Dating in the Digital Age

DATING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

BY

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# Abstract

My dissertation examines the broader social context of hookup culture and dating in this current digital age. Data comes from a mixed-methods study that draws on original self-administered surveys (N=196) and focus groups with undergraduate women (N=21) at a university in Ontario, Canada. In this dissertation, I show that hooking up and dating coexist on campus and I examine the broader social context of hookup culture as constituted by women’s friendship groups and new technology to date and hookup. Through this research, my findings reveal how the pursuit of pleasure comes alongside many non-consensual encounters for undergraduate women. Taken as a whole, my research reveals the pleasures and perils of partying, dating, swiping, Snapchatting, and hooking up for undergraduate women.

In Chapter Three, I draw on the descriptive statistics from my self-administered online survey and focus groups with undergraduate women to investigate whether hookup culture has emerged in a different social context without a dominating Greek culture and the role of new dating/hookup technology in this culture. In Chapter Four, I draw on the focus groups to show that hookup culture should not be understood as only about a set of expectations around sexual partners, but rather, hookup culture is heavily organized around women’s friendships with other women who support each other as they navigate the hookup scene and attempt to mitigate risks to their safety. In Chapter Five, I examine the potential of new dating apps to improve women’s dating/hookup experiences, revealing that they often fail to achieve their promises and, in other cases, they introduce new unforeseen risks to women’s safety.

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# Introduction

## The Hookup Generation

Giggling and snacking on pizza, I sat one winter afternoon in a brightly lit room with four undergraduate women at Stoney University to talk about hooking up and dating.

“The communication aspect of dating [has] definitely changed. It’s truly a skill to be able to go up to people, like in person, and initiate a conversation,” Britney explains. “There are people who can inherently do that sort of thing, but for the most part Tinder’s caused us to rely on our ‘behind the screens’ personas.”

“So, it’s really funny cause there’s this guy I was talking to on Tinder and Snapchat… so I walk in the library, sit down at the table, and who’s sitting across from me – the guy on Tinder!” Carrie reveals, with what only can be described as a Cheshire cat grin sprawled across her face.

“That’s so funny,” I reply. Carrie energetically nods, “Yeah, the guy on Tinder!” The whole group of us begins to laugh, and I ask, “Did you talk to him?”

“So I looked up,” Carrie replies, “opened my laptop, looked back over to him, and looked at my friend next to me, and I texted her and she was like ‘oh my god, no way!’ and he knew who I was and I knew who he was - *but we didn’t say anything*!”

“You didn’t say anything?” I ask.

“No!” Carries exclaims, “and I just looked up and was like, *oh my god, what is going on*!”

“That’s so funny,” Norah interjects through deep laughter, as if surprised, and yet, totally unsurprised at the same time.

“And he texted all of his friends who I was and that I was sitting across from him and I was texting my friend, and after he texted me and he was like, ‘I’m like ninety-five percent sure you were sitting directly across from me.’ So, I was like, ‘yep, that was me!’ And now we text and we talk all the time! It was so funny!”

We then began talking about their sexual experiences in university hookup culture and their experiences with Tinder hookups. Kelly tells us,

One of my friends was put in a compromising situation. She invited this guy just to come over *just to hookup,* but when he got there she decided, like, she didn’t want to anymore. They ended up hooking up because she felt pressured to… because that’s what she invited him over for.

Pausing between every few words, as if reconsidering and rationalizing the situation to herself, she explains,

But everyone had left the house so she wasn’t going to message her roommates in the middle of it. It was an iffy situation. I guess it was just hard because you don't want to criticize the guy because they, you know, she's the one who asked him to come over, but at the same time, that person has to respect that you can change your mind at any moment. I don't know…

Trailing off, as if not knowing how to make sense of her friend’s experience, Kelly shrugged and leaned back in her chair.

“Do you think it’s hard to take away consent?” I ask the group.

“I think so,” Kelly replies, nodding thoughtfully.

“I never want to put in that position where I’ve invited someone over that I’ve never met before and there’s an expectation to hookup because if I want to revoke my consent,” Christina pauses before continuing, “I’ve never been in the situation where I felt like I wasn’t being respected… Well, that’s not true,” she pauses again as if reconsidering her past experiences in a new light. Continuing slowly, she explains,

But I’ve never had it go physically further than I wanted… I don’t ever want to feel that way, so I feel like going [on a date] beforehand to screen them is a nice way for me to gage if I want to actually sleep with the person… I just want to meet them first and gage their personality because you can't tell online - like *you* *can’t*. There’ve been people I’ve been excited about then I meet them in person and I’m like, ‘uh, you suck.’

“I think that there’s a lot of pressure if you meet someone on Tinder for a hookup that you have to have that hookup now,” Britney adds, “because you can’t take back what you said and there’s that expectation there, which I don’t think is right but I think it’s there.”

“It’s just ridiculous,” Kelly says indignantly, shaking her head as if acknowledging that Britney’s point is both morally wrong and yet accurate of their experiences.

“Yeah, I think it’s crazy” Britney exclaims in agreement, “But personally, I don’t think I know anyone whose gone out [to have a hookup] and then been like, ‘no, I don’t want this.’ They’ve always gone through and had sex.”

“I think our generation in general though is more of… a hookup generation anyways,” Christina surmises, “so like, even if you were to meet someone ‘authentically*,*’ and you went on a date, who is to say you aren't going to hookup afterward. I feel like that's *always* the expectation anyways, or it’s in the back of your mind at least.”

“So you expect that if you or if your friend meets someone on Tinder and go to meet up with them, you expect that something sexual will happen?" I ask. Everyone nods, looks at one another and laughs tentatively at their shared perspective.

\*\*\*

I open with this conversation between undergraduate women to show the highs and lows, the humour and the sadness, and the often confusing messiness of women’s romantic and sexual experiences navigating university hookup culture in the digital age. Carrie’s story is a perfect example of how digital hookup culture is folded into in-person experiences. Likewise, Kelly’s description of her friend having sex because she did not feel like she could say “no” is also reflected in many of the stories told by the women in my study. These stories of reluctant or absent negotiations of consent were often told through laughter as if women were trying to cope or perhaps just make sense of their experiences. They laughed - of course not at the idea of forced, pressured or coerced sexual encounters - but to cope with their shared realities of the unseemly sides of sexuality on campus. Their laughter was the medicine helping to wash down the painful and uncomfortable experiences navigating the grey areas of sexual consent, which, as my research will show, are commonplace among women engaged in university hookup culture. Their stories reveal the very real risks of participating in university hookup culture and reflect how they collectively move through the various ups and downs of partying, drinking, dating, swiping, Snapchatting, and hooking up on campus.

Drawing on data from a self-administered online survey (N=196) and focus groups (N=21) with undergraduate women on their experiences in hookup culture at a university in Ontario, this dissertation investigates the gendered norms, rituals, and risks that women must navigate in the in-person and digital spaces of university hookup culture. In my conversations with undergraduate women, I learned about how the intersecting dynamics of gender and sexuality that constitute the university hookup culture impact women’s participation in the in-person hookup scene and new digital spaces. Hookup culture research has been conducted *almost* *exclusively* in the United States, and yet, my research shows that hookup culture does exist across geographical and social contexts. Though the location of the hookup scene differs in my case study and the use of new dating and hookup technology is more prevalent than in previous research from the United States, the social norms of hookup culture are translated in both the context of my Canadian case and in digital spaces, contributing to similar risks to women’s safety and wellbeing.

To mediate risks and also enjoy their experiences, I discovered that women dedicate large portions of their evenings to women-centered partying rituals and that women’s friends are each other’s supporters, wing women, and defenders against unwanted sexual advances during their nights out in the in-person hookup scene. I also learned how deeply embedded technology is in their everyday lives and how common it is to rely on apps to begin and sustain sexual and romantic relationships. I also heard countless stories of the complicated, grey areas of sexual consent throughout their in-person and online experiences.

Before diving into these findings, in this introductory chapter I will first produce a literature review that addresses the existing sociological research on hookup culture, the theories that have been employed to understanding hookup culture, and literature on the impacts of technology on dating and sexuality. I then outline the goals and contributions of this research. Finally, I will outline the organization of the dissertation.

## Research on Hookups and Hookup Culture

Research from a wide range of disciplines and subfields have claimed that there is a new modus operandi to the culture of dating in four-year colleges and universities in the United States.[[1]](#footnote-1) These researchers suggest that unlike the dating culture that existed before the early 2000s, the dating and sexual culture of universities can now be characterized as a *hookup culture* (Stinson 2010). Some researchers claim that hookups reflect a shift in the cultural and social organization of sexuality (Heldman and Wade 2010; Wade 2017).

Researchers have consistently found that students’ definitions of what constitutes a hookup are vague and broad. Generally speaking, hookups tend to be understood in the academic literature as casual sexual encounters, though the sexual practices involved in these encounters can range from casual sex involving vaginal-penile, oral or anal sex for some students to behaviours like making out, grinding or body fondling for others (Currier 2013; Heldman and Wade 2010; Garcia et al. 2012; Ronen 2003; Rupp et al. 2014). The reason for such vast differences in how students define hookups is unclear. Currier (2013) argues that said definitions are often intentionally and strategically ambiguous. By describing their sexual activities as a hookup, students are employing an impression management strategy that protects their social and sexual identities.

There is an assumption in popular culture that hooking up is synonymous with having sex and that having sex is imperative to participating in hookup culture. This suggests that hookup culture is predicated on the prevalence or quantity of sex students are having. If this definition is to be believed, then the very existence of this relatively new hookup culture would be contradicted by the data showing that university students of earlier generations had just as much sex as students today (Nagoski 2016). Alternatively, others in the academic community have refuted the notion that hookup culture is defined by the amount sex students are having. These scholars have pushed the current sociological understandings of hookup culture by emphasizing the cultural aspects of hookups rather than focusing exclusively on sexual activity (Wade 2017). Regardless of what students are doing in their sexual lives, by using the terminology of hookup *culture*, scholars are noting a change in the sexual/dating culture of universities, rather than just a change in sexual behaviours. These studies have highlighted the cultural patterns of sexuality at university and have suggested that the rituals, social norms, and practices of hookup culture are specific to the university context (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Wade 2017).

