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Whatever She Wants:
An Ethnography of American Women, Sex, Intimacy and the Internet

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The introduction of new technologies has affected norms of human behavior from time immemorial. At the interstices of new media technologies and sexuality in particular, we encounter a longstanding and complex network of relations and contentions. On the internet, sexuality exists in many forms: in pornography, erotic cyber chat and email, marketing and even sexual health information.

Sex and technological advancement is not new. With the advent of private telephones in the home and office, phone sex emerged. Later, the introduction of Polaroid and video cameras made it possible for the amateur to produce their own sexual media content. On the internet, the heterogeneity and convenience of sexual opportunities and material available provides for a proliferation of all types of sexual activity and connectedness. A particular form of sexual encounter – “internet mediated hooking up” is the subject of this paper. What is hooking up? The term “*hooking up*” refers to the practice of casual or pseudonymous sex. In her book, “*Unhooked: How Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both*”, Laura Sessions Stepp defines “hooking up” as the un-relationship that “can consist entirely of one kiss, or it can involve fondling, oral sex, anal sex, intercourse or any combination of those things. It can happen only once with a partner, several times during the week or over many months. Feelings are discouraged and both partners share an understanding that either of them can walk away at any time” (Stepp 2007). While on the surface, casual sex or hooking up (terms I shall use interchangeably in this talk) portend the seeming NON-development of a relationship of any kind with one's casual sex partners, my research in this area is beginning to elucidate the opposite. For the women I spoke with, internet mediated hooking up is very much fraught with the nebulosity and accoutrements of more “traditional” relationship forms, norms and expectations. Despite popular media depictions of women openly engaging with sexuality and intimacy on their own terms – think *Sex and the City* – among my informants, casual sex facilitated by the internet remains a secret and transgressive act that straddles complicated spaces of public and private intimacies, and demands negotiation of societal pressures around sexual freedom, desire, and self expression.

Using ethnographic field data to illuminate the practice of “internet mediated hooking up” among women today, I shall describe what “going online” for casual sex entails: from how the women create online personas of themselves in the virtual realm to how they situate themselves in a real world physical sexual encounter. In particular, I attend to the subsequent implications the encounters have for individual subjectivities. My research took place between 2007-2008 and employed three different types of research methodologies: qualitative one-to-

one in-depth interviews ('informant interviews'), a quantitative internet based survey ('web survey') hosted by SurveyMonkey.com and as a complement to the qualitative and quantitative data collection, textual analysis of popular media and websites used to facilitate internet mediated sexual encounters and "hook-ups". In this paper, I shall focus on data from the in person interviews.

I stratify internet mediated hooking up into three distinct phases. The first phase incorporates familiar tropes around identity creation and performance, and takes place in what I am terming the "*foraging and finding*" stage of searching for potential partners. The second phase is the "*hook up*" itself, the actual dalliance/experience - be that 15 minutes or 15 hours. The third phase is aptly entitled "*the morning after*", and encompasses the implications and ramifications, if any, of the given hook up for the informant.

Where do people meet online? There are many different types of websites or online "personals" systems devoted to hooking up and each are differentiated primarily by the mechanism that enables users to connect and interact with one another. These include 1) search/sort/match systems that provide user profiles and private messaging capability, e.g. Yahoo Personals or Match.com; 2) personality-matching systems such as E-Harmony; 3) social networking utilities such as Facebook 4) and free sites such as Craigslist. Creating an online profile, or posting an advertisement on an electronic bulletin board, is much like marketing a commodity or product, which in this case is one's self. As with any success oriented marketing endeavor, it is important to convey an image that plays up one's strengths and detracts from one's perceived weaknesses. For specific sites, creating a profile often entails responding to a series of questions describing one's physical characteristics (e.g. height, weight, ethnicity, hair and eye color), one's personality and proclivities (e.g. self-described demeanor, favorite movie, food, drink, last great book read), relationship status (e.g. single, attached, married, in an open relationship), and the kind of relationship one is seeking (e.g. dating, friends with benefits, no strings attached, a long term relationship). On some websites, particularly those devoted exclusively to sexual encounters, the questions become very specific with respect to the type of sexual activity one is seeking (e.g. cyber sex, voyeurism, threesomes, bondage and submission).

