

International Conference on Social and Education Sciences



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October 13-16, 2022

Austin, TX, USA

College Students' Perceptions of Chaperones in Opposition to Hookups or "Body Dating"

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Abstract: Studies on the socialization of American college students indicates a pervasive trend in hookups as opposed to the traditional dating. Hookups are associated with fraternity and sorority parties in which two individuals "hook up" and have a sexual encounter without the commitment of developing a formal relationship. This research was based on inquiry if the practice of hookups was still popular and prominent among undergraduate college students. Two focus groups and two independent investigative studies of undergraduate students were collected over four independent semesters. The results indicated that college students do scan the physical appearance of prospective partners as well as friends, thus, perhaps promoting the concept of body dating as reference to hookups and a possible perpetuation of body image issues. Contrarily, the results indicated that hookups and its associated at-risk behaviors such as alcohol abuse or coercion were not supported or desired, but rather, this sample of college students actively engaged in roles of chaperones as a means for developing a safe environment. The majority of this sample also identified themselves as religious, having low levels of depressive symptoms but higher levels of anxiety and stress tendencies.

Keywords: College Students, Dating, Hookups, Chaperone

Citation: Terneus, S. (2022). College Students' Perceptions of Chaperones in Opposition to Hookups or "Body Dating". In M. Shelley, V. Akerson, & I. Sahin (Eds.), Proceedings of IConSES 2022-- International Conference on Social and Education Sciences (pp. 146-156), Austin, TX, USA. ISTES Organization.

Introduction

There has been a plethora of research on the social behaviors of college students in regards to hookups and atrisk behaviors. Hookups are associated with two consenting individuals who "hook up" with the intention of having a sexual encounter without commitment of the development of a relationship, rather, a consenual onenight stand. Hookups are prevalent across campuses as a quick and easy social encounter with the purpose of casual sex among two strangers or acquaintances who usually meet at permissive social functions such as fraternity and sorority parties (Bartoli & Clark, 2006; Bogle, 2008; Freitas, 2013; Mark & Murray, 2012; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000; Siebenbruner, 2013). This trend as a social encounter may have replaced the traditional dating roles since the ambiguity and confrontation of intra and interpersonal thoughts and emotions and personal risks of rejection seemed to be eliminated (Bogle, 2008; Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2013). However, Bogle (2008) and Garcia (et al, 2013) disclosed that there are college students





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who had hoped that a hookup could, in fact, lead to a continuing romantic relationship, and Kerner (2013) concurred in stating that college students, who had engaged in a hookup encounter, did so under the belief that it was a first date.

Body Dating

In an investigation of the initial process of partner selection (N=259), a sample of undergraduate college students were asked that during introductions to someone for the first time, did they scan that person's body parts. Seventy-four percent of the responses indicated that they did so (44% males and 57% females). Males indicated scanning the appearance of the head and hair followed by the chest and buttocks. Females indicated also scanned the appearance of the head and hair followed by the shoulders and stomach. Surprisingly, respondents also indicated that they scanned friends as well. Respondents were also obsessed with their own appearance with 39% of males identifying having thoughts of personal appearance from frequently to constantly all day compared with 66% of females who identified thinking of personal appearance frequently to constantly all day. This tendency of obsessing over one's personal appearance and body scanning others may invoke a covert norm or custom of body scanning which perhaps naturally leads to body dating or hookups with the potential desensitization of the value of actually knowing each other before engaging in sexual encounters...

Thus, current trends for developing social encounters and/or dating relationships among college students displayed a variety of scenarios for hookups: 1) to meet someone and have casual sex with no commitment as referenced as a "one-night stand," 2) to meet someone and have casual sex on multiple occasions as referenced as "friends with benefits," 3) to meet someone and have some sexual contact without vaginal penetration such as oral sex in the guise of allowing vaginal penetration only with the hopes of future dating, 4) to meet someone and have sex/some sexual contact and commence a dating relationship, and 5) to meet someone and have some sexual encounter and terminate future contact. Clearly, although hookup encounters may initially provide ease of meeting someone with the intention of consensual sex, it can become problematic to ascertain the genuine meaning of the potential consequences from the hookups (Terneus, 2021).

