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## **Toward Complex and Inclusive Studies of Sex Scripts, College Students' Sexual Behaviors, and Hookup Cultures on U.S. Campuses**

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# Toward Complex and Inclusive Studies of Sex Scripts, College Students' Sexual Behaviors, and Hookup Cultures on U.S. Campuses

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## Abstract

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Much attention has been devoted in recent years to students “hooking up” on college and university campuses across the United States. Hookups broadly entail sexual behaviors that range from anal and vaginal intercourse to oral sex, masturbation, and other physically pleasurable activities. In this article, we synthesize the literature on college hookup cultures. Specifically, we use sexual scripting theory to analyze and critique existing peer-reviewed studies. Ultimately, we present five themes pertaining to the study of hookup phenomena at U.S. colleges and universities. This article concludes with several recommendations for making future hookup studies more inclusive of undergraduates from a range of racial/ethnic groups, sexual orientations, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds, and postsecondary institutional contexts, something previous scholars have largely neglected to do in their research.

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**Keywords:** Hooking up, college, sexual behavior

# Hacia Estudios Complejos e Inclusivos sobre Scripts Sexuales, Conductas Sexuales de los Estudiantes, y Culturas de los Encuentros en los Campus de EUA

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## Resumen

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En los últimos años se ha dedicado mucha atención a los “encuentros” que los estudiantes han establecido en los campus universitarios de Estados Unidos. Dichos encuentros implican comportamientos sexuales que van desde la relación sexual anal y vaginal al sexo oral, la masturbación y otras actividades físicas placenteras. En este artículo, se sintetiza la literatura sobre las culturas de “los encuentros” en la universidad. En concreto, utilizamos la teoría del scripting sexual para analizar y criticar los estudios previos sobre el tema. En última instancia, presentamos cinco temas relacionados con el estudio del fenómeno de los encuentros en las universidades de los Estados Unidos. Finalmente, este artículo concluye con varias recomendaciones para futuros estudios sobre encuentros más inclusivos de los estudiantes de grado considerando los diferentes grupos étnicos, las orientaciones sexuales, situaciones socioeconómicas y opciones religiosas, y teniendo en cuenta también el contexto institucional de la educación superior, algo que autores anteriores han descuidado en gran medida.

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**Palabras clave:** Encuentros, universidades, comportamiento sexual

In *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both*, Laura Sessions Stepp, an American journalist, explored sexual behaviors among students at U.S. colleges and universities. The book ignited a firestorm of media attention that vilified undergraduates for what was characterized as promiscuous, irresponsible, and detrimental sexual behaviors (Kalish, 2007). Surprisingly, few readers questioned the generalizability of Stepp's claims, which were based on interviews with nine college women. Comparatively, Kathleen A. Bogle's (2008) book, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*, more deeply contextualizes the sexual behaviors of over 70 women and men. But like Stepp (2007), Bogle's findings are far from generalizable – her study is based on a 95% White, 96% heterosexual and majority middle to upper class sample. Citing the lack of diversity in her sample as a limitation, Bogle urged scholars to develop the “hookup” literature with intentional foci on unexamined groups, particularly non-White and non-heterosexual students.

Hence, the purpose of this article is to synthesize the extant literature on college hookup cultures and commission scholars to diversify their methodological approaches to this important work. In the next section, we present the theoretical lens that guided our interpretations of materials analyzed for this study. Next, we summarize our research methods and present five themes pertaining to the study of hookup phenomena on college campuses in the U.S. Finally, we conclude this article with several recommendations for complicating and making more inclusive future studies of hooking up in college.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Sexual scripting theory suggests sexual behaviors are determined by “scripts” that organize sexual encounters into understandable conventions (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), effectively dictating who will do what and when in a particular context. Context is of utmost importance here, as this perspective embraces social constructionism, a set of sociological theories that acknowledge how, within context, objects of consciousness and social phenomena are constructed (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). A sociologist by training, Bogle (2008) not only cites classic sociologists Gagnon and

Simon's assertion that "sexual behavior is socially learned" and manifests in "sexual scripts", but she also specifies "the roles men and women play are shaped by cultural influences in the context of both a specific social setting, such as the college campus, as well as a specific historical time period" (p. 8). Simply, sexual scripts can be understood as outlines for appropriate behaviors in sexual encounters.

