

### Author's Statement:

For the final paper for my Anthropology of Gender & Sexuality course, we were tasked to build upon our semester-long research project about a topic of our choice relating in some way to gender and/or sexuality. In this paper, I attempt to perform and analyze my own ethnographic study about purity culture across the Wesleyan campus. I incorporate various ethnographic techniques that are typical of an anthropological study– including a google form survey, and several interviews (consent has been given from all participants to be in this paper and referred to by a pseudonym of their choice). In this paper, I attempt to answer the question: to what extent is the Wesleyan campus still affected by purity culture?

## Sex, Drugs and Crime: Purity Culture Across Wesleyan's Supposedly Transcendent Liberal Bubble

What do sluts, whores, and prostitutes have in common? Easy, they're all women. Perhaps this joke is offensive, your mouth has dropped at my sheer unapologetic vulgarity in an academic paper, and maybe you're even progressive enough to respond "No! Those words simply refer to people who are sexually promiscuous. Men can be sluts! Men can be whores! Men can be prostitutes!" Personally, I don't disagree– but the google dictionary does.

 **slut**  
/slət/  
noun

1. **OFFENSIVE**  
a woman who has many casual sexual partners.

Similar: promiscuous woman strumpet trollop

 **whore**  
/hôr/  
noun

1. **DEROGATORY**  
a prostitute.

 **pros·ti·tute**  
/'prästəˌtoot/  
noun

a person, in particular a woman, who engages in sexual activity for payment.

The reality is, even if men can be sluts, whores, and certainly prostitutes, there is an undeniable association with shameful sexual terminology and women. The closest term we have

that even addresses the promiscuous behavior of men is “player”, however even the word player has a whole list of other positive meanings in the dictionary before its informal meaning of a “confident , successful man with many sexual partners” is mentioned.



## play·er

*/ˈplāər/*

*noun*

noun: **player**; plural noun: **players**

1. a person taking part in a sport or game.

"a tennis player"

**Similar:**

participant

contestant

competitor

contender

team member



- a person or body that is involved and influential in an area or activity.  
"the country's isolationism made it a secondary player in world political events"

- **INFORMAL**

a confident, successful man with many sexual partners.

noun: **playa**; plural noun: **playas**

"she knows Harry is something of a player"

2. a person who plays a musical instrument.

"a guitar player"

**Similar:**

musician

performer

instrumentalist

soloist

virtuoso

artist




- a device for playing recorded music or video.  
"an MP3 player"

3. an actor.

"there are moments of tenderness beautifully expressed by the players"

Shaming female sexuality, while praising and honoring male sexuality is by no means a new concept. In many cultures throughout the world, women are instilled with a sense of shame or dirtiness for their sexuality and genitalia. A woman's value is placed solely on her ability to remain pure, and her husband's honor and pride depend on that purity (Delaney 1947). The burden of remaining pure, clean, and holy has been forced upon predominantly women, and it continues to persist through modern shaming methods which include everything from Christian

Morality teachings (Klein, 2022), to dress codes, and even the infamous Rice Purity Test.

 **pu·ri·ty**  
/'pyöörədē/  
*noun*  
noun: **purity**

freedom from adulteration or contamination.  
"the purity of our drinking water"

**Similar:** cleanness clearness clarity freshness lack of pollution ▼

- freedom from immorality, especially of a sexual nature.  
"white is meant to represent purity and innocence"

**Similar:** virtue virtuousness lack of corruption morality goodness ▼

Purity culture is not only limited to the sexual purity of women, however. The idea of impurity is projected onto any object or being that society deems unclean or dirty (Douglas 2002). The idea of dirt correlates with disorder, the idea is that if we get rid of dirt, we can maintain social order. Thus, societies use the categorization of cleanliness and uncleanliness, purity or impurity to scapegoat the wrongs with society and what must be eliminated (Douglas 2002). Since this idea of impurity is projected onto objects society deems as less than, it is unsurprising that homosexual behavior is another category that has been considered to be thought of as impure or dirty. Just like the sexual shaming of women, homosexuality too is deeply shamed in many cultures.