In particular, Wade (2017 p. 29-49) finds that there is a common process to hooking up and a set of social norms in hookup culture, which allowed her to construct a theory of how students hookup. This process includes a pregame, grinding, initiating the hookup, doing “something sexual” (anything from kissing to intercourse), and establishing meaninglessness after the hookup. This final element—wherein participants in a sexual encounter establish that it was or will be casual, uncommitted, and emotionally meaningless—is arguably the most defining characteristic of a hookup (Garcia et al. 2012; Reid, Elliot and Webber 2011; Wade 2017). Although young adults are not having more sex than previous generations and university students can decide to not hookup, Wade claims that students at most four-year universities cannot escape the *culture* of hooking up. In other words, they can choose not to have sex, but they cannot stop their roommate from hooking up in the bunk-bed below them, or prevent themselves from feeling pressured to dance with a fellow student at a fraternity party, or stop the gossip about who is hooking up with whom, or avoid being shamed, ignored, or called desperate if they leave a sexual encounter having developed romantic feelings. Therefore, the literature suggests that hookup culture has less to do with the amount of sex students are having and more to do with the new shared rules, customs, and behaviours that people often take for granted as normal sexual or romantic practices in the university context.

## Gender and Sexuality in Hookup Culture

## Traditional Gender Beliefs

The most extensive body of literature on hookups have compared men and women’s sexual hookups and has addressed the gender differences in perceptions and consequences of heterosexual hookups (Allison and Risman 2013; Bradshaw, Khan and Saville 2010; Lovejoy 2015; Paul and Hayes 2002; Reid, Elliot, and Webber 2011). This is for good reason, as researchers have consistently found the practice of hooking up to be a gendered sexual script structured to serve men and reproduce the dominant gender order (Currier 2013).

Scholars have employed various gender theories in their efforts to unpack the gender dynamics of hookup culture from structural, cultural, and interactionist perspectives. Sociologists have argued that gender is not only a marker of identity or an embodied attribute but a social structure that impacts interactions, regulates individuals on multiple levels, and reproduces social inequalities by privileging cisgender male social actors (Risman 2004). Taken as a social structure, gender is understood to have institutional/organizational, cultural, and interactional components. Specific to the cultural and interactional levels, scholars have illustrated how traditional ‘gender beliefs’ function as cultural instructions that reproduce structural differences between men and women (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Gender beliefs refer to the dominant cultural notions that underlie and impact how men and women understand *how to* *behave*. They can help sociologists understand how common-sense notions of masculine or feminine behaviours, displays, rituals, and scripts are normalized.

Traditional gender beliefs contribute to gender inequality in university hookup culture because - though gendered interactions often appear natural or voluntary - they are structured by gender in ways that reproduce gender inequality (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Even those who do not hold traditional gender beliefs are still impacted by those around them who do. Hence, students are forced to confront the ways their gendered identity is interpreted by those around them (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) have argued that universities are ideal sites for investigating traditional gender beliefs. Their work illuminates how, as cultural instructions, gender beliefs impact participation in university hookup culture. Although there is no clear, singular definition of a hookup, most research suggests that hookups refer to *casual* and *emotionally* *meaningless* sexual encounters. For women, this conflicts with the traditional gender beliefs pertaining to their sexual behaviour, namely, that they should engage in sexual activity only within the context of a committed relationship (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009).

Research shows that traditional gender beliefs not only shape how men and women interact, they also impact how women perceive and judge the behaviours of other women. This is particularly apparent in Hamilton and Armstrong's (2009) and Armstrong and her colleagues (2014) research exploring how gender intersects with class in hookup culture. In their study of slut discourses and slut-shaming, they find that high-status women reinforce their class advantage through the use of slut discourses that emphasize their "classiness" compared to "trashy" low-status women who, in turn, mock and degrade "rich, bitchy sluts" for being exclusionary. Similarly, research finds that men have flexibility in their sexual decision-making and are often celebrated for their sexual experience in heterosexual contexts (Fjær, Pedersen and Sandberg 2015). On the other hand, women are expected to exert self-control or risk being slut-shamed for their perceived sexual promiscuity (Fjær, Pedersen and Sandberg 2015). These findings reflect how traditional gender beliefs impact and potentially prohibits women’s sexual and romantic agency in intimate heterosexual interactions, privileging male pleasure and control over women (Ronen 2010).

## Gender-Based Risks in Hookup Culture

Of particular interest to scholars, journalists, students, and concerned parents alike are the implications of hookup culture on students’ safety, health, and wellbeing. Hookups have been blamed or praised for a multitude of students’ experiences and feelings. Some of this research has focused on the loneliness, isolation, and individualism of hookup culture (Lovejoy 2015; Wade 2017). For instance, Lovejoy (2015) conducted interviews with 30 women from diverse backgrounds at a college in the United States and found that the individualistic norms of hooking up are a double-edged sword for women. On one hand, hookup culture includes freedom from emotional intimacy and interpersonal obligation, which can be positive to the extent that they allow for women to openly explore their sexual desire. On the other hand, the norms of hookup culture also pressure women to suppress their emotions when they do ‘catch feelings’ for a hookup partner, thus generating anxiety about the ambiguity of their intimate relationships. Similarly, Wade's (2017 p. 24) analysis of "the emotional landscape of hookup culture" also poignantly shows the negative impacts of the individualistic norms of hookup culture while also demonstrating how high rates of sexual violence, risky binge drinking behaviours, feelings of inadequacy, body insecurities, and unsatisfying sex that saturate the narratives of the women in her study.

Previous studies suggest that there are greater risks for women in hookup culture than men (Allison and Risman 2013; Bradshaw, Khan and Saville 2010). Research has shown that it is common for women to experience sexual harassment, violence, and being coerced into sex (Paul and Hayes 2002)*.* Recently, research on the gender-based risks of hookup culture has focused on the spectrum of sexual violence experienced by undergraduate women (Ford 2017). Drinking, in particular, has been identified in the hookup culture literature as a high-risk behaviour that can contribute risks of sexual assault (Ford 2017).

Similarly, Gilbert and their colleagues (2018) compared the situational context of non-capacitated sexual assault to sexual assaults that occur when incapacitated by drugs and/or alcohol. They find that nearly half of the undergraduate women who experienced sexual assault were incapacitated due to drugs or alcohol. They also found an association between incapacitated sexual assault and having attended a party, bar, or similar venue with their assailant beforehand, being an acquaintance of their assailant beforehand, or having met on a dating app beforehand. Alternatively, they find that other sexual assault tactics, such as being physically forced or verbally coerced, were more likely to be associated with sexual assaults against non-capacitated students and were more likely to be perpetrated by intimate partners.

Likewise, Khan and their colleagues (2018) find that students have strongly felt reasons for why they do not label their experience as sexual assault, seek professional help, or tell friends, family, or authorities. These reasons include their desire not to change their current identity, remaining in-control over their own story, getting back to what was normal to them after the trauma, fear of losing their social group, and/or negatively impacting future opportunities.

The recent scholarship on campus sexual violence has called for more diverse ways to understand sexual assault, to provide better help to students, develop more effective strategies to educate students, and reduce incidences of assaults (Gilbert et al. 2018; Khan et al. 2018). For instance, despite some of the myths of ‘stranger danger,’ incapacitated sexual assault tends to occur during or after participating in social settings, such as parties and bars, in which people are drinking and using drugs with their perpetrator who is known or familiar to them. However, Ford (2017) finds that students who experienced sexual assault were more likely to report their assault if they did not know their assailant well before the assault. These findings emphasize the need to address the role of bystanders and bystander intervention and they also complicate the common beliefs about who commits sexual assault and the rates of sexual assault (Gilbert et al. 2018).

Other research shows that verbal coercion is highly impactful despite not receiving as much attention as cases of rape (Mellins et al. 2017). Further, since the assault may have occurred after being coerced into giving consent, legal definitions often fail to account for these forms of sexual assault (Mellins et al. 2017). The emphasis on educating students on affirmative consent has therefore gets called into question based on these findings that reveal how there are many social dimensions in which sexual consent is given. This research emphasizes the need to understand the social structures that impact consent practices and reveal a need to focus on what leads to consent and the different contexts in which consent is given or assumed to be given rather than just consent itself (Hirsch et al. 2018a). In this dissertation, I will discuss the shared patterns of behaviours, meanings, and risks of women's participation in hookup culture. My research emphasizes that understanding how gender beliefs structure women’s participation in hookup culture is not only crucial to learning how sexuality is organized in the university setting, it also has significant implications for understanding how women’s oppression and victimization gets reproduced in early adulthood.

## Life Course Theory: Emerging Adulthood in the University Context

The life stage of ‘emerging adulthood’ and the time some emerging adults spend at university is a unique time-period within the life course (Ansari and Kinenberg 2015). In many ways, the time emerging adults spend at university is a formative time period – a time of independence, higher learning, and self-discovery - in which they may leave home for the first time, be exposed to diverse types of people, and have more access to unsupervised 'adult' activities like partying, drinking, and sex (Wade 2017). Though marriage used to be the first step into adulthood, going to university and/or starting a career has increasingly replaced this step (Ansari and Kinenberg 2015). The increase in women's participation in secondary education has also made it more socially acceptable for women in particular to focus on their careers, delay committed relationships and marriage, and become more independent despite the pressures of traditional gender norms (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009).

Few academic articles on hookup culture have employed a life-course framework, nonetheless, this theory can help scholars understand how to situate sexual and romantic partnerships in university within the larger trajectory of marriage and family formation. For instance, Allison and Risman (2016) examined whether current norms regarding marriage may also be shaping young adults' sexual activities. They find that students who expect to get married later are more likely to have hooked up. They cannot, however, know for certain whether ideals around marriage timing shape sexual behaviour, whether the sexual behaviours in university shape ideal marriage timing, or whether both are true. Regardless, their research suggests that there is a relationship between the broader social norms around marriage timing in the life course and participation in university hookup culture.

There has not been a longitude study on hookup culture to date and there is minimal research investigating whether hookup culture follows students after university. Bogle (2008) has argued that that the social norms of hookup culture are insulated within the university context and Wade (2017) suggests that, although young adults may ‘hookup’ after university, they are no longer in a ‘hookup culture’ that necessitates casualness and emotional meaninglessness in relationships. Instead, individuals tend to be more focused on dating and seeking committed relationships after university (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). The data used in this dissertation cannot assess the long-term impacts of hookup culture over the life course, however, it can aid future scholars in Canada to develop a better understanding of the sexual culture of universities as a-part-of or divergent from the broader social norms and trends for marriage and family formation. Further, as I will discuss more momentary, analyzing hookup culture alongside the influx of new hookup and dating technology is a worthwhile endeavour to better understand sexuality and relationship formation in emerging adulthood.

## Rethinking Hookup Culture in the Digital Age

Online dating was introduced in the mid-1990s through messaging services like America Online (AOL) and dating websites like Match.com. Dating websites have come a long way in the decades since. Newer dating apps now cater to different religious groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, and many other types of partnerships, desires, and social groups that were not catered to in the early days of online dating. Some websites and apps, such as OkCupid, allow individuals to filter potential matches based on a plethora of criteria, including sexual orientation, race, relationship expectations, political and social values, level of education, income preferences, and sexual preferences. Others employ less sophisticated algorithms for matching users but are more specialized in the groups they target. For instance, JSwipe is a dating app created for Jewish individuals looking for a Jewish partner, while others, such as HER and Grindr were designed for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Apps like Bumble[[2]](#footnote-2) are also trying to make the online experience safer for women by forcing men to wait to be messaged by women on the app to give women more control over who can message them.