The most salient sexual scripts are heterosexist and sexist, assuming heterosexuality and disproportionately emphasizing the roles of men (Kim et al., 2007). Traditionally, as sex is central to male identity, men are portrayed as active sexual agents who prefer and pursue non-relational sex, while women are portrayed as passive, sexual objects that must act as gatekeepers (Kim et al., 2007). Also gendered, sexual scripts' underlying messages for women and men are often starkly different (Wiederman, 2005). Variety in sexual scripts is routinely interpreted as inconsistency. Consider the lyric "a lady in the street and freak in the bed," a prime example of the Madonna-whore dichotomy (Welldon, 1988). Messages that simultaneously call for a "lady" and a "freak" are inherently contradictory and make it difficult for women to navigate socially constructed sexual expectations (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). In addition, ambiguity regarding appropriate levels of casualness and emotional investments in hookups is a source of considerable conflict.

Though much research identifies media as the origin of gendered sexual scripts (Kim et al., 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003), few scholars are certain why. Saad (2007) suggests that consumer behavior is predicated on products like love and sex that are both most producible and most salient to human survival and reproduction. Garcia and Reiber (2008) describe media as a "reflection of our evolutionary penchants" magnified by popularity and conclude popular sexual scripts are "exaggerated examples of behaviors that are taken to an extreme for the purposes of media sensationalism and activation of core guttural interests" that are often problematic (p. 167). Media proliferations of these contradictory, inconsistent, and problematic gendered sexual scripts provide a backdrop with which to more deeply understand the roles sexual hookups play in undergraduate students' lives.

### **Method and data sources**

This article synthesizes studies about hookup culture on college and university campuses in the U.S. Using electronic retrieval databases (e.g., Project Muse, SpringerLink, EBSCOhost Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar), we searched the words “hookup”, “hook up”, “hooking up” and “hooked up.” As our aim was to locate scholarship on college hookups, our criteria for selecting the research were as follows: some version of the word hookup must appear in the title; the manuscript must be a peer-reviewed study; and finally, the research has to primarily engage young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. Only research-based journal articles (not magazines, newspapers, blogs, etc.) on college students were included. Documents not fitting our criteria (e.g., book chapters, movies, and non-scholarly books and articles) were occasionally consulted, but only for supplemental details. We ultimately found 33 peer-reviewed journal articles and one book. Of the journal articles, four were literature reviews, 25 were quantitative studies, three were based on qualitative research methods, and one used a combination of statistical and qualitative methods.

### **Five themes from the hookup literature**

Presented in this section are five major themes from previous studies about students hooking up sexually on U.S. college campuses. Findings presented herein are not necessarily reflective of our beliefs, nor do we endorse them. In fact, the impetus for our writing this article was the lack of generalizable and widely applicable research on college hookups. Hence, we do not present the five themes as truth, per se, but merely as a synthesis of claims previous authors have made.

### **(Un)Common Definitions of “Hooking Up”**

For both the students who engage in it and the scholars who investigate it, defining “hooking up” has not been an easy task (Armstrong et al., 2009; England et al., 2008; Flack et al., 2007; Paul & Hayes, 2002, Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Paul et al., 2000). When Bogle (2008) asked students to define a hookup, she got a multitude of responses; the most salient difference among them was the range of the sexual acts committed. While

some students felt that a hookup entailed “having sex,” others believed that it did not involve vaginal or anal intercourse, but rather “just kissing” or “making out.” Because it is difficult to know exactly what another person meant when they said they hooked up with someone, the details of an encounter are often left up to the listener’s imagination, Bogle observed.

The best available definitions of hookups are comprehensive. Stinson (2010) defines a hookup as a “casual ‘no strings attached’ sexual encounter” (p. 98). While this definition does not seem to limit the scope of a hookup, the finding that many students engage in hookups with some sort of expectations contradicts the “no strings attached” caveat. Furthermore, most scholars have demystified this notion of no strings attached, finding that women and men tend to have expectations for hookups (Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Townsend & Wasserman, 2011), although expressing their expectations are taboo according to the dominant hookup script (Bogle, 2008). Epstein et al. (2009) cite three themes that are central to the definitional script: (1) the absence of a committed relationship, (2) a short-term encounter, and (3) the presence of a variety of sexual behaviors.

Bogle (2008) found that students could readily describe the dominant hookup script and provide great detail on what hookups typically entail. Hookups are usually initiated at a college party or social event, alongside alcohol consumption, and after two individuals have an exchange of verbal or non-verbal cues that connote mutual sexual interest. Depending on the desired level of privacy, the individuals involved can engage in varying forms of sexual contact either in the party or in a dorm room, off-campus apartment, etc. To avoid the “walk of shame” – returning home in the morning wearing the same disheveled clothing from the prior evening – the visitor (usually undergraduate women) rarely stays the night. If the encounter is not interrupted, the hookup ends when one person leaves, passes out, or climaxes (Paul & Hayes, 2002) and rarely results in a long-term monogamous relationship (Paul et al., 2000).