Due to the deep misogynistic and homophobic roots of purity culture, I wanted to examine how a highly liberal and sex-positive University like Wesleyan was impacted by purity culture, or if— in its liberal and practically ‘misandrist’ bubble we had managed to transcend the impact of purity culture and reached a point where women and gay people are honored for their sexuality and men are shamed for being sluts.

Alas, this is where I reached a problem— how does one even begin to quantify purity to begin to analyze its impact upon different genders and sexualities? This is when I stumbled across the infamous Rice Purity Test. The Rice Purity Test—a 100-question test designed by Rice University students to test the purity and innocence of individuals when it comes to topics like sex, drugs, and crime— is an excellent way to numerically quantify the purity of an individual. This viral test was famous for creating score-sharing extravaganzas, almost every college student has taken or heard of it. I had found a solution— I rushed to create a google form that would collect the individual's gender, sexuality, Rice Purity Test score, and a 1-10 ranking about how they felt about that score. After collecting 63 responses, I began to compute my data, and the results were fascinating.

The average Rice Purity Test score for women was a 68.63, compared to that of men which was a 54.51. Since this test results in a lower score the more things you have done, this means that men on Wesleyan's campus have done roughly 14 more things on the 100 question list than the women have. This begs the question, what things are the men doing on that 100 question list that women aren't, and why are their scores so much lower? It can be easy to point to various biological factors that would make women's scores higher and men's scores lower— for one, men have higher testosterone levels and tend to have a higher sex drive so of course they would seek out sexual actions more frequently (van Anders, 2012). However, a 2012 study that analyzed the sex drive and testosterone levels of 91 women and 105 men found that it was masturbation frequency, not testosterone levels that influenced the sex drive of the participants (van Anders, 2012). Based upon the study, the frequency an individual masturbates can influence and increase their libido (van Anders, 2012). In our society, female sexuality and female masturbation is shamed and almost never discussed, whereas male sexuality is praised and

openly talked about– because of this, it is impossible to say that men biologically have higher sex drives. Our society has dichotomized the sexualities of different genders to such an extent, that it is impossible to tell the difference between a biological factor (men have higher sex drives) and a cultural factor (women are shamed for their sexuality, which would lower their desire for sex).

On the other hand, when we look towards the difference between heterosexual and homosexual Rice Purity Test results, instead of the shamed group (the homosexuals) having higher and more pure scores, it is the honorable heterosexuals who remain more pure. People who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community regardless of gender have a 58.33 Rice Purity Test score average, compared to that of straight people who have a 62.03. This difference of about 4 points is less striking than the difference between that of men and women, but it is still a significant difference. There is clearly a form of subversion in the gay community– purity norms may be forced upon all people, but it seems to be heterosexuals who internalize the necessity of purity, and homosexuals– who are already rebelling against societal standards by taking upon a queer identity– see less of a need to conform to standards of purity.

Alas after all of this wonderful mathematical data had been collected, I discovered a major caveat of using the Rice Purity Test to quantify purity. When two of the participants in my survey, LeRoy and Sapphire Thestripper<sup>1</sup>, took the Rice Purity Test for my survey next to each other. They laughed at the absurdity of the questions, turned around and announced one after another that they both had a 49. This was incredibly shocking for all three of us. LeRoy was in a committed monogamous relationship with their girlfriend, whom they had lost their virginity to a month prior– they had never drank alcohol, smoked, or done any sort of drug. Sapphire on the other hand was a drug dealer in high school, she had tried weed, shrooms and acid, and wasn't

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed for privacy purposes to pseudonyms the participants themselves chose.

opposed to doing other sorts of drugs. Sapphire was immensely proud of the “roster”<sup>2</sup> she had created, she was seeing different men and women every other week, and she loved it. It made no sense, how could these completely different people have the same purity score? After sitting down next to each other and checking the boxes off together, we figured it out: LeRoy had been able to check off many of the crime related questions after being caught jumping the turnstile and evading the subway fare in New York City. Sapphire had never had any altercations with the police, and so what LeRoy was able to check off she made up for it with more of the drug and sex related questions.


