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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

College Students' Perceptions of Hookup Culture Through a Social Ecological Lens

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Abstract

Based on student journal submissions, we detail how students at a large Mid-Western University in the United States perceive and engage in hookup culture on their campus. Students responded to journal entry prompts and chronicled their own and their friends' sexual activities and how they perceive the broader campus sexual culture. The initial findings from 110 journal entries illustrate that hooking up has both social and emotional impacts. In this paper we describe the benefits students expressed about hooking up such as feelings of belonging and fitting in as well as the drawbacks and broader issues related to hooking up and campus sexual culture like feelings of emptiness, disgust and shame. We situate these experiences within a social ecological model to understand the broader campus ecosystem and how multiple and often competing narratives and institutions collide to create the campus social and sexual environment. While broader cultural narratives would have us believe that everyone on campus is engaging in hookups, our research shows a more nuanced understanding of how and why these students hookup, or do not hookup, and how those experiences relate to their understanding of broader gendered sexual scripts.

Keywords Hookups · Campus culture · Sexuality · Social ecological model

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Introduction

In the last roughly twenty years, campus hookup culture has been examined from a variety of perspectives. Researchers have spent time trying to understand the lives of college students, and their sex lives in particular, in order to grasp what is happening on campuses. Much of early hookup culture research culminated in Lisa Wade's (2017) *American Hookup* wherein Wade chronicled the way young people on college campuses talk about and engage in campus hookup culture. Her text was highly publicized and used as foundational in understanding a new direction for campus hookup culture research focusing on why students engage in hookups. Broadly speaking, what we learned from much of this research on hookup culture is multifold: heterosexual, cisgender white men benefit most from campus hookup culture; LGBTQ + students have much different experiences than their heterosexual cisgendered counterparts; students of lower socioeconomic status, particularly those that have jobs or who commute are less likely to engage in hookup culture; and non-white students engage in hookup culture at lower rates given their racialized experiences on campus more broadly. This current research addresses a gap in these previous studies, instead focusing on students' *perceptions* of their own experiences as well as the broader campus culture and why (or why not) they feel campuses still center their sexual culture on transactional "hookups". With this study, we sought to understand how students at this large Mid-Western University perceive and experience the concept of "hookup culture" and how those experiences fit within the broader campus ecosystem.

Literature Review

Hookup culture has been broadly conceptualized by a number of scholars in the last two decades and has received international attention. While the focus of this research was on students at a large Mid-Western University in the United States, scholars from around the world have investigated hookup culture on college campuses (Joshi et al., 2013; Kohli et al., 2022). Popularized by media depictions of "typical college life," hookup culture now saturates the popular imagination about what the college sexual experience looks like. Research has attempted to find whether campus sexual culture is a "hookup culture" or, if campus sexual culture instead also includes "hookups" (Heldman & Wade, 2010).

The term *hookup* has been used to indicate a broad range of sexual behaviors that includes things like kissing, making out, as well as sexual intercourse (Bogle, 2008; Wade, 2017). For this paper, we use the underlying understanding of hookups where participants engage in some level of sexual activity that is "free from the obligation to form any ongoing, committed romantic relationship" (Lamont et al., 2018, p.1002). Hookups can, and often do, occur more than once between the same people, but these hookups share the common understanding that repeated sexual encounters does not mean a more sexually exclusive, committed relationship will result.

Hookup culture on college and university campuses provides one lens into the sex lives of college students. The importance of such a lens has been emphasized within certain literature for understanding hookups during young adulthood as a means of allowing young adults to make healthy and smart decisions regarding their sexuality. This emphasis placed by Garcia et al. (2012) explored how hookups have become a popular cultural shift in the westernized world in young adults, focusing on the US. Current scholarship in general has shown that hookup culture tends to reinforce norms about sexual inequality, the sexual double standard, and the orgasm gap; all of which fit into the aforementioned importance of understanding hookups during young adulthood (Allison & Risman, 2014; Armstrong et al., 2012; Armstrong et al., 2015; Backstrom et al., 2012).

Much of the research on campus hookup culture demonstrates that hookup culture remains largely gendered and heteronormative (Lamont et al., 2018; Armstrong et al., 2012; Currier, 2013). This has meant that there has tended to be a gap in how LGBTQIA + individuals experience hookup culture. To fill that gap in the research, Lamont et al. (2018) investigated how LGBTQ college students navigate hookup culture on college campuses. In addition to being largely heteronormative, hookup culture and the research about it, has also focused on white and upper-middle class students. Some, like Pham (2017) have focused on primarily white, middle-upper class, heterosexual individuals who engaged in hookup culture on college campuses. They described how minorities in race and sexualities formed their sexual relationships and did not have equal access to geographic spaces that white heterosexual individuals regularly had to engage in hookups. This is similar to what Allison and Risman (2013) and Wade (2017) found. Because students of color have to combat sexualized racial stereotypes, their engagement in hookup culture can come at the cost of having their individual behavior be attributed to their race (Wade, 2017).

Hookups have the potential to challenge some of the normative ideas about sexuality including the gendered sexuality of women. For example, while not often the case given the persistent sexual double standard that remains in US society, hookups provide a means for heterosexual women (particularly upper-class women) to experiment with sexuality and explore different sexual opportunities without having to immediately settle down for long-term relationships (Lamont et al., 2018; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). While hookups have the *potential* to provide this, we wanted to further understand if this was the case. Women continue to be held to a higher standard and have to balance both that they are told they have sexual freedom but are also held to a sexual double standard. We wanted to understand some of their perceptions of whether they perceive hookups to be "liberating". College students' perceptions of hookup culture provide a means by which to understand the ways gendered and sexual scripts continue to shape the sexual environment on college campuses.

This study addresses a gap in existing literature as previous research has explored hookup culture broadly, but limited attention has been given to how students themselves perceive its impact. By situating these perceptions within a social ecological model framework, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the individual, interpersonal, and structural factors that shape campus sexual culture, and college students' experiences and interpretations of hookup culture at this

university. In utilizing this framework, our study can advance theoretical understandings of hookup culture by demonstrating how individual experiences are embedded within and influenced by structural and cultural forces.

