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**Communication in the Modern Hookup Culture: A  
Literature Review**

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Today's college-aged generation is increasingly forsaking traditional dating practices in favor of a "hookup culture" of casual sex. Although scholars disagree about whether sexual activity is increasingly common (cf. Bradshaw, Khan, & Saville, 2010; Garcia et al., 2012) or increasingly socially accepted (cf. Lehmiller, 2014; Szalavitz, 2013), it is clear that there is an attitude of acceptance regarding non-committed sexual relationships. It should be noted that not all students choose non-committed relationships; many still pursue committed relationships. This generation also faces the added complication of a heavy reliance on technology-based communication, which has earned college-aged adults a reputation for poor communication skills that impact every aspect of their lives from workplace communication to interpersonal relationships. Articles that offer college-aged adults advice on navigating the dating scene ultimately encourage clear and effective communication that articulates the student's expectations for each engagement (e.g. Lewandowski & Bobrowski, 2011). However, most available literature that is focused on the topic of college dating does not explain how students can communicate with hookup and relationship partners. The impact of the lack of guidance extends to all types of romantic involvement whether it be initiating a hookup, strengthening a relationship, setting physical limits during a hookup, or discussing transitioning from a hookup to a relationship.

### **The Benefits of Committed Relationships for College-Aged Adults**

While there is little advice on how college students can communicate to forge, maintain, and navigate through committed relationships, there is ample evidence to suggest that these types of relationships can be beneficial. Marriages and their influence on mental health have been studied for several years. While marriages are often the focus of these studies, the results also apply to committed relationships and

cohabitation; these types of relationships correlate better to college-aged adults who are likely unmarried, but who may have experience with committed relationships.

Research suggests that marriage can actively benefit mental health, perhaps because it can provide an intimate and emotionally-fulfilling relationship that encourages healthy behaviors and provides the couple with a sense of purpose and identity (Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, & Bruner, 2013). A recent 2013 study, titled “Committed Dating Relationships and Mental Health among College Students,” examines whether these protective benefits apply to committed but non-marital relationships experienced by college-aged adults who, as a group, have an “elevated risk” for mental health problems as well as alcohol and substance abuse problems (Whitton et al., 2013). The study concludes that, similar to marriages, committed relationships are protective, not harmful, to college-aged adults; those in a committed relationship reported fewer depressive symptoms and lower rates of clinically significant depression (Whitton et al., 2013). Both men and women are positively affected, but the impact is greater in women. Additionally, both genders report fewer instances of problematic alcohol use than those in committed relationships (Whitton et al., 2013).

A similar study, “Romantic Relationships and the Physical and Mental Health of College Students,” conducted by Scott Braithwaite, Raquel Delevi, and Frank Fincham (2010) confirms that college relationships provide positive effects on mental health. The study found that those in committed relationships experienced fewer mental health problems, encompassing a broader range of health issues than the aforementioned study’s discussion of depressive symptoms. Braithwaite et al. (2010) added that, in addition to engaging in fewer risky drinking behaviors, students in committed relationships are less likely to participate in risky sexual behaviors. Other benefits to

college students maintaining committed relationships, including providing a social identity, emotional connection, and a source of support, could explain why these students are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Both studies concluded that relationships help partners to avoid unhealthy behaviors and ultimately result in more satisfaction and a higher quality of emotional well-being (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012; Whitton et al., 2013).

