



# Implications of the Endorsement of Hookup Culture on College Campuses in the United States

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I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on  
this assignment/examination. – Alexa Paganini

## **Abstract**

Hookup culture has grown to characterize a vast majority of the sexual and romantic behavior currently occurring on college campuses in the United States. While this culture endorses casual and commitment-free sexual encounters, it is notable that the amount of sex happening now is not significantly different than the amount that happened before this new outlook became the focus of many studies and media outlets. Thus, this research review article will serve to analyze the implications of the endorsement of hookup culture on college campuses in the United States. Through the use of studies, survey data, and sources in popular media, a comprehensive outlook of hookup culture will be provided. This will include background on the endorsement of hookup culture and misconceptions surrounding the level of sexual activity occurring on college campuses, risks and benefits of casual sex, changes as a result of sexual behavior becoming less taboo, and how these changes will likely expand and affect future generations. Overall, hookup culture has both positive and negative aspects that depend on situational characteristics for those involved. Perceived increases in the future of communication surrounding sexual activity, coupled with new methods of providing safe sex interventions on college campuses, are expected to provide many benefits for young adults in later years.

## **Introduction**

The sexual and romantic behavior of college students in the United States has come to exist under a phenomenon known as hookup culture. This is characterized by the movement away from a culture of dating or courting toward a “culture of casual, commitment-free, and relationally ambiguous sexual encounters called ‘hookups.’” (Aubrey & Smith, 2013, p. 435). Although the term “hookup” has a wide range of definitions, the underlying theme of each meaning involves casual sex practices with no strings attached (Bogle, 2008). This is an

important issue among college students due to misperceptions that exist in terms of the level of peer involvement in casual sex, and how partaking in this form of sexual behavior may affect an individual in both positive and negative ways, in accordance with situational circumstances (Vrangalova, 2015; Zelin, Erchull, & Houston, 2015). This review article will serve to examine the changes that this new outlook on sexual activity has had in relation to safe sex practices and levels of promiscuity on college campuses. After comparing the occurrence of casual sex in recent years to that of earlier eras, the risks and benefits of sexual behavior will be outlined. This will be followed by a discussion of new outlooks, movements, and trends that have resulted as a byproduct of the endorsement of hookup culture. Finally, the article will conclude by assessing what these societal changes may have in store for future generations, while taking into account recent suggestions for the implementation of safe sex interventions on college campuses.

### **Growth of Hookup Culture & Promiscuity on College Campuses**

Although hooking up is written about as a recent phenomenon, there is evidence that suggests that this behavior was in place long before its recognition in literature (Bogle, 2007). Many cultural changes occurred during the latter part of the twentieth century, which ultimately allowed American youth to stop dating as a primary means of getting together with the opposite sex and begin hooking up instead (Bogle, 2008). The most notable changes that occurred during this time period include how college students began to socialize in groups, the birth control pill became more widely available, more liberal views emerged surrounding sexuality, feminist movements challenged gender norms, and more women began to attend college (Bogle, 2008). The continued growth of hookup culture can be attributed to the means of socialization that have become more prominent on college campuses over the years. “Instead of socializing in dating pairs as they did earlier in the twentieth century, college students tend to ‘hang out’ socially in

groups at dorms, parties, or bars” (Bogle, 2008, p. 29). Each of these settings encourage the use of alcohol and other stimulants, in addition to peer pressure to conform to social norms, which often lead to involvement in sexual activity (Bogle, 2008). While college students recognize what the dating script is, it is very uncommon for these individuals to participate in traditional forms of dating simply due to the fact that “going on dates is no longer the centerpiece of campus social life as it once was” (Bogle, 2008, p. 46). The hookup era began to solidify during the 1970s; thus, casual sex has grown to become a widely accepted and normative social behavior in more recent years.

The acceptance of hookup culture, however, is often misinformed. Many students believe that more of their peers are participating in the act of hooking up than actuality (Bogle, 2007; Zelin et al., 2015). Studies that compared survey results from waves in 1988 to 1996 to those of 2004 to 2012 found “no evidence of substantial changes in sexual behavior that would indicate a new or pervasive pattern of non-relational sex among contemporary college students” (Monto & Carey, 2014). Thus, the incidence of casual sex in modern society is largely exaggerated. That being said, although the behaviors that occur within the context of hookup culture are not new, it is notable that it is more common for hookups to occur among friends and acquaintances, rather than strangers (Fielder & Carey, 2010). Contemporary hookup culture has evolved to include sexual activity among members of the same friend group, so long as the relationship between partners remains unchanged as a result of hooking up (Bogle, 2008). This suggests that current college students are not involved in “the rampant hedonistic free-for-all portrayed in the media,” but are instead simplifying sexual acts into casual means of satisfaction (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England, 2010). This level of intimacy may even be prioritized in friendship more than romance due to its perceived level of “relative safety,” as involvement with a friend makes “it

possible to be sexually active while avoiding behaviors with the highest physical and emotional risks” (Armstrong et al., 2010). While non-committal sex is not a new phenomenon created by the current generation of college students, young adults are beginning to seek physical pleasures with individuals who they can trust, while maintaining a mutual understanding that their involvement is not to cross any emotional boundaries.