Methods

Participants

Students from a large Mid-Western University were asked about their perceptions of campus culture. This institution has more than 52,000 students and is a primarily white institution (65% White, 6.8% Black or African American; 5.16% Asian; 4.34% Hispanic or Latinx; 0.23% American Indian/Alaska Native; 0.108% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 18.362% "Other"). This campus has a thriving Greek Life system with 60 fraternities and sororities. In addition to being a large public institution, this campus has also had major sexual abuse scandals in recent years which shape some of the discussion and perception of students.

A total of 110 student responses were reviewed in Phase I of this ongoing project. We sought to understand the lives of college students through their own words. Our particular interest was the sexual lives of college students, but we were additionally interested in other campus life issues including students' expectations versus real experiences with college, racial and other bias issues on campus, what students were concerned and hopeful about for their future, among others. To do this, we used a convenience sampling technique and recruited students from 100-level; 200-level and 300-level sociology courses during the 2022 and 2023 academic years. These students represent a diverse mix of students including age, discipline, year in school, and family background. Most students who enroll in these courses are not sociology majors and instead, enroll for general education credit. All names are pseudonyms selected by students. Some students used the same name (i.e. Taylor Swift; Betty Boop; Jane Doe).

While we asked the students to discuss their hookup experiences, not all students explicitly discussed whether or not they had hooked up. Of the 110 respondents, 42 explicitly discussed hookups. Some discussed their own hookups, some described friends' experiences, and some provided vague references that were not clear about whether or not they had actually participated in hookups. Students were not explicitly asked about their current relationship status. While some provided their current or previous relationships, others did not. In this way, comparison data is unavailable.

While participants were invited to include as much information regarding their demographics as they preferred within responses, some participants chose to self-identify their race/ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, while others specified none. Of participants who specified racial and ethnic status, roughly 67 self-identified as being white, 10 as being Black, 19 as being Asian, 5 as being Hispanic, 4 as being Middle Eastern, and 2 as being Native American. This is representative of this campus which is a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Regarding gender, roughly 62 participants self-identified as women, 36 as men, and 1 as nonbinary. In terms of self-identification of sexuality, about 84

participants identify as being heterosexual, 2 as gay, 5 as bisexual, and 6 as queer or unspecified. These numbers serve as rough estimates for the demographics of the participants within the sample who chose to self-identify with these racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. That being said, these results cannot be validated nor disputed and were extracted from within particular responses. Additionally, not all students chose to identify for certain demographic categories, and some students who self-identified for certain demographic categories did not provide information regarding others. Since this demographic information was self-reported, we are limited to the data that respondents voluntarily chose to provide. Due to this, we do not have a comprehensive sociocultural context of the participants. Without this broader context, it is difficult to fully account for the potential influence of social, cultural, or environmental factors on the results (Fig. 1).

Procedure

Participants were invited to complete an extra credit opportunity to answer questions about students' experiences with campus sexual culture in the form of open-ended responses to semi-structured questions. All students were able to decline participation in the study. The questions were delivered through an online class learning platform, Desire to Learn (D2L). In their response, students could reflect on one or more experiences that were not necessarily bracketed in time but were encouraged to focus on their time at this large Mid-Western public university. IRB approval was secured prior to data collection. Once responses were completed, students were able to submit them confidentially using a pseudonym and to a dropbox on the courses D2L page. If choosing to participate in the research study, students were required to fill out an informed consent document explaining the minimal risk in participation which also provided resources should the students experience any emotional distress due to answering the prompts. See Online Appendix 1 for prompt questions. We chose to specifically focus on prompts related to hookup culture for this paper.

In their responses, students were asked 10 questions. They were able to address any of the questions. Some chose to provide responses to all the questions, while others chose to only answer some. Prompts were provided at mid-semester and students were required to submit their responses prior to the end of the semester. Some students focused their responses on their own experiences, while others focused their responses on experiences of their friends and/or on things they had heard from others. We focused our analysis on prompt 5 ("talk to me about what the campus culture/climate is like. Please describe in particular issues related to sex/sexuality as well as any other climate issues. In your experience, is there a 'hookup culture' on campus? If so, how? If not, how else would you describe it" and prompt 7 "have you participated in a hookup? If you participated in a hookup at any point this year or during your college career, how did you feel? If you have not participated in a hookup, describe why").

Total:

Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity	Religion	Gender
Heterosexual: 84	White: 67	Christian: 42	Woman: 62
Gay: 2	Black: 10	Jewish: 2	Man: 36
Bisexual: 5	Asian: 19	Muslim: 6	Non-binary: 1
Queer or unspecified: 6	Hispanic: 5	Atheist/Agnostic/Non-religious: 29	
	Middle Eastern: 4	Hindu: 2	
	Native American: 2	Omnist: 2	

Demographics for Positively Associated Themes:

Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity	Religion	Gender
Heterosexual: 7	White: 10	Christian: 5	Woman: 7
Gay: 0	Black: 1	Jewish: 0	Man: 5
Bisexual: 1	Asian: 1	Muslim: 0	Nonbinary: 0
Queer or unspecified: 0	Hispanic: 1	Atheist/Agnostic/Non-religious: 6	
	Middle Eastern: 0	Hindu: 0	
	Native American: 1	Omnist: 0	

Demographics of Negative Emotional Responses to Hooking up:

Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity	Religion	Gender
Heterosexual: 11	White: 14	Christian: 7	Woman: 10
Gay: 1	Black: 0	Jewish: 0	Man: 7
Bisexual: 1	Asian: 4	Muslim: 0	Nonbinary: 0
Queer or unspecified:	Hispanic: 1	Atheist/Agnostic/Non	
0		-religious: 5	
	Middle Eastern: 0	Hindu: 0	
	Native American: 0	Omnist: 0	

Demographics for Socio-ecological Model:

Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity	Religion	Gender
Heterosexual: 13	White: 12	Christian: 8	Woman: 12
Gay: 0	Black:	Jewish: 0	Man: 4
Bisexual: 1	Asian: 2	Muslim: 0	Nonbinary: 1
Queer or unspecified: 0	Hispanic: 0	Atheist/Agnostic/Non-religious: 2	
	Middle Eastern: 1	Hindu: 0	
	Native American:	Omnist: 1	

Fig. 1 Demographic info

Analysis

The present analysis of the data was conducted through an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) of qualitative journal entry responses. A thematic analysis "involves the searching across a data set to find repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 88). It is a "method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clark, 2012, p. 57). The strength of using a thematic analysis is that it allows for shared meanings and experiences to be seen and conceptualized by the researchers.