### **The Hookup Culture**

Despite these clear benefits of committed relationships, college students are in the midst of a culture that accepts—if not promotes—casual sex. There is an ongoing debate as to the validity and severity of the hookup culture that seems to be prevalent today. Casual sex and hookups, generally defined as anything from kissing to sexual intercourse between two people with no expectation of a future committed relationship, are certainly common on college campuses (Aubrey & Smith, 2013; Bradshaw, Khan, & Saville, 2010; Fielder, Carey, K, & Carey, 2012; Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012; Letcher & Carmona, 2015; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Siebenbruner, 2013). Also prevalent is the mindset that relationships limit freedom, preventing experimentation and exploration of options (Fielder et al., 2012). Some students worry that they will miss out on experiences or chances to meet people by committing to a relationship. They fear that they will be unhappily tied down to one person while they could be having what they consider to be fun, casual relationships with other people (Fielder et al., 2012). Others are concerned that a committed relationship will not allow them to experiment sexually. These concerns encourage students to move away from the relationships that they see as limiting and to move toward noncommittal hookups (Fielder et al., 2012).

As a result of this shift in attitudes, many researchers claim that there has been an increase in college students selecting temporary hookups over committed relationships (Bradshaw, Khan, & Saville, 2010; Buktaman, 2014; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Garcia et al., 2012). Some scholars adamantly disagree, claiming that the hookup culture is nothing new. Justin Lehmiller (2014), Ph.D., a social psychologist, draws from his extensive background in relationship and romance dynamics while referencing multiple studies and research to argue that students today are not more sexually active than students in the 80s and 90s. However, Lehmiller (2014) does not discuss the nature of these sexual encounters to address whether there is a shift from sexual relations within the confines of committed relationships to casual encounters. Other arguments against the hookup culture similarly cite the consistent number of sexual encounters, often without addressing the nature of the encounters (Bogle, 2007; Szalavitz, 2013). Of those who argue that the culture is not a new phenomenon, Maia Szalavitz (2013) traces the origins of the hookup culture back to the 1970s, when birth control became widely available and culture began to shift away from the standard of marrying in college or shortly thereafter.

Many sources claim that, even though hookups are prevalent on college campuses, students and the public overestimate their impact, believing that students have more sexual encounters and more partners than they actually do (Bogle, 2007; Lehmiller, 2014; Szalavitz, 2013). For example, a study by Elizabeth L. Paul and Kristen A. Hayes (2002) that examined the “casualties of ‘casual’ sex” found that although students estimated that an average of 85% of their peers engaged in hookups, the actual number is slightly lower, with about 70% reporting engaging in a hookup during college.

Another study suggests a similar number, estimating that 60 to 80% of North American college students have some sort of hookup experience (Garcia et al., 2012).

Those who argue that the hookup culture is a growing problem believe, along with the general populace, that hooking up has become more common than traditional dating among college students. Garcia et al. (2012) cite a study that found that both genders reported nearly twice as many hookups as first dates. This statistic, while shocking at first, must be considered in context: first dates may turn into multiple dates with the same person, or a relationship, reducing the number of first dates that occur. Hookups, however, are often a one-time occurrence. While some, such as Bukatman (2014), argue that the apparent shift away from commitment is due to a rising obsession with sex, others suggest that it is due to a desire to maintain freedom, to explore and experiment, to gain social status and self-confidence, and to have the stereotypical college experience (Fielder et al., 2012; Kerner, 2013). There may also be other factors that lead students to make a distinction between a first date and a hookup.

Although scholars disagree about whether the hookup culture is a growing reality or an over-exaggerated and pre-existing occurrence, they typically agree that hooking up is common and generally accepted on college campuses (Aubrey & Smith, 2013; Bradshaw, Khan, & Saville, 2010; Fielder et al., 2012; Garcia et al., 2012; Kerner, 2013). Garcia et al. (2012) describe hookups as so common that they are becoming “culturally normative,” as exemplified by a pop culture saturated with images “that depict and often encourage sexual behavior.” Popular discussion of the hookup culture claims that hookups are a way of avoiding the commitment and emotional connections that come with a relationship, but Aubrey and Smith (2013), among others, suggest that college-aged adults accept and endorse the hookup culture not to avoid commitment, but

because hookups are inconsequential and have no impact on commitment or on day-to-day life (Bukatman, 2014). Aubrey and Smith (2013) also propose the idea that the hookup culture [can be labeled as such, not because it is an increasing epidemic among college students, but because hookup behavior is present, prevalent, and meets the definition of a “culture.” They define a culture as “a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices,”](#) (Aubrey & Smith, 2013, 435) citing the shared and often unspoken rules, beliefs, and expectations surrounding hookups.