Why seek casual sex partners online and not in more traditional venues such as bars or clubs or other social gatherings? Brown, et al (2005) noted that the internet immediately appealed to gay men seeking casual sex because, as with other marginalized groups, this community had few places to meet without fear of negative

social consequences. Accordingly, the internet has turned out to be a popular venue for exchanging information, placing and responding to personal ads and partaking in erotic discussion in an anonymous fashion. (Brown, Maycock, and Burns 2005). The women I interviewed cited similar reasons for going online to meet casual sex partners. The internet provides an opportunity to meet new people, and explore sexual experiences from the safety of one's own home or office that more public venues, such as bars and nightclubs, do not seem to provide. The perceived privacy allows the creation of online personas that are not subject to public view or social scrutiny. Further, one can create a persona, or avatar, that augments a "real world" personality, or alternatively create an entirely new persona, who may be completely different from the one presented in the real world. Several of my informants cited escape from their "real lives" as the primary reason for venturing online. While this was not always the sole motivation, it served as a major driver. The virtual world also offers an opportunity to fulfill emotional or sexual needs that are perceived as otherwise missing from their lives. One informant, Ashley, age 25, told me that going online to meet potential partners (whether for casual sex or to seek a relationship), was simply less harrowing than going to a bar. Ashley says:

I can't go sit at a bar by myself because I feel weird. I feel very awkward. You just can't sit there and do anything unless it's a sports bar where at least you can watch the TV. I mean guys can do that, and I just have that feeling of "look at that single chick", like you automatically get this kind of either desperate label or loose label or whatever label that everyone wants to give you in the bar. – Ashley

Not unlike the personal ads of the print era, my informants noted that venturing online for casual sex requires mastering of certain "codes" and language in operation to successfully navigate personals and in particular, "free range" environments, such as the Craigslist Casual Encounters forum. Acronyms such as NSA (No Strings Attached) SWM (single white male), W4M (woman for man), HWP (Height Weight Proportionate), DDF (Drug and Disease Free), PNP (Party and Play: hard drugs and sex) or phrases such as "420 friendly" (Marijuana friendly) are commonly incorporated into ads and profiles. In addition to the acronyms, the online taxonomy requires a literal reading between the lines. For example, a woman who describes herself as "curvy" can be physically curvaceous or alluding to the fact that she may be perceived as overweight. A man may emphasize his personality or intellect to compensate for perceived deficiencies in his physical appearance. Ads or profiles may also be written with a specific purpose that masks the implicitly understood goal of the encounter. For example, meeting for a "foot massage" or "taking erotic photos" is a veiled way of stating that such an interaction could ideally lead to a sexual encounter. At what point does a woman decide that she wishes to take it

to the next level with a potential hook up? How do the participants negotiate the terms of the encounter? Similar to navigating the taxonomy required to successfully negotiate productive online exchanges, there is also a learning curve to negotiating the terms of the actual encounter. Jodi, age 32, describes the first time she used Craigslist Casual Encounters (CE) to find a partner. Previously, she was finding hook ups through regular dating sites. On CE, she found what she was already able to attain through the dating site – casual sex, but without all the performance and politic she had experienced on Yahoo Personals. On CE, she was able to determine what she wanted sexually, state the terms, carryout the transaction (or interaction, as one might say) and go her own “merry” way afterwards. Jodi describes her first CE experience:

“So, I went onto Craigslist Casual Encounters and I found an ad for a sensual massage. The guy sent his picture and I was like whoa, I love massage and this sounds great. He said come to my house, I won’t expect anything, I promise, I’ll just give you a massage. I jumped into my car at four o’clock, arrived at his house 20 minutes later, knocked on the door, and gave him a hug hello. He took me to his bedroom, where there were lights and candles. This was all in the matter of an afternoon. I had gone online at 1:00 pm and I’m already at his house by 4. I was kind of not sure what to expect because I had never done anything that quick before. Because with the online dating thing you just meet for coffee or something first. So then, um, the massage [sex]. Afterwards I got dressed and left. And I never heard from him again. I thought this is fantastic (laughing). I get home at 8 o’clock and go back online. I remember thinking could this get any better?” – Jodi