Each journal entry response was read line-by-line to uncover the presence of open codes (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003). The entries were individually coded by three student researchers who coded independently from each other. The coders met regularly to discuss the open codes. Any discrepancies, while rare, were resolved during these meetings. It was at this point that the codebook was created and maintained throughout the coding process.

From the relevant text and initial codes, a repeating ideas document was created. Upon creating this document, we found that some codes were very closely related to each other, and it made sense to combine them. Through this document, three overarching themes emerged: "Positive Emotional Implications," "Negative Emotional Responses," and "Behaviors Linked to Hookup Culture". By reading through the repeating ideas within these overarching categories, multiple sub themes were identified and systematically coded into second-level axial codes, forming the subcategories discussed in this paper (Auerbeck & Silverstein, 2003). The coded themes and subthemes were then clearly defined using the respondents' dominant terminology to ensure they accurately reflected the data. At this stage, a saturation of the data was reached as new codes no longer emerged, and all cases could be explained using the newly created analytical categories. Through reaching saturation, reliability and validity were achieved for the present study. After coding and analyzing the data, the research team determined that utilizing a social ecological model would be most valuable in describing and situating the different themes that were emerging within the broader structural context of university life.

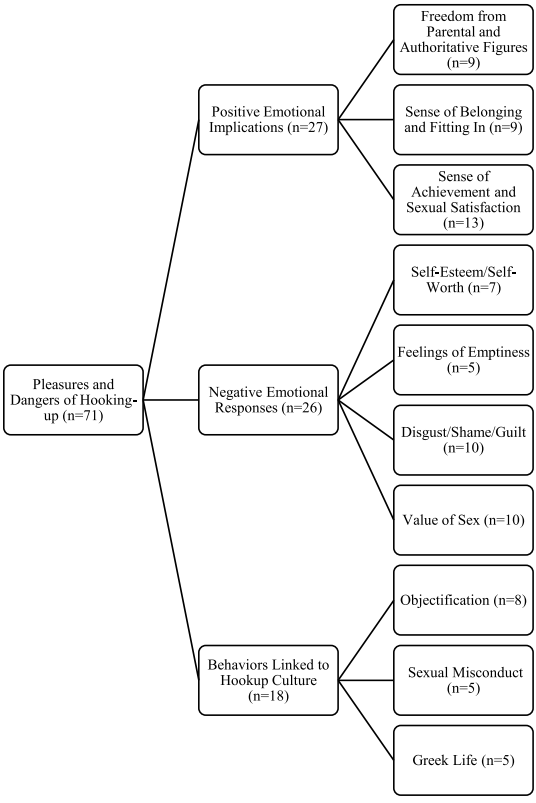
Social Ecological Modeling

College campuses, like other institutions, have unique ecosystems. Social ecological models provide a method for analyzing the interactions between individuals and their ecological environments. These environments are conceived as a "system of social structures, each structure nested within the next one" (Willis & Jozkowski, 2018). These interactions often influence outcomes and experiences (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Osuana et al., 2024) because college students are constantly interacting with their surroundings which, over time, can both influence and shape these contextual factors (Vest et al., 2022). There is a web of relationships that influence students' college experience. Social ecological models are well-suited for research on campuses because they allow a comprehensive understanding of student

behaviors as an interplay of individual factors, interpersonal relationships, the campus environment, and broader societal influences (Vest et al., 2022). Utilizing social ecological modeling, we see that at the *microsystem* level, students have their peers, faculty, and staff interactions within the institution. At the *mesosystem* level, there are the classroom environments and other spaces such as co-curricular organizations like extramural activities, greek life, registered student organizations, etc. The mesosystem interacts with students' immediate relationships in the microsystem. The *exosystem* level is composed of the university structure (such as staffing, governance, policies, etc.). These exosystem systems are influenced by the broader social and policy landscape which is the *macrosystem*. Interactions at each of these levels influences how students interact with and perceive hooking up and hookup culture.

First we present our discussion of the qualitative findings focusing on the positive and negative emotional responses to perceived hookup culture and engaging in hookups. Then we utilize a social ecological model to analyze those student experiences as nested in the larger campus and social environment. The student responses revealed two primary thematic categories encapsulating students' perspectives regarding their experiences and interactions within hookup culture: positive emotional implications and negative emotional implications (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Coding map



To highlight the social ecological nature of our findings, we use respondents' discussions of consequences and misconduct within campus hookup culture to illustrate the overlapping systems levels within each of these categories, especially since this campus has had a number of very public sexual abuse scandals in recent years.

Results

Positive Emotional Responses to Hooking up

We first outline the positive emotional implications that students reported resulting from engaging in their campus hookup culture, with n = 27 total responses aligning with this theme. 9 respondents within this thematic domain discuss hooking up and hookup culture as activities that occur due to the freedom from parental and authoritative (n = 9) figures that comes with the newfound individualism of college life. They also discussed positive implications of hookup culture, including feelings of belonging and fitting in (n = 9) and achievement (n = 13), that can occur because of partaking in hookups and overall hookup culture.

Nine student respondents reported a new sense of freedom and independence living away from restrictive or authoritative figures. Laura Holland, a heterosexual Black Christian woman, highlights this idea of newly achieved freedom and how it may be used to understand the sexual patterns on college campuses. She explains that young adults who previously had limited freedom, are now able to engage in "adult things, such as hooking up for the first time," without facing "any actual consequences from parents or family." Laura's perspective suggests a connection between freedom and the absence of parental constraints. Other students express similar views, often framing hookup culture as an outlet for the freedom college life provides. For example, Taylor Swift, a heterosexual white non-religious woman, attributed the prevalence of hookup culture to the combination of newfound freedom and youthful hormones: "I think that between new freedom and still being young and hormonal there is an expectation that everyone participates in hookup culture." Mace Windu, a heterosexual white atheist man, further observed that the concentration of young adults in college settings contributes to the rise in hookups:, "I think if you put enough 18-to-22-year old's in one spot you are bound to have a higher-than-average amount of hookups." These accounts highlight the significant role that autonomy and peer dynamics play in shaping students' engagement in hookup culture.

Moreover, Bloom, a heterosexual white, Black, and Native American agnostic woman, also emphasizes how college serves as an escape from parental restrictions, but positions women at the center of this pursuit of freedom. She describes, "many girls come to college to escape strict rules from their parents, and they truly feel free." This idea connects to conventional perspectives on sexuality, which often control women's sexuality more closely than men's. Axinn et al. (2011) expands on this by noting that in the United States, traditional gender roles often impose stronger prohibitions on women's participation in premarital sex, which may explain why

young women are particularly motivated to explore new freedoms once away from home.