The fact that these highly different individuals were able to have the same Rice Purity Test score value, shows the absurdity of purity tests and how little meaning the score holds. The reality is the Rice Purity Test, or any purity test, cannot account for the intricacies of the human experience, which is why soon after collecting my 63 responses and analyzing them, I switched over to a different style of ethnographic research. I went undercover as a Wesleyan University student (a task that was for some reason not too difficult) and attempted to infiltrate the social circles to discuss sex and purity with my peers. Nothing was recorded, everything I describe in the subsequent paragraphs is from notes I took directly after such experiences; I only asked permission to include these moments days after they said it. For privacy purposes, everyone is anonymous and all participants have chosen their own pseudonyms.

A friend of mine, Context, lost their virginity this semester— well they’re actually not sure if they did. Context is a lesbian, and earlier in the year they engaged in oral sex with another woman, both them and the other women referred to this act as them having sex. The issue is, Context isn’t sure if that technically qualifies as sex. Many of Context’s heterosexual friends identify as virgins, even though they have engaged in oral sex with men. Sex for Context’s

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<sup>2</sup> A roster is a list of different people someone is actively having sexual relations with

heterosexual friends would involve the standard penis in vagina penetration, and oral is simply “hooking up”. Similarly, another friend of mine, Evelyn, engaged in oral sex with a man recently. Evelyn is bisexual and mentioned that if she had performed oral sex on a woman instead, it would have constituted real sex for her, but since it had been a man it didn’t count. This double standard of nearly the same action counting as sex for the same sex, and not counting for the opposite sex may help to explain why gay people have an average Rice Purity Score that is lower than straight people– perhaps the same actions are occurring, but one group is counting it as sex, and the other is not.

 **vir·gin·i·ty**  
/vər'jɪnədē/  
*noun*

the state of never having had sexual intercourse.  
"he **lost his virginity** in college"

**Similar:** chastity maidenhood chasteness virtue honor purity pureness

- the state of being naive, innocent, or inexperienced in a particular context.  
"his political virginity"

The entire concept of virginity and what constitutes sex is another fascinating result of purity culture. Virginity is a state in which the individual is pure and innocent, before they become contaminated by the acts of sex. The language surrounding virginity, especially for women, is rooted deeply in misogynistic and purity culture values. For instance, the concept of deflowering a woman implies a loss, equivalent to removing the most beautiful aspect of a plant. The expression “popping the cherry” refers to the possibility of the hymen stretching during penetrative sex and causing bleeding (Planned Parenthood). The stretching of the hymen is irreversible, but it can also happen naturally through participating in a sport, or using tampons, therefore there is no biological way to tell if a woman has had penetrative sex or not (Planned

Parenthood). In addition, simply framing virginity as something that can be “lost” implies the loss of purity and thereby value.

For some reason at Wesleyan, instead of people feeling a need to maintain their purity, they appear to be obsessed with the idea of losing their purity. During my numerical ethnographic study, not only did I collect the average Rice Purity Test scores, but I also collected a 1-10 ranking about how people feel about their Rice Purity Test scores (a 1 would represent that they wish their Rice Purity Test score was significantly lower, a 5 would represent that they are perfectly happy with where it is, and 10 would represent that they wish it was higher). Although the majority of my participants claimed to be perfectly happy with their score, 38% of the participants wished their score was lower, and only 14% wished their score was higher. Indeed, in Wesleyan's sex positive liberal bubble, hook-up culture is glorified and awards social points to those who participate in “impure” activities.