As Kerner (2013) and Bogle (2008) warned, participants who could become confused as to the meaning of the sexual encounter and question if consenting to have sex with a person for the first time deemed a date, a beginning of a date, or the promise of a romantic relationship, may be left in feelings of regret and low self-esteem. Depression and sexual regret stemming from feelings of being used or of using others from hookups was also supported in other findings (Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2013; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Walsh, Grellos, & Harper, 2006). Bogle (2008) also suggested that the alcohol consumption, peer pressure, and potential for coercion may further camouflage the clarity of providing "consensual" sex as well as the outcomes and intentions of the hookups. Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) reported that women who imbibed in alcohol were perceived by men as a social cue that the women were sexually available. Therefore, the literature described hookup cultures as social encounters which promoted atrisk behaviors of alcohol usage and coercion. Also, although the majority of participants perceived hookups as



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positive, the attached ambiguity of the meaning of the sexual encounter left nearly half of the respondents with negative feelings of regret, diappointment, and confusion for both genders (Paul & Hayes, 2002).

Two focus groups (n=50) discussed the means of dating and hookups in two consecutive semesters. Both focus groups adamantly prohibited speed dating and hookups as a means of dating due to sexual regret, the high potential for peer and sexual coercion, and alcohol intoxication. The focus groups were united in the use of chaperones for one to two pre-dates. The pre-dates allowed two interested parties to have the opportunity to socially engage and get to know each other before moving forward to a formal date. During the pre-dates, chaperones would accompany the pair as a means of guardianship, i.e, making certain that both parties returned home safely after alcohol was consumed, providing a sense of security, and providing prosocial friendship. The roles of chaperone were a traditional cultural practice which was not readily used in the recent past but has been successfully reinstalled at this campus community. Based on the literature and input from the two focus groups, this researcher developed an investigative survey composing of questions about relationships, mental health issues, and religious practices. After obtaining IRB approval, the survey was administered the following subsequent semester to undergraduate students.

Method

Participants

Participants (N= 85; 28 males and 57 females) were undergraduate students at a public university in a small southeastern community in the Bible Belt region of the United States. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 22 years or older (M = 19.23; SD = 1.24). The majority of the participants reported being European American (88%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (4%), First Nation/Native American (4%), African American (3%), and other (1%). In regard to relationship status, participants identified themselves as In a Committed Long-term Relationship (22%), Single and Not Dating (26%), Single but Looking for a Partner (24%), Partnered (22%), Single and Dating Multiple Partners (2%), and Married (4%). The majority of the participants (75%; 64% males and 80% females) had identified themselves as religious or spiritual, and (33%; 27% males and 36% females) attended church/service or spent time in prayer, meditation, or readings more than once a week.

Results

This researcher designed exploratory questions regarding forming relationships/dating. The majority of the questions were dichotomous in design and required a "yes" or "no" response while a few questions were posted with Likert-style responses.

Relationships

The majority of participants responded that they were not pursuing hookup relationships as defined as casual sex and dating several people simultaneously (79%; 64% males and 86% females), and that they were not living life



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in the moment inclusive of sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously (80%; 68% males and 86% females) (see Table 1). Rather, the majority of this sample dated with a purpose in developing a relationship with the intention of marriage as an outcome (90%; 86% males and 91% females) and searched for a partner who could be identified as a best friend who would work together to overcome obstacles (95%; 96% males and 91% females). The majority of this sample also identified themselves as having awareness of themselves and could specificially identify similar values and characteristics in another person who would be a strong match for a long-term relationship (93%; 96% males and 91% females) and could identify the boundaries of friendship and a romantic relationship (93%; 89% males and 95% females) which could become blurred during hookup encounters.

Table 1. Relationships

Variables	Yes	No	M	SD
I am looking for someone who enjoys life to the fullest without				
personal commitment. I believe casual sex is beneficial for all parties				
if they are consenting adults. I believe a person can date several people				
simulatanously without feeling constraints.	21.43%	78.57%	1.79	0.41
I date in order to enjoy life in the present moment and experience all that				
life has to offer including sexual relationships with multiple partners				
simultaneously.	20.24%	79.76%	1.80	0.40
I enjoy whatever life brings me; I am a free spirit and open to whatever				
unfolds before me.	46.43%	53.57%	1.54	0.50
I date with a purpose; to find a lifetime partner and a committed				
relationship resulting in marriage.	89.29%	10.71%	1.11	0.31
I am looking for someone who would be my best friend, to be my				
Partner, and to work together as a team in overcoming obstacles.	95.24%	4.76%	1.05	0.21
I have a clear idea between the boundaries of a friendship and a				
romantic relationship so I can make healthy choices with a potential				
partner.	92.86%	7.14%	1.07	0.26
I have enough awareness about myself that I can specifically identify				
similar values and characteristics in another person who would be a				
strong match for me.	92.86%	7.14%	1.07	0.26

