South Asian	Heterosexual	Muslim	Liberal	Lower-middle
Elizabeth	Yes	19	White	Heterosexual	N/A	Very Liberal	Middle
Mia	No	20	Multiracial	Heterosexual	Agnostic	Radical Liberal	Middle
Anna	No	20	White	Pansexual	Grew up Unitarian	Very Liberal	Middle
Maria	No	20	Latina	Queer	Atheist	Very Liberal	Upper-middle
Tiana	No	21	Hispanic/ African American	Heterosexual	Baptist	Moderate liberal	Upper-lower
Jess	No	21	White	Queer	Christian	Very Liberal	Working class
Audrey	Yes	18	White	Heterosexual	Raised Christian	Very Liberal	Middle
Danielle	No	19	African American	Heterosexual	Muslim	Pretty Liberal	Working class
Shannon	No	18	Chinese American	Not 100% Heterosexual	Episcopalian	Very Liberal	Middle
Rachel	Yes	20	White	Bisexual	None	Very Liberal	Upper-Middle
Olivia	No	18	White	Heterosexual	Episcopalian	Very Liberal	Upper-middle
Natalie	No	20	African American	Heterosexual	7th Day Adventist	Very Liberal	Lower-middle
Olive	No	18	White	Pansexual	Agnostic	Very Liberal	Lower
Lydia	No	19	White	Heterosexual	Grew up Christian	Moderate liberal	Lower-Middle
Britney	No	20	White	Queer	None	Very Liberal	Middle
Paige	Yes	20	White	Pansexual	Christian	Very Liberal	Middle
Riley	No	21	Biracial	Mostly Heterosexual	Raised Buddhist/Agnostic	Very Liberal	Upper-Middle
Isabella	No	21	White	Lesbian	None	Radical Liberal	Lower
Skye	No	21	Chinese American	Heterosexual	None	Moderate Liberal	Upper-middle
Samira	No	18	South Asian	Heterosexual	Muslim	Very Liberal	Working class
Lucy	Yes	20	White	Asexual	Wiccan/Secular Humanist	Pretty Liberal	Middle
Victoria	No	20	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Presbyterian	Moderate Liberal	Middle
Becca	No	19	White	Queer	None	Very Liberal	Lower-Middle

⁴⁸ These identity markers were self-identified by my participants, thus they are not objective, universal categories.

⁴⁹ All participant names are pseudonyms in order to keep their identities anonymous.

⁵⁰ Political orientation was measured on a scale from “very conservative” to “very liberal.”

Samantha	Yes (?)	21	White	Pansexual	None	Very Liberal	Lower-Middle
Yasmin	No	20	Iranian American	Queer-ish	None	Liberal	Upper

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me some basic information about yourself?
 - a. How old are you?
 - b. What is your racial/ethnic identity?
 - c. What is your sexual orientation?
 - d. What is your religious orientation?
 - e. What is your class background?
 - f. What are your political views on a scale from “very conservative” to “very liberal”?
 - g. What is your current neighborhood like? Size? What kind of place is it (rural/urban/suburb)? How close are you to your community?
 - h. What is your college like? What is the culture like?
2. What messages did you receive about virginity growing up?
 - a. From your parents/guardians? From your friends?
3. Did you get messages from the media? If so, what kinds and from which platforms?
 - a. Do you ever look at any media related to gender and sexuality? For example, do you read any feminist writings, go on self-help sites, or read online blogs?
4. (*If relevant*) How did you deal with competing messages?
5. How do you define virginity? How do you define sex?
 - a. Do you believe people can be virgins again after they’ve had sex?
6. What messages about virginity do you hear in your current environment?
7. What ideas do **you** have about virginity today? Have your ideas changed over time?
8. Do you think about these messages when making decisions about sex? Did they influence your choices, feelings, and/or ideas about sex?
9. Do you consider yourself a virgin?
10. Have you ever lied about your virgin status? Why or why not?
11. Have you ever felt social pressure to lose your virginity? If so, where did this come from?
12. What do you think people in your current environment think of virgins in general?

- a. What percentage of people at your college do you think identifies as virgins?
Why? What does that number mean to you?
13. Is there anything I should have asked, but didn't?

FOR VIRGINS

1. Do you feel comfortable telling other people that you are a virgin?
2. Do you have an idea of how you would like to lose your virginity?

FOR NON-VIRGINS

1. Have you ever felt proud that you are not a virgin? Do you currently feel proud?
2. Has losing your virginity shaped your sexual life in certain ways? How so?