

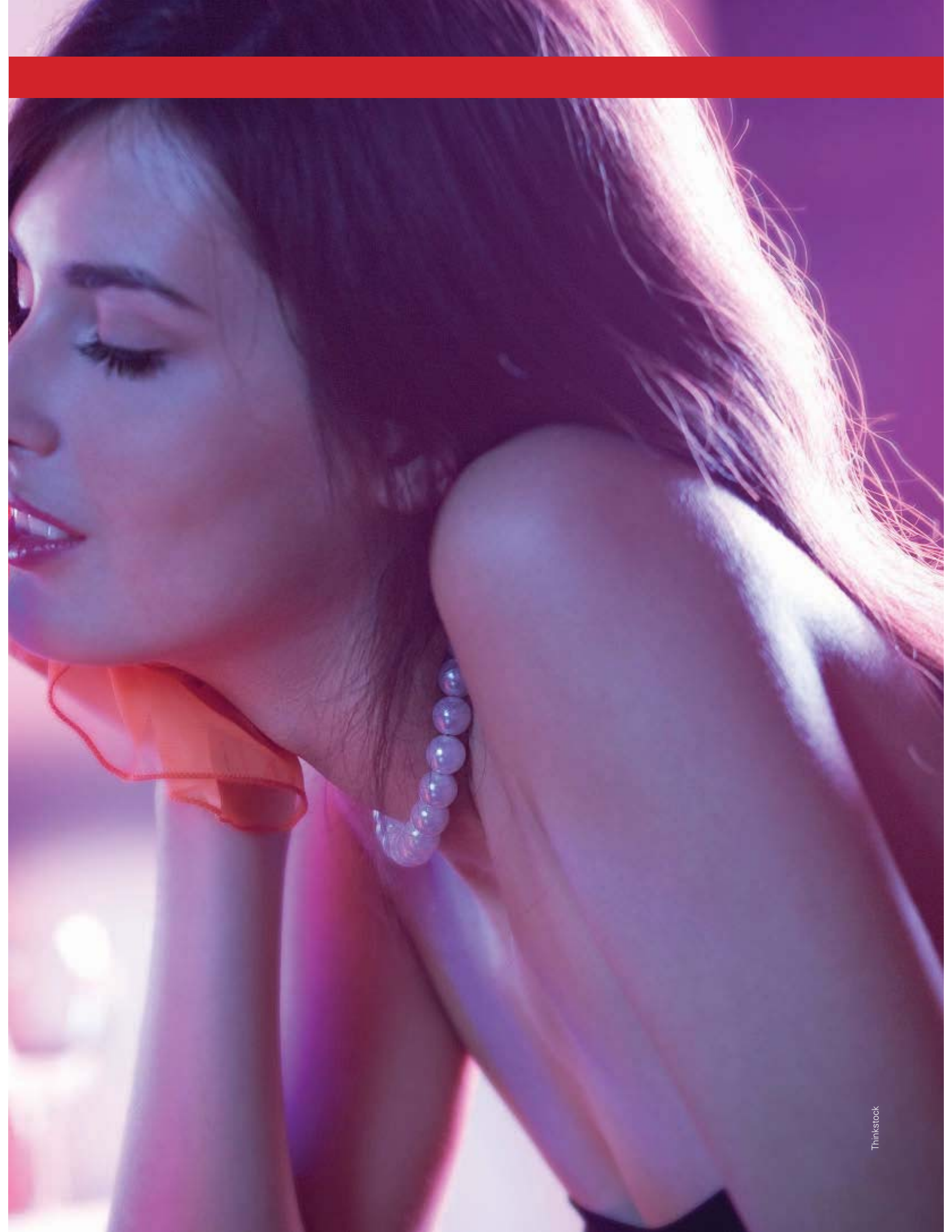


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# Sexual hook-up culture

With more emerging adults having casual sex, researchers are exploring psychological consequences of such encounters.

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**I**t is an unprecedented time in the history of human sexuality. In the United States, the age when people first marry and reproduce has been pushed back dramatically, while at the same time the age of puberty has dropped, resulting in an era in which young adults are physiologically able to reproduce but not psychologically or socially ready to “settle down” and begin a family (Bogle, 2007; Garcia & Reiber, 2008).

These developmental shifts, research suggests, are some of the factors driving the increase in sexual “hookups,” or uncommitted sexual encounters, part of a popular cultural change that has infiltrated the lives of emerging adults throughout the Western world.