In recent years, the use of technology to date or hookup has never been more common, more accessible, and potentially more normalized (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Arguably, the accessibility and popularity of dating and hookup technology can also be attributed to the emergence of smartphones and apps.[[3]](#footnote-3) For instance, based on data from 2016, the dating app Tinder made a daily average of 26 million matches and had 1.4 billion swipes[[4]](#footnote-4) (Smith 2016). Additionally, through their longitudinal and nationally representative survey, *How Couples Meet and Stay Together* (HCMST), Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) found that online dating is the fastest growing way for couples to meet. The growing body of research on online dating is an indication of how popular this relatively new medium for seeking romantic relationships has become. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) show that people are increasingly moving away from traditional methods of meeting partners (e.g. through friends or at school) in favour of online platforms. I suggest that because current research illustrates the importance of the Internet to modern romantic relationship formation, gender and sexualities scholars must also investigate how technology impacts the dating process among young women. Correll (1995) has suggested that online spaces and communities have their own rules. With this in mind, the significant increase and popularity of online dating should be met with inquiries regarding how dating and hookup practices – and potentially the social norms of hookup culture - have also changed.

The research on whether technology is having a positive or negative impact on romantic relationships is mixed. On one hand, Rosenfeld (2017) has argued that the negative aspects of online dating have been over-emphasized and over-cited in academic research. He attributes this over-emphasis to traditional arguments against or in-fear-of modernity. Recent studies show that technology is having a positive impact on outcomes like the longevity of relationships formed online and relationship satisfaction (Cacioppo et al. 2013; Rosenfeld 2017; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). On the other hand, research also shows there are various risks to online dating, such as risks of sexual harassment online (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; Walker 2018). For instance, Walker (2018) conducted extensive research on women’s experiences using the dating website, Ashley Madison, that caters to individuals seeking relationships outside of their primary partnerships. Walker’s research showed that it is common for women to receive aggressive, harassing, threatening, or offensive message online, particularly in regards to women’s rejection of men.

Sociologists currently do not know whether or how new technology is impacting hookup culture or undergraduate women’s experiences in hookup culture. The research on hookup culture has focused - almost exclusively – on in-person encounters. Considering the impact of technology on contemporary dating rituals, norms, and practices more broadly, far more analytic attention is needed to learn whether the current findings on women's experiences in hookup culture still ring true as technology gets included in the hookup process.

## Goals and Contributions

This dissertation aims to make a number of contributions to the gender and sexualities literature. As I have already stated, research on hookup culture has been conducted nearly exclusively in the United States and has yet to fully consider how students are using current apps to hookup and date on campus. Therefore, using original survey and focus group data to examine undergraduate women’s experiences in hookup culture in a Canadian context, my research reveals that hookup culture exists in different social and geographical contexts and the impacts of new technologies on this culture.

My dissertation also uncovers the broader social context of hookup culture as constituted by women’s friendship groups and facilitated by new dating technology. In this dissertation, I investigate the role of women’s friendships and show that women participate in university hookup culture collectively, using their friendship groups to attempt to mitigate potential risks and seek fun and pleasure. I find that women’s friendship groups are a vital social group to the maintenance of hookup culture, which is a new and important revelation that has largely been missed by the current research. I also investigate the role of technology in university hookup culture. Students today are coming of age in a dating world that is practically inextricable from technology and social media. Anecdotally speaking, it would be reasonable to suggest that young adults live in a digital age of dating given the many cultural representations of dating apps like Tinder in film, television, and magazines[[5]](#footnote-5); however, sociologists have yet to determine the impact of these new technologies on the shared norms of dating and hooking up. Indeed, as an understudied aspect of the recent paradigm shift in the sexual culture of universities, these new technologies warrant far greater sociological attention.

Further, throughout this dissertation I contribute new research on how non-consensual sexual encounters are normalized and expected by women in hookup culture. As I have discussed, current research finds that undergraduate women experience particular challenges to their safety and wellbeing alongside their pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment. I recognize that there has been a lot of research conducted on women in hookup culture and that studying men is a worthwhile endeavour to better understand hookup culture. Nonetheless, both the normalization of non-consensual sexual encounters and women's perspectives about those encounters make understanding their experiences highly valuable, particularly as this research moves into the new frontier of digital hookup spaces. For instance, my findings show that risks of non-consensual sexual encounters are entrenched in the sexual culture on campus. I identify how women use their friendship networks and technology to attempt to mitigate risks and have fun while seeking potential partners. I also illuminate how traditional gender beliefs guide women's social behaviours, expectations, and interpretations of consensual and non-consensual sexual encounters while seeking sexual partners and participating in the in-person venues of university hookup culture. By focusing on undergraduate women in this dissertation, I am able to make new contributions to help scholars understand women’s experiences and perspectives about the nuanced, 'grey areas' of non-consensual sexual encounters in hookup culture.

## Organization of the Dissertation

Before examining my findings, I will first outline my research methods in the following chapter. Then, in Chapter Three, I examine the descriptive statistics from my self-administered online survey and supplement these findings using the focus group data to investigate whether hookup culture has emerged in a different social context without a dominating fraternity culture and the role of new dating/hookup technology in this culture.

Subsequently, in Chapter Four, I show that women-centered friendship groups are a vital social group to understanding the broader social context of hookup culture. I show that there are many risks to women’s safety in the in-person hookup scene and I question why women still participate in hookup culture despite the risks to their safety, wellbeing, and enjoyment. Through examining the rituals and practices of a typical night out in Stoney University's hookup scene, I reveal the importance of women-centered friendship groups to their enjoyment, sense of safety, and to the maintenance of hookup culture itself. Throughout Chapter Four, I illuminate the broader social context of hookup culture in which women-centered friendship groups produce hookup culture and facilitate its practices while illustrating the commonality of non-consensual sexual encounters.

Chapters Three and Four suggest that traditional gender norms structure hookup culture in such a way that should lead us to be concerned about women’s safety and wellbeing. What is still yet to be known, however, is whether technology undermines some of the traditionally gendered aspects of hookup culture. Therefore, in Chapter Five, I continue to examine the broader social context of university hookup culture by extending my analysis of undergraduate women’s experiences in the in-person hookup scene to examine some of the promises of new technology to date and hookup. Throughout this chapter, I illuminate how women engage with technology and employ various strategies to manage risks to their safety online and when navigating the transition between online spaces and in-person dates. Last, in the concluding chapter, I summarize and discuss the findings and contributions of this dissertation, discuss the limitations of my research, and propose future research objectives.

# Studying Hookup Culture at Stoney University

In the fall of 2017, I began a two-phase, mixed-method research project that combined online surveys and focus groups to investigate the experiences and perspectives of undergraduate women hooking up, dating, and seeking sexual or romantic partners at a mid-sized Canadian university.[[6]](#footnote-6) The survey was designed to produce descriptive statistics of the prevalence and characteristics of dating, hookups, and committed relationships and student’s use of dating apps/websites. I then conducted focus groups with undergraduate women to investigate their experiences in the different spaces of hookup culture, with particular emphasis on risks, safety, and whether women are enjoying their experiences. Through this research, I intended to unpack the gendered experiences of women participating in the sexual culture of a Canadian university and learn how undergraduate women are using different avenues to meet and interact with sexual and romantic partners.

## The Case Study: Hookup Culture Research at a Canadian University

This project focuses on the experiences of undergraduate women at a mid-sized university in Ontario that I call Stoney University. Stoney University between 25,000 and 30,000 undergraduate students. The student population has a typical gender balance, with 53% women students. Although Stoney University is not considered a commuter school - a school in which the majority of students commute - some students commute from the Greater Toronto Area and surrounding cities. It is also not a religious institution; though like most universities in Canada, there are opportunities to take religious studies courses, form on-campus student clubs based on religion/spirituality, and there are spaces to worship. The university has a strong sports culture, active on-campus student clubs, and student-run services. The campus and city have a lively nightclub and bar scene, however, as this study began all of the gay and lesbian bars have been closed, leaving LGBTQ+ students to have to travel to Toronto to go to a gay or lesbian club or bar.

My personal experiences provided insights on university hookup culture that helped to shape this project's research design. Over the past 12 years, as an undergraduate, Masters, and Ph.D. student, I attended three universities in Ontario, which has taught me about the types of party scenes and the sexual culture of universities in Ontario. Further, in preparation for this study, I observed the nightlife of various other universities in Ontario to develop a deeper and broader understanding. Stoney University was selected because its characteristics are similar to many universities in Ontario and because it is located in what is considered to be a ‘university town.’ Contrastingly, the party/nightlife of Stoney University does differ slightly from universities located within the bustling urban center of Toronto.

To date, there is little published sociological research and available data on sexuality and dating practices in Canada.[[7]](#footnote-7) In particular, hookup culture research has been based almost exclusively in the United States where fraternities govern the social landscape. The issue of whether there is a similar hookup culture elsewhere, such as in Canada, remains unaddressed. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Canadians have completely different sexual experiences from their U.S. neighbors, but there are some institutional and cultural differences. These differences include (but are not exclusive to) the lower prevalence of abstinence-only sex education, the earlier legalization of abortion and same-sex marriage, the lower legal drinking age in Canada,[[8]](#footnote-8) and the lack of fraternities and sororities affiliated with Canadian universities. During the research design process, I anticipated to find that there is a similar hookup culture on Canadian campuses despite these differences. Nonetheless, it was important to acknowledge that there were reasons to expect that Canadian and U.S. undergraduates might experience hookup culture differently. As a Canadian sociologist, I believe it is necessary to produce new knowledge and build new theories on young adult sexuality in Canada to contribute needed Canadian research to the sociology of gender and sexualities. By examining undergraduate women at a Canadian post-secondary institution, this research will produce new insights about the sexual culture that exists on a Canadian campus.

## Methodology

This dissertation employs data from a self-administered online survey and focus groups with undergraduate women at a mid-sized university in Ontario, Canada to examine the interplay between gender, sexuality, and technology in structuring undergraduate women’s participation in the university hookup culture. The descriptive statistics produce a narrative of the perspectives and experiences of my sample, which provide important insights about whether and how hookup culture has emerged in different social and geographical contexts outside of the United States. The focus groups allow me to investigate the gendered rituals, practices, and expectations of university women dating and hooking up at Stoney University.