### **Risks of Casual Sex**

While the idea of casual sex is advertised as a care-free means of enjoying oneself, especially among college students, there are many risk factors involved in recreational sexual activity. After surveying 187 college students, Paul and Hayes (2002) found that casual sex is not necessarily “casual” or impersonal, as many college students described their previous hookup experiences as complex, emotional, and thought provoking. Involvement in hookups, when done for non-autonomous reasons, could affect college students’ psychological and physical well-being (Vrangalova, 2015). Individuals who chose to become involved in casual sex, as a result of self-imposed pressures, external contingencies, or lack of intentionality, were associated with the development of negative outcomes in well-being, including lower self-esteem, higher anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms (Vrangalova, 2015).

This is particularly notable for women, as the ideologies surrounding hookup culture often favor the outlook of men. According to Bogle (2008), “women far outnumber men on many college campuses in the United States” (p. 23). It is argued that men are now a “scarce resource on campus” when compared to the dating era, allowing college men to have greater power in determining “what suits their needs when it comes to interacting with the opposite sex” (Bogle, 2008, p. 23). Thus, Bogle (2008) argues that women may have felt the need to adapt to a script that is more beneficial to men. In fact, many of the individual stories documented by

Taylor (2013) suggest that many women may have been pushed into hookup culture as a result of their environment. “Some women went to college wanting a relationship, but when that seemed unlikely, they embraced hooking up as the best alternative” (Taylor, 2013). While the increased involvement of women in hookup culture is not necessarily negative, the dominating patriarchal views in American society have been found to affect women within the context of hookups. After speaking to many college women, Taylor (2013) found that oftentimes men assume that consent is given, men do not care about pleasuring women, and women are pushed into sexual acts that they were not entirely convinced that they wanted to participate in. Gender inequality and sexism are thought to contribute to problems that women may face when participating in hookups (Kelly, 2012; Lovejoy, 2015). College women, in particular, have been found to experience forms of sexual and romantic alienation, sexual health problems, exploitation, and mistreatment as a result of partaking in casual sex (Lovejoy, 2015).

Furthermore, the most commonly noted risk of hooking up, for both men and women, is the possibility of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, or STD. Behavioral, biological, and cultural factors place sexually active young adults, aged 20 to 24 years, at a high risk of acquiring STDs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). That being said, many individuals in this population do not recognize the magnitude of the risk that they face when engaging in sexual behaviors. After analyzing the cognitive strategies that young adults use to explain their engagement in unprotected sex, it was found that many individuals believed that the use of condoms would hinder levels of sexual pleasure and functioning (O'Sullivan, Udell, Montrose, Antonello, & Hoffman, 2010). This, coupled with a perception of invulnerability, often results in unsafe sexual behavior among college students (O'Sullivan et al., 2010). Many participants viewed condoms as a means of preventing pregnancy, while preventing disease was

not categorized as a main motivator for this form of contraception (O'Sullivan et al., 2010). Thus, the risk of contracting STDs is often dismissed or ignored among young adults.

### **Benefits of Casual Sex**

While there are blatant risks to engagement in hookup culture, each individual may experience a wide range of benefits or positive outcomes as a result of involvement in sexual activity. A study by Jannini, Fisher, Bitzer, and McMahon (2009) analyzed the reasons why sexual intercourse is considered to be healthy, as each contributor used his or her individual experience in sexual medicine, in addition to endocrinology, psychology, gynecology, and urology, to examine the impacts of sexual activity. In men, increased levels of sexual activity are linked to greater physiologically produced testosterone, which “correlates with both psychological and general health” (Jannini et al., 2009, p. 2641). Sexual activity can even be considered as an “efficient marker” of general health, as a ten-year-long study found that “men who had fewer orgasms were twice as likely to die of any cause compared to those having two or more orgasms a week” (Jannini et al., 2009, p. 2642). Jannini et al. (2009) goes on to suggest that “satisfactory and frequent sexual activity should be prescribed as a medicine” to cure many intrapsychic, relational, and physical diseases (p. 2642). Evidence shows that sexual intercourse can alleviate health challenges ranging from clinical depression to fibromyalgia (Jannini et al., 2009). In women, benefits of sexual activity were found in terms of physical changes to the vagina and pelvic floor, as well as endocrine and emotional changes related to orgasm (Jannini et al., 2009). “Vaginal lubrication, elasticity, and the trophism of the vagina are enhanced and maintained by sexual activity” (Jannini et al., 2009, p. 2643). This is notable due to the fact that these factors may reduce a woman’s risk of acquiring sexual health problems, such as chronic cystitis (Jannini et al., 2009).