Hookups are becoming more engrained in popular culture, reflecting both evolved sexual predilections and changing social and sexual scripts. Hook-up activities may include a wide range of sexual behaviors, such as kissing, oral sex and penetrative intercourse. However, these encounters often transpire without any promise of — or desire for — a more traditional romantic relationship.

In this article, we review the literature on sexual hookups and consider the research on the psychological consequences of casual sex. This is a transdisciplinary literature review that draws on the evidence and theoretical tensions between evolutionary theoretical models and sociocultural theory. It suggests that these encounters are becoming increasingly normative among adolescents and young adults in North America and can best be understood from a biopsychosocial perspective.

Today’s hook-up culture represents a marked shift in openness and acceptance of uncommitted sex.

### **A cultural revolution**

Hookups — defined in this article as brief uncommitted sexual encounters between individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other — have emerged from more general social shifts taking place during the last century. Hookups began to become more frequent in the 1920s, with the upsurge of automobiles and novel entertainment, such as movie theaters. Instead of courting at home under a parent’s

watchful eye, young adults left the home and were able to explore their sexuality more freely.

By the 1960s, young adults became even more sexually liberated, with the rise of feminism, widespread availability of birth control and growth of sex-integrated college party events. Today, sexual behavior outside of traditional committed romantic pair-bonds has become increasingly typical and socially acceptable (Bogle, 2007, 2008).

Influencing this shift in sexuality is popular culture. The media have become a source of sex education, filled with often inaccurate portrayals of sexuality (Kunkel et al., 2005). The themes of books, plots of movies and television shows, and lyrics of numerous songs all demonstrate a permissive sexuality among consumers. The media suggest that uncommitted sex, or hookups, can be both physically and emotionally enjoyable and occur without “strings.” The 2009 film “Hooking Up,” for example, details the chaotic romantic and sexual lives of adolescent characters. Another film, “No Strings Attached,” released in 2011, features two friends negotiating a sexual, yet nonromantic, component of their relationship. Popular pro-hookup same-sex representations have also emerged in television series like “Queer as Folk” and “The L-Word.”

When it comes to real life, most of today’s young adults report some casual sexual experience. The most recent data suggest that between 60 percent and 80 percent of North American college students have had some sort of hookup experience. This is consistent with the view of emerging adulthood (typical college age) as a period of developmental transition (Arnett, 2000), exploring and internalizing sexuality and romantic intimacy, now including hookups (Stinson, 2010).

Although much of the current research has been done on college campuses, among younger adolescents, 70 percent of sexually active 12- to 21-year-olds reported having had uncommitted sex within the last year (Grello et al., 2003). Similarly, in a sample of seventh, ninth and 11th graders, 32 percent of participants had experienced sexual intercourse and 61 percent of sexually experienced teenagers reported a sexual encounter outside a dating relationship; this represents approximately one-fifth of the entire sample (Manning et al., 2006).

### **Affective responses to hooking up**

On average, both men and women appear to have higher positive affect than negative affect after a hookup. In one study, among participants who were asked to characterize the morning after a hookup, 82 percent of men and 57 percent of women were generally glad they had done it (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). The gap between men and women is notable and demonstrates an average sex difference in affective reactions.

Similarly, in a study of 832 college students, 26 percent of women and 50 percent of men reported feeling positive after

a hookup, and 49 percent of women and 26 percent of men reported a negative reaction (the remainders for each sex had a mix of both positive and negative reactions; Owen et al., 2010).

However, both sexes also experience some negative affect as well. In a qualitative study that asked 187 participants to report their feelings after a typical hookup, 35 percent reported feeling regretful or disappointed, 27 percent good or happy, 20 percent satisfied, 11 percent confused, 9 percent proud, 7 percent excited or nervous, 5 percent uncomfortable, and 2 percent desirable or wanted (Paul & Hayes, 2002). However, this same study found that feelings differed during hookups compared with after: During a typical hookup, 65 percent of participants reported feeling good, aroused, or excited, 17 percent desirable or wanted, 17 percent nothing in particular or were focused on the hookup, 8 percent embarrassed or regretful, 7 percent nervous or scared, 6 percent confused, and 5 percent proud (Paul & Hayes, 2002).

### Hook-up regret

A number of studies have looked at regret with respect to hookups and have documented the negative feelings men and women may feel after casual sex.

In a large Web-based study of 1,468 undergraduate students, participants reported a variety of consequences: 27.1 percent felt embarrassed, 24.7 percent reported emotional difficulties, 20.8 percent experienced loss of respect, and 10 percent reported difficulties with a steady partner (Lewis et al., 2011). In another recent study conducted on a sample of 200 undergraduate students in Canada, 78 percent of women and 72 percent of men who had uncommitted sex (including vaginal, anal, and/or oral sex) reported a history of experiencing regret following such an encounter (Fisher et al., 2012).

