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Hookup Culture on College Campuses: Centering College Women, Communication Barriers, and Negative Outcomes

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The majority of college students feel that their lives are dominated by the hookup culture, or a sexual culture of non-committed sexual encounters. However, college students are actually participating in this culture in much smaller numbers than they believe their peers to be, pointing to a culture that is driven by perception rather than clear communication or healthy desire. This article provides a comprehensive review of the literature on this subject, with particular emphasis on the challenges to communication that exist within hookup relationships with the understanding that this may contribute to the negative outcomes experienced by students. As women tend to experience the negative outcomes of hookup culture at higher rates than men, their experiences are centered within this literature review.

Keywords: College students, communication, hookup relationships, pluralistic ignorance, social norms

For most students, college is a period described by Erik Erikson (1968) as psychological moratorium in which an individual holds few responsibilities and is able to try on a multitude of identity roles. Part of this process is sexual experimentation. While this has historically been the case, particularly since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, recent trends in the literature point to a new mode of sexual exploration on college campuses called hooking up. A hookup is defined by Garcia, Reiber, Massey, and Merriweather (2012) as a “brief, uncommitted sexual (encounter) among individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other” (p.1). It is important to note the use of the word uncommitted in this definition, as it is the uncommitted nature of sexual acts that define hookups, rather than the specific acts. Scholars who have explored the topic generally conclude that the hookup culture has replaced traditional courtship norms among young adults (Arnold, 2010; Bogle, 2008; Garcia et al., 2012).

According to the relevant literature on the topic, hookup culture should give college and university administrators cause for concern. The problem does not lie within the fact that students are having casual sex, but within the surrounding culture. While hookup culture extends beyond the college setting, beginning in the K-12 environment and following students into the post-graduate world, it can be argued that this culture is particularly pervasive on college campuses (Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickinson, 2003).

According to the recent literature, male and female college students have experienced twice the number of hookups as opposed to first dates (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010). While hookup culture is the dominant sexual script on college campuses, it is defined by a paradox – college students believe their peers are hooking up significantly more than is actually the case (Barringer & Velez-Blasini, 2013; Chia & Gunther, 2006; Fretias, 2013; Hoffman, Luff, & Bernston, 2014; Holman & Sillars, 2011). While 91% of college students feel that their lives are dominated by hookup culture, the median number of total hookups for a graduating college senior is seven (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England, 2010). Assuming a student completes their degree in four years, this amounts to an average of 1.8 hookups per year.

In addition to the aforementioned disparity between students' perceptions and their actual behavior, research shows that male and female students are dissatisfied with hookup culture, often experiencing regret or even depressive symptoms post-hookup (Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2012; Welsh, Grello, & Harper, 2006). Additionally, the literature suggests that women tend to experience these negative outcomes of hookup culture at greater rates than men (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Fielder & Carey, 2010). This profound disparity in students' perceptions of their peers' behavior as opposed to their actual behavior, along with the fact that they are unhappy with their behavior is disturbing. These converging factors point to a culture that is driven by perception rather than healthy desire – and a sexual culture that is devoid of communication.

The nature of communication within hookup relationships has only begun to be explored within the academic discourse on this topic (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Knight, 2014). Existing studies suggest that hookup relationships tend to suppress clear communication practices. Research conducted by Knight (2014) suggests that women in particular experience concerns about practicing clear communication within hookup relationships. This paper seeks to build upon this emerging research and explicitly connect it to the already existing research that establishes a discrepancy between the desires of students and their actual experiences within hookup relationships. This literature review will also center the experiences of college women within hookup culture, particularly in regards to communication. Findings within this body of literature suggest that hookup culture encourages participants to avoid communication, which may contribute to negative outcomes such as lower rates of contraception usage, higher rates of sexual assault, and higher rates of emotional distress (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Fielder & Carey, 2010; Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2011; Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). It is important to note that the majority of the research on this topic has been conducted on students who identify within the gender binary. As such, this literature review focuses on this population.

The literature review below is broken down into several sections and will provide an overview of the following topics: defining hookup culture, characteristics of hookup culture, the relationship between the environment of college campuses and hookup culture, the ways in which women experience hookup culture, and larger societal factors that inform hookup culture. This review concludes with an overview of the limitations within the current body of literature and suggestions for further research on this topic.