While students stray away from conforming to rules or expectations imposed by parental and adult figures, they are not immune to the pressures of peer conformity. In fact, adolescents often construct their self-esteem and personal image through the criticism of others (MacDonald, 2003). Social groups on college campuses, where fitting in is crucial, may exert as much influence as family expectations. Therefore, students may prioritize aligning with peer behaviors, such as engaging in hookup culture, over conforming to parental authority or familiar constraint. Thus, the desire to belong within the social setting of a college campus can sometimes be more compelling.

Sense of Belonging and Fitting in

Nine student respondents described participating in hookup culture to fit in with their peers and conform to the surrounding climate, expressing that it gave them a greater sense of social belonging. Research suggests that the social stigma attached to virginity has the ability to shape students' perceptions regarding the topic (Gesselman et al., 2017). For example, Lillian, a heterosexual white Christian woman, recalled being mocked for her virginity, stating, "I think that there is 100% a hookup culture on campus. I was watching a movie with this guy in my room last year and he literally made fun of me for being a virgin." Her experience highlights how social stigma can pressure individuals to become sexually active to avoid judgment and feel socially conformed.

Furthermore, Betty Boop, a bisexual white non-religious woman, reflected on her personal experience with the social and emotional impacts of sexual activity, explaining: "I felt a sense of relief after losing it, like I was socially finally an 'adult'. My freshmen year was a rough time for me. I used sex as a way to cope and to feel like I fit in." This experience highlights how some students may view losing their virginity as a way to gain a sense of belonging or maturity, using it to navigate self-expression and societal pressures.

One student also shared an experience with sexual experimentation, framing it as a positive opportunity. Darwin, a white atheist male, described that "hookups can also be somewhat educational because they give you the opportunity to explore someone else's desires and maybe open up a new door for your sexual interests." Darwin's experience uncovers how engaging in sexual experimentation can encourage a sense of belonging by allowing individuals to explore their own desires while connecting with others on an intimate level. By learning together, participants in hookup culture may feel less isolated while discovering their sexuality, as the process becomes a shared journey rather than a solitary struggle.

Sense of Achievement and Sexual Satisfaction

Thirteen students reported a sense of achievement or sexual satisfaction from engaging in hookups, citing feelings of happiness, confidence, and personal accomplishment. For instance, Yoda, a white Christian man, explained that hookups are tools of

fulfillment when a relationship is not desired, highlighting their role in meeting short term physical needs. Devin, another white Christian man, emphasized his positive experience by describing his hookups as moments filled with happiness and excitement. Similarly, Dux, a white heterosexual man of Native American and Mexican descent, elaborated on how hookups boosted his self-esteem by creating a sense of mutual value and connection with attractive partners. Darwin, a white ex-Christian male, expanded on this theme by describing the sense of personal achievement he gained from these encounters, noting that sex raised his self-esteem and provided feelings of accomplishment, even framing his experiences as "defying the odds." Two female respondents also expressed satisfaction from hookups. Raina Paytas, a white woman who identifies as an atheist, described, "For me personally, hook ups are ways for me to still get attention and fulfill any sexual need without having to commit to someone and feel chained down." Harley Johnson, a heterosexual white non-religious woman, claimed that it is hard to feel anything but good emotions when the anxiety of hooking up has faded away. Together, these perspectives reveal how hookups can provide immediate satisfaction, a boost in self-confidence, and personal gratification, illustrating their ability to shape an individual's well-being.

While a female respondent, Danielle, a heterosexual Asian Christian woman, described her initial happiness after a hookup, her feelings quickly turned negative. She explained, "I feel empowered as a woman to have power to make a man feel like his best, but at the same time, sometimes I get wrapped around my head and may start to overthink about my appearance when doing daily tasks post-hookup." While Danielle initially described positive emotions, these were ephemeral, replaced by self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. This shift reflects the emotional complexities that can accompany hookups, a dynamic we will explore further in the next section on negative emotional responses to hooking up (Fig. 3).

Negative Emotional Responses to Hooking up

While there are positive emotional experiences that students encounter as a result of hookup culture, this was not the case for all of the student respondents. Many of our students (n = 26), reported experiencing negative emotional implications consequent to their engagement in hookup culture. For some, participation in hookups was perpetuated by diminished levels of self-esteem, coupled with the belief that such engagements would serve to elevate these levels. These responses included feelings of emptiness, disgust, shame, and guilt. These adverse feelings stemmed from the pervasive societal pressures that are exerted on students to participate in hookup culture, and in turn resulted in lower levels of perceived self-worth. A large contributing factor to these negative implications derives from an overall valuation of sex as something that is more intimate and significant than a casual sexual encounter. The responses that contained comments regarding negative feelings were divided into three subcategories: negative feelings in relation to self-esteem or self-worth (n = 7), feelings of emptiness (n = 5), feelings of disgust, shame, and guilt (n = 10). These negative implications were also discussed by students as being the result of hookup culture's devaluation of relationships and sexual experiences (n = 10).

Total Amount of Participants Coded With Positive or Negative Themes: n=56

Participants Coded With Positively Associated Themes Total: n=27	Participants Coded With Negative Emotional Responses to Hooking up Total: n=26
Freedom from Parental and Authoritative Figures: n=9	Self-Esteem/Self-Worth: n=7
Sense of Belonging and Fitting in: n=9	Feelings of Emptiness: n=5
Sense of Achievement and Sexual Satisfaction: n=13	Disgust/Shame/Guilt: n=10
	Value of Sex: n=10

Gender Distributions of Positively Associated Themes:

Freedom from Parental and Authoritative Figures	Sense of Belonging and Fitting in	Sense of Achievement and Sexual Satisfaction
Women: n=5	Women: n=7	Women: n=7
Men: n=4	Men: n=2	Men: n=6
Non-binary/Other: n=0	Non-binary/Other: n=0	Non-binary/Other: n=0

Gender Distributions of Negative Emotional Responses to Hooking up:

Self-Esteem/Self-Worth	Feelings of Emptiness	Disgust/Shame/Guilt	Value of Sex
Women: n=6	Women: n=3	Women: n=9	Women: n=5
Men: n=1	Men: n=2	Men: n=1	Men: n=5
Non-binary/Other: n=0	Non-binary/Other: n=0	Non-binary/Other: n=0	Non-binary/Other: n=0

Fig. 3 Theme saturation charts

Self-Esteem/Self-Worth

College is a formative time for many students and their identities and takes place simultaneously with the struggles of self-esteem and self-worth in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2014; Longmore et al., 2004). College years are times where many students experience a number of firsts, and as a result their perspectives of themselves are subject to change. Seven students reported that hookup culture either had a negative impact on their self-esteem and views of self-worth, or the fact that certain students partook in hookup culture as a result of their low self-esteem. This trend was predominately found with heterosexual female respondents, where they felt that their self-esteem was dependent on male treatment or validation.