Fisher et al. (2012) also found few sex differences in reasons for regret, with better quality sex reducing the degree of regret reported. It appears the method of asking participants whether and when they had experienced regret (i.e., ever, last hookup, or typical hookup) produces a sex difference, but in terms of categorical presence, most emerging adults experienced a kaleidoscope of reactions. This is consistent with Stinson's (2010) message of sexual development requiring experimentation, including trial and

error, good feelings and bad feelings.

In a study of 270 sexually active college-age students, 72 percent regretted at least one instance of previous sexual activity (Oswalt, Cameron, & Koob, 2005). In a report of 152 female undergraduate students, 74 percent had either a few or some regrets from uncommitted sex: 61 percent had a few regrets, 23 percent had no regrets, 13 percent had some regrets and 3 percent had many regrets (Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008).

Another study identified two types of sexual encounters that were particularly predictive of regret: engaging in penetrative intercourse with someone known less than 24 hours and engaging in penetrative intercourse with someone only once. Among a sample of 1,743 individuals who had experienced a one-night stand, Campbell (2008) showed that most men and women had combinations of both positive and negative affective reactions following this event. Campbell also found that men had stronger feelings of being "sorry because they felt they used another person," whereas women had stronger feelings of "regret because they felt used." Again, both men and women had experienced some sexual regret, but women were more negatively impacted by some hook-up experiences.

Hookups, although increasingly socially acceptable, may leave more "strings" than public discourse would suggest.

### Hook-up culture and mental health

An individual history of hook-up behavior has been associated with a variety of mental health factors. In a study of 394 young adults followed across a university semester, those with more depressive symptoms and greater feelings of loneliness who engaged in penetrative sex hookups subsequently reported a reduction in both depressive symptoms and feelings of loneliness (Owen et al., 2011). At the same time, participants who reported fewer depressive symptoms and fewer feelings of loneliness who engaged in penetrative sex hookups subsequently reported an increase in both depressive symptoms and feelings of loneliness (Owen et al., 2011). In another study, among 291 sexually experienced individuals, people who had the most regret after uncommitted sex also had more symptoms of depression than those who had no regret (Welsh et al., 2006). However, in the same sample, women's but not men's degree of depressive symptoms increased with number of previous sex partners within the last year (Welsh et al., 2006).

In the first study to investigate the issue of self-esteem and hookups, both men and women who had ever engaged in an

uncommitted sexual encounter had lower overall self-esteem scores compared with those without uncommitted sexual experiences (Paul et al., 2000). The potential causal direction of the relationship between self-esteem and uncommitted sex is yet unclear (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Paul et al., 2000).

Just as multiple motivations can be in conflict, a person's affective reactions during and after a hookup can be in conflict. Discrepancies between behaviors and desires, particularly with respect to social-sexual relationships, have dramatic implications for physical and mental health. Despite the allure of engaging in uncommitted sex, research shows that people engage in these behaviors even when they feel uncomfortable doing so (Lambert et al., 2003; Reiber & Garcia, 2010). In addition, people overestimate others' comfort with hookups and assign variable meanings to those behaviors (Lambert et al., 2003; Reiber & Garcia, 2010). Misperception of sexual norms is one potential driver for people to behave in ways they do not personally endorse. In a replication and extension of Lambert et al.'s (2003) study, Reiber and Garcia (2010) found that 78 percent of people overestimated others' comfort with many different sexual hook-up behaviors, with men particularly overestimating women's actual comfort with a variety of sexual behaviors in hookups.

Hook-up scenarios may include feelings of pressure and performance anxiety, contributing to feelings of discomfort. In Paul et al.'s (2000) study on hookups, 16 percent of participants felt pressured during their typical hookup. In this sample, 12 percent of participants felt out of control when intercourse was not involved, while 22 percent felt out of control when sexual intercourse took place. (Note that this study asked participants about typical hookups, and although this is informative for general patterns, it does not capture specific factors influencing specific individual scenarios. For instance, it is unclear how one might rate a "typical" hookup if one instance involved sexual coercion and regret while another, before or after, was consenting and more enjoyable.)