Operationalizing Hookup Culture

Finding an operational definition of what it means to hook up can be complex. Many scholars have taken on this task and have come up with various definitions. Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) define a hookup as “a sexual encounter, usually only lasting one night, between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances. Some physical interaction is typical but may or may not include sexual intercourse” (p. 79). Glenn and Marquardt (2001) define a hookup as when two individuals “get together for a physical encounter and don’t necessarily expect anything further” (p. 82). The explicitly broad definition used by Garcia et al. (2012), a “brief uncommitted sexual encounters among individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other” (p. 161) will be utilized for the purposes of this study. The most important aspect to note about a hookup is the uncommitted nature of the sexual encounters, rather than the specific sexual actions that take place, or with whom.

Additionally, Bogle (2007) highlights how imperative it is for researchers to differentiate between dating and hooking up when studying the sexual behaviors and interactions of young people. According to Bogle (2007), the hookup script is a reversal of the dating script: following the dating script, students would spend time together before becoming sexually intimate. Within the hookup script, students are first sexually intimate and then potentially spend time together. Traditional hookups are typically executed devoid of emotional attachment (Bogle, 2007). This new script, which has replaced the dating script, creates a culture of sex and relationships informed by “the convergence of evolutionary and social forces during the developmental period of emerging adulthood” that is avoidant of communication or commitment and is largely driven by learned social/sexual scripts and perceptions rather than desire (Garcia et al., 2012, p. 161).

Characteristics of Hookup Culture

Indirect Communication

Limited research exists on the communication practices of young adults in the context of their casual intimate relationships. The existing literature on the sexual communication practices of college students generally points to a preference for indirect communication practices. Lindgren, Schacht, Pantalone, Blayney, and George (2009) conducted a qualitative study on 29 male and female undergraduate students to explore the ways in which students communicate sexual interest and sexual goals. Responses showed the majority of students, regardless of gender, preferred indirect methods of communication, such as body language or eye contact to express sexual interest (Lindgren et al., 2009). The same study also found that many male participants incorrectly perceived women’s nonverbal behaviors such as style of dress as a means of communicating sexual interest.

Additionally, some scholars have looked at the communication practices of young adults in casual intimate relationships. Findings seem to indicate a communication paradox within these relationships; while young adults note the importance of clear communication within these relationships, this rarely takes place. While Hughes,

Morrison, and Asada (2005) found that 40.6% of participants listed communication rules as essential for making casual intimate relationships work, Bisson and Levine (2009) found that out of 125 undergraduate students, 77.3% of participants had not set ground rules within their casual intimate relationships and avoided relational talk with their partners. Additionally, the Weaver, MacKeigan, and MacDonald (2011) study found that young adults relied on indirect communication methods and implicit understandings with their casual sexual partners.

Operating on Assumptions

The relevant literature establishes that college students significantly overestimate their peers' participation in hooking up (Barringer & Velez-Blasini, 2013; Chia & Gunther, 2006; Fretias, 2013; Hoffman et al., 2014; Holman & Sillars, 2011). For example, Chia and Gunther (2006) found in a survey of 312 college students that participants consistently believed their peers to be more sexually permissive than they were. Several scholars have examined some of the contributing factors. Hoffman et al. (2014) highlight the ambiguity of the term hooking up. It is ubiquitous enough to include a range of sexual behaviors – from kissing to penetrative intercourse. Through the use of the term for any of these behaviors, students may be communicating that they are participating in more sexualized behavior than they actually are.

Similarly, in a survey administered to 187 college students, Paul and Hayes (2002) found a discrepancy between students' lived experiences of hookups and their descriptions of those experiences. Survey responses showed that when discussing sexual encounters with friends, students tend to over-emphasize what happened and how much it was enjoyed. Additionally, students are more likely to discuss good sexual experiences and avoid talking about bad sexual experiences. Through this process of reality management, students communicate inflated positive attitudes about hooking up, reinforcing the perceptions their peers may have about their sexual behavior.

Alcohol as a Vehicle

A substantial body of research exists that establishes a relationship between alcohol use and hookup culture. Fielder and Carey (2010) found that out of 118 undergraduate students in their first semester of college, 64% of participants reported the presence of alcohol in their hookup encounters. Additionally, Downing-Matibag & Geisinger (2009) found in a qualitative study conducted with 71 undergraduate students that 80% of participants reported the use of alcohol as a vehicle for initiating their last hookup encounter. In the substantial mixed-methods study conducted by Freitas (2013) on 2,500 male and female students at seven different institutions of higher education, participants reported the use of alcohol to facilitate hookups. Participants explained that consuming significant amounts of alcohol served as a catalyst for students to engage in a hookup encounter, noting that the use of alcohol could serve as an excuse for initiating hookups. These studies suggest that alcohol is used by college students as a social lubricant, and as a means to avoid direct conversations about relationships. Freitas' study

in particular underscores the avoidance of communication that is present within hookup culture – students feel the need to utilize alcohol to act on sexual and romantic feelings.