Hookups follow several scripts (Bogle, 2008; England et al., 2008; Flack et al., 2007; Paul et al. 2000). Manifestations of them include “random” one-time encounters, “regular” encounters that usually occur on the weekends, infrequent and sporadic sexual late night encounters known as “booty calls”, and regularly occurring sexual encounters with a friend without the structure of a relationship referred to as “friends with benefits”

or “fuck buddies”. Except for friends with benefits, a lack of regular communication is common among these archetypes (Bogle, 2008).

Dating and hooking up are not the same. Because college students do not mean the same thing when they use these terms, they cannot be used interchangeably (Stinson, 2010). When students describe dating, they know what the concept is, but they are explaining something in which they do not often engage (Bogle, 2008). According to them, it either refers to someone who attends an event, like a formal, with a date or to two people who are already in a monogamous relationship (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Presently, traditional dating is rarely the pathway through which college students get together. Hookup culture is the dominant pathway to intimacy and students engage in it quite regularly (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001).

The rates and frequencies with which college students engage in hookup behavior are also of import, particularly when distinguishing between hooking up and a hookup culture (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Garcia and Reiber (2008) surveyed over 500 students at Binghamton University to assess the prevalence of and motivation for hooking up, finding approximately two thirds of students hooked up at some point during college. This figure appears to be on the lower side, as Armstrong et al. (2009), England et al. (2008), and Paul et al. (2000) all report about three quarters of their respondents engaged in a hookup during college. Armstrong et al. provide further insights into the frequency of hookups, reporting that of those who have hooked up in college, 40% did so three times or fewer, 40% did so four to nine times, and the other 20% hooked up at least ten or more times during their undergraduate years. England et al. also found that more than a quarter of students (28%) had hooked up at least 10 or more times during college. Additionally, Armstrong et al. inquired about participants’ last hookup partners, discovering that half were hooking up with their most recent partner for the first time, 18% hooked up with this person a couple times prior, 33% had hooked up with this person at least three times before, and 16% had hooked up with this person more than 10 times. Paul et al. (2000) found that only one third of women and one half of men on campus engage in intercourse during a hookup encounter. More specifically, England et al. (2008) explains that when asked about their most recent hookup, 38% of students reported only going



as far as kissing and touching, 16% and 15% went as far as masturbation and oral sex, respectively, in addition to kissing, and 38% of students reported engaging in penile-vaginal intercourse. Evidently, there exists a range of sexual activity that falls under hookup umbrella. Though several stories can be told using statistics presented in this section, the main takeaway here is that scholars agree that a majority of college students are participating in hookup culture (Heldman & Wade, 2010).

Dominant scripts help explain the prevalence of some sexual activity. England et al. (2008) identified a shift in heterosexual sex scripts occurring alongside the flourishing of hookup culture that is characterized by a decline in the rates of vaginal intercourse and an increase in the rates of oral and anal sex. Though the rates of oral sex have seemingly increased dramatically since the second half of the twenty-first century, the last decade has seen a significant decline in the rates of vaginal intercourse (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Further, adolescents report engaging in more oral sex more than vaginal sex, and not considering oral sex actual sex (Epstein et al., 2009). Noteworthy is the reported decline in men's rates of performing oral sex as the overall oral sex number grew, indicating the feminization of oral sex and the male domination of the hookup script (Backstrom et al., 2012). With these significant increases in oral and anal sex amongst these populations, Heldman and Wade (2010) assert that students are engaging in a wider variety of sexual behavior than prior generations, and when they do not engage in vaginal intercourse, they do engage in oral sex. With an understanding of the culture and its scripts, we temporally situate the emergence of hooking up.

### **Emergence of the Hookup Script on U.S. Campuses**

Few scholars (e.g., Bogle, 2007, 2008; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Stinson, 2010) have offered explanations about the timing and emergence of hookup cultures at U.S. colleges and universities. Bogle (2008) argues that a number of sociohistorical trends, both cultural and demographic, during the mid-1960s have had the greatest influence on the emergence of the hookup era. The first is the Sexual Revolution, in which American society, particularly its youth, experienced fundamental, liberating changes in ideology about the traditional codes of behavior related to sexuality and relationships. These include the arrival and availability of contraception and