In contrast to the risks surrounding the position of women within casual sexual relationships as discussed above, many sources in popular media depict the involvement of women in hookup culture to harbor empowering characteristics (Armstrong et al., 2010; Baker, 2012). The article by Baker (2012), in particular, denounces many of the critiques of the role of women in hookup culture with the use of her own personal experiences and those of her peers. While referencing other written works, including a book by Hanna Rosin, Baker (2012) argues that feminist progress depends on the existence of hookup culture. Hookup culture is described as a great equalizer, allowing women to have the power to choose when they want to focus on relationships, academics, careers, or self-discovery (Baker, 2012). In fact, Baker (2012) states that single women in their sexual prime are, on average, more successful than their male peers due to their ability to become involved in temporary relationships that do not deter their attention from their ambitions. The individualism of hooking up may allow women to experience benefits in the form of self-growth, autonomy, and self-gratification (Lovejoy, 2015). Thus, the involvement of women in hookup culture is rather complex. Each individual may experience aspects of hooking up under varying circumstances, which may have overwhelmingly positive or negative outcomes for those involved.

### **Changes Brought by Hookup Culture**

With the increasing documentation and discussion of hookup culture, a more open dialogue has been created in regards to sexual behavior among young adults. This is especially notable in the Casual Sex Project led by researcher and New York University professor, Zhana Vrangalova (Bahadur, 2014). Bahadur (2014) was able to speak with Vrangalova about her intentions surrounding the project, which she explained as providing a platform for people to anonymously share their unique hookup stories with the general public. This is thought to



demystify casual sexual encounters and educate people about the reality of hookup culture, which harbors incredibly varied experiences for those involved (Bahadur, 2014). Thus, as hookup culture continues to enter the public eye, more people may feel willing to discuss their encounters and reflect on their experiences without fear of being judged or receiving criticism for their sexual behavior.

Additionally, the increased involvement of women in pursuing purely sexual relationships has led to shifts in the portrayal of women's sexuality. After many instances of "slut-shaming," and victim-blaming in the case of using a woman's appearance as an excuse for rape, SlutWalks have formed to allow women to protest the objectification of their bodies (Dow & Wood, 2014). SlutWalks serve to empower women, as participants may choose to dress in scandalous clothing for the purpose of demonstrating that the visibility of their bodies is not grounds for sexual assault or harassment (Dow & Wood, 2014). These movements argue that women should no longer be oppressed or judged by their sexuality, and that being in charge of their sex lives should not expose them to an expectation of violence (Dow & Wood, 2014). The cofounders of SlutWalk Toronto, Sonya Barnett and Heather Jarvis, explained the importance of these movements in redeeming the word "slut" for women (Dow & Wood, 2014). They stated that women "are tired of being judged" and that enjoying sex should not be equated with attracting sexual assault (Dow & Wood, 2014, p. 23).

On college campuses in particular, increases in the discussion of casual sex has led to a greater desire for knowledge surrounding safe sex practices. For instance, Galentine (2013) wrote about how many students at the University of La Verne expressed that they would like the university's health center to do more in terms of educating students about methods of disease protection and prevention. Many students believe that representatives from the health center

should initiate conversations about safe sex, rather than solely providing condoms and educational pamphlets (Galantine, 2013). This is important to note, as it is clear that many college students would like to make more informed decisions in regards to sexual encounters. Although this is an example of a specific institution, it is likely that many college students harbor similar views across the United States.

