Chapter 4

The Electric Hookup: Individual and Social Risks Related to Hookup App Use Among Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

Social critics claim that emerging adults are subjecting themselves and one another to a variety of risks through the use of mobile dating and hookup applications, or “apps.” These narratives emphasize concerns about authenticity, the threat of sexual predators, and changing expectations about the nature and emotional intimacy of relationships. The use of apps among emerging adults presents risks for individual users and for social relational patterns, both in the digital world and “on the ground.” In this chapter, the authors analyze the theoretical and empirical risks of mediating hookup culture through the use of mobile dating apps and discuss the potential risks to app users, such as harassment, cyberstalking, and sexual violence. Next, the authors explore the social risks pertaining to authenticity, trust, the quality of relationships, and conflicting understandings of social norms and acceptable behaviors. Finally, the chapter concludes with suggestions for future directions in research related to the use of hookup apps and its related risks.

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INTRODUCTION

Emerging adults are especially vulnerable to a variety of risks, both “on the ground” and in the digital world. According to Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is a period of development located between late adolescence and the early twenties, most specifically between the ages of 18 and 25. Emerging adults operate between adolescence and adulthood in a way that Erikson (1968) described as a sort of psychological dizziness where young people struggle with the transition from childhood to adulthood. Thus, much of their focus is trained on identity development and exploration. According to Klinger (2016), this unique identity-seeking feature of emerging adulthood draws them to hookup culture where they can experiment with the presentation of self and sample intimate relations without having to commit themselves to a restrictive relationship.

Hookup culture can be understood as a social climate in which engaging in casual, romantic, or sexual interactions outside of a committed relationship is deemed acceptable and, in fact, encouraged by changing sociosexual scripts (Bogle, 2008; Garcia, Reiber, Massey & Merriwether, 2012; Monto & Carey, 2014; Wade, 2017). In Lisa Wade’s book, American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus (2017), she describes hookup culture as an overwhelming presence that we are entrenched in, regardless of whether or not we are actively participating. As a result, many college students in particular feel as though hookup culture is, as Wade puts it, a “dominating force” in their lives and those of their peers (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England 2010; Wade, 2017).

“Hooking up” has become a common topic in popular discourse, but it is one that is difficult to explicitly define as it is based on the subjective sexual experiences one has within the larger culture. In an effort to better define hooking up, we summarize it as brief, but sometimes repeated, uncommitted sexual or romantic encounters between individuals who are not romantic partners or dating one another (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). In this way, hooking up is an ambiguous term, as it can refer to anything ranging from simply kissing to sexual intercourse (Wade, 2017). An Online College Social Life Survey found that sexual intercourse occurs during approximately 40% of hookups; while foreplay- a sexual experience referring to nudity and genital touching- and open-mouth kissing occur in 12% and 35% of hookups respectively (England, 2011; Wade, 2017).

Technology and online resources have streamlined the process of seeking out potential romantic and sexual partners by developing applications, or “apps,” that can be downloaded on user’s mobile devices. These mobile dating apps, also commonly referred to as dating or “hookup apps,” have grown in popularity over the years. In fact, the percentage of those aged 18-24 who used dating apps went from a meager 10% in 2013 to 27% in 2015 (Smith, 2016). Research on the motivations of Tinder (a popular app) users identified a variety of objectives, including love, casual sex, ease of communication, thrill of excitement, self-worth validation, and trendiness (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). These motivations differ based on gender identity, as men are more highly motivated by casual sex, ease of communication, and thrill of excitement. These differences are partly attributable to deeply ingrained gender socialization that make engaging in casual sex and hookups more anxiety-producing for women (Klinger, 2016; Petersen & Hyde, 2011; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017; Widman et al., 2006).

According to recent scholarship, one of the dominant characteristics of hookup culture is a reliance on assumptions and a lack of direct communication (Klinger, 2016; Wade, 2017). Often, participants are operating on assumptions, in some measure due to the ambiguity of the term “hookup,” but also due to the comorbidity between hookup culture and alcohol use (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Klinger, 2016; Vander
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