the birth control pill, the acceptance of premarital and nonrelationship sex, and the normalization of other forms of sexual behavior like oral sex, which grew increasingly prevalent among well-educated Whites during the latter half of the twentieth century. This revolution signaled the foundation of the expansion of sexual expression for many heterosexual Americans. Simultaneously, there was a second cultural change, the Women's Movement, which advocated for the liberation of women in their societal roles and behaviors. One important arena was sex and relationships, in which feminists argued that women should be free to pursue men as well as negotiate their own conditions for sex, within or outside the context of marriage. During this era of change, American youth began to express their individualism as well, exercising personal choice and departing from adult expectations, an example of this being the demands college students made to college administrators and the subsequent privileges they ascertained on campus. While college campuses had historically been sexually restrictive and segregated, students rallied for privacy and sexual freedom until administrators gave in and shifted resources from advocating for appropriate sexual behavior to advocating for safe sexual behaviors. Currently, unrestricted access to the opposite sex is a staple on most campuses (Bogle, 2008; 2007; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Stinson, 2010).

Beyond the cultural changes, Bogle (2008) contends that a confluence of demographic changes—an increase in median age at first marriage, the younger ages at which young women and men become sexually active, and the stark increase in women's college going rate—have also heavily contributed to the emergence of hookup cultures. Whereas the median age for first marriage in 1960 was 20 for women and 23 for men, it rose significantly to 25 for women and 27 for men by 2008. Considering that the average age which young women and men are sexually is 17, there is a long eight to ten year period between sexual activity and marriage. Thus, were one to subtract four of those years for exploring their options during college, women and men still have four to six years after college with which they can make finding a spouse a priority. Finally, the increased presence of women on college campuses seems to have reversed the sex-ratio imbalance, and thus, further shifted the balance of power in college men's favor. With women outnumbering men in higher education 100 to 80, men have more options of women to choose from, and thus greater

power to determine what the campus sexual scripts are. Consequently, women are often left with few options to access intimacy. In many cases, they can adapt and adhere to this male-oriented script or get left out of this aspect of campus social life.

Heldman and Wade (2010) contend it is necessary to delineate the difference between a culture that includes hooking up and a hookup culture to truly understand its advent. In contrast to Bogle's explanation of a "going steady" dating culture being normative on college campuses from the 1920s to the 1960s, today's campuses do not have a dating culture to balance hookup behaviors (England et al., 2008). Garcia and Reiber's (2008) finding that one third of students lose their virginity during a hookup corroborates the claims casual sex grows more normative and romance and relationships are not desired by many of them (England et al., 2008). The basis of Heldman and Wade's argument is that for a campus climate to be defined as a hookup culture, it may need to be characterized by a disinterest, rejection, and/or absence of a dating culture, characterized by emotionally meaningful, monogamous relationships. While they agree that the Women's Movement and Sexual Revolution may have been necessary for the emergence of hookup culture, Heldman and Wade (2010) argue that they alone are not enough. They call into question Bogle's (2008) claim that hookup culture emerged in 1980s, explaining that by then, the major societal shifts of the 1960s had already begun, and potentially declined. Instead, they suppose, depending on how you define culture, that hookup culture's emergence started in the 1990s, using the more traceable decline of sexual intercourse and the rise of oral and anal sex a temporal marker.

Stinson (2010) reframes Bogle's claims about hookup culture's emergence around social context, seeking to understand "the extent to which the social environment of university campuses is affecting the beliefs, norms, and behaviors of students" (p. 100). First, she argues that the social norms and scripts created and enforced by popular culture and peer groups contribute to the proliferation of hookup culture on college campuses (Bogle, 2008; Lambert et al., 2003; Stinson, 2010). As some believe navigating sexual intimacy is a developmental process and period of transition (Bogle, 2008), Stinson (2010) contends college is a space to experiment with and negotiate sexual boundaries. Therefore, it is conducive to hooking up.

## Placing Hookup Cultures in Campus Contexts

There is something unique about campus life that makes hookup culture flourish there (Bogle, 2008; Fielder & Carey, 2010a; Lambert et al., 2003; Paul et al., 2000; Reiber & Garcia, 2008; Stinson, 2010). Emphasizing environment as a major influence on sexual and romantic decisions, Bogle describes a set of contemporary ideologies that may lead to the prominence of hookup culture on campus. First, she observed that students generally perceive college to be just as much social as it is academic, making it a time to party, let loose, and have fun. In contrast, many students see committed, exclusive relationships as inhibitors to enjoying their full college experience, limiting their ability to have fun and party. Subsequently, few display a sense of urgency for marriage, as many students today believe that there is plenty of time to find a future spouse post graduation. Of note, is the average 18-24 year old student is in a distinct period of their development, called “emerging adulthood,” where she or he is no longer an adolescent, but not quite an adult. Absent the adult responsibilities of children, mortgages, and a full-time employment, college students are afforded the freedom to experiment how they see fit. When these ideologies are compounded with the unique contemporary campus structure, hooking up is often the result.

