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The Female Perspective of Hooking-Up on College Campuses

Maura Gallagher

ABSTRACT

Hooking-up is a new trend in the lives of today's young adults. It has become the most common heterosexual form of a relationship on college campuses. But what exactly is hooking-up? According to social scientist, hooking-up is "a sexual encounter, usually lasting only one night, between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances." This literary review will look at the social norms, benefits, and personal factors that have caused many students to make the switch from traditional dating to hooking-up. Some of the serious consequences that can go along with hooking-up for females are depression, unplanned pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. Research has shown that college females may not be as comfortable with these new sexual encounters as it may appear.

INTRODUCTION

The culture on college campuses has gone through many changes in the last several decades. The social norms of society have undergone many transformations. One major aspect of college culture that has developed is the tradition of dating. Years ago dating or "going steady" was seen as a customary feature of life that students were expected to partake in. Since the 1960's, the roles and expectations of dating have completely changed (Gross 2005). It is now much less common for students to participate in the dating world. In today's college culture, it is becoming much more conventional for students to "hook-up" than partake in a traditional heterosexual dating relationship.

There is much discrepancy surrounding the definition of hooking up. It can be defined differently depending on who is talking, where you are, and whom you are talking to (Sacco et. al 2011). Hooking up is defined by social scientists as "a sexual encounter, usually lasting only one night, between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances." Hook-ups are casual sexual encounters that do not necessarily always include sexual intercourse. Most importantly, a hook-up takes place outside of the realm of commitment. This is an extremely vital component of the definition because on today's college campuses, students constantly feel over whelmed and pressed for time. Hook ups give them the opportunity to have their physical needs met without the time commitment expected in a steady relationship. Hooking up does not imply emotional interest in the other person, but it also does not exclude for it to

eventually develop (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). For example, a hook-up could be two people that meet at a party and decide to engage in sexual activity. Hooking up has become more common than heterosexual dating on college campuses around the United States.

In this paper, I will examine empirical literature to gain further insight into the stigmas, social norms, motivations and hypocrisies that go along with hooking up on college campuses to find out how the attitude and level of comfort relative of hooking up vary by gender. I will look at three factors to determine how the different sexes feel about hooking up: emotional benefits, social acceptability and personal influences. By looking at these factors, the attitude and comfort that female college students feel towards hooking up will be evident.

WHO BENEFITS?

When it comes to dating versus hooking up, males and females tend to take opposing sides. Males are more likely to favor hooking up, whereas females prefer dating (Eshbaugh 2010). Sociologists have found after analyzing the costs of dating and hooking up that each gender gains greater benefits from its respective preference. Part of the reason that men prefer hooking up over dating is because traditionally dating requires much more effort on the male's part. Men are more vulnerable during the traditional dating process. Men also like to hold on to a sense of freedom that comes along with hooking up. It is also more likely that men will gain status after the hook-up among other male peers. Contrary to males' opinion of hooking up, females tend to be more hesitant about the idea. Females prefer the sense of security that goes along with having a steady boyfriend. Females also are more likely to lose status after hooking up among their female peers (Rohen 2010). When asked about relationship goals, men's goals usually involve some type of sexual accomplishment whereas females focus more on companionship, nurturing, and adventure (Bradshaw, Kahn and Saville 2010).

Traditionally, a man asks a woman out with the chance of being rejected, plans the date, picks the woman up, pays and is to initiate the second date. For women, dating gives them the option of saying yes or no to a male's offer. They are responsible for getting ready, going on the date, getting brought home and allowing, accepting, or rejecting the second date. This customary pattern of dating allows the female to have less stress and vulnerability during dating than males do. This may be part of the reason as to why males are not always so fond of dating. The "traditional" gendered script of dating is hardly present anymore on college campuses (Uecker and Rengus 2010). Women are more likely to seek long-term relationships than men are. Overall, traditionally in dating, men are the active participants and women are the reactive participants.