Chapter Three draws primarily on the descriptive results from the online survey to illuminate the characteristics of hookup culture at Stoney University. The survey results produce descriptions and summaries of my sample of undergraduate women survey takers definitions’ of hookups, the prevalence of hooking up, dating, and romantic relationships on campus, their experiences or hopes after a hookup, where they are meeting their hookup partners, and their use of technology to date and hookup. In Chapter Three, I also draw on my focus group data to help contextualize, explain, and/or support the results of the survey data. These results will allow me to identify and examine differences between my Canadian case study and the central claims from the previous research conducted in the United States.

Chapter Four and Chapter Five draw on the focus group data, allowing me to construct a detailed analysis of women's experiences as they navigate the in-person hookup scene and online dating. The qualitative analysis brings to light the broader social context of university hookup culture as constituted by more than the dyadic relationship of men and women and the practices of sexual hookups. My analysis of the focus group data also illuminates the risks to women's wellbeing and safety throughout their experiences, showing the often nuanced and complicated ways that undergraduate women experience negotiating sexual consent and managing non-consensual sexual encounters.

## Phase 1: Online Surveys

To learn about undergraduate women’s dating and hookup lives in Canada, I administered my online *Dating in the Digital Age Survey* that I designed for this dissertation. The survey instrument is divided into three broad sections on dating, hooking up, and technology. I also asked demographic questions such as their gender, race/ethnicity, age, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation. I asked questions that required respondents to think about their dating and sexual histories, where respondents met their most recent partner, their most recent dating experiences, their most recent hookup experiences, and their use of dating apps and websites. The survey was comprised of closed-ended questions with some ‘other’ options in which respondents were asked to ‘please specify.’

Online surveys are a common and effective tool used by scholars researching sexuality, dating, hookups, and relationships. For instance, the *Online College Social Life Survey* (OCSLS) designed by Dr. Paula England investigated romantic relationships, sexuality, and hookups on U.S. college campuses. In my survey, I used some of the same question wording as the OCSLS to ensure the quality of my questions. Further, nearly every question in this survey was developed based on the wording of survey questions that had already been tested in the field. For instance, questions about race and religion were composed based on the Canadian Census and the General Social Survey.

To create the survey, I used the online survey generator, *LimeSurvey.* I collected quantitative data from undergraduate students enrolled at a Stoney University. The survey consists of a 20-minute questionnaire that students completed online in a location of their choosing. Participation was completely voluntary, with no course credits or monetary incentives provided to respondents. I actively recruited survey participants from a wide range of programs and diverse groups around campus, however, because my networks are in the social sciences, this study reflects a non-representative sample in which 73.5 percent of participants are from the university’s Faculty of Social Science. It is unclear how much non-representativeness came from the recruitment strategy. By the end of my data collection timeframe, 196 women enrolled at Stoney University took the survey. The average age of respondents is 20.45 (see Appendix A for demographics).

## Phase 2: Focus Groups

A focus group is a form of qualitative research characterized by group interviews and discussions (Frith 2000; Braun and Clarke 2013). Participants collectively discuss a topic that has been chosen by the researcher to learn about the experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions that underlie their behaviours (Frith 2000). Focus groups allow for participants to debate and form consensuses (Aurini, Heath, and Howells 2016). Through careful and reflective research design, focus groups can also encourage greater openness and candor among participants when researching sexuality-related topics (Barbour 2007). For instance, focus groups have been employed to research risky sexual behaviour (Hammer et al. 2006), sexual violence (Norris et al. 1996; Hamby and Koss 2003), sexual decision-making (Gilmore, DeLamater and Wagstaff 1996; Kline, Kline and Oken 1992), sexual behaviour of young adults (Werner-Wilson, Fitzharris, and Morrissey 2004), and bisexual invisibility (Hartman-Linck 2014). I determined that focus groups were an ideal method to investigate women’s collective experiences in hookup culture. I used purposive sampling to recruit undergraduate women to participate in the focus groups. Women were invited to participate in the study through email recruitment to professors and on-campus clubs/services, campus flyers, word-of-mouth, and in-class recruitment presentations. My final sample of focus group participants yielded 21 undergraduate women who were attending Stoney University at the time of data collection.

There is not a specific requirement for how many participants should be in a focus group, though they typically range from 4-12 people depending on the type of research (Aurini, Heath, and Howells 2016, p. 119). Through testing the focus group guide, I found that smaller group sizes are best for focus groups on sensitive or emotional subjects and, therefore, chose to conduct focus groups with 3-4 participants in each. Smaller groups also allow each participant to discuss their thoughts, opinions, and experiences in-depth. I found these smaller focus groups also gave participants the time to all have a chance to respond to nearly every question that was posed, take a moment to reflect, converse and respond to one another, and occasionally introduce unexpected lines of discussion. From a practical standpoint, small groups also reduced some concerns about confidentiality, as there are simply fewer participants that could potentially break the confidentiality agreement, which is something I considered due to the sensitive nature of this research.

The small size of each focus group also allowed for a greater sense of security when discussing topics that tend to be perceived as “sensitive” – e.g. casual sex, sexual pleasure, sexual violence, virginity, and sexually transmitted infections. During these types of conversations, my participants were candid and generous with their thoughts and experiences. When talking about a subject like sexual violence or sexual consent, it was important for my participants to have the time to articulate their experiences without feeling rushed. Perhaps most importantly, some of my participants’ stories come with feelings of embarrassment or shame that took them a bit longer to articulate. By paying attention to my participant's body language, tone, and facial expression, I tried to be cognizant of how participants were feeling throughout the focus group. From my positionality as a woman who has participated in hookup culture, I too have felt shame and embarrassment regarding potentially risky decisions, experiences with sexual violence, and difficulties negotiating consent. I drew on my own experiences and previous training working for a university-based crisis phone line and was empathetic of the self-imposed shame or embarrassment that some women can experience in the aftermath of painful or uncomfortable experiences. The use of smaller groups allowed participants to feel that their stories were heard and valued.

Each focus group lasted approximately two hours. I moderated each discussion, made use of an audio recording device, had another Ph.D. student take notes, and kept a post-focus group journal of my overall impressions (Aurini, Heath, and Howells 2016, p. 120, 135). I had a script to guide the focus groups to ensure that we addressed the research questions, though I remained flexible and adaptive when unanticipated lines of discussions emerged and proved to be enlightening. I was also very clear about the voluntary nature of the research. I took great care to ensure participants did not feel unduly pressured to divulge things they were not comfortable discussing. I was also sensitive and alert for potential emotional triggers[[9]](#footnote-9) as I moderated the discussions.

I transcribed the audio files and research notes. I then used the qualitative coding software Atlas.ti. To code and analyze the focus group dataset, I employed thematic analysis techniques in which themes are intended to emerge from the existent literature, capture important revelations in the dataset about the research question, and identify patterned responses and meanings (Braun and Clarke 2006). Unlike content analysis that aims to quantify qualitative data, in thematic analysis themes are identified based on their prevalence and/or importance and are derived based on whether they capture and help to answer the research questions. In this case, prevalence might refer to whether a theme was brought up at all in an individual focus group, the number of individual speakers who discussed a given theme, the number of times a theme was discussed across the entire dataset, or the importance/emphasis placed on a given theme by respondents. To analyze my focus groups, I derived themes/codes from the current research, though I remained open to unexpected themes.

# Hookup Culture at Stoney University

There is a wealth of research that finds that traditional dating practices are no longer the norm on college campuses in the United States and that the sexual culture of universities should be characterized as a ‘hookup culture’ (England, Shafer and Fogarty 2012; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). This research has been based in the United States where fraternities govern the social landscape and regulate access to the hookup scene. The issue of whether a similar hookup culture has emerged in different social and geographical contexts, however, remains largely unaddressed by the current literature. Further, there has been an influx of new dating and hookup apps in recent years, which have likely complicated student’s participation in hookup culture. The *Online College Student Life Survey* – the largest dataset on hookups in the United States - was collected before the advent of apps like Tinder. Therefore, there is a notable gap in the current research about the role of new technologies in hookup culture. In this chapter, I provide new data from a Canadian university to uncover whether hookup culture has emerged in a different social context without a dominating fraternity culture and the impacts of new dating/hookup technologies on this culture.

Current research has examined the emergence and implications of hookup culture on undergraduate students’ sexual and romantic lives. Some of this research has focused on the characteristics of hookups and hookup culture, illuminating the sexual practices, social norms, and potential negative implications of this culture (England, Shafer and Fogarty 2012; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Wade 2017). Others have emphasized that there is a direct connection between fraternity culture and the emergence of hookup culture, suggesting that many of the negative outcomes of hookup culture can be directly connected to the primacy of fraternities in hookup culture (Wade 2017). The research on hookup culture has been conducted almost exclusively in the United States. A notable difference between the Canadian and U.S. context is the absence of fraternities on most Canadian campuses, making Canadian universities ideal sites to further our understanding of how hookup culture is produced in different social contexts.

Also, there is a growing body of literature that shows that technology is profoundly impacting how adults are meeting sexual and romantic partners (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Scholars studying hookup culture, however, do not know whether new dating/hookup apps are replacing traditional ways couples are meeting on campus. Further, there is mixed evidence regarding whether new dating apps are making women’s experiences safer (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). It is therefore necessary to understand the role and impacts of new technologies in hookup culture.

Throughout this dissertation, I expand the sociological knowledge on hookup culture by illuminating the larger social context of hookup culture that is organized around women-centered friendship groups and examining how digital hookups are folded into the broader in-person social practices and norms of hookup culture. These contributions not only do the important work of revealing the larger social context of hookup culture, but they also uncover the insidious ways in which sexual violence against women is normalized and reproduced on university campuses. The important tasks of this dissertation, however, must start with an understanding of how hookup culture emerges in different social contexts and the role of technology in this culture. As my broader research objectives are prefaced by the assumption that hookup culture exists in a Canadian context and that students are using technology to hookup, in this chapter I investigate these assumptions using data from my Dating in the Digital Age Survey and focus groups with undergraduate women. Before diving into my finding and discussing their implications, I will first review some of the current literature from the United States and provide a brief outline of the chapter.

## U.S.-Based Research on Hookups and Hookup Culture

## Hookups, Hookup Culture, and Dating on U.S. Campuses

Researchers have attempted to operationalize and define what students mean when they discuss hookups. Most studies find that students’ definitions of what constitutes a hookup are vague and range in the types of sexual behaviours that students associate with hooking up (England, Shafer and Fogarty 2012). Broadly, scholars tend to agree that hookups tend to refer to *casual* sexual encounters that include some sort of sexual activity, often ranging from making out to having penetrative sex (see Heldman and Wade 2010 for an overview). ‘Casual’ refers to the expectation that a hookup should be void of romantic or emotional feelings and that students should not expect a committed relationship to come from a hookup (England, Shafer and Fogarty 2012; Wade 2017). For instance, England, Shafer, and Fogarty (2007) find that students think that hooking up can, but does not have to, include sexual intercourse, but it is the casualness after the encounter that is most important to how students understand hookups. Wade (2017) also finds that, although hookups do involve doing ‘something sexual,’ the ‘casualness’ and ‘meaninglessness’ of the encounter and the avoidance of seeming‘desperate’ for a relationship is equally, if not more, important to defining hookups and understanding hookup culture.