There are also structural factors on campus that facilitate hookup culture (Bogle, 2008). The college admissions process, for example, creates an environment where similar and same-age students surround each other, providing a wealth of options for hookup partners. Moreover, their similarities as college students embellish an atmosphere of trust and familiarity amongst strangers who do not necessarily perceive themselves that way. In addition, the layout of a college campus puts these eligible candidates in extremely close proximity to one another, providing unparalleled access to the opposite sex in ways few other settings do. Not only do college students tend to assess themselves based on what their peers are doing, but also they report that watching and discussing others is a common pastime for them and their peers (Lambert et al., 2003; Reiber & Garcia, 2010; Stinson, 2010). For students who want to fit in, these contextual pressures may lead to conforming to the perceived social norms, even for those who may fundamentally oppose it (Bogle, 2008; Lambert et

al., 2003; Reiber & Garcia, 2010; Stinson, 2010). This concept is known as pluralistic ignorance.

Reiber and Garcia (2010) and Lambert et al. (2003) analyze the role of pluralistic ignorance in the context of a college campus. According to them, it exists when individuals within a group believe that their private attitudes, beliefs and judgments do not align with the perceived norms, or the behaviors publicly displayed by said group. Most regularly, students overestimate the frequency and level of sexual activity in hookups. Assuming that they are the only one in the group experiencing conflict between their private attitudes and public behaviors and that most others endorse and desire to act in the normative ways, individuals try to fit in by conforming to the norm. Lambert et al. (2003) hypothesized that students would perceive others as being more comfortable than themselves in hookup scenarios. Their findings revealed that this was in fact true and that pluralistic ignorance has a significant influence on students' decision-making processes when it came to hookups and hookup behavior. Reiber and Garcia's (2010) findings corroborate these claims. Because hooking up is the norm for heterosexual relationships on campus and majority of students are in fact engaging it, most students overestimated their peer's levels of comfort while performing various sexual acts during a hookup as well as the percentage of their peers that are actually hooking up. This problematic perception that "everyone's doing it" may encourage some students to hookup (Fielder & Carey, 2010a; Lambert et al., 2003; Reiber & Garcia, 2010).

Fielder and Carey (2010a) center much of their analysis on social norms, distinguishing between descriptive and injunctive norms. The former refers to an individual's perception of the prevalence of a certain behavior while the latter refers to perceptions of peer approval of behavior. Fielder and Carey (2010b) also believe that the consistent overestimation of both descriptive and injunctive norms lead to students conforming. Acknowledging modeling and vicarious learning as integral in behavior formation, they suggest that the college campus and the misperception of its social norms are possible determinants of sexual hookups.

Regularly described as a predictor, motivator, factor, cause, and/or social norm, alcohol has traditionally been strongly associated with casual, sexual activity and is contemporarily cited throughout the hookup literature

(Fielder & Carey, 2010a; Flack et al., 2007; Heldman & Wade, 2010). On many U.S. college campuses, it is available and abundant, and its use and abuse are commonplace (Bogle, 2008, 2007). Grello et al. (2006) found that 65% of his sample drank prior to their most recent casual sex encounter. More specifically, Paul et al. (2000) found that frequency of alcohol consumption was lowest among individuals who had never hooked up, higher among students who has a history of hookups with sexual intercourse, and was highest among those who had a history of hookups with sexual intercourse (p. 1106). Further, the students in Bogle's (2008) study reported that alcohol not only makes them want to hookup, but also leads to them going farther sexually during a hookup and hooking up with people they would otherwise reject (p. 64). Thus, scholars have reached a consensus that alcohol plays a significant role in campus climates and hookup cultures (Owen et al., 2010). With this understanding of the role of the college context, we offer additional reasons why American students might be hooking up.

### **Hookup Motives and Outcomes**

To address the variance in hookup participation and sexual activity, researchers have investigated personal motivations (Armstrong et al., 2009; Bogle 2008; England et al., 2008; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Heldman & Wade, 2010) as well as demographic variables and psychosocial factors (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Owen et al., 2010; Paul et al., 2000). Nine of 10 students report physical pleasure as being one such personal motivation, but more startlingly, 54% of students reported emotional motivations, which inherently contradicts the “no strings attached” stigma (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). In fact, several studies contend (Armstrong et al., 2009; Bogle, 2008; England et al., 2008, Garcia & Reiber, 2008) that women only modestly desire a relationship more than men and the potential for relationship formation is a primary motivator in hookup culture. It seems students are using this “no strings attached” culture for relationship formation, considering only 13% of participants in Garcia and Reiber's study (2008) were completely uninterested in anything more than hooking up. In England et al.'s study (2008), 47% of women and 36% of men expressed interest in starting a relationship with their most recent hookup partner.