Hookups can result in guilt and negative feelings. In a study of 169 sexually experienced men and women surveyed in singles bars, when presented with the statement, "I feel guilty or would feel guilty about having sexual intercourse with someone I had just met," 32 percent of men and 72 percent of women agreed (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993). The

percentage of women expressing guilt was more than twice that of men. This is consistent with a classic study by Clark and Hatfield (1989), which found that men are much more likely than women to accept casual sex offers from people they find attractive. Conley (2011) replicated and extended this finding, demonstrating that, under certain conditions of perceived comfort, the gender differences in acceptance of casual sex are diminished.

Qualitative descriptions of hookups reveal relative gender differences in terms of feelings afterward, with women displaying more negative reactions than men (Paul & Hayes, 2002). This is also consistent with earlier work demonstrating a sex difference, with women generally identifying more emotional involvement in seemingly "low investment" (i.e., uncommitted) sexual encounters than men (Townsend, 1995). Moreover, in a study of 140 (109 female, 31 male) first-semester undergraduates, women, but not men, who had engaged in intercourse during a hookup showed higher rates of mental distress (Fielder & Carey, 2010). Possibly contributing to findings on gender differences

in thoughts of worry, in a sample of 507 undergraduate students, more women than men hoped that a relationship would develop following a hookup. Only 4.4 percent of men and 8.2 percent of women (6.45 percent of participants) expected a traditional romantic relationship as an outcome, while 29 percent of men and 42.9 percent of women (36.57 percent of participants) ideally wanted such an outcome (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). It is possible that regret and negative consequences result from individuals attempting to negotiate multiple desires. It is likely that a substantial portion of emerging adults today are compelled to publicly engage in hookups while desiring both immediate sexual gratification and more stable romantic attachments.

### **Hook-up culture and sexual risk**

Despite the prevalence of positive feelings, hookups can include negative outcomes, such as emotional and psychological injury, sexual violence, sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy. Despite those risks, a qualitative study of 71 college students (39 women and 32 men) found that nearly half of participants were not concerned about contracting sexually transmitted diseases from intercourse during a hookup, and most were

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unconcerned about contracting diseases from fellatio or cunnilingus in hookups (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009).

Compounding disease risks, people who hook up are more likely to have concurrent sexual partners (Paik, 2010b). Moreover, in a sample of 1,468 college students, among the 429 students who had engaged in oral sex, anal sex or vaginal intercourse in their most recent hookup, only 46.6 percent reported using a condom (Lewis et al., 2011).

In terms of condom use, another issue of concern involving hookups is the high comorbidity with substance use. As part of a larger study, in a sample of several thousand people ages 15 to 25, men and women who had used marijuana or cocaine in the previous 12 months were also more likely than nonusers to have had nonmonogamous sex in the past 12 months (van Gelder et al., 2011). More specifically, in one study of undergraduate students, 33 percent of those who reported they had uncommitted sex indicated their motivation was “unintentional,” likely due to alcohol and other drugs (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). In Fielder and Carey’s (2010) study among 118 first-semester female college students, participants reported that 64 percent of uncommitted sexual encounters followed alcohol use, with the average occurring after consuming three alcoholic drinks. Similarly, another study found that nearly 61 percent of undergraduate students used alcohol, with an average of 3.3 alcoholic drinks, during their most recent hookup (Lewis et al., 2011).

Not all hook-up encounters are necessarily wanted or consensual. People occasionally consent to a sexual act but do not necessarily want sex (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). In a sample of 178 college students, participants noted that most of their unwanted sex occurred in the context of hookups: 77.8 percent during a hookup, 13.9 percent in an ongoing relationship and 8.3 percent on a date (Flack et al., 2007). Similarly, in a sample of 761 women students, approximately 50 percent of women reported at least one experience of unwanted sex (Hill, Garcia, & Geher, 2012). Of those women, 70 percent experienced unwanted sex in the context of a hookup and 57 percent in the context of a committed romantic relationship (Hill et al., 2012).

Even more worrisome, a proportion of hookups also involve nonconsensual sex. In a study by Lewis et al. (2011), 86.3 percent of participants portrayed their most recent hook-up experience as one they wanted to have, while 7.6 percent indicated that their most recent hookup was an experience they did not want to have or to which they were unable to give consent. Unwanted and nonconsensual sexual encounters are more likely occurring alongside alcohol and substance use.

Alcohol use has also been associated with a type of hookup: The greatest alcohol use was associated with penetrative sexual hookups, less alcohol use with nonpenetrative hookups, and the least amount of alcohol use occurred among those who did not hook-up (Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011).