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In regards to physical attraction, it was interesting to note that physical attraction was nearly a 50-50 split for participants who identified physical attraction as a priority; however, the majority of participants identified a reciprocal relationship in having a partner who was physically attactive and vice versa (85%; 86% males and 84% females) (see Table 2). Another source of note is an apparent conflict in that the concept of dating someone who was physically disabled resulted in 55% agreement (43% males and 61% females) and 45% of the sample who opposed dating someone who was physically disabled (57% males and 39% females) respectively; however, the majority of participants did have expectations that their partner would be committed to them regardless if they were to incur physical disability, disease, or mental illness (94%; 89% males and 96% females). It may appear ego-centric that the participants definitely preferred someone to be available to support him/her if unfortunate health circumstances should occur, however, when the role was reverse, there seemed to be a biased, at least in regards to dating someone who is physically disabled. Clearly, further investigation of dating parameters, selection of dating partners from a diversity perspective, and genders dating issues would add to the understanding and confirmation of research results.

Table 2. Relationships – Physical Considerations

Variables	Yes	No	M	SD
Is physical attraction a high priority in someone you would				
like to date?	47.06%	52.94%	1.53	0.50
I am looking for someone who is physically attractive to me				
and I to him/her.	84.52%	15.48%	1.15	0.36
I have no hesitations dating someone who is physically disabled.	54.76%	45.24%	1.45	0.50
I am looking for someone who will be there for me even if				
I develop a terminal disease, paralysis, or mental illness.	94.05%	5.95%	1.06	0.24

It is also interested to note that in regards to communication (see Table 3), the majority of participants identified that they were able to freely communicate without fear of rejection (82%; 82% males and 82% females), believed that their date would be honest with them (89%; 86% males and 91% females), yet, the majority of the participants were emotionally guarded as a means of self-protection (80%; 75% males and 82% females). This conflict may stem from undisclosed inner psychological issues and an area which may prove fruitful to extended research in regards to the influence of past carryover emotional rejections in present dating patterns. This conflict would suggest examining more ambiguous perceptions of trust and levels of emotions in relationships as well.

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Another area to note is that 67% of the sample (almost two-thirds) believed that the person dated should know the participant well enough that the participant should not have to say what he/she wanted or liked. Perhaps, this belief of someone knowing another so well that he/she doesn't have to say what he/she wanted or liked is perceived as a strength in a relationship; however, this could be a grave lack of awareness of the pertinence of genuine and open communication between partners. This can be interpreted as a disturbing acknowledgement of a preference for depending upon assumptions and a deterrence from open communication with one's partner as well as suggesting that people do not evolve and/or change, even if minor, in some area of their life. Although hookups encounters bypass the open communication process endured during dating and relationship development, this sample who opposed hookup encounters may not have perceived open communication as a healthy facilitation of relationships.

Table 3. Relationships – Communications

Variables	Yes	No	M	SD
I am able to talk freely to the person I date without fear of being				
rejected by him/her.	82.14%	17.86%	1.18	0.38
I trust my date to be completely honest with me.	89.29%	10.71%	1.11	0.31
I believe that the person I date should get to know me well enough				
that I shouldn't have to tell him/her what I want or like.	66.67%	33.33%	1.33	0.47
I usually am somewhat emotionally guarded in relationships, so I can				
protect myself from being hurt if the relationship is not what I had hoped.	79.76%	20.24%	1.20	0.40

Anxiety and Depressive Tendencies

According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2022 January), anxiety continues to be the most common presenting concern followed by stress and depression among college students. In a 2017 national study, approximately 24 percent of college students cited anxiety and nearly 16 percent cited depression as affecting their academic progress (United Educators, n.d.). Thus, the researcher developed a brief measure of using seven anxiety and depressive symptoms using the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). This measure was not intended for clinical use but to ascertain mental health tendencies among college students. Both mental health survey questions utilized a Likert Scale inclusive of possible answers that ranged from experiencing symptoms ranged from None, for Several Days Within Two Weeks, for More than Half of the Days within Two Weeks, and for Nearly Every Day within the Past Two Weeks (see Table 4).