Still, students remain doubtful, only 6% expecting to be successful (Garcia & Reiber, 2008).

While not getting into a relationship is the most common outcome of a hookup (Bogle, 2008), the literature tends to focus on more startlingly ones. Hookup sex is often coercive and unpleasant, particularly for women (Armstrong et al., 2009; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Flack et al., 2007; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000; Wade & Heldman, 2010). Despite the rise in non-traditional sexual behaviors, men have become less likely to perform oral sex for their partners, whereas women are more likely than ever to pleasure their partners in that way (Backstrom et al., 2012). Measuring sexual satisfaction by orgasm, Armstrong et al. (2009) uncovered that women only orgasm 49% as often as men when they hookup with repeat partners, and a mere 32% as often as men with first time partners. Inconsistencies between desired outcomes and actual outcomes may be the source of hookup culture's social and emotional tolls (Paul et al., 2000). The majority of students, women at slightly higher levels than men, report that hookup scenarios with no emotional connection and little to no chance at a future relationship may likely leave them feeling lonely and isolated (Paul, 2006; Townsend & Wasserman, 2011; Wade & Heldman, 2010). Further, the persistence of long standing double standards and gender roles places a great emotional toll on women, while for some men, social rewards are often the outcome. As they accrue more encounters and partners, women approach a socially unacceptable state of promiscuity while men approach a lauded plateau of masculinity (Armstrong et al., 2009; Bogle 2008, 2007).

Hookup culture also facilitates sexual assault and STI transmission (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2009; Littleton et al., 2009; Wade & Heldman, 2010). Women who attend college have a greater chance of being sexually assaulted than those who do not; women who partake in hookup culture are at greater risk for sexual assault than those who do not (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2009; Littleton et al., 2009). Surveying a representative sample of 178 students at a small liberal arts university in the first study of unwanted hookup experiences, Flack et al. (2007) contends that overall, 78% of coerced oral, vaginal, and anal sex on campus occurred during a hookup. According to Heldman and Wade (2010, p. 326), "hook-up culture carries a higher risk of contracting a STI than dating culture because the

former entails more sexual activity with ‘strangers’ and sexual contact with more partners.” Scholars overwhelmingly agree.

Recognizing the problematic outcomes of hooking up, scholars have begun investigating why these cultures persist. Bogle (2008) submits, “women may have had to adapt a script that is particularly beneficial to some college men (p.23). Central to hookup culture is the power college men derive from their lack of numbers (Bogle, 2008). Coinciding with Waller’s historic deduction (1937) that the party least interested in continuing a heterosexual relationship holds the most power, Bogle (2008, 2007) points to the sex-ratio imbalance in higher education that made men a scarce campus resource. Supply and demand dictates that because women on campus outnumber them 100 to 80, college men have greater power to determine what suits their needs when it comes to the opposite sex. Though clear exceptions to the rule exist, men generally pursue sex and women relationships. Above outcomes considered, there is great incentive for women commit to a monogamous relationship. In contrast though, the surplus of women provides little incentive for men to date exclusively. In *To Hookup or Date: Which Gender Benefits*, Bradshaw et al. (2010) presents a cost benefit analysis of hooking up and dating that reports men, in most situations, prefer hooking up to dating and the opposite is true for women. This disparity between motivations has historically and contemporarily shaped the interaction between the sexes on campus. Today, as college women recognize that a relationship is not a likely the outcome of a hookup, they report experiencing feelings of powerlessness. Perhaps, as Victor (2012) explains, hookup culture disallows women to strive for committed relationships and forces them to “adjust to college life, where their acceptance is contingent on learning how to hide hookup fears and appearing to enjoy hookup experiences” (p. 29). Bogle (2008) corroborates this claim, contending whether or not women are happy with the existing hookup script, it is the only one available, and they must come to terms with it. Still, others remain disadvantaged by typical hookup scripts.