Recent scholarship shows that hookup culture is pervasive, but even when students do not engage in sexual hookups; hookup culture still governs the practice of seeking sexual partners. In terms of the prevalence of hookups, although studies vary due the methodology, sample size and operationalization of hookups, recent studies suggest that between 60 to 75 percent of U.S. undergraduates have had a hookup during their college years (Armstrong, England and Fogarty 2012; Fielder and Carey 2010; Garcia et al. 2012; Kurperberg and Padget 2015; Paul and Hayes 2002; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley and Fincham 2010; Rupp et al. 2014). Although the majority of students are hooking up, data shows that students are not having more sex than previous generations (Nagoski 2016). This suggests that student’s participation in hookup culture is not defined by the amount of sex students are having or the types of sexual activity involved in the encounter, but by the social norms of hookup culture that necessitate casualness in seeking sexual partners.

Research on hookup culture also tends to conclude that hookup culture is bad for women. This research finds that the social norms of hookup culture are heternormative and are shaped by traditional gender beliefs that privilege heterosexual men’s agency, pleasure, and desires (Allison and Risman 2013; Bradshaw, Khan and Saville 2010; Lovejoy 2015; Paul and Hayes 2002). Since intimacy must be casual and non-committal, this emphasis on casual and carefree sexual intimacy can lead carelessness in regards to student’s emotional and physical wellbeing (Wade 2017). For instance, Wade (2017) makes the argument that hooking up has led women becoming sexual rivals on-campus, their worth evaluated by men’s evaluation of their sexiness, and that when women desire a caring partner the necessity of casualness in hookup culture can lead them to being perceived as desperate. The research has consistently shown that hookup culture is a double-edged sword for women, who have opportunities to explore their sexuality but must also deal with emotional dissatisfaction and manage substantial risks to their safety and wellbeing, including the risk of sexual violence (Lovejoy 2015).

Recent scholarship convincingly shows that the social norms of hookup culture shape the sexual culture on U.S. college campuses, however, the current research does not provide evidence that hooking up has completely replaced the practice of dating on U.S. campuses (Bogle, 2008; Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; England, Fitzgibbons, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2007; Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Brimeyer and Smith (2012) find that as students spend more time in college they tended to hookup and date more. Bradshaw, Khan, and Saville (2010) find that given the opportunity women prefer traditional dating to hookups and would prefer being in a committed relationship. As Armstrong, England, and Fogarty (2012) explain, university students’ intimate lives at university are nuanced, often involving a combination of dating, hooking up and committed relationships.

## The Role of Fraternity Culture on U.S. Campuses

Fraternities are emphasized as key players in hookup culture. Wade (2017) finds students may seek hookup partners at nearby bars and clubs that -- intentionally or unintentionally -- serve to minors, but that hookup culture can be most clearly seen at the parties in the large off-campus houses on Greek row. At fraternity parties, students can access alcohol, dance, and meet hookup partners regardless of whether they are of legal drinking age (Ronen 2010; Wade 2017). Although Greek life existed long before hookup culture, Wade suggests that there is a direct connection between Greek life and the emergence of hookup culture.

Fraternities have a long history of exclusionary and abusive behaviour. The connection between rape culture and fraternities has been documented in the earliest research on university party scenes (Boswell and Spade 1996; Martin and Hummer 1989). These studies argue that, although men tend to be the perpetrators of rape, explanations for rape on campus cannot simply be limited to individual behaviours and that the social norms of fraternities matter to understanding the prevalence and likelihood of sexual violence and harassment (Boswell and Spade 1996; Martin and Hummer 1989). For instance, Boswell and Spade (1996) find that women who are at the highest risk of rape are those who fraternity men did not know personally. They also find that although drinking is present at most fraternities, fraternities that encouraged heavy drinking to the point of becoming visibly drunk also led to more high-risk situations for women. Alternatively, the researchers find that commercial bars tend to be more focused on socializing and are therefore less risky for women. Boswell and Spade find that even men that reject demeaning behaviours towards women nonetheless can behave in ways that reproduce rape culture.

Recent scholarship has also connected fraternities to sexual assault of women (Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006). Some research reveals that impression management is important to fraternity men who do not want to be labeled as ‘rapey’ or are concerned about the potential for legal action against their fraternity if a sexual assault occurs (Wamboldt et al. 2019). Nonetheless, the party culture of many four-year colleges and universities in the United States are regulated by fraternity men who control who has access to the party and alcohol and they can exercise control by enforcing a theme and dress code that can sexualize or be deeming to women (Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006; Wade 2017). Men’s control over access to the party scene can also lead women to feel they need to be deferent to men and sex can sometimes be an expected form of compensation for access to the party (Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006). In addition to academic research, there is also plenty of legal and anecdotal evidence to support the notion that non-consensual sexual encounters are an issue on university campuses and that fraternity culture fosters rape culture. For instance, Yale's Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity gained negative news coverage after requiring new pledges to repeatedly chant, "no mean's yes, yes means anal" outside the school's Women's Center in 2014. Although there were threats of suspension by the university, they were ultimately met with a slap on the wrist.

Greek culture and fraternities have been emphasized as central to hookup culture and there is such primacy of fraternities on U.S. campuses that it begs the question of whether hookup culture would exist without fraternities or at the very least look quite different without them. It is therefore relevant to consider whether a difference in the hookup/party scene that does not have a dominant Greek life, such as at Canadian universities, might impact how hookup culture translates.

## Dating & Hookup Technology

In a recent article in Vanity Fair entitled, "Tinder and the Dawn of the Dating Apocalypse," the author claims that hookup culture and the rise of dating apps have led to the destruction of dating and has furthered inequalities for women (Sales 2015). As hyperbolic as the dating apocalypse might sound, these types of arguments are peppered throughout cultural and media representations of modern sexual and dating practices. Some of the academic research supports the argument that dating apps may be bad for women. Ansari and Klinenberg (2015) find that women encounter many unwanted sexual advances while using dating apps that range from ‘inept sexual advances' to sexual harassment. On the other hand, women can use privacy and security measures online and can engage in surveillance strategies such as Googling their matches before meeting in-person, which may lead to a safer dating experience (Couch, Liamputtong, and Pitts 2011).

As recent as the literature on hookups is, no works have been able to keep up with the advent of new technologies to meet sexual or romantic partners, such as Tinder, Coffee Meets Bagel, Hinge, Tastebuds, and Happn. Also, as challenging as hookup culture is for students to navigate, the influx of new dating apps has likely complicated this further. In their research on ‘modern romance,’ Ansari and Klinenberg (2015) reveal technology is fundamentally altering how emerging adults are findings sexual and romantic partners. They find that dating apps have produced a convenient way to meet potential partners, however, the seemingly endless pool potential partners has made users of these new technologies hesitant to settle on one person and the norms of these apps allow for endless vague conversations that often do not lead to an actual meet-up. Sociologists do not yet know the role of technology in hookup culture and whether women are using apps exclusively or in tandem with parties and other social events to meet sexual or romantic partners. There is a need for further research on the role of new technology in university hookup culture.

Although there are many similarities between Canada and the United States, various differences including - but not exclusive to - access to early sexual health education in the public school system, a younger legal drinking age in Ontario, and the absence of fraternity culture on most university campuses make it necessary to investigate - rather than assume - whether a similar hookup culture exists in a Canadian university context. All of the research I have outlined thus far is U.S.-based and whether a similar hookup culture exists in different social contexts, like on Canadian campuses, is yet to be known. Further, there is a dearth of sociological knowledge on the impacts of new technologies on hookup culture. Hence, this chapter will advance our understanding by providing new data on hooking up and online dating at a Canadian university to learn whether hookup culture can emerge in a different social context without a dominating fraternity culture and by producing new knowledge on the digital contexts that students are meeting and engaging with hookup partners.

What follows are the results from the Dating in the Digital Age Survey on undergraduate women’s experiences hooking up, dating, and using new hookup/dating technology (N=196) and focus groups with undergraduate women (N=21). First, I investigate whether there is a similar hookup culture at Stoney University by examining undergraduate women’s definitions of hookups based on the sexual practices and social norms they ascribe to hookups, the prevalence of hookups, and whether hookups have replaced dating practices. Second, I discuss where students met their most recent hookup partner and where students are going to interact with potential hookup partners in the absence of fraternity culture on campus. These first two sections will help to determine whether a similar hookup culture has emerged in my Canadian case despite the aforementioned differences in the Canadian and U.S. context. Third, I investigate the role of new technologies in this culture.I conclude by discussing the implications of my findings.

## Hooking up, Hookup Culture, and Dating at Stoney University

## Characteristics of ‘The Hookup’ at Stoney University

The Dating in the Digital Age Survey asks respondents to identify the sexual behaviours they think constitutes a hookup to learn what undergraduate women mean when they discuss hookups.[[10]](#footnote-10) As **Figure 1** shows, 85 percent think that there would be kissing or making out during a hookup. The vast majority also report that when they talk about hookups they are referring to sexual activities such as penile-vaginal intercourse (82 percent), giving oral sex (83 percent), receiving oral sex (82 percent), stimulating their partners genitals with their hand (84 percent), and having their genitals stimulated by their partners hands (83 percent). Other sexual activities, such as touching one's genitals (35 percent), having their breast or buttock touched (68 percent), and anal intercourse (66 percent) are less commonly reported. Less than half of the survey takers report that having an orgasm or their partners having an orgasm is important to defining hookups. This does not mean that sexual pleasure is not important to hookups, but that students may not always be engaging in the types of sexual activity that brings them to orgasm and a hookup is not contingent on whether they or their partner had an orgasm. Similar to Wade’s findings (2017), I also find that fewer respondents think that hookups refer to dancing (1 percent) or hanging out with someone without sexual contact (12 percent), which suggests that, although sex (such as vaginal, oral, and anal sex) does not necessarily need to be present for someone to call the experience a hookup, most think that *something sexual* will happen.

In support of the survey results, my focus group participants’ definitions also tended to range from making out and fondling to oral and vaginal sex. For instance, Jennifer expressed that, “even if I haven’t had sex with someone, I would say I hooked up.” When asked if a hookup can include ‘making out,’ Jennifer replied, “No, if I just made out with someone I would say we made out. [Hooking up means that] it’s further than [making out] and in a private setting.” Similarly, Lauren described that “if some clothes are off, that’s hooking up” and Carrie added that “I would think of hookup up as *everything but sex*, like fondling would go under hooking up for me." On the other hand, Gwen described hooking up as doing something "towards the end of the sexual spectrum… penetration, whether that's hands or oral or vaginal or whatever." Geri explained, "I consider a hookup to be sex. Like, if you're hooking up, you're having sex and all that stuff." Like the findings from the United States, my survey results and focus group findings show that the sexual behaviours in a hookup vary quite a lot between participants. Nonetheless, most agree that some sexual activity needs to be included for an intimate experience to be considered a hookup.