Hooking up tends to have more negative consequences for females, such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, depression and sexual assault. College women consistently express less comfort with hooking up than college men do (Bradshaw et. al. 2010). Women often feel pressured to go along with whatever sexual advances their male partner is attempting out of fear of rejection. Many of these occurrences could be legally considered rape

(Rohen 2010). Men enjoy hooking up because it allows them to feel as if they are not losing any freedom. In contrast, 37% of women feel that they have been overly sexually compliant in their relationships (Uecker and Rengus 2010). Sexual compliance is when one party agrees to partake in an activity without having any desire to and does not feel as if they are capable of voicing their want to omit from the activity (Bradshaw et. al). When a woman feels like this, she is also more likely to feel less of a sense of commitment from her partner. The force of sexual behavior actually distances the couple and can result in the women suffering from depression (Katz and Tirone 2009).

The sexual double standard can make women feel guilty about hooking up. Researcher Elaine M. Eshbaugh (2010) argues that females sense more regret of action than men. Eshbaugh administered a voluntary survey to 152 college females at a Midwestern University in the United States to gauge the level of regret that sexually active students feel after a hook up (Eshbaugh 2010). 72% of female college students say that they have had at least one sexual encounter in college that they truly regret. Men, Eshbaugh believes from her research, sense more regret of inaction, meaning that they have more regret from omitting from an action than they do if they partake in said action. This statement provides insight into the fact that it is more socially acceptable for men to be sexually permissive than it is for women. This causes a gender-based double standard.

SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY

In recent years, it seems to be just as acceptable to hook-up as it is to date on college campuses. Hooking up is now considered a social norm, which makes students believe it is more acceptable. In their survey, Bradshaw et. al. (2010) found that 77.7% of females and 82.4% of males reported hooking up at some point in college with a mean of 10.8 hook ups and a range of 0-65 hook ups. Previously, hooking up with strangers would instantly ruin a person's reputation. Now it is not so commonly viewed as something to necessarily be ashamed of. College students tend to view their peers as much more promiscuous than they think of themselves to be, but this is not always the case (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Society tends to push two contradicting messages: sexual deviance is completely acceptable but it is only acceptable if you are a male.

It is so common now for words like "slut" and "whore" to be tossed around as if they have no negative connotation. The media reinforces that females are to try to pursue loving and committed relationships. Men are expected to pursue sexual strictly relationships (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009.) This message is attainable in many of today's media, such as wedding advertisings in female-directed magazines and television shows like "Say Yes to the Dress." Television shows, movies, books, and magazines that promote the idea of the "traditional" wedding style tend to be marketed towards women. These types of media are a constant reminder to females that they must be looking for loving and committing relationships, not just moving from hook up to hook up. Media that is directed towards males tend to be much more sexualized.

Women who attempt to pursue sexual relationships tend to be called names and talked poorly about by their peers (Rohen 2010). Researchers have found that when it comes to sexuality women are judged more harshly than men. Women who attempt to gain sexual gratification outside of a committed relationship can have their reputation completely diminished by their peers. On the contrary men who pursue hooking up over a serious committed relationship are seen as “studs” and “players,” words that are more playful than hurtful (Rohen 2010). Men gain status from having sexual experience, where as female college students lose status and are seen as not having any self-respect. This shows that females are more likely to sense regret due their peers’ reactions.