Dissatisfaction and Regret

Hookup culture appears to be defined by dissatisfying and regrettable sex. A multitude of studies have been conducted on the reactions of students in the wake of a hookup encounter. For example, in a study of 1,468 college students, Lewis et al. (2011) explored the emotional responses to hookups. Study participants reported a range of emotional outcomes, including embarrassment (27.1%), a decrease in self-respect (20.8%), and emotional struggles (24.7%). Additionally, Fisher et al. (2012) found in a study of 200 college students, 78% of female participants and 72% of male participants reported regret about their most recent hookup encounter. Hookups have also been found to facilitate sexual dissatisfaction for the majority of students, regardless of gender. In a study of the behaviors and attitudes of 507 college students participating in hookup culture, Garcia and Reiber (2008) found 89% of male and female participants reported physical satisfaction, but only 54% reported satisfaction on an emotional level.

Unsafe Sex

Along with regrettable sexual encounters, hookups have been linked to unsafe sexual practices. In the Lewis et al. (2011) study of undergraduate students, only 46.6% of the 429 students who had recently participated in penetrative intercourse in the context of a hookup disclosed the use of a condom. Similarly, Fielder and Carey (2010) found that 0% of students surveyed used a condom during oral sex and only 69% used a condom during penetrative hookups.

Communication Barriers

In a qualitative study of 25 undergraduate students, Knight (2014) explored why clear communication is so challenging within casual intimate relationships. Four themes emerged from this study: participants perceived relational communication to be undesirable work; relational talk was feared to be potentially stigmatizing and a means of losing power within the relationship; the expression of negative emotions related to the relationship was perceived to be wrong and in violation of the nature of the relationship; and avoiding relational talk was used as a means of maintaining the casual relationship.

In the Bisson and Levine (2009) study, participants indicated feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty in their casual intimate relationships, particularly in regards to the nature of the relationship and the future of the relationship. Despite the frequency of these feelings within these relationships, participants noted that they rarely discussed these feelings with their partners. These findings seem to suggest that the tenuous nature of these relationships contributes to the fear of expressing discomfort.

College Environment and Hookup Culture

The campus environment is crucial to student development and behavior. Stern's (1970) need x press = culture theory argues that "behavior is a function of the relationship between the individual (needs) and the environment (press)" (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 169). Many scholars have identified four-year residential colleges and universities as environmentally ideal for hookups among students. Arnold (2010) describes the college environment as a space where, "Extensive, unsupervised free time, along with a dense population of same-age, similar peers makes it possible for college students to define a collective peer culture of physical intimacy and sexual experimentation without apparent consequences" (p.1).

Scholars have also pointed out the role of perceived peer behavior in actual student behavior when it comes to hooking up (Arnold, 2010; Bogle, 2008; Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003). This creates a social environment in which student perceptions determine student behavior. According to a recent study, 91% of college students agree that their lives are dominated by the hookup culture (Wade, 2013). However, the reality is that three out of ten students have never hooked up in college, and by senior year, four out of ten students are virgins or have only one sexual partner (Taylor, 2013). These statistics show that students tend to overestimate what is considered "normal" among their peers and how influential perceived peer behavior is among college students. This argument aligns with that of Astin (1993), who identifies peer groups as the single greatest determining factor in students' academic and personal development in college, and as contributing to the cultural normalization of hooking up on college campuses (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Following Stern's (1970) model, it can be argued that the relationship between students and their environment creates and perpetuates the behavior that reinforces hookup culture.

Outcomes for Women

Unwanted Sex and Sexual Assault

Along with unsafe sexual practices, some scholars have found a relationship between hookup encounters and sexual assault. Littleton, Tabernik, Canales and Backstrom (2009) conducted a study of 109 women, comparing hookup scripts to rape scripts. They found the existence of comparative psychological consequences, such as shame. Scholars examining hookup culture have found patterns of consensual, but unwanted sex. In these instances, clear, verbal consent for sexual activity is given, but the partner giving the consent does not particularly desire the sexual activity. For example, in a study consisting of 178 male and female college students, Flack et al. (2007) found that 77% of unwanted sexual experiences described by participants occurred within a hookup relationship. These findings are disturbing, and further underscore the pressure students, particularly female students, may feel to participate in behavior they may not find fulfilling.