Michelle, another participant in my survey, appeared obsessed with her Rice Purity Test score. In the beginning of the semester, she flaunted her 80, but kept telling me how she wished she could lower it. One night in September, Michelle and I were socializing in my dorm, when she asked if she could sleep over because she did not want to walk back to her dorm now that it was past midnight. I told Michelle that this was not ideal for me because I did not have room for her to sleep, and she suggested that we share the bed (in a platonic fashion). I was certainly not pleased with this suggestion, as I knew neither of us would sleep well, but Michelle continued to push “Please, if I sleep over with you then I can check off number 41 on the Rice Purity Test”. Number 41— spent the night with MPS (Member of the Preferred Sex)— was legitimately one of her prime motivations to spend the night with me. After I told her that us sharing the bed platonically did not even count for that question, she proceeded to walk back to her dorm.

Michelle would do practically anything to lower her Rice Purity Test score— once at a party I watched her try Poppers, and the first thing she said after sobering up was— “wait, does that mean I can check off ‘Used a drug stronger than marijuana’ off the Rice Purity Test?” In addition, after having her first kiss at a party, instead of focusing on the action of the kiss, she couldn’t stop squealing about lowering her Rice Purity Test score 4 points in one night.

Michelle is not the only person to treat the Rice Purity Test as a sort of bucket list<sup>3</sup>. The Rice Purity Test has become a checklist for people to assess their maturity and progress towards adulthood; in doing so it has evolved into another shame mechanism for college students— but this time in the opposite direction. One of my participants admitted to me that they hated the Rice Purity Test because it put a pressure on them to have a low score. This participant had a score in the 90s, and when they told people their score, people infantilized them for their innocence. This resulted in a pressure that made them feel that they should rush into doing impure things so the infantilization would stop.

It’s rather ironic that the Rice Purity Test has evolved into a reverse slut shaming mechanism that pressures college students into doing impure actions for their social status— especially since the test began as a mechanism to shame women. The original Rice Purity Test was created by Rice University students in 1924 for their school newspaper: *The Thresher*; it contained 10 questions, for each yes the individual adds 10 points to their score:

1. Have you ever played cards for money?
2. Have you ever been drunk?
3. Have you ever sworn?
4. Have you ever told a lie? White fibs are not counted.

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<sup>3</sup> Rather ironically, the header on the Rice Purity Test exclaims: “**Caution: This is not a bucket list. Completion of all items on this test will likely result in death.**”

5. Did you ever dress conspicuously?
6. Did you ever dance conspicuously?
7. Have you ever smoked?
8. Have you ever cheated?
9. Have you ever done anything that you wouldn't tell your mother?
10. Have you ever been engaged and broken it?

The test was given to 119 Rice University girls (this test was designed solely to examine the purity of women), and the average score was a 62. The article in *The Thresher* subsequently describes Rice girls as “not half bad” (*The Thresher* 1924). The test was later revamped in a 1988 edition of *The Thresher* with more modern questions. The 1988 purity test, advertised as “new and improved” consisted of 150 questions for both sexes to fill out and test their purity. This edition put a lot more focus on male sexuality. After listing the 150 questions, the article mentions male campus leaders and their scores; those who have lower scores are praised, one campus leader was quoted: “big dicks, big reputations, small scores” (*The Thresher* 1988). The current viral test (<http://ricepuritytest.com/>) is significantly more inclusive– it describes itself as a way for orientation groups of all genders and sexualities to bond and track their evolution in purity throughout their transition to college life, rather than a way to test the purity of women. However it is undeniable that misogynistic purity culture still maintains influence over the sex lives of college students even though the tests have become more inclusive.

Although Wesleyan students love to claim that we have transcended purity culture and reached a point on campus where men can be sluts, whores, or prostitutes and women are honored and empowered to explore their sexuality– this is not completely true. Purity culture is completely alive and well at Wesleyan– the 14 point difference between men and women's

average Rice Purity Test Score strongly supports this observation. In our attempt to transcend the shame instilled with sexuality, we have only managed to shame and pressure those who we consider too prudish or innocent. Instead of freeing ourselves from the clutches of purity culture, we have trapped ourselves on both sides— one cannot be too impure without being contaminated, and one cannot be too pure without being shamed for their naivety or innocence. You're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't. There's no winning when it comes to purity culture— so what's the solution? Well, as Nicki Minaj once said in her song *Starships*, "Fuck who you want and fuck who you like."

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