Taylor, a heterosexual white and Puerto Rican Christian woman, describes that "it made me feel like I did not have respect for myself". Even when certain students participated in hookup culture to gain validation and a feeling of fitting in, students such as Taylor found the opposite results of what they expected.

Bugs Bunny, a heterosexual white atheist woman, also corroborated this idea, stating that the majority of students that get into hookups at this large Mid-Western public university "have lower self-esteem and are looking for a way to get validation and boost their self-confidence. They think that having this hookup will make them feel like they are wanted by someone but then after the hookup the realization sets in and regret could start". This student not only states the existence of this chain of events "from experience" but also expresses that they have seen this issue with many other female students as well. Rather than a hookup encounter resulting in a boost of one's self-esteem, hookups at this university have resulted in a lowering of self-esteem or an increase of negative feelings. However, a white Christian male student who used the pseudonym J, found that he would engage in a hookup "as a confidence boost" when he was "struggling with self-esteem". This response supported the overarching theme that hookup culture at this university has the frequent potential to stem from negative feelings about oneself, and one's self-esteem, regardless of gender. This theme is more frequently found with female respondents, and they tend to have more negative feelings as a result in comparison to their male counterparts.

Feelings of Emptiness

Concerning feelings of emptiness as a result of hookups and hookup culture overall, five students reported a shared feeling of hookups being more "unfulfilling" than anticipated and feeling "empty" emotionally (Travis Griffin, white heterosexual man & Indiana Jones, white heterosexual man). One of the main reasons why students reported desiring a hookup initially was due to a sense of loneliness or aspiration to be in a romantic relationship. Harry Potter, a white agnostic woman, articulated this idea where she partook in a multitude of hookups to "fill the temporary void of feeling wanted", which in turn left her feeling "sad" and "a bit used". Since hookup culture is something that is frequently seen as normalized in a college environment, it can become an easy avenue for students to utilize hookups as a sort of coping mechanism against loneliness, feelings of emptiness, and unfulfilled desires of emotional or physical intimacy (Owen et al., 2011). This theme of feelings of emptiness was not isolated to one gendered demographic of students, and it was found to be shared between those who self-identified as men and women. This lack of gendered discrepancy creates reason to believe that this is not necessarily a gendered issue on this campus, as is stated in past literature on hookup culture, but is instead an issue due to the common factor of hookup culture and its "no strings attached" frame of thinking. However, one student who utilized the pseudonym, Happy Feet, a heterosexual white woman, found a nuance in this issue, where she found that the consequential feelings of emptiness are worsened by her perspective that hookups and short-term physical relationships are "all the boys want", which can "be degrading" and make her "feel used". On the other end of the spectrum, a male student found

that in the moment of a hookup when you are physically "feeling satiated" you are left with "times where you still feel lonely and empty" (Totoro, heterosexual Asian agnostic man). Therefore, while men and women may view hookup culture from different nuanced and unique perspectives due to their different social identities, there is still the shared experience of feelings of emptiness and an emotional void that the hookup could not fill.

Disgust/Shame/Guilt

In addition to feelings of emptiness and feeling used, the largest underlying theme found in regard to the negative implications of hookup culture was in relation to feelings of disgust, shame, and guilt. Out of the ten student responses that listed these emotions resulting from hookups or hookup culture, nine were submitted by women, which is something that is not isolated to this subcategory within the larger theme of negative feelings. Women identifying student respondents reported the highest levels of negative feelings related to hookup culture overall. The shared theme of these negative emotions is one of feeling a sense of disgust or shame due to the hookups themselves, but also due to the intentions of sexual partners and the lack of intimate connection that was present during the hookups. Female student Kerry Hill, a bisexual white agnostic woman, described viewing hookups as though she was "taken advantage of for [her] body", which in turn made her feel "disgusted and used". This was not a unique feeling, as another female student, Taylor, also felt "gross hooking up with other males who I did not have feelings for". Both of these women experienced these feelings due to their perception that men "only see girls as objects for their own pleasure", or that there is a selfish nature in the male perspective of hookup culture between men and women (Kerry Hill). This is also visible in a heterosexual white Christian female student Gracie Smith's responses that detailed a specific hookup experience where a man "tried to make [her] feel guilty for not having sex with him", further displaying the sense of unspoken expectations that follow hookup culture in a college environment. Expanding on the theme of male pleasure and how women perceive hookup culture in relation to men, other student respondents reported feeling guilty due to male coercion and a desire for male validation. Student respondent Thea, a heterosexual white Christian woman, found that the time she spent partaking in hookup culture on her campus was spent "looking for male validation", which she stated "disgusts [her]", and made her "feel like a worthless human". There is not a single student response that found that hookup culture was an avenue to make meaningful connections with other students, or that it aided them in finding a deeper connection of intimacy. This lack of emotional fulfillment is stated to be the reason for these negative responses and feelings resulting from hookup culture on this campus.

