

LGBTQ College Students and Hookup Culture

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Introduction

Among contemporary college students, casual sex or hooking up has slowly become more prevalent in place of traditional emotional relationships (Monto 2014). The amount of hooking up and casual sex that individuals engage in can be influenced by identity-based factors such as age, gender, race, sexuality or situational factors such as drug or alcohol use (Fielder 2013). Because of socialization and societal expectations when it comes to gender roles and identities, some groups may not experience casual sex the same as others or feel as though they can participate in it at all. Various consequences of engaging in casual sex or hooking up can include psychological distress, experiencing an existential crisis, a boost in self-esteem, or a higher or lower placement on the social hierarchy (Adkins 2015) (Owen 2011). The various consequences can also be influenced by an individual's age, gender, race, or sexuality (Eaton 2015) (Jankowiak 2015). In what follows, I offer an overview of the academic literature on hookup culture.

What is casual sex/hookup culture?

Although sexual practices between two (or more) people vary for each individual experience, casual sex and hookups share the same traits. Generally speaking, people who engage in casual sex do not have any emotional or romantic connections with each other before or after they engage in sexual practices. In addition to lack of substantial connection, people who hook up with each other are usually doing it for the purpose of pleasure seeking (Fielder 2013). Among college students, hooking up may also allow them to explore various sexual experiences without the substantial commitment of a traditional relationship. Because hooking up does not require the two (or more) individuals involved to be committed to each other romantically or emotionally, some

individuals may find it easier to engage in casual sex rather than going through the trouble of entering a committed relationship. In addition to individual freedom and autonomy, factors that can contribute to people's reasons for hooking up can range from alcohol/drug use, peer pressure, impulsivity, and sexual desire among others (Gute 2008).

Popular media and literature has contributed to the misconception of college students' sexual activities and behaviors and also given negative connotations to the term *hookup culture*. However, research shows that casual sex and hooking up among college-aged adults is becoming more common. Using data from the General Social Survey (1988-1996 and 2004-2012), Monto (2014) found that while the amount of sexual encounters among college-aged adults has remained steady, the nature of those relationships has shifted. Monto's research suggests that college-aged adults do not have more sexual partners or more frequent sexual encounters. However, respondents from the more modern data do report having more sexual encounters with a "casual date/pickup or friend" than with a "spouse or regular partner" (Monto 2014). Monto's research suggests that sociocultural scripts regarding casual sex and hooking up has changed and it has become somewhat more of a norm among college-aged adults. Although a good amount of college-aged adults in general partake in casual sex or hooking up for various reasons, gender and sexuality are very important factors that contribute to people's perceptions towards and experiences of hookup culture.

Gender & Hookup culture

College-aged heterosexual men and women experience different motives for hooking up and different perceptions of hookup culture (Armstrong 2012) (Fielder 2013). Across college campuses in the US, hooking up has replaced the more traditional

experience of committed dating. Generally, dating requires a greater deal of commitment, emotional compatibility, and investment than hooking up (Bradshaw 2010). Stemming in part from the additional emotional commitment of a traditional relationship, most college-aged heterosexual men prefer hooking up rather than dating and often benefit from it more depending on their motivations for the encounter (Bradshaw 2010). Heterosexual college-aged women tend to report seeking companionship and intimacy, which are more attainable through dating than hooking up (Bradshaw 2010).

It is important to note that gender differences in hooking up may stem from social norms and expectations related to gender and that not all men seek non-committal casual sex and not all women seek emotional, committed relationships. Due to societal double standards when it comes to engaging in casual sex and hooking up, women often do not have the same personal autonomy that men have (Armstrong 2010). On college campuses, women who engage in casual sex often run the risk of gaining a negative reputation, while their male counterparts who mirror the same activities are most times praised and gain a positive reputation, with that reputation becoming more and more positive in correlation to how many sexual partners they have (Allison 2013).

Another reason for the gender gap in hook up culture may be due to differential satisfaction during casual sex or hooking up. College-aged women tend to have more consistent orgasms (which can be seen as a sign of maximum sexual satisfaction) in relationships compared to hookups (Armstrong 2012). Therefore, in addition to wanting emotional fulfillment, heterosexual college-aged women may prefer relationships rather than hooking up because they do not experience optimal sexual pleasure from their

heterosexual male counterparts who are motivated within hookup culture to seek pleasure and satisfaction for themselves (Bradshaw 2010).

Gender norms surrounding sexuality also affects college-aged men's experiences of casual sex and hooking up. Because of hegemonic masculinity being so present in the institution of school and peer groups (Hearn 2004), men who reject the idea of hooking up in order to pursue emotional, committed relationships are sometimes invalidated in comparison to their male peers who pursue numerous sexual partners without commitment or emotion (Basenberg 2016).

Sexuality & Hookup culture

Because of the heteronormative society we exist in (Jackson 2006), people of non-heterosexual sexualities do not have the same options of in-person pursuit of partners for the purpose of casual sex. LGBTQ people face a much higher risk of facing social exclusion, being degraded by heterosexual people within the vicinity or possibly being assaulted compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Davis 2016). However, with dating/hookup apps on phones and computers gaining prominence in the early 21st century, LGBTQ people have a safe space for finding other people who identify with sexualities similar to them for the purpose of casual sex or hooking up. Because personal cyberspace profiles have the availability to be very descriptive, immediate conversation for two LGBTQ people is undeniably more attainable online than it would be in person (Gudelunas 2005). Within a culture where queer sexualities are constantly policed and restricted, online applications and social media spaces are at times a necessity for LGBTQ people to safely and comfortably find sexual or romantic partners.