**Figure 1**. Sexual activities that students are referring to when discussing hookups **Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Online Survey (N=196)

## Characteristics of ‘Hookup Culture’ at Stoney University

Although the sexual behaviours varied, the social norms of hooking up were extremely consistent among my focus group participants. **Figure 1** shows that 81 percent of students report that hookups refer to sexual activity that is ‘casual, non-committed, or non-romantic.’ My focus group participants supported this result. They consistently agreed that, although a relationship can come from a hookup down the line, that social norms of hookups necessitate being casual and non-committed. Britney described that “hooking up means you’re not exclusively seeing each other” and Monica agreed, expressing that “it’s strictly physical.” Repeatedly, I heard undergraduate women talk about avoiding seeming ‘too desperate’ and maintaining an, ‘if it happens, it happens’ mentality to meeting partners. For instance, Kelly explained that,

There’s no emotional security. With hookups, obviously, it's not a monogamous practice. Hooking up is casual. You can hook up with as many people as you want, even if it's the same people, but you just don't have any emotional attachment to any of them.

The lack of emotional connection can be complicated for undergraduate women. For instance, Britney added, “I feel like there is sometimes emotional attachment and catching feelings.” Kelly agreed, “Yeah, there’s always that fear of getting hurt.” When asked what happens when one person ‘catches feelings’ Britney responded that, “It’s just messy.” Christina also explained that,

It always goes to shit. I always surprise myself with how much I care. I want so badly for it to be just a sexual relationship and for it to be easy. I’m always surprised about how much I care that the other person doesn’t care.

Although there has been a lot of emphasis on sexual activities in earlier research on hookups, my research supports the claims from the recent literature that reveal that the difficulty in defining hookup culture based on a set of sexual acts is because hookup culture is better understood as a set of widespread social norms and social expectations. These social norms and expectations have meaningful impacts on women’s wellbeing and reveal that hookup culture is not necessarily always positive for women.

## Prevalence of Hooking Up and Dating at Stoney University

Similar to the rates of hooking up on U.S. campuses, I find that of the 196 undergraduate women who took the Dating in the Digital Age survey, 64 percent (n=125) have had at least one hookup while at university (**Figure 2**). **Figure 2** also shows that 74 percent of undergraduate women report having been on a date while at university. I also find that 68 percent of undergraduate women report having at least one romantic relationship that has lasted at least six months. At the time of taking the survey, 54 percent reported that they were currently in a committed relationship. Although hookups are prevalent at Stoney University, my survey results also show that, rather than replacing dating, hooking up and dating coexist at Stoney University.

**Figure 2.** Percent of hookups, dates, and relationships undergraduate women have had while at university

**Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Online Survey (N=196)

To examine the connection between hookups, dating, and committed relationships, **Figure 3** shows that after their most recent hookup, 55 percent of undergraduate women report hooking up with the same partner again, 43 percent report going on a date with their hookup partner, and 28 percent report entering a romantic relationship with their hookup partner. Although fewer hookups lead to a committed relationship, hookups can lead to future hookups or dates. Therefore, my results support some of the U.S. findings, like Armstrong, England, and Fogarty (2012), which claim that students participate a combination of dating, hooking up and committed relationships at university.

**Figure 3.** Encounters with hookup partner after most recent hookup

**Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Online Survey (N=196)

During my focus group conversations with undergraduate women, my participants could clearly articulate how hookups are unique from dating. Alicia said that "a hookup doesn't necessarily have to be planned, a date is." Nicki explained that "I would say the primary difference between a date and hookup is that the function of a hookup is sex. Like if you say ‘I'm going to go to their house and hookup,’ it's about sex." Jennifer described that "a date is going out somewhere - like it could be them coming over and you cooking for them - but when I go on a date it's more a conversational situation and it doesn't have to be sexual." My participants also said that a date can “spiral into a hookup” if they decide they are not interested in their date and still want a sexual encounter, however, the purpose of dating is seeing whether or not a committed relationship is possible. There is still the pressure for undergraduate students to follow the social norms of keeping their dating encounter ‘casual’ to avoid seeming ‘too desperate.’ This suggests that although dating does happen, the social norms of hookup culture influences dating practices.

## Where Students Meet and Engage with Hookup Partners in the Absence of Fraternities

As I have identified, fraternities do not have the same presence on Canadian university campuses as they do in the United States. Many Canadian universities prohibit them or simply do not recognize them as affiliated with the university, as is the case at Stoney University. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate where students met their most recent hookup and where students go to interact with potential hookup partners to learn whether this difference in the scene impacts hookup culture in the Canadian context.

As I will discuss momentarily, technology is impacting how students are meeting potential hookup/dating partners at Stoney University. The survey results show that 30 percent of respondents met their most recent hookup partner online (**Figure 4**), however, this does not mean that apps and websites are replacing the in-person ways in which students are meeting sexual and romantic partners. **Figure 4** shows that most respondents met their most recent hookup offline, with 23 percent respondents reporting that they met their most recent hookup at a bar, club or house party, 10 percent met their partner on another on-campus location like a dorm or in class, 19 percent met their most recent hookup through work, friends, sports or other activities, and 18 percent met their most recent hookup in high school.

**Figure 4.** Where respondents first met their most recent hookup partner

**Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Online Survey (N=196)

To clarify, where students first met their most recent hookup partner and the hookup scene where students engage with potential hookup partners are not always the same. In my conversations with undergraduate women, they agree that ‘the club’ and ‘the bar’ (venues that have a dance floor) are the most common locations that students frequent during their nights out. Victoria said, "Lately, I’ve been going to clubs in the hopes of hooking up with people, but not to find a relationship.” Christina agreed and said,

Even if I don't have intentions of hooking up with somebody at the bar, it's always in the back of my mind…In terms of looking for a relationship at the bar, not so much. I think it's way more of a hookup environment.

Most of my participants describe that they and their friends do not have the expectation that they will meet someone for anything more than a hookup at a club or bar, revealing how these locations are central to seeking hookup partners in my Canadian case study.

But does the difference in location mean that women are safer without a dominating fraternity culture? The current research from the United States suggests that fraternity men’s control over access to the party and alcohol leads to inherent risks for women (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). My research reveals that there are remarkably similar social norms in my Canadian case compared to the U.S. context. During in my conversations with undergraduate women, I heard plenty of stories of non-consensual sexual encounters with men during their nights out. As I will explain in-depth in Chapter Four of this dissertation, the women I spoke with consistently described instances of non-consensual touching, groping, or verbal harassment during their nights out at the club. So, although undergraduate men do not control the locations of hookup culture as they do on U.S. campuses, my findings reveal that an absent fraternity culture does not make hookup culture fundamentally different or safer for undergraduate women. This reveals that fraternity culture is not necessary to the emergence of hookup culture on university campuses nor is it the primary cause of gender inequalities and sexual violence in university hookup culture.

## The Role of Technology in Hookup Culture

To understand the role of technology in hookup culture, I first investigated what types of relationships undergraduate women are hoping to find when using apps. When asked their reason for using dating/hookup apps and websites, I find that 43 percent report that they use apps to meet someone for a hookup, 50 percent are using an app to meet someone who just wants to have fun without being in a serious relationship, and 53 percent of respondents are using apps to in the hopes of being in a committed relationship (**Figure 5**). While over half may be using an app to find a committed relationship, only a quarter have had a committed relationship with someone they met on online (**Figure 6**).

**Figure 5**. Reasons undergraduate women use dating/hookup apps and websites

**Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Survey (N=196), respondents of these questions n=127

**Figure 6**. Undergraduate women’s use and outcomes of dating/hookup technology

**Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Survey (N=196), respondents of these questions n=127

My results show that undergraduate women’s intentions when using apps and their reality is quite different. There is a relatively even split between respondents that want a casual hookup encounter and those who are interested in a committed relationship when using apps. Undergraduate women may want to find a committed partner, but it seems to be difficult to form relationships after meeting on a dating app or website in the context of hookup culture. These results suggest that the apps and websites students use are not necessarily making it easier to escape the social norms of hookup culture that necessitate casualness or make it easier for women to find the types of partnerships they want.

## Why Tinder Dominates at Stoney University

Of the undergraduate women who took the online survey, 127 undergraduate women -- 65 percent-- reported that they have used a dating app or website at some point while at university (**Figure 6**). Due to the array of free apps and websites currently available I expected that my respondents would report using a variety of apps and websites. On the contrary, the survey results reveal that Tinder[[11]](#footnote-11) dominates in Stoney University’s hookup culture. **Figure 7** shows that 91 percent of undergraduate women report having used Tinder. For comparison, only 36 percent report using the next most-used app, Bumble. This does not mean that students exclusively use Tinder, but that overwhelmingly they think that Tinder is the app to use to seek romantic and sexual partners at Stoney University.

**Figure 7.** Respondents who have used each app or website while at university[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Survey (N=196), respondents of these questions n=127

Data from the focus groups help to explain Tinder’s role in university hookup culture. Similar to my findings, other research has shown that Tinder has become the most popular mobile dating app (Timmermins and De Caluwé 2017). My focus group findings reveal that one reason students use Tinder is that it allows users to connect their profile to other social media platforms, like Facebook or Instagram. This feature enables its incorporation with the other digital spaces where students are engaging with one another. It also allows users to see whether they have mutual friends, which can make undergraduate women feel safer when meeting partners online. These design features demonstrate Tinder's ability to integrate into the student’s broader social lives and hookup experiences.

My focus group participants tend to call apps like Tinder ‘dating apps,’ regardless of whether they are using the app to meet someone for a date or a hookup. However, they describe Tinder as more of a hookup app*,* not necessarily because Tinder matches always leads to a hookup or that students want to only hookup on Tinder, but because the social norms and rules of the game on Tinder are characteristic of university hookup culture. Jennifer explained, "Tinder is thought of as a hookup app. I feel like if you're on OkCupid or Plenty of Fish or the other [dating websites] you could be paying for, they’re thought of more as *more serious* and are for people looking for something *more than a hookup*.” Similar to hookups, my participants think that committed relationships can come from Tinder, and many of them want to ultimately find a committed partner and to be in a relationship. But as Geri explained, “I think generally people are interested in hookups, initially at least.” My focus group participants described that the appeal of Tinder is that it is free, easy to use, and does not require a lot of effort to set up. My participants explained that some other apps, like Hinge, have slightly longer bios and this is not necessarily desirable in hookup culture because they require more effort and ‘more effort' is not a positive thing in hookup culture. The survey results and focus group findings also suggest that there is a contention between what many women want – a committed relationship – and the social norms of hookup culture. Their discomfort in subverting the social norms and fears of seeming desperate ultimately outweighs their desire to explicitly seek a committed partner.