Value of Sex

A large component to the nature of these negative feelings as a result of hookup culture at this university can be attributed to the student respondents' value of sex and sexual relations that constitute hookups. Ten student respondents reported that these

senses of unfulfillment, feeling used, and feeling shame were results of valuing sex as a form of "intimate connection" and that sex "is supposed to mean something" (Olivia Smith, heterosexual Korean and white woman & White Heart, heterosexual white Christian woman). This valuation was found among all genders and sexual gender minorities who wrote about this issue. One student, Alpha, a white Christian man describes that with hookup culture, "one of you is bound to start getting attached and very hurt in the end", which articulates the negative implications that result from participating in hookup culture while simultaneously holding the value that sexual actions hold more meaning than "no strings attached" hookups. With the view that sexual relations are more than simply superficial, there is reason as to why these students have negative emotional reactions as a result of hookup culture. There is a sense of burden that comes with engaging in actions that are opposed to one's true beliefs, which is shown with the students' responses. When there is the view that hooking up "is supposed to mean something", yet is seen as a "meaningless thing", there is a contradiction and the opportunity for one to feel as though they are "just becoming another number to that person", which can feel very dehumanizing (White Heart). The prevalence of hookup culture on this university's campus is also seen by certain students as ruining their perspectives on committed relationships and long-term exclusivity that comes with hookup culture. Students discuss hookup culture as the antithesis to committed relationships, and that it is destroying students' desires for relationships. Sparty, an Asian man, stated that to him, "relationships are less and less what people want. People do not want commitment", which displays the shift in perception that hookup culture is making people value sex or hookups as emotionally insignificant. Male and female respondents find this issue similarly, where a heterosexual Asian Christian female student Hannah Montana also wrote that "hookup culture is ruining relationships", as well as a gay white agnostic male student Gio Bennett stating that "one-time hookups with other guys… seems to be the only thing that guys want, not actual relationships". Gio stated that this issue "is a huge problem within the gay community", however these same ideas were supported by heterosexual men and women as well (Fig. 4).

Discussion

Hookup Culture through a social ecological model

The last section of our analysis discusses the behaviors associated with hookup culture, pivoting away from the negative emotional ramifications and instead focusing on the perceptions and actions that interlock with this social phenomenon. Student responses revealed external influences of hookup culture that are not isolated but are rather a part of a broader social dynamic.

Social Ecological Model

Students in this sample discussed a variety of experiences and impressions of what hookup culture looks like on their campus. Their experiences highlight the need to

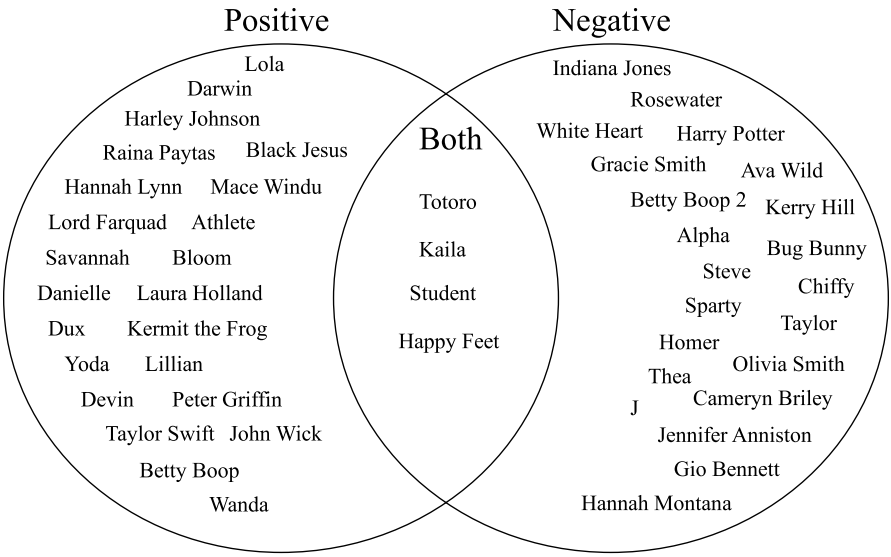


Fig. 4 Venn diagram of overlap in thematic saturation

understand hookup culture through an ecological model lens (Moylan & Javorka, 2020). As described above, students had both positive and negative impressions and experiences of hooking up and hookup culture, but they also described how hookup culture on their campus fit within larger cultural and social narratives about sex, gender roles, and sexual scripts as we will discuss below.

There are often multiple and competing levels of interaction within an ecological lens. Similar to the coding used by Osuna et al. (2024), we utilized microsystem (interpersonal, references to specific activities, people, etc.,); mesosystem (references to interactions among two or more microsystems, peer culture); exosystem (references to the environment that has an impact but does not contain them like administration or policies); and macrosystem (references to the totality of each system, e.g. culture, the campus more broadly, campus level variables) (Fig. 5).

Overlapping Levels

Much of our respondents' discussion illustrates the overlap between the many different levels of the social ecological model. Students described both internal and interpersonal interactions, but also how they interacted with larger social forces and norms. For example, a statement from "John Wick" describes both how he understands his own perceptions of how girl's dress and how that aligns with broader conceptions of appropriate gender roles. He claimed, "no offense, there are a lot of girls on this campus whose fathers would be very upset with them and what they let others do to their body". This reinforces broader gender role norms about how girls should/should not behave or dress. It also reinforces patriarchal notions about girls being property of their fathers. Below we discuss how many of the themes fit within

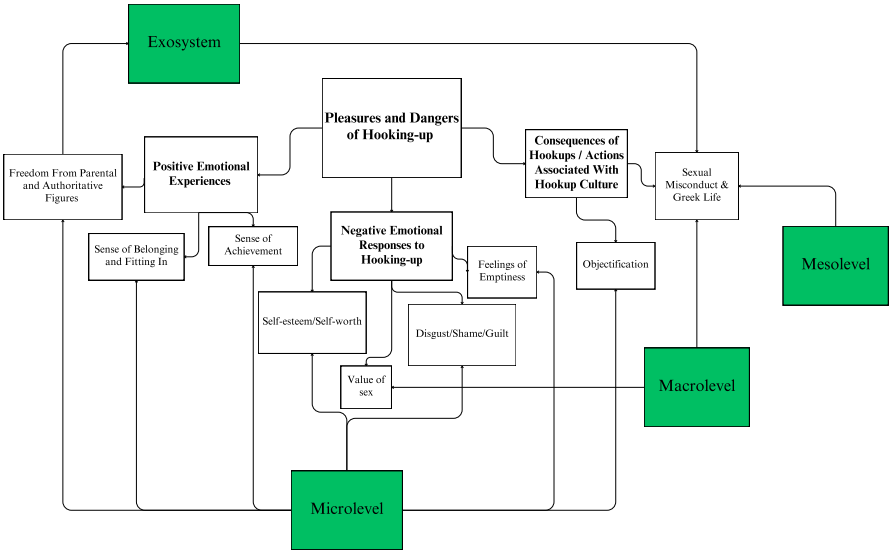


Fig. 5 Flow chart of social ecological model and themes

different levels of the social ecological model while recognizing that much of the responses fit within overlapping levels.