Although there are already existing dating websites and applications in cyberspace, a majority of the users are heterosexual; therefore the LGBTQ population who are also users of these apps often feel excluded (Gudelunas 2012). For LGBTQ-centered apps, there are ones which are seen more so for the purpose of casual sex rather than dating. Often times, users of those apps have already developed sexual scripts in their heads (Licoppe 2016). Once the attraction between two users on the apps is established, the two users have a short-lived dialogue based on pictures and profile information (in which they express what they are looking for), and then usually the sexual encounter occurs with no repeat (Licoppe 2016). For many LGBTQ people, modern day attitudes and perceptions about casual sex have been influenced by these online apps.

This paper takes a closer look at the hook-up experiences of LGBTQ college students. Using an anonymous, open-ended online survey, this paper explores LGBTQ college students' experiences of and attitudes toward casual sex and hooking up with special attention to dating and hook-up apps.

Methods

In order to obtain my data, I created an anonymous, open-ended online survey that was entirely confidential. This research was approved by my university's IRB prior to collecting data. The reasoning behind the creation of the survey was so that I could obtain qualitative data and respondents would feel more comfortable taking the survey in the comfort of their own privacy without outside pressure. In order to recruit subjects to be interviewed, I advertised recruitment through my campus's LGBTQ student center, hung flyers around campus, and had three undergraduate LGBTQ student organizations

share the survey through their weekly emails. I also used snowball sampling, asking LGBTQ friends and acquaintances I know to take the survey and share the survey with others.

The following findings are limited to preliminary analysis of the available data. The survey was deployed in March 2017 and at this time there are 16 respondents. The preliminary analysis discussed here should be understood as ongoing and incomplete. The research qualitatively coded the existing data and wrote memorandums about five themes that arose: changing sexual scripts, dating apps and the LGBTQ community, emotional experiences of casual sex, personal use of hook up apps, and popular culture and LGBTQ hook up apps.

Findings

Changing Sexual Scripts

Prior to preliminary analysis of the existing data, my literature review suggested that most respondents would have shifted their attitudes about casual sex from negative to positive, being that they were introduced to a college setting where casual sex and hookup culture are more accepted. Upon preliminary analysis, the data revealed that participants' views of casual sex are evolving. Most respondents revealed that their opinion of casual sex has changed. This finding was true for participants, regardless of individual participation in casual sex or hook-up culture.

Dating Apps and the LGBTQ Community

Prior to preliminary analysis of the existing data, my literature review suggested that dating apps such as Tinder, OkCupid, and Plenty of Fish are not considered taboo and are a common, accepted experience among LGBTQ college students. These types of

apps are mainly used/seen as dating apps (which are perceived as more substantial than hookup apps) and Tinder & OkCupid have a good amount of heterosexual users as well. Upon preliminary analysis, the data revealed that participants did not have a negative association with dating apps. The respondents felt as if they could not be judged for simply using those apps because everyone who uses them has the same objective in mind (finding a partner(s) for the purpose of casual sex).

Emotional Experiences of Casual Sex

Prior to preliminary analysis, my prediction was that most of the respondents' emotional experience of casual sex would be based off of the nature of the hookup or sexual encounter—whether it was sexually pleasing or disappointing—not off of the sole act of engaging in casual sex. However, my predictions were wrong, being that most of the respondents said that they would feel regretful, used or uncomfortable.

Personal Use of Hook Up Apps

Prior to preliminary analysis, my prediction was that a majority of the respondents would say that the reason that they do not use hookup apps anymore is because of a lack of substantial emotional connection with other people, or they simply were not interested in casual sex anymore. Upon preliminary analysis, data revealed that this prediction was correct. Most respondents reported emotional-based reasons why they left the hookup apps including feeling lonely and a self-love transformation.

Popular Culture and LGBTQ Hookup Culture

Prior to preliminary data analysis, my prediction was that a majority of the respondents would report that they were not in favor of the media's portrayal of LGBTQ hookup culture. Preliminary analysis revealed that my prediction was correct. Most of the

respondents did not approve of the overall media portrayal of LGBTQ hookup culture due to how it fetishizes their experiences of casual sex rather than situating these experiences in a larger social context of college-aged sexuality.

Conclusion

Based on preliminary data analysis, we can see that dating/hookup apps contribute heavily to LGBTQ college students' experiences of casual sex and hookup culture. Overall, opinions about dating/hookup apps varied and did not lean more towards approval or disapproval, but instead stayed neutral. Emotional stability and personal needs arose as factors in whether LGBTQ college students participate in casual sex themselves.

Limitations of this research were the lack of respondents I received in the survey which stems from only surveying LGBTQ individuals on a college campus, and also regional limitations with my subjects being strictly from one medium sized college campus in the midwestern region. Future research that could possibly be built off of this one is studying LGBTQ college students in different regions of the US and/or studying LGBTQ students on more than one college campus.

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