### **Who is Hooking Up?**

Most often referring to White, heterosexual college students from more affluent backgrounds, and only juxtaposing the experience of women and



men, the hookup literature, though abundant, rarely acknowledges those who represent expansive arrays of socioeconomic status, educational attainment levels, sexual orientations, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. While this substantial shortcoming leaves us with a dearth of perspectives from other populations, the literature does offer insights into which students are and are not hooking up among “traditional” undergraduates (Bogle, 2008; Brimeyer & Smith, 2012; Burdette et al., 2009; Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Fielder & Carey, 2010a; Gute & Eshbaugh, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Holman & Sillars, 2012; McClintock, 2010; Olmstead et al., 2012; Owen et al., 2010).

Though she asserts hookup culture is prominent and pervasive, Bogle (2008) acknowledges that not all students choose or are able to participate in it. In her sample of 76 students, the vast majority White, middle to upper class, and heterosexual, hookup culture transcended gender, institution type, and grade level, though some students reported hooking up being more prevalent freshman year. Bogle argues that at the center of hooking up is attraction, contending that personality and looks dictate students’ success with this script. While for men attraction starts at their looks and can be supplemented with desirable qualities like fraternity or athletic team membership, women are less privileged, their status being mainly confined to perceptions of physical attractiveness. Bogle also discovered that a student’s level of alcohol consumption and circle of friends were good predictors of how engaged in hooking up she or he was. Members of popular campus groups like fraternities, sororities, and athletic teams were more likely to be heavily involved in hooking up. Greek members specifically, often the host of parties where alcohol is available in excess, are at the center of campus social life and have incredible access to alcohol and the opposite sex. As such, they find themselves in the settings most conducive to hooking up. The amount of hooking up varied for students not in popular or Greek circles, but the availability of alcohol-driven social events presented them with ample opportunities to procure a hookup partner. In contrast though, the students who struggled to find hookup partners were those who seemed less involved with social events and alcohol consumption.

Bogle (2008) also discusses the students she found to have opted out of hookup culture. While students already in exclusive relationships had no

need to participate in hookup culture, others, like “the less privileged women”, actively sought out relationships to avoid it. As Bogle explains, students who are deemed more attractive can more easily ascertain hookups, Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) add less “privileged” women don’t find hooking up as appealing an alternative and are more inclined than privileged women to “build both relationships and career at the same time” (p. 606). For some students with strong religious beliefs, the hookup script did not coincide with their faith, though many others are able to compartmentalize obvious conflicts (Burdette et al., 2009). There are other students, Bogle (2008) suggests, that may not engage in hooking up for more practical reasons. Finding that White and minority students are not interested in hooking up with one another, Bogle states that minority students tend to socialize among themselves on campus and maintain ties with friends from home. Though they recognize hooking up as normative, they reported not participating in it, but engaging in a more courtship oriented process called “talking” to someone. Similarly, she reports homosexual students lack options on campus. Generally on their own to find potential partners, this group is more inclined to venture off-campus for alternatives. In summation, Bogle (2008) contends students who do not participate in hookup culture on campus are on the “margins” of the social scene. “For some, the hookup scene is not a viable option due to their minority status or sexual orientation. For others, avoiding hooking up is a choice” (Bogle, 2008).

### **Advancing a more inclusive study of hooking up in college**

The hookup literature uses multiple research methods, but namely surveys and interviews. Samples have included students from co-educational and single sex institutions; various classifications from first-year undergraduates to senior; and varying levels of religiosity. Still, scholars identify several huge shortcomings in knowledge that continue to impede our understanding of hookup culture.

Finding fault with the minimal qualitative research, Bradshaw (2010) requests that some scholarship seeks to understand in more depth what motivates women and men to hookup or date. Olmstead et al. (2012) and LaBrie et al. (2012) contend future research should include longitudinal

assessments and multivariate approaches to examine factors that influence hookup trajectories over time, particularly the transitions from high school to college and from college to career and verify causality. Similarly, Heldman and Wade (2010) maintain more interviews as well as presently unemployed methods like focus groups and ethnographies that provide qualitative data across many disciplines are necessary. Longitudinal studies—examining students’ sexual behaviors from high school through the college years—will shed light on the long-term effects of participation in hookup culture. Cross-college comparisons can help better determine to extent to which hookup cultures exist across U.S. institutions of higher education. Moreover, ethnographic studies could help provide far deeper, more textured qualitative insights into hookup phenomena.

There also is a need to complicate and be more inclusive of the identities of students who participate in hookup research. As most studies of hookup culture remain resolutely non-intersectional, Heldman and Wade (2010) explain we know very little about how sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, religious affiliation, (dis)ability, and other variables influence or interact with hooking up among individuals. Future scholarship, according to Downing-Matibag and Geisinger (2009) should address the issue of the limited samples, involving college students from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups, as well as undergraduates from a more expansive array of sexual orientations.