Microsystem Level

At the *microlevel*, students described hookup culture at the interpersonal level. These students gave examples including their own personal experiences of hookup culture—how they felt, the emotions associated with them, etc. For example, Ava Wild talked about how hooking up made her "either feel amazing, or would feel terrible about myself", and Rick Sanchez explained how he "could not help to look at her cleavage and she was not trying to hide it". Like Ava, Kerry Hill talked about how during her hookup she "felt as if I had been taken advantage of" and Gracie Smith described how "flirting turns into nonconsensual touching. I have had males grab me, without even asking my name first". Each of these responses fit within a microsystem level analysis where students focused on their peers, faculty, and staff interactions within the institution.

Mesosystem and Macrosystem Level

At the mesosystem and macrosystem levels, students described the ways that Greek Life (meso) and a broad culture of objectification (macro) created spaces of vulnerability and danger for students. Several respondents revealed that problematic sexual behavior took place at fraternities tied to our institution or other non-specified areas. Social hotspots revolve around a major street adjacent to campus, with multiple bars, clubs, and restaurants. The larger surrounding neighborhoods on all sides of campus

includes 27 fraternity houses that are clustered in similar areas. This concentration intensifies the vulnerability of students to potentially harmful situations, and the high density of social activities in this area creates a crowded and often chaotic environment, making it easier for inappropriate behaviors to go unnoticed. Even on-campus, one student was told that they "would hear a lot of strange things about River Trail" such as it being referred to as the "Rape Trail" (Jane/John Doe, non-binary). Olivia Smith also mentioned the history of sexual misconduct within this institution, explaining that "ever since (a major sexual abuse scandal)" occurred, the school has implemented programs as an effort to prevent students from engaging in.

sexual misconduct, "but it still occurs."

Specifically, Greek-life culture promotes and facilitates problematic sexual behavior within campus life, as some students reveal in their responses. Journalist Marie Weidmayer investigated sexual misconduct at fraternities on our campus and discovered that nearly "20 alleged sexual assaults were reported at fraternity houses" since 2012, and "none resulted in criminal charges or convictions" (Weidmayer, 2017). This underscores the pervasive nature of the issue and the lack of accountability within the system.

Regardless of whether respondents identified themselves as participants in Greek-life culture, they frequently discussed personal experiences, observations, and anecdotes that were tied to events within Greek Life. One respondent simply stated that fraternity houses are full of "hormone-surged teenagers, zero parental supervision, and seemingly no consequences" (Student, heterosexual Christian woman). Lola, a heterosexual white woman, furthered this point by adding that "we have a lot of frats" in our institution that "perpetuate rape culture more than anything on campus" and that they are "not held accountable" for their actions. Additionally, student respondent J, a white male, asserted that our campus has a "very well known" sexual assault problem that resides within fraternities and is also blatantly presented on social media with no repercussions. Another student respondent, Boone, a heterosexual white woman, described a specific instance of sexual violence occurring at a fraternity party, where her friend, a woman, was "raped after getting roofied at a fraternity party" and told her that "she made it clear she didn't want to have sex with that person and wanted to leave." Maverick, a heterosexual white Christian male, also shares that he has seen "women being taken advantage of in fraternities and at bars'' and that one of his friends was "drugged in a fraternity." Furthermore, Hannah Montana shares that there is a particular fraternity where members "make their Facebook profile picture the picture of the girl they last hooked up with" and that "you can see how many times they change their picture." They also added that this is considered hazing, but it is "never taken seriously" when it comes to fraternities.

Moreover, two students, both of whom identified as cis-females, explained experiences where "flirting turns into non-consensual touching" and multiple occasions where no verbal cues were in place before being kissed or getting touched (Gracie Smith & Franklin Peters, heterosexual Asian women). Moreover, student respondent Bloom expressed how sad they are to "hear about the number of women who have been raped at this school." They shared that a Twitter page was made in response so girls could anonymously "tell their stories about a particular man that raped them" and how the page was used as a tactic for other women-aligned individuals to avoid

the sexual predators on campus. Student respondent Hannah Montana shared the same experience, where she knows "many girls who have been assaulted, harassed, or roofied" and that "nothing feels safe on/by the campus nor some groups within the school." Ava Wild also expresses that she has been "followed, cat-called, and stalked on campus and even on off-campus events." Together, these accounts elucidate a culture tied to campus life where issues of sexual assault, abuse, and disregard for consent appear to be prevalent.

Additionally, at the *mesolevel and macrolevels* outside of Greek Life and rape culture, as discussed above, students described hookup culture in relation to peer culture and broader institutional culture, specifically looking at the institution's response (or lack thereof) to a large-scale sexual abuse scandal. Jane Doe discussed how some of the major landmarks on campus are often riddled with perpetrators. The registered sex offender who likes to "walk around the bars and popular spots". Fraternity houses and administrative responses to sexual violence were the most commonly discussed at the mesolevel including Olivia Smith who described how the university may be trying to respond to violence since the scandal but "it still occurs". Boone described an incident where a woman was assaulted "after getting roofied at a fraternity party" and Maverick also discussed how his female friends describe getting drugged or "taken advantage of in fraternities and at bars".

Exosystem Level

At the exosystem level, similar to the meso and macrosystems described previously, students talked about how there were external factors that influence their perceptions of hookups on campus including hearing about different fraternities were "rape frats" or that the river trail that runs through campus was a "rape trail". Lola's discussion of how frats "perpetuate rape culture" and how they are frequently not "held accountable and there are a shit ton of excuses made for them whenever they do something wrong" reflects both a meso and exosystem interaction. Ideas about virginity loss and engaging in hookup culture more broadly reflect different societal expectations for men and women. Bloom described how "many girls come to college to escape the strict rules of their parents, and they truly feel free" which reinforces a broader cultural environment where parents are often strict about girls' expressions of sexuality in a different way than they are of boys' sexual expression.