The “massage” scenario Jodi described allows people to meet and then carry on to the next level sexually if both parties wish to. The only expectation is of a massage, not sex. Thus, the “massage” provides an inroad as well as an exit strategy for both parties involved in the transaction. In this next excerpt, Christina, age 28, describes the first time she posted an ad on CE and followed through with an advertisement for a hook up.

Well, I was very naïve. I mean, SUPER naïve to this. So when I posted an ad, I didn’t expect all of the responses. A lot of men showed naked pictures of themselves and I just deleted those right away. And prior to this I was only with my husband for 9 years so this was totally new to me. I went to a conference in another state and was just saying (to the potential hookup), let’s just meet up for drinks or whatever and see what happens. Understand that I’m married and this is just going to be totally, non-committal sex or whatever. And I got plenty of responses, and it happened so fast [with the one guy]. There was definitely some correspondence for about a week before we actually met. But we didn’t even talk [on the telephone], we didn’t even exchange pictures. Next thing I know, I get on the plane, he picks me up at the airport and we had a great time, that’s all I can say. – Christina

Without question, there is a wide variation among my informants in their motivations and practices around hooking up, as well as perceptions and discourse around norms concerning sex, intimacy and love; than I am able to explicate here. A common thread has been that while the internet provides much choice and selection, as one participant put it, “it’s like being a kid in a candy store”; my informants remain very much constrained by the “traditional” gender norms and sex roles they have been socialized with since childhood, and which holds reproductive oriented heterosexual pairings situated firmly at the top of the dominant sexual hierarchy.

Adrienne Rich, in her provocative piece, *Compulsive Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, explicates exactly how family and institutions are involved in the shaping of sexual selves. She notes that “we are taught and coerced into adopting conventional gender identities...individuals learn what is acceptable sexuality through romanticizing of heterosexual relationships and through marginalization of those that are considered “deviant” (Rich 1999). My informants frequently incorporated value laden terms like “normal”, “slut”, and “promiscuous” to describe their sexual selves, situating themselves along a continuum of sexual behavior. In this final excerpt, Ashley describes how engaging in hooking up introduces conflicted feelings that she experiences from societal expectations around love, intimacy and “appropriate” sexual behavior, in contrast to what she enjoys sexually:

I guess one part of it is kind of rebelling against that idea that I'm not allowed to do that. There is that lingering guilt that is 'wow, I'm a little bit of a slut' which is corny because I don't believe in the word slut, or the meaning of the word slut or even the negative connotation of it, but still that all goes through my head. So it's kind of a mixture of like pride and guilt. And sometimes, being, I don't know if this is because I'm a girl, but kind of feeling of being used, even though I totally went into this consensually, even though I knew the rules, I knew what was going on, you could still kind of be like 'he totally used me'. And it's like why do you feel that victim thing? You know, that's part of being a girl that you're supposed to cherish your sexuality and not let anyone in and use you. – Ashley

What do these narratives reveal about sexuality, about intimacy and about utilizing the internet to meet casual sex partners? While brevity and informality serve as hallmarks of internet mediated hooking up, my informants describe experiences which often induce much more reflection about one's self long after the hookup. Thus, the temporally brief casual sex encounter requires a time investment, what I term “emotion work for sexual pleasure” drawing upon Arlie Hochschild's research of emotion on the laborer who is asked to provide a particular feeling with a service. Hochschild suggests that all emotion is governed by social rules, whether that is what we do privately or what we do as part of a job - and in the case of my informants, what they do in hooking up online. As technology strives to make our lives more efficient, purportedly streamlining the time and energy we need to expend, it also seems to be simultaneously burdening my informants with a type of emotion work that is increasingly more complex than originally anticipated.

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