The women at Stoney University that I spoke with - without exception - would judge someone who used a *dating* *website* such as Match.com. My participants' descriptions of dating websites fell into three interrelated camps: dating websites are for people who were "looking for something serious," for "older individuals," or for people who were "desperate for a relationship." As Christina said,

Websites are too serious in undergrad. I associate them with finding a long-term relationship, whereas with Tinder, I don’t know what my expectations are but I don’t want to define them. I’m on Tinder ‘cause it’s fun and there’s always possibilities but I feel like as soon as you go to a dating website, I feel like it’s because I’m in danger of not finding a long-term partner.

Similarly, Gwen said that she only uses dating apps because “using a website… signifies a higher level of seriousness. Websites signify more of a commitment. You don't make a website profiles to hookup with someone.” Kelly also described that,

I associate it with age. I associate dating websites for people who are maybe like in their 30s and still haven’t found anyone and they’re looking for a serious relationship. I think right now I’m still young and there’s so many places to still meet people. Tinder is a lot more of a casual thing than online dating [websites].

Monica agreed, adding, “I have friends who have used websites and they’re more serious, they’re getting closer to the age where they want to marry and they haven’t really found anyone.” Depictions of dating websites as being used by ‘older’ people are echoed by many of the undergraduate women I spoke with. For this reason, my participants do not see dating websites as having any relevance in the university hookup culture. Regardless of which rationale they had for not using dating websites, these descriptions continue to align with the claim in the current literature that hookup culture necessitates casualness. My participants' rationales for using Tinder and disliking websites harkens back to the idea that hookup culture necessitates meaninglessness and that wanting commitment is an act of desperation, and being desperate is the worst thing you can be in hookup culture (Wade 2017).

## Women’s Sense of Safety when using Dating/Hookup Apps

The current research shows that women experience many risks to their safety and wellbeing in hookup culture but it is unclear whether dating apps or websites are making women feel any safer. In terms of negative experiences while using apps, **Figure 8** shows that 67 percent of survey respondents report having been contacted by someone on an online dating site or app in a way that made them feel harassed or uncomfortable and 63 percent felt like someone else seriously misrepresented themselves in their profile. Only 7 percent of survey respondents think that online dating is safer than meeting partners in-person.

**Figure 8.** Negative experiences and perspective using a dating/hookup website or apps

**Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Survey (N=196), respondents of these questions n=127

**Figure 9.** Strategies mitigate risks when deciding to meet an online match in-person

**Source:** Dating in the Digital Age Survey (N=196), respondents of these questions n=127

In terms of the strategies they employ to try and stay safe, **Figure 9** shows that 95 percent will meet their online match in a public place like a bar, restaurant or café and 87 percent tell someone where they will be when meeting in-person for the first time. Likewise, some of the current research suggests that being able to ‘screen’ a potential match before meeting in-person can make individuals feel safer. While my survey and focus groups cannot say for certain whether apps and websites are making hookup culture safer for women, my research suggests that apps are not necessarily making them feel safer.

## Conclusion

This chapter makes new contributions to the current sociological literature on hookup culture by investigating whether hookup culture has emerged in a different social context, in this case, without the presence of a dominating fraternity culture and I also examined undergraduate women’s use of technology in this culture. A central question of this chapter is whether the change in the social context of hookup culture - from one dominated by fraternities to a nightclub scene that is not regulated by undergraduate men who control access to alcohol and the party - makes the sexual culture in my case study fundamentally different. I find that students’ definitions of hookups and the prevalence of students who are hooking up, dating, and forming relationships are remarkably similar to the results in the U.S.-based literature. Although the current literature suggests that there is a direct line between fraternity culture and the emergence of hookup culture, my findings do not suggest that fraternity culture produces hookup culture. I find that the social norms of hookup culture are consistent regardless of whether fraternity culture is present.

Some of the current research has claimed that men’s dominance over the central location of hookup culture explains many of the negative consequences of women’s experiences (Wade 2017). Some of these arguments are convincing, and yet, since Stoney University does not have a dominant fraternity culture and I find similar social norms and – as I will show in more depth in the following chapter - similar consequences for women, I am unconvinced that fraternity culture explains all the negative aspects of university hookup culture. Though fraternities should take some of the blame for the negative aspects of hookup culture in the United States, the change in the scene does not eradicate risks for women. This is not to say that there are no differences in fraternities and the nightclubs at Stoney University, but that eliminating fraternity culture certainly does not eliminate risks for women.

In terms of technology on campus, many undergraduate women want to find a partner for a committed relationship when using apps, and yet, few end up being in a committed relationship with someone they met on an app. Although online dating may allow women to meet a larger pool of potential partners, this is not necessarily translating to their desired type of partnerships. My research suggests that technology is not impacting the culture in such a way that it challenges the social norms of hookup culture that necessitate casualness, instead, the technology used by undergraduate women at Stoney University fits seamlessly into the culture. Despite that many women want to be in a committed relationship, the social norms of hookup culture that necessitates casualness and avoiding seeming desperate are limiting women to use apps like Tinder and to feel like they need to be casual in their dating and sexual encounters.

Last, technology is widely used but it is not necessarily making undergraduate women feel safer or protecting them from online harassment. Similar to other studies on online dating, my respondents report that they engage in strategies to try to stay safe, such as Googling potential partners, requesting to meet partners in a public place, and telling friends where they will be so they can check in on them. Regardless, women do not feel safer meeting someone online and many women report having met someone who misrepresented themselves or contacted them in a way that made them feel uncomfortable or harassed.

My research suggests is the social norms of hookup culture that necessitate casualness and contribute to inequalities for women remain persistent across social contexts and in digital spaces. Although fraternity culture may not dominate the hookup and party scene at Stoney University, as I will discuss in Chapter Four of this dissertation, women do not have freedom from unwanted sexual pressures or advances by men. To deal with these risks, I find that they use their women-centered friendships and employ strategies to have fun and manage risks. My findings also show digital spaces may not be changing the culture, but they are important and widely used avenues to meet hookup and romantic partners that have emerged with particular rules of engagement and social practices that need to be examined. My findings also suggest that students use technology in tandem with in-person encounters on campus and it is necessary to better understand this dynamic. Therefore, I will discuss the promises of technology in hookup culture further in Chapter Five.

# Girls’ Night Out: Women-Centered Friendship Groups in University Hookup Culture

The role of women’s friendships in hookup culture has been vastly under-emphasized by the current research, which has primarily focused on the dyadic relationship between men and women interacting in the hookup scene and engaging in sexual hookups. In this chapter, I reveal that hookup culture should be understood as more than a set of expectations around sexual partners. My research reveals how women-centered friendship groups are what produce hookup culture and facilitate the practices of hookup culture.

Through conducting focus group discussions with undergraduate women, I discovered that hookup culture at Stoney University is heavily organized around women’s friendships with other women who support each other as they navigate the hookup scene and engage in social activities. Specifically, my research suggests that traditional gender beliefs shape men and women’s interactions in the in-person hookup scene in ways that contribute to non-consensual sexual encounters. So, to try to mitigate these risks *and* enjoy their experiences, undergraduate women at Stoney University dedicate a significant portion of their nights out to women-centered bonding rituals and partying, while also employing various strategies within their friendship groups to try to stay safe.

In this chapter, I analyze my focus group discussions with undergraduate women at Stoney University and make new and important contributions to the hookup culture literature. First, by changing the lens of analysis from the individual dyad of men and women’s sexual relationships to examining the larger set of social rituals and practices, I show that participating in hookup culture is not constituted by the individualist practice between two people. Through my research, I redefine hookup culture as a community practice among women. In addition, through my analysis of the various strategies and social roles women take on within their friendship groups to keep each other safe, I also produce a nuanced - and profoundly necessary - picture of the prevalence, diverse manifestations, and normalization of non-consensual sexual encounters experienced by women in the in-person hookup scene and discuss the implications of these experiences.

## Reframing What Constitutes Hookup Culture

Current research has primarily examined men and women’s interactions in hookup culture and has shown that, despite the potential promise of sexual empowerment for women, traditional gender beliefs guide their interactions and maintain gender inequality in university hookup culture (Allison and Risman 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010). For instance, studies have shown that hooking up tends to result in less sexual pleasure for women compared to men (Armstrong, England and Fogarty 2012; Wood et al. 2016). Studies also show that women can be slut-shamed for having casual hookups (Armstrong et al. 2014; Fjær, Pedersen and Sandberg 2015). Similar to earlier research on the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses (Martin and Hummer 1989), some of the current literature also emphasizes women’s experiences with sexual assault in hookup culture (Ford 2017; Paul and Hayes 2002)*.* As I will show throughout this chapter, my research also suggests that traditional gender beliefs impact men and women’s interactions, resulting in risks of non-consensual sexual encounters that are normalized and expected by women.

Since the current literature - and my dissertation research - show that there are many negative consequences for undergraduate women in hookup culture, it begged the question: what are women getting out of hookup culture and why do they still participate in it? My research reveals that it is women-centered friendship groups that not only make participating in hookup culture so worthwhile, they are fundamental to understanding the broader social context of hookup culture. My focus group discussions with undergraduate women at Stoney University produced countless stories of women coming together to support and protect one another during their nights out. I find they relish in the company of other women, reserving large parts of the evening for women-only activities. When asked about hooking up and their experiences in hookup culture, my participants spoke of their friendship group as much – if not more – than their interactions with men and having sexual hookups. Therefore, my research suggests that academic scholars need to reframe their focus and expand the level of analysis from the dyad of sexual partners to understanding hookup culture as fostered by women-centered friendship groups, which, consequently, can also help scholars better understand the various risks to women’s safety and wellbeing.

As a clarifying note, in the following chapter I will examine how undergraduate women are using new technologies for dating and hooking up to further my analysis of the broader social context of university hookup culture. In this chapter, I briefly discuss how undergraduate women use technology throughout their evening, though I largely focus on their experiences navigating the in-person hookup scene. In what follows, I first discuss how women spend significant portions of their evenings dedicated to women-centered bonding rituals. Second, I show how women actively and strategically manage their alcohol consumption to have fun and ‘loosen up,’ while not getting too drunk and spoiling the night for their friends. Third, I examine the risks of participating in the hookup scene and reveal how women take on different social roles that include engaging in group-level strategies to mitigate risks, facilitating desirable hookups for their friends, and using technology to keep tabs and check-in on their friends who leave for a hookup. I conclude this chapter by discussing the implications of women’s friendships in hookup culture.