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At least one-third of the sample reported experiencing anxiety tendencies. The majority of participants identified experiencing anxiety tendencies of Feeling Nervous, Anxious or on Edge for Several Days within Two Weeks (42%; 46% males and 39% females), followed by Becoming Easily Annoyed or Irritable for Several Days within Two Weeks (35%; 36% males and 34% females), and closely followed by Feeling so Restless that it is Hard to Sit Still for Several Days within Two Weeks (34%; 36% males and 33% females). When asked if the participant coped successfully with academic stressors, the majority of participants concurred (66%; 64% males and 66% females) but 35% of participants disagreed (36% males and 34% females). This would seem to parallel the one-third of participants who indicated symptoms of anxiety. It would be interesting to continue further research to identify factors facilitating the emotion of worry and anxiety. Since the survey was distributed during mid-semester, perhaps, other variables of mid-term exams and assignments were prominent.

Table 4. Anxiety Tendencies

Symptoms	None	Several	More than	Nearly	M	SD
		Days For	Half of the	Every		
		Two	Days for	Day for		
		Weeks	Two Weeks	Two Weeks		
Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	8.33%	41.67%	20.24%	29.76%	2.75	1.00
Not being able to stop or control worrying	20.48%	32.53%	19.28%	27.72%	2.56	1.11
Worrying too much about too many things	16.67%	22.62%	29.76%	30.95%	2.75	1.11
Trouble relaxing	19.28%	32.53%	18.07%	30.12%	2.64	1.14
Feeling so restless that it is hard to sit	32.53%	33.73%	12.05%	21.69%	2.20	1.13
Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	15.48%	34.52%	27.38%	22.62%	2.70	1.02
Feeling afraid as if something awful might						
happen	35.71%	20.24%	17.86%	26.19%	2.27	1.22

In regard to depressive symptoms, the overall results were more indicative of positive health as compared to anxiety tendencies (See Table 5). In regard to depressive symptoms, half of the participants indicated finding pleasure in life (52%; 36% males and 61% females) followed by sleeping and eating well (41%; 36% males and 43% females), and (40%; 32% males and 43% females) not feeling lonely, thus, this would suggest that this sample was not experiencing levels of depressive symptoms as compared to anxiety symptoms. In identifying depressive symptoms, one-third (33%; 43% males and 29% females) reported Feeling Overwhelming Sadness for Several Days within Two Weeks, and one-third (33%; 29% males and 34% females) reported Feeling Tired and Exhausted Nearly Every Day for Two Weeks closely followed by Feeling Tired and Exhausted for Several Days within Two Weeks (32%; 39% males and 30% females).

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It would also be interesting to note that since the survey was distributed during mid-semester, perhaps, other optimistic variables of semester break as well as campus and community social functions were occurring as well as examine the sense of tiredness and exhaustion. This score may be indicative of the 35% of participants who disagreed with coping successfully with academic stressors above.

Table 5. Depressive Tendencies

Symptoms	None	Several Days For Two Weeks	More than Half of the Days for Two Weeks	Nearly Every Day for Two Weeks	M	SD
		WCCRS		1 WO WCCRS		
Feeling overwhelming sadness	38.10%	33.33%	8.33%	20.24%	2.02	1.14
Not able to concentrate in class	28.57%	28.57%	20.24%	22.62%	2.36	1.12
Not finding pleasure in life	52.38%	20.24%	13.10%	14.29%	1.77	1.09
Not eating or sleeping well	40.48%	16.67%	21.43%	21.43%	2.13	1.15
Feeling tired and exhausted	11.90%	32.14%	22.62%	33.33%	2.71	1.03
Feeling lonely	39.29%	22.62%	14.29%	23.81%	2.14	1.20
Feeling as if you don't have a purpose in life	60.71%	11.90%	10.71%	16.67%	1.73	1.14

Lastly, participants were asked to rank their reason for attending college. The reason or motivation for going to college by males were: Preparing for a Career (54%), Learning and Academic Achievement (47%) and Finding a Partner (30%). The majority of females selected Learning and Academic Achievement (44%), Preparing for a Career (44%), Didn't Know What Else to do with my Life (49%), and Finding a Partner (45%). These findings are congruent with the literature regarding motivation and expectations for the college life experience. It was interesting to note that both genders (30% males and 45% females) had expectations of Finding a Partner. It is also interesting to note that 49% of females had identified that they Didn't Know What Else to do with my Life and one may ponder how this motivation to achieve this goal may have affected their dating habits.