Bad Sex

Some scholars have examined the physical and emotional dissatisfaction that hookups can potentially foster in participants, even when the encounters are consensual. Physical dissatisfaction within the hookup experience is particularly pervasive for women. In a mixed-methods analysis, Armstrong, England, & Fogarty (2012) surveyed 12,295 undergraduate women from 21 different four-year institutions to examine this issue. Surveys were followed up with 85 in-depth interviews from undergraduates at two different universities. The study focused on the female orgasm and sexual enjoyment within both hookup and committed relationships. The quantitative portion of the study found that women experience orgasm and sexual enjoyment more often in relational sex than in hookup sex. Factors such as particular sexual acts, such as oral sex, and greater levels of commitment were found to lead to higher rates of female orgasm, and these factors were identified within committed relationships more often than in hookup relationships. The qualitative component of the study suggests the existence of a sexual double standard within hookup relationships that places greater value on male sexual pleasure than on female sexual pleasure.

In a qualitative study of 43 college women, Armstrong, Backstrom and Puentes (2012) explore women's attitudes and experiences of oral sex within the context of both hookup and committed relationships. As oral sex has been found to lead to greater orgasm in women (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012), the study sought to explore the ways in which women negotiated this particular sexual act within the contexts of their different relationships. Responses from participants indicate that oral sex for women is less frequent within hookup relationships than it is within committed relationships. Through the framework of script theory, which suggests that behavior is informed by unspoken understandings of conduct and attitudes, Armstrong et al. (2012) found that oral sex for women was contradictory to the hookup script. Participants indicated that in relationships, equitable receipt of oral sex was assumed for both partners, but in hookup relationships, women had to be particularly assertive to receive oral sex. Like the findings of the Armstrong et al. (2012) study, these findings point to dynamics within hookup relationships that undermine the value of female pleasure.

Mental Distress

A substantial body of research establishes the mental distress that often accompanies hookup encounters. Overwhelmingly, women experience the negative mental consequences of hookups more than men. Crawford and Popp (2003) found in a study of 832 college students, that only 50% of men and 26% of women had a positive emotional reaction to a hookup encounter. Similarly, in a sample of 311 male and female college-aged individuals, 82% of men but only 57% of women reported being happy to have participated in a hookup (Garcia & Reiber, 2008).

In the Littleton et al. (2009) study of 109 women of multiple ethnicities, hookup scripts were compared to rape scripts, in which similar emotional outcomes such as shame were identified, although sexual assault was not experienced. Welsh et al. (2006) found that in a sample of 291 sexually active students, women's depressive symptoms

increased incrementally with their number of sexual partners. However, this result was not found for male participants. Additionally, Fielder and Carey (2010) found in a study of 140 first-semester undergraduate students that female participants who had engaged in a hookup that involved vaginal intercourse experienced higher rates of distress. These studies show that both genders seem to experience emotional fallout from hookups, but women disproportionately so.

Conflicting Sexual Scripts

Related to hookup culture is research associated with sexual script theory, which argues that sexual and dating behavior is often informed by gendered, unspoken assumptions of how to conduct oneself (Simon & Gangon, 1986). Sexual scripts typically subscribe to heterosexual norms, with men operating as pursuers of sex and women operating as sexual gatekeepers (Tolman, 2006). These scripts unconsciously inform peoples' ways of being and meaning making in sexual relationships, and are largely circulated and perpetuated by mass media (Jhally, 2007; Phillips, 2000).

Sexual scripts are particularly complicated for women, especially within the context of hookup culture. Common gendered sexual scripts are often in conflict with one another, and may contribute to the assumptions and confusion that often define hookups. Phillips (2000) found in a qualitative study conducted with 30 female participants that maneuvering sexual initiation is especially confusing for women. The participants of this study reported media-based messages that were at odds with each other: these messages simultaneously encouraged all women to be virginal good girls, provide partners with sexual pleasure, and also be independent, assertive women. The study's participants recounted confusion about initiating sex during encounters with partners, in part because of these multiple, contradictory behavioral scripts they had learned. This likely contributes to the confusion and distress women experience during and after hookup encounters.