The changes in STD rates in the population of individuals aged 20 to 24 years may, in part, represent the desire of college students to become more knowledgeable in terms of their sexual health over the past ten years. From the year 2005 to 2012, rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea experienced a rather large increase in this population (CDC, 2014). In the year 2005, chlamydia in young adults was reported at a rate of 1,705.54 per 100,000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], & National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention [NCHSTP], 2015). This ratio per 100,000 increased to 2,265.34 in 2010, 2,450.80 in 2011, and finally 2,453.92 in 2012 (DHHS et al., 2015). Gonorrhea, on the other hand, had a rather shaky occurrence among young adults, decreasing substantially from 2005 to 2010, and increasing at a dramatic rate in the years 2011 and 2012, with an incidence of 510.22 per 100,000 (DHHS et al., 2015). That being said, a notable shift occurred in both STD rates during the year 2013. Reports of chlamydia decreased to a rate of 2,451.64 per 100,000 in young adults (DHHS et al., 2015). The amount of gonorrhea cases also experienced a decrease in this population, reported at a rate of 500.53 per 100,000 (DHHS et al., 2015). The decreases in chlamydia and gonorrhea rates, although slight, show improvement when compared to the increases that occurred each year from 2005 to 2012. This may suggest more successful efforts toward preventing and controlling these diseases in more recent years.

## **Future Implications**

In terms of future outlooks toward sexual activity and promiscuity on college campuses, it is likely that a more open dialogue about these behaviors will continue to develop among college students. This, along with body positive movements and outlooks that argue against slut-shaming, will create an overwhelmingly positive environment in terms of accepting the occurrence of casual sexual behavior (Dow & Wood, 2014). This acceptance would lead college students to be more willing to communicate about sex and, in turn, engage in safer sexual activity. Thus, even though college students may continue to participate in casual sex, they will have increasing opportunities to learn about how to do so in a less risky manner. The increasing endorsement of hook-up culture will allow students to feel less shameful about engaging, or wanting to engage, in sexual activity. Thus, it is expected that they will be more willing to talk to campus representatives and peers in order to attain more information regarding safe sex. Additionally, more open communication may serve to debunk the assumptions that many young adults make about the involvement of their peers in sexual behavior (Zelin et al., 2015). While partaking in this behavior will not cause individuals to be subjected to shame or ridicule, students will be exposed to the reality that not everyone may want to engage in non-committal sexual activity. Although there is no right or wrong choice, it is stressed that the ability to communicate with others and reflect on one's own motivations will allow college students to understand whether or not they will enjoy or benefit from hooking up (Vrangalova, 2015).

Furthermore, many studies have been conducted in recent years in order to determine more efficient ways of initiating safe sex interventions on college campuses. With the use of this information, it is expected that STD rates will continue to decrease among this population of young adults. According to Downing-Matibag and Geisinger (2009), the Health Belief Model is

a useful framework for understanding sexual risk taking among college students, as preventive health behaviors are contingent on perceived susceptibility to the health outcome, severity of the outcome, benefits of preventive behaviors, barriers to implementing prevention, and self-efficacy. It is important to note that situational characteristics, including spontaneity, may affect these perceptions (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009). Thus, methods of educating college students should focus on identifying situational aspects that may place these individuals at higher risk for engaging in unsafe sexual activity (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Sadovszky et al., 2003). By highlighting common themes involved in risky sexual encounters, such as the involvement of alcohol or a cozy ambiance, it is believed that young adults would be more alert when placed in similar circumstances, and that they will chose to act in a safe manner (Sadovszky et al., 2003). Interventions should push young people to acknowledge the reality surrounding risks of sexual activity, and to confront them when choosing to participate in such behaviors (O'Sullivan et al., 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Although the endorsement of hookup culture is not something that is relatively new, the recent increase in studies that focus on the phenomenon of hooking up have allowed for more attention to surround this “centerpiece of campus social life” (Bogle, 2008, p. 46). While hooking up does not occur to the extent that many individuals perceive it to occur, casual sex has become “a normal and taken-for-granted part” of many college students’ social lives (Bogle, 2008, p. 30). This shift in behavior is accompanied by both positive and negative aspects, which largely depend on situational characteristics. Each instance of hooking up is unique, and may affect those involved in different ways. Both risks and benefits may affect an individual’s psychological and physical well-being, meaning that the motivations behind hooking up are

important to analyze on a person-by-person basis (Vrangalova, 2015). Additionally, the endorsement of hookup culture has led to a much more open dialogue surrounding sexuality among young adults in the United States. This is demonstrated in the Casual Sex Project and SlutWalks, which serve to encourage people to feel comfortable discussing and being in charge of their sex lives (Bahadur, 2014; Dow & Wood, 2014). These growing outlooks, paired with more detailed means of providing safe sex interventions on college campuses, may encourage individuals to be more knowledgeable and open about topics surrounding sexual behaviors. This could assist in decreasing STD rates among young adults and ensuring that college students will make appropriate decisions regarding their involvement in sexual activity in the future.