Despite routinely describing undergraduate men as “drunken, promiscuous, lovers of pornography, who rape women...” (Harper & Harris, 2010, p. 10), the field of higher education has yet to deem the pervasiveness of casual sex on campus worthy of study. Meanwhile, in their efforts to mitigate sexual shaming, regret, assault, and rape, the sociologists and health professionals who have conducted scholarly research on college hookup cultures place an inordinate amount of attention on the victims rather than on the perpetrators. Disproportionately focused on the harmful outcomes of hooking up for women, their reactionary approach has failed to sufficiently consider how men are socialized to think about sex in college.

In the seminal text, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2009) writes: “one is not born a woman, but becomes one” (p. 283). Similarly, one is not born a man, but becomes one (Butler 2008; Connell, 2005; Harper & Harris, 2010; Kimmel & Messner, 2004). As femininity and

masculinity are socially constructed, women and men learn how to perform according to expected gender behaviors from myriad societal influences, including their families, peers, communities, schools and the media (McGuire, Berhanu, Davis, & Harper, 2014). Seemingly most prominent among undergraduates, there is something about the postsecondary environment that makes hookup cultures pervasive on campus. Accordingly, how men learn (or are taught) to become men and be intimate with others during college warrants investigation.

Empirical studies regarding college men as “gendered” beings are, at best, marginally inclusive of men of color and men who are not heterosexual (Harper & Harris, 2010; Kimmel & Messner, 2004; McGuire et al., 2014). More research on undergraduate men’s gendered and sexual experiences can provide higher education stakeholders with the tools to assist them in developing healthy identities absent violence, sexism, racism, homophobia, and misogyny (Harper & Harris, 2010) and prevent problematic trends within hookup cultures and elsewhere on college and university campuses. Understanding why so many undergraduate men hook up with so many partners in college would be insightful. Also needed are more studies of how college men make sense of sex, hooking up, sexual health, romance, and their prospects for long-term sexual relationships after college.

The primary concern of hookup culture literature seems to be mitigating its problematic outcomes. LaBrie et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of assisting incoming students with making better informed decisions in enhancing their health and well being. This may be achieved through anecdotal and normative information about students’ post event evaluations of their hookup experiences and associated psychoemotional consequences; visible messaging targeted to naturalistic drinking contexts that provides salient cues, highlighting behavioral risks; creating and extending support structures for students (i.e., pre-first year hookup culture orientation) as they navigate collegiate hookup culture; and targeted interventions for hookup’s high-risk populations, like first-year and sorority women. Olmstead et al. (2012) also argue college administrators should take steps to provide education for their students regarding healthy and safer sex and relationship education targeting emerging adults should include discussions about the importance of making deliberate decisions regarding relationship

transitions and formation. Downing-Matibag and Geisinger (2009) recommend the development of mandatory and nationwide sexual risk-prevention programs that provide incoming students with accurate information regard STIs and how to protect themselves from them. These prevention programs and resources need to be available and promoted to students from their first to last days on campus through a variety of venues. Owen and Fincham (2011) suggest that educators recognize and initiate discussions with young adults about both the positive and negative aspects of hooking up, helping them balance their desires of instant sexual gratification and a lack of commitment with realistic understandings of the risks involved, the dominant message being enjoyment should not trump risk. As some of the students hooking up desire relationships, educators should assist them in navigating effective techniques for forming them.

### **Conclusion**

Of the varied experiences and health risks young women and men will experience, perhaps none are as pervasive and widely experienced as engagement in and desire for romantic attachments and experiences with sexual activity (Garcia & Reiber, 2012). Understanding hookups during the critical stage of late adolescent development and young adulthood is paramount for protecting and promoting healthy sexuality and healthy decision-making among emerging adults. Donna Freitas (2013) states the following in the *End of Sex: How Hookup Culture is leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused about Intimacy*:

The cultural conversation surrounding hookup culture should be about what we want our young people to get out of sex. It should offer a wide range of models for good sex and romantic relationships, with hooking up as one option among many. (p. 10)

As Heldman and Wade (2010) posit, a research agenda examining hook-up culture will be necessarily multi-methodological with cross-disciplinary collaboration, including better communication across the various disciplines that investigate the subject. This manuscript not only commissions a diversification of the disciplines, fields, and methodologies engaged and employed in hookup research, but also cautions researchers and students to

critically assess both the anecdotal and scholastic information we receive about casual sex on U.S. college and university campuses.

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