### **Millennials and Communication**

The other facet of this problem is communication between millennials, the generation to which college-aged adults belong. Communication has not been addressed in the context of dating and hooking up in the hookup culture, revealing a clear need for further research, particularly because of the poor communication skills that characterize this generation. Millennials are widely known for their preference of technological communication over more traditional forms of communication, such as face-to-face conversations, phone calls, and letter-writing. They have fewer in-person interactions than previous generations and so, their interpersonal skills are challenged and require more guidance (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). Some have found that this leaves millennials “deficient” in their ability to communicate (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). Millennials struggle when communicating without technology, which is impacting their schooling and, according to employers, the workplace as well (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). Evidence then suggests that communication deficiencies are also occurring within romantic relationships. Given that communication is a central pillar of relationships and interactions of every kind, millennials need to be competent in

communication to effectively navigate both relationships and hookups (Lewandowski & Bobrowski, 2011).

Researchers note a rising dependence on communication via technology in relationships as millennials turn to dating apps instead of face-to-face meetings, and texting instead of talking (Bukatman, 2014). In the article “The Hookup Culture Has Killed the Possibility of Dating in College,” Allie Bukatman (2014) notes that communication has begun to break down in millennials’ relationships as they too often shrug off proper communication, reducing “I love you” to a simple “<3.” They are prone to conduct conversations through text rather than in-person or on the phone, leading to excessive analysis of text messages and frequent miscommunication (Bukatman, 2014). Bukatman (2014) also notes that millennials are even more susceptible to poor communication, as the hookup culture has fostered the mentality that “whoever cares less wins.” In this mindset, initiating communication and expressing emotion (such as expressing the desire to have a relationship) equates to losing. The complicated and impersonal nature of the communication methods of college-aged adults, coupled with a hookup culture, points to a clear need for more attention devoted to communication in millennials’ relationships.

## **In Conclusion**

There is ample research on relationships, the hookup culture, and communication, but there is surprisingly little conversation on the overlap of these topics. The few advice-giving articles that attempt to take on this problem cover it passively, poorly, and with generalization; they simply praise the idea of good communication or encourage communication about dating intentions, yet they don’t advise how to do so (e.g. Fishel; Lewandowski & Bobrowski, 2011; Montgomery, 2015).

Beyond that, advice articles tend to offer generic suggestions including openness and honesty in communication, but give millennials little concrete guidance as to how they should proceed in both technological and traditional communications (Lewandowski & Bobrowski, 2011). In a hookup situation, which already lacks a lot of communication, millennials' poor communication skills can be the deciding factor for whether hookups go well or not, end on a positive note, result in feelings of guilt and shame, or turn into relationships.

An absence of information exists on the overlapping issues of millennial communication, the modern hookup culture, and committed relationships. The lack of readily available research on the topic shows a definitive need for further exploration of communication strategies for interpersonal relationships, particularly hookups. Because of the scarcity of research in this area, the results and implications have not been publicized and shared with the general public. Those who need, but cannot obtain this information, may struggle with scenarios such as discussing expectations for a hookup, asserting physical limitations, determining the nature of the relationship between two people, and vocalizing the desire to transition from a hookup to a relationship. These dating and hookup relationships often occur in a stressful college setting and with an increased chance of susceptibility to mental health problems. Effective communication skills are clearly an essential tool for millennials, and especially useful for those who wish to change their role in the hookup culture, or commit themselves to a relationship. Millennials are in the midst of a culture where hookups are becoming increasingly normative and expected. Investigation into this topic could aid students not only in changing their relationships, but also potentially facilitating a change in the hookup culture itself.



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