Our society is becoming very sexually driven. Today’s media consistently reinforces the gender-based double standard and acceptance of sexuality. College students very rarely get the opportunity to directly observe their peers sexually, so what they gather as social norms they get from the media. A theory that can accurately describe this is the cultivation theory. The cultivation theory is responsible for explaining the effects of viewing television shows. This means that there is a consistent stream of similar images fed to every household via television programs. These images reinforce the ideas of sexuality and allow the majority of households to have similar views on the topic (Chia and Gunther 2006). Now, the cultivation theory is not only limited to television, but is extended to all types of media. Where today’s media is so sexualized, college students are repeatedly reminded of the acceptance of sex in society. Chia and Gunther performed a study in 2006 that explored the media and its contributions to the misconceptions of social norms about sex that are believed by college students. They hypothesized that college students believed that their peers were much more sexually active due to what they saw in the media. Chia and Gunther gained information for 312 male and female students in a sociology lecture at a United States University. They found that the hypothesis proved correct after what was gathered from the survey. A limitation of this study was that it was only performed in the United States. This is a limitation because many Western countries have much different media laws that the United States. I think it would have been very interesting to see how the difference in laws would affect the outcome of the students’ responses.

INFLUENCES

There are a plethora of factors that can influence a female’s decision to participate in hooking up. One large reason that girls decide to hook-up is because they believe that it will serve as a starting point to a relationship. 18% of female students surveyed view hooking up as a stepping-stone towards a future relationship (Bradshaw et. al. 2010). In reality, men will not usually just hook up with a woman they see a potential relationship with. Men have an easier time separating sex and love. Women on the other hand tend to intertwine the two believing that they go in hand. 60% of women surveyed say that they went into college expecting to find a husband. Seeing that most hook-ups occur in college, it can be inferred that women do use hook ups to potentially further relationships.

Another factor that can influence a girl's reasons to hook-up is religion. Girls who indicate strong religious beliefs are less likely to indicate a high level of regret related to hook-ups (Eshbaugh 2010). Much to contrary belief, women of Catholic belief are more likely to hook-up at college than females with no religious affiliation. Extreme conservative Protestant women are the least likely to hook up while at college and women who attend a university with some type of religious affiliation are more likely to hook-up than those who attend a school with no religious affiliation. (Burdette, Ellison, Hill and Glenn 2009).

Alcohol can play a large role in hooking up on college campuses, especially for females. Sociologists have found that hooking up usually occurs after activities involving drugs and alcohol and after being at establishments such as frat houses, house parties, and bars (Bradshaw et. al 2010). Alcohol is a disinhibiting force, meaning that they can use alcohol as an excuse or a justification for hooking up. 35% of students surveyed following their first year of college reported that they had been swayed to partake in sexual behavior after consuming alcohol (Beck 2009). Students tend to believe that consumption of alcohol will also boost their chances of hooking up when in reality alcohol lowers the presence of the hormone testosterone in the bloodstream, lowering sexual desire. This proves that alcohol psychologically makes people want to hook-up, not physically. Female students tend to use the "because I was drunk" response when it comes to talking about hook-ups. They feel regret and guilt. Alcohol acts as an explanation for actions that they would not have normally committed if sober. The only situation that on average women prefer hooking-up to dating is when alcohol is present (Bradshaw et. al. 2010).

CONCLUSION

Hooking up on college campuses is hardly a phase. I strongly believe that this is a new transformation our culture is going to be seeing for a long time. Marriage rates are declining and people are waiting longer to get married. This shows that commitment is going on the back burner compared to personal gratification. Uecker and Rengus (2010) found in their study that due to the fact that men tend to be less present on college campuses than females, there is less motivation for women to partake in the traditional patterns of dating.

I believe that women still aim for a loving, strong commitment instead of a hook-up but where hook-ups are becoming more socially acceptable, traditional dating will become a much more rare occurrence. Hooking up also provides much more risks for the female involved. Risks associated with hooking up are unwanted pregnancy, sexual assault, sexually transmitted diseases and depression (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Due to these factors it is clear to see that women, on average, prefer dating opposed to hooking up for the sense of security and comfort.

Overall, female college students tend to hook up without being comfortable with it. Though hook ups are on the rise, it is not necessarily what female college students are trying to

get them into. Where on average, females outnumber males on college campuses it can be a challenge to find a dating partner for females. With the age of first marriage being delayed, commitment is less and less on the minds of college students. College is now more viewed as a time to “have fun,” as portrayed in the media.

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