In one study of men and women who had engaged in an uncommitted sexual encounter that included vaginal, anal or oral sex, participants reported their intoxication levels: 35 percent were very intoxicated, 27 percent were mildly intoxicated, 27 percent were sober and 9 percent were extremely intoxicated (Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2012). Alcohol may also serve as an excuse, purposely consumed as a strategy to protect the self from having to justify hook-up behavior later (Paul, 2006).

Although alcohol and drugs are likely a strong factor, it is still largely unclear what role individual differences play in shaping decisions to engage in hookups. In a sample of 394 young adults, the strongest predictor of hook-up behavior was having previously hooked up — those who engaged in penetrative sex hookups were 600 percent more likely than others to repeat this over the course of a university semester (Owen et al., 2011). Other factors may include media consumption, personality and biological predispositions. Garcia, MacKillop, et al. (2010) demonstrated an association between dopamine D4 receptor gene polymorphism (DRD4 VNTR) and uncommitted sexual activity among 181 young men and young women. Although genotypic groups in this study did not vary in terms of overall number of sexual partners, individuals with a particular “risk-taking” variant of the dopamine D4 receptor gene (DRD4 VNTR; also associated with substance abuse) were shown to have a higher likelihood of having uncommitted sexual encounters (including infidelity and one-night stands); however, no sex differences were observed. This suggests that biological factors that contribute to motivating the different contexts of sexual behavior for both men and women may be fairly sexually monomorphic (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Garcia, Reiber, et al., 2010). This may, in some cases, point to fairly stable individual differences.

### **Sex differences in hook-up behaviors**

Some research has considered the interactions of sex and individual differences in predicting hook-up behavior. The Mating Intelligence Scale, designed to measure an individual’s cognitive abilities in the evolutionary domain of mating (see Geher & Kaufman, 2011), was used to assess hook-up behavior in a sample of 132 college students. Young men higher in mating intelligence were more likely than others to have hooked up with strangers, acquaintances and friends, while young women higher in mating intelligence were only more likely than others to have had more hook-up experiences with acquaintances (O’Brien, Geher, Gallup, Garcia, & Kaufman, 2009). The authors proposed that given the potential risks and costs of sex to females, sex with strangers would be disadvantageous; and because women do not generally report having sexual motives toward opposite-sex friends (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001), women with high mating intelligence were likely striking the optimal balance,

whereas men high in mating intelligence were obtaining maximum sexual encounters (O'Brien et al., 2009).

Still unclear are the degree to which hookups may result in positive reactions, and whether young men and young women are sexually satisfied in these encounters. Fine (1988) has argued that sex negativity is even more pronounced when directed at women and, further, that the possibility of desire seems to be missing from the sexual education of young women. This discrepancy in the socialization and education of men and women may be a significant influence on behavioral patterns and outcomes in sexual hookups.

Armstrong, England and Fogarty (2009) addressed sexual satisfaction in a large study of online survey responses from 12,295 undergraduates from 17 different colleges. Participants were asked about oral sex rates and orgasm in their most recent hookup and most recent relationship sexual event. In this study, men reported receiving oral sex both in hookups and in relationships much more than women. In first-time hookups that involved oral sex, 55 percent included only men receiving oral sex, 19 percent only women receiving oral sex, and 27 percent both mutually receiving; in last relationship sexual activity, 32 percent included only men receiving oral sex, 16 percent included only women receiving oral sex, and 52 percent included both mutually receiving.

In both contexts, men also reached orgasm more often than women. In first-time hookups, 31 percent of men and 10 percent of women reached orgasm; in last relationship sexual activity, 85 percent of men and 68 percent of women reached orgasm. Armstrong et al. (2009) concluded with an important message: "A challenge to the contemporary sexual double standard would mean defending the position that young women and men are equally entitled to sexual activity, sexual pleasure, and sexual respect in hookups as well as relationships. To achieve this, the attitudes and practices of both men and women need to be confronted. Men should be challenged to treat even first hookup partners as generously as the women they hook up with treat them."

### **Conclusion**

Uncommitted sex, now being explored across a variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives, is best understood as a biopsychosocial phenomenon. Evidence suggests that both pleasure and reproductive motives may influence these sexual patterns, as seen in participants' reactions following uncommitted sex. Further, the findings that a majority of both men and women are motivated to engage in hookups, but often desire a more romantic relationship, are consistent with a nuanced perspective that takes into account changing social scripts, new patterns of development, and the cross-cultural and biological centrality of the pair-bond (Fisher,

1992; Gray & Garcia, 2013).

By definition, sexual hookups provide the allure of sex without strings attached. Despite their increasing social acceptability, however, developing research suggests that sexual hookups may leave more strings attached than many participants might first assume. ■



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