Respondents expressed an underlying theme of objectification at all system levels, whether they were subjects of such attitudes or contributors to these perspectives. Because sexual harassment and assault are perceived to be part of the college experience, it leads to a normalization of these practices. 8 student responses showed that within their hookup experiences or other forms of intimate encounters there were undertones of objectification. The responses that reported such instances suggest that there are external ideologies that may influence interactions and/or thought processes in relation to hookup culture. One heterosexual Middle Eastern Christian male respondent, under the pseudonym John Wick, mentioned a preference for 'reserved girls.' He expressed that "there are girls on this campus who dress in bikinis" and that their "fathers would be very upset with them and what they let others do with their body." The emphasis on personal attraction based on a person's

level of modesty or approval from their fathers reduces individuals to their outward appearances and suggests that a woman's worth is tied to her adherence to certain conservative standards. Another heterosexual white omnist male respondent, Rick Sanchez, conveyed a similar ideology. His response detailed an instance where he "could not help to look at her cleavage" because it was something "she was not trying to hide." Both of these responses reduce an individual to a specific physical attribute. Such comments contribute to a culture that objectifies individuals based on physical appearance as opposed to valuing intellect, character, or other intrinsic qualities—something that occurs regularly within broad American culture. While we recognize that finding someone physically attractive is not inherently negative and there are instances where someone might find someone's physical appearance pleasurable and not their personality, it is important to ensure that this perception does not reduce a person to merely their physical attributes. This can become problematic when someone's worth or identity is solely based on their appearance, disregarding their full personhood.

It is important to note that these two respondents both identified as heterosexual men, and both displayed objectifying behaviors. Another heterosexual white agnostic male respondent, Jason, also expressed the perspective that "gender issues arise" when men objectify women and "women are okay with that." Although this does bring awareness to a culture of objectification on campus, placing the blame on women can contribute to this cycle of degradation. When blame is disproportionately assigned to one group, it has the potential to normalize objectifying behaviors where individuals may feel devalued based on their physical appearance. Chiffy, a white Christian female respondent, furthered this perspective by stating, "the girls get all nicely dressed" in hopes of "some trashy frat guy" looking at them and that "college girls just want so badly for a guy to lock eyes with them and find them attractive." Chiffy's comments suggest a societal expectation that places pressure on women to conform to a certain appearance in order to gain validation from men. This illustrates cisgendered heterosexual objectification by highlighting how some women feel pressured to dress in a certain way solely to attract the gaze and approval of men, reducing their value to mere objects of male desire.

On the other hand, one female heterosexual respondent, Lillian, shared her personal encounters with objectification. She described instances where individuals have messaged her, urging her to come over late at night, and mentions that others engaged in a bet concerning "who would have sex" with her first. Late night invitations and the construction of a bet for a sexual conquest reduces this respondent to an object of desire rather than acknowledging her as a human being with feelings and individual wants. Three other heterosexual females share this same feeling, shortly after instances of hooking up. Ava Wild, a heterosexual white Christian woman, describes that after a hook-up, if the guy didn't text her right after or for a couple of days, it would make her "feel like an object that was just something he used when he wanted to." Kerry Hill describes a similar experience, where she "felt as if I had been taken advantage of" for her body. Female respondent Happy Feet also states that sex is what "all the boys want" so after "that night you can feel used." These experiences underscore the objectification of women by depicting situations where they felt their worth was tied to sexual desire. These respondents' reflections

on feeling like objects after hooking up emphasize how their bodies are commodified, leaving them feeling used and devoid of emotional connection or respect. These narratives collectively illustrate how objectification dehumanizes women, reducing them to objects of male gratification. This may reaffirm existing beliefs that men are often at the forefront, perpetuating a cycle of objectification while women must navigate the consequences. Within specific social contexts, we delve deeper into the dynamics that shape the actions and behaviors of students on our campus, recognizing that objectification extends beyond personal perceptions and experiences.

Conclusions

The students in our sample in many ways represent the "average" college experience. They described how ideas about hookup culture have permeated their social spaces on campus. Some had positive experiences with hooking up while most either had personal negative experiences or knew someone who had negative experiences. The campus ecosystem is filled with a variety of differing expectations, institutions, assumptions, and narratives. Students spend much of their time trying to navigate personal desires with institutional and social expectations. We find that on the one hand, hookup culture still primarily benefits and is framed by male heterosexual, cisgendered gendered scripts as described by these students and it also has the potential to provide the freedom to explore new scripts and can provide some women an avenue to make choices outside of institutionalized expectations. The experiences presented by our respondents were framed specifically around the prompts that were provided. While some students expanded on these prompts, others kept to those prompts which makes it difficult to expound beyond what was presented. While not necessarily a new phenomenon, our respondents suggest that social notions of heterosexual gender roles still permeate campus sexual culture and that issues of objectification, harassment and abuse still exist at all levels of the social ecological model. Our respondents presented a more nuanced understanding of the campus sexual ecosystem and the ways that students make sense of their own experiences.

Limitations

This research is the preliminary data analysis of a larger project with more than 500 qualitative responses. Our findings and data come from one large Mid-Western institution in the United States. This means that there are likely other experiences with hookup culture happening at other institutions, as well as in other countries. Having students self-identify demographic data meant that not all responses include demographics and, of those that did, not all provided all demographic information (i.e. some provided sexuality but not race, etc.). These are self-report journal entries which can have their own limitations in terms of both generalizability and validity. Knowing that student life and engagement can be unique to the school of choice, it is also notable that there is the potential for self-report bias. Given that the data were gathered through

self-reported journal entries, and that these entries address personal sexual experiences, there is the risk for social-desirability bias, meaning participants might have misrepresented their behaviors to conform or align to perceived social norms regarding hookup culture. While the prompts solicited extensive open-ended responses, not all respondents fully described their experiences, some mentioned experiences of others with corroboration, and many provided important, but undetailed, information.

Future Research

This is Phase I of a larger project that will look at hookup culture and consent from an intersectional perspective, specifically addressing how social identities like race, gender, and sexuality interact with hookup culture and the multiple levels of the socio-ecosystem. The research participants from this study reflect a representative spread of overall demographics that make up this large Mid-Western University, however, some respondents reported that specific social identities that they hold create a nuanced way in which they interact with the institution of hookup culture. Looking into these proportionally smaller groups could reveal how different social identities impact our greater findings about hookup culture at this university and can begin to uncover different social dynamics that intersect with broader hookup culture. Additionally, focus groups are scheduled to further expound on these topics to provide a more thorough illustration of many of these experiences. Lastly, in Phase I of this analysis, we looked at 110 responses. For the future analysis we will be examining almost 500 responses. This will enable us to more fully describe nuanced experiences and areas of future research as well as providing nuance for policy implications and suggestions for campus initiatives that focus on safety and security of the campus ecosystem.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no direct or indirect competing interests, and the authors have no relevant financial interest to disclose.

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