Discussion

The literature review noted some of the more current research on hookup behaviors; however, there are several informative studies regarding how college students are conducting dating. Numerous articles have focused on alcohol abuse on college campuses. Paul and Hayes (2002) suggested that alcohol was positively correlated to hookup behaviors both in inhibiting judgment, signaling sexual availability, and possibly as an excuse to justify the lack of integrity associated with hooking up. In addition, history of hookup behaviors may indicate mental



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health issues. In regard to self-esteem and hookups, both genders who had engaged in an uncommitted sexual encounter had lower self-esteem compared to those who had not (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Other research reviews (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2013) found that females reported more negative reactions than males in regard to hookups, specifically, thoughts of worry, increased mental distress, and unfulfilled hopes that the hookup would lead to a relationship. Studies have revealed that there are qualities or patterns of individuals who participate in hooking up. Bogle (2008) found that physical attraction was one of the top qualifications, especially for females. However, a male's status was determined by membership or leadership in a fraternity, sports affiliation, academia, and intellectual aspects.

The majority of participants responded that they were not supportive of hookup relationships as defined as casual sex and dating several people simultaneously. Rather, the majority of this sample dated with a specific purpose to developing a relationship with the intention of marriage. As per two focus groups, both genders expressed concerns about college student development publications, specifically, college students' substance abuse, coercion and peer pressure, hookup practices and consequences. In fact, both focus groups clarified that hooking up originated during high school and not college. Contrary to hookups, the focus groups consistently practiced the cultural tradition of chaperones. The specified the role of the chaperones was to provide safety and prosocial friendship to both parties for one to two pre-dates, i.e., ensuring both parties arrived home safely after drinking alcohol at a campus or social function, providing a network of friends to transfer students, etc. After two pre-dates, the parties felt more solid in their decision to move forward as a dating couple without emotional regret of a hookup encounter. The focus groups believed that chaperones were a healthy way to begin dating and opposed hookups, and often encouraged and offered other females who were depressed as a consequence of hooking up to try their alternative. The focus groups believed they were offering a positive alternative to both genders and alternative sexual orientations. It would be curious to note at what level various religions play a role in influencing dating/hookup behaviors for other cultures.

In regards to religion, Fife, Ardegoke, McCoy, and Brewer (2011) reviewed research which reported religiosity or divine relationship as a strong predictor of overall well-being and life satisfaction. In addition, religious commitment as a social cohesion and quality of life indicator predicted life satisfaction for both African Americans and European Americans. Although the majority of participants in this sample were European Americans, religious or spiritual practices occurred more than once a week. Although the majority of the participants (76%) identified themselves as being in committed relationships, it would be interesting to note if the coupleship of these relationships correlated with different religious affiliations or practice of devotion or a change of religious orientation/doctrine since most college campuses have a student religious fellowship representation that may minister differently than the participant's home church.

Conclusion

The majority of this sample albeit located in the Bible Belt of the United States rejected hookup or body dating practices. Perhaps, the culture and the support of the chaperones allowed an alternative to starting relationships

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without the ambiguity and emotional regret which may often occur via alcohol abuse and peer coercion in hookup encounters. Lastly, the participants may have viewed their behavior of the college experience (alcohol, substances, sexual exploration) as behavior which were not congruent with religious principles, especially in the cultural and social norms of the Bible Belt.

In addition, the majority of this sample described themselves as prosocial and active in their religious practices which may had have a positive influence on their self-awareness, respect for others, and low evidence of depressive symptoms. However, there is a need for future research to explore and confirm: 1) the satisfaction levels of both genders between hookups and chaperones, 2) how the role of a chaperone could become exploitive, 3) the satisfaction of both genders in being emotionally guarded in coupleship, 4) how prevalent are mental health tendencies in hookups, and 5) the characteristic of physical attraction as an important quality in dating someone who is physically disabled (and type of disability) as well as mental health issues, or having a terminal disease. In sum, this sample group of college students expressed concerns regarding the recent journal articles' depiction of college students, and specifically, at-risk behaviors which seemed prevalent in publications. Their response was to proactively engage in cultural norms of chaperones and chivalry. Further research in this area will discern the success of this approach.

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