Disconnect Between Desired and Actual Outcomes

While it would be stereotypical to assert that all college women hope hookup encounters lead to committed relationships while college men do not, there are several studies that point to a gender disparity in preferred outcomes of hookup encounters. Owen & Fincham (2011) found, in a study of 394 college-aged adults, that the majority (64%) of female participants and less than half (45%) of male participants hoped a hookup would turn into a relationship. In the Lindgren et al. (2009) qualitative study, male participants tended to be more interested in pursuing casual sex while female participants were more interested in building committed relationships. The gender differences in preferred outcomes outlined above indicate that women may prefer relationships more than men do. Further, these studies show that women are participating in hookups, but are not necessarily experiencing their desired outcomes.

Fear of Stigmatizing Labels

In the Knight (2014) qualitative study of communication barriers within casual intimate relationships, one thematic finding was a fear among participants that initiating relational communication would result in stigmatizing labels. According to Knight's findings, female participants noted this fear more often than male participants. Particular concern was given to the notion of being labeled as crazy or that girl, described by participants as an exceptionally needy, emotionally unstable partner. Participants' responses indicated a discomfort with expressing relational concerns or emotions within casual intimate relationships that was grounded in an implicit understanding that it was wrong to experience emotional distress within these relationships.

What Informs Hookup Culture?

Media and Technology

Popular media consumed by college students is highly sexualized, and often portrays casual sexual encounters. A 2005 study found that 77% of prime-time television shows contained sexual content (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005, as cited in Garcia et al., 2012). This same study also found that young adults base their understandings of sexual behavior and norms on media portrayals. Additionally, the increased usage of technology, particularly among college-aged students contributes to the ease of hookup culture. Social media, along with casual dating smart phone apps like Tinder (a smart phone application that allows users to match and chat with other singles in their area based on mutually liking one another's profile photos) make hookup encounters more accessible (Kearney, 2014). It is within this societal and more localized environmental context, both of which arguably promote casual sex, that college students are making decisions and developing learned behavior about sex and relationships.

Emerging Adulthood

It is important to understand college students in a broader developmental context. Erikson (1968) argues that while in college, students typically occupy a state of psychological moratorium (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Moratorium is a developmental space of being in which students are not tied to any particular identity, and feel compelled to explore. This developmental context is highly conducive to the hookup culture, as students experiencing moratorium tend to be less interested in commitment and more interested in experimentation. Additionally, Arnett (2004) argues that modern young adults are currently experiencing an extended period of moratorium that lasts well beyond college (as cited in Arnold, 2010). Arnett refers to this phenomenon as "emerging adulthood", which he argues lasts from ages 18-28. Emerging adulthood is characterized by a postponement of typical adult milestones such as marriage, home-ownership and children, replaced by "identity exploration and instability in residence, jobs, and relationships" (Arnold, 2010, p. 4). Because these commitments are being delayed well beyond college, college students are largely not focused on them. Accordingly, they are more concerned with their own personal, sexual, identity, and career development, which

many students view as not being achievable within committed relationships (Taylor, 2013). Based on this uncommitted, self-focused developmental context experienced during moratorium, it is possible to argue that this is a major contributing factor to the college hookup culture.

Conclusion

Upon reviewing the literature on hookup culture, several thematic characteristics emerge: indirect communication methods, assumptions-based decision-making, a reliance on alcohol, unsatisfying sex, and unsafe sex. The literature shows similar themes for women, who may experience unwanted sex or assault, bad sex, mental distress, conflicting sexual scripts, a disconnect between their desired and actual relationship outcomes, and a fear of receiving a stigmatizing label if relational communication is initiated. Collectively, these themes and their supporting studies suggest that hookup relationship dynamics are largely predicated on unconsciously understood scripts, implicit understandings between partners, and assumptions. This indicates that communication between partners within hookup relationships is unclear. While studies have begun to examine communication within hookup relationships (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Knight, 2014), there is ample room for further research. The literature reviewed above suggests that more research should be conducted specifically on the experiences women have navigating communication within hookup relationships, as the literature suggests that women may experience specific barriers to and outcomes based on communication. There is also ample room for more research exploring the connections between hookup culture and sexual assault on college campuses. Finally, it is important to note that the majority of current research on this topic focuses on white, heterosexual, middle to upper-middle class college students who identify within the gender binary. More research must be done to include students who do not hold these identities in an effort to create a more inclusive, generalizable body of literature.

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