## Prioritizing Women-Centered Rituals and Bonding Time

At Stoney University, undergraduate women reserve a large part of their evenings out for women-centered activities. The most substantial example of this emerged from my participants’ spirited descriptions of socializing, getting ready, and drinking at ‘the pre.’ Though my participants tend to call this stage of the night ‘the pre,’ scholars have used the terms pre-drinking, pre-partying, pre-loading, and pre-gaming to describe a social ritual that tends to involve drinking alcohol at someone’s residence before going to another location like a fraternity party (LaBrie et al. 2012; Pedersen and LaBrie 2007; Wade 2017). Research has focused on the excessive alcohol consumption that occurs during this stage of a night out. Although undergraduate women do drink during the pre - and I will discuss their drinking habits more in the next section – the following findings highlight how undergraduate women use this time for women-centered social activities that bond them together as a group.

## ‘Getting Ready’: A Patterned Social Ritual for Women-Centered Bonding

In all of my discussions with undergraduate women at Stoney University, they described that their nights out start with women getting together beforehand; spending between two to five hours to ‘get ready’ at the pre. As Nicki explained in tones of joy and nostalgia,

It's just, like, you know, a bunch of dishevelled girls showing up in someone's basement to do their makeup and drink together in order to go somewhere an hour and a half later than they said they would, listening to super corny music from way back when. *That’s the pre*.

“Exactly,” Robyn affirmed, laughing enthusiastically at the accuracy of Nicki’s description, “that is *exactly* right!” Getting ready involves selecting outfits, doing their makeup and hair, and casually drinking alcohol. It is a substantial portion of a night out for the women in my study. My participants describe the ‘getting ready process’ as a deeply pleasurable time that is shared by women as they prepare for their nights out and as a highly valued and patterned ritual that they engage in with their friends.

Sometimes the pre starts off as a women-only occasion and then others will join in (e.g. friends, boyfriends, etc.), but nonetheless, my participants consistently dedicate a large amount of time for women-only social activities. Nicki explained her friends use technology to ensure they have women-only time during the pre before meeting up with their other friends,

I have a group chat on Facebook Messenger with a bigger group of friends and another group chat with the girls of that group. Recently, a guy from the larger group messaged everyone about going out that night and then just about the second that message was sent, somebody in the 'all-girls group chat' messaged the girls of that group and said, ‘so we'll get together like two hours before and then we'll meet the guys after.’ Then we do our makeup and have a bit of something to drink.

“Yeah we do that too,” Robyn said in agreement.

"Same with my friends," Shania added, "we will pre at home with the girls and then maybe go over to one of our good friend's place and drink for a bit and then we'll go to a club." Emma said that, as a first year living in residence on campus, her friends will gather in one of their dorm rooms to get ready together, "We're doing makeup, doing our hair, getting dressed up. The girls get ready together and the guys just do their own thing then we all meet." Norah said, "We, the girls, tend to get ready like 4 hours before the mix-gender pre-drink. Yeah, we take *a long* *time*. Then a group of guys show up [around] 30 minutes before we leave.” The majority of my participants discussed communicating their intentions and plans for a women-centered pre using free group messaging technology such as WhatsApp, iMessage, or Facebook Messenger. It is a way to ensure they have time for women-centered bonding before going to a club or meeting with other people. The getting ready process is portrayed as a cherished experience of equal importance to the actual night out in the hookup scene, demonstrating that they do not just go into the public party scenes and hookups outright, they dedicate a large portion of time to bond with each other.

While getting ready together, my participants also support each other by encouraging their friends to wear whatever makes them feel their best. Alicia described that,

I usually go out with my roommates.... we get would ready, we probably have music on and chatting, talking, stuff like that, but then we’ll plan our outfits. I’m pretty loose with what I’m going to wear but my roommates will plan and they’ll be like, ‘do these shoes go good with that’ and things like that.

Some of the women discussed how their friends also share clothing. Robyn said,

We tend to get ready together… So you hear someone screaming from upstairs that they need this pair of shoes or this dress. They're all a similar size but I'm Goliath, I'm like 10 feet taller than the rest of them so I can't borrow things as easily but we kind of get ready together… and you hear people yelling for different types of clothes and someone playing music.

All of the women described wanting to “look good” during their nights out and, though what that means varies from person to person, their descriptions showed that the women in my study tend to support and encourage their friends’ to wear what they personally like. For instance, when asked what women tend to wear Jessica confidently replied that women “can wear whatever they want.” *Without judgment*, she said that recently, "I went to a house party in jeans and a sweater and there were other girls that were basically topless. It really depends on the person." Mandy added that "sometimes I'm really casual" but she also sometimes dresses "really slutty" if she wants to. Gwen said that an outfit is about showing your intentions. She described herself as having an "alternative, edgy style" and said that in order to be attracted to someone, "they have to dress like me. I don't believe in inter-style breeding." Robyn added that as a lesbian going out to non-LGBTQ+ clubs, she dresses in a way that indicates her sexuality to other queer women. She explained that,

We don’t tend to go to LGBT specific clubs because there are none in town. It feels a little risky to just walk up to someone and say ‘hey, you’re really hot, let’s make out,’ so I would rather them approach me. So, I tend to dress in a way that other people know that I’m not straight. I try to look very stereotypical so women can pick up on it and if they think I’m cute they won’t feel scared coming up to me.

Although the women in my study do dress up and want to ‘look good’ during their nights out, I was surprised by the diversity of what this means to them and how my participants described supporting their friends’ individualities. I did not find that they feel the necessity to always dress provocatively, nor did I find that they engage in slut-shaming of other women who do decide to dress sexually.

Some of the current literature finds that the social norm of hookup culture encourages women to dress for the male gaze (Wade 2017). For instance, in her study of hookup culture in the United States, Wade (2017 p. 27) finds that women often dress to look sexually provocative during their nights out. As one of her participants says, “the goal is to look fuckable.” In the United States, where fraternities dominate the location of the party and access to alcohol, women’s sexual attractiveness to men can impact their access to the party (Wade 2017). In my case, being desirable to men is not what gets students access to Stoney University’s hookup scene, where bouncers are the central gatekeepers to the party. Instead, my participants tend to dress up for the sake of dressing up and think that it is fine for women to dress provocatively if they want to, but that dressing sexually is not a necessity. Though slut-shaming may happen between women in Canadian hookup culture, I did not find this present in the narratives of my participants.

On the other hand, a few of my participants expressed that they have been slut-shamed or made to feel uncomfortable about their clothing or sexuality by men. For instance, Emma told the group that she recently went to a party and,

There was this guy who was talking down to me and he - I don’t know how to phrase it in a polite way - but he made a comment about how girls who wear low cut shirts are all sluts. At the time I was wearing a turtleneck because it was cold and we walked all the way from [residence] and I think he was trying to compliment me, but it was really sexist.

Geri also explained that “I don’t usually wear bras because I don’t need to wear a bra,” and that recently a male student she met at a house party made derogatory jokes and suggested that she should wear a bra to not reveal her breasts. She felt that, in part, he was trying to shame her and make her uncomfortable by talking about her breasts and sexualizing her body despite dressing “super casually in a T-shirt and jeans.” Geri said that, despite his efforts, she does not care if the natural shape of her breasts makes men uncomfortable and she is not going to let a man dictate what she is going to wear. This statement was met with enthusiastic agreement among the other women in the focus group.

The only instances described by my participants of feeling slut-shamed for what they wore during a night out came from men, and yet, my participants seemed to care far more about the support of their friends than men’s opinions of their outfits. While some of the literature finds that women regulate their sexual behaviours and the way they dress due to their fear of being slut-shamed (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, and Seely 2014), my participants painted an encouraging picture of women’s support for each other as they get ready together at the pre. Although getting ready may seem like a frivolous activity, it is a dominant bonding ritual that is central to establishing a social support network in which women encourage each other to feel comfortable to be themselves.

## Sharing Sexpectations to Establish Social Roles for Caregiving

Another way that women support their friends is through sharing what I call their ‘sexpectations’ for the night during the pre. Kelly described that she and her friends use the pre “to obviously get more comfortable and have a little bit of alcohol in your system before you go out” but she also finds that “people just relay their intentions for the night.”

“It’s like a game plan,” Britney said in agreement.

“Yeah, I have people in my friend group who almost exclusively are going to a bar to hookup,” Kelly explained, “and that’s not always me, but if it is me, I’m probably going to vocalize it.”

“Yeah, same with my friends. It’s very much like we know what we [all] want before we go. Intentions are put on the table,” Mandy added.

"It's an encouraging environment," Kelly exclaimed enthusiastically, “we're all like, ‘yeah, go for it! We'll be your wing women!’”

Undergraduate women’s descriptions of setting their sexpectations before their nights out highlight the first way that they support each other to hookup and collectively participate in the in-person hookup scene. As I will discuss, some women are cautious of their friends picking up hookup partners because of the potential risks to their safety, but in general, I find that women support their friends who want to find a hookup partner. By communicating their sexpectations at the beginning of the evening, this allows them to offer emotional support and encouragement for their future sexual activity.

In general, the pre stage of the night exemplifies the role of women’s friendships in hookup culture, in which women support each other through helping each other get ready and by articulating their sexual intentions and supporting their friend’s sexpectations for the night. I was struck by the way my participants discussed how getting ready with one another is a valued bonding ritual, a time in which they get dressed as provocatively as they like and relay their sexpectations - or lack thereof - positively and without judgment. The women-only stage of the night was described with an immense sense of pleasure and as a meaningful time for women to support each other in an unexpectedly feminist and sex-positive way. The pre ultimately emerged as a fundamental women-centered social ritual for my participants to establish strong friendship ties with one another that bonds them and helps maintain an ongoing support network throughout their nights out in the hookup scene.

## Managing Alcohol Consumption to Manage Risks and Have Fun

One way that women try to increase their enjoyment while managing risks in the hookup scene is to be cognizant and cautious about the amount of alcohol they are consuming. I find that my participants drink alcohol during the pre so that they can loosen up and socialize with their friends – and most want to feel drunk *-* but they do not want to get *too drunk* or *wasted.* As Jessica stated, “for the most part, we’re not drinking to pass out, you just want to loosen up.” In my participants’ descriptions of the pre, the risks are minimal because the space, even if it opens up to men, is still exclusive to friends. At the club, being too drunk can be risky to their safety and, almost more importantly, to their friends’ enjoyment*.*

My participants' discussions of managing their alcohol consumption is a noteworthy finding compared to some of the literature on heavy drinking habits among young adults. Graham, Wells, and Kuntsche (2013) find that young adults that predrink to go out to clubs or bars tend to drink at least twice as much as opposed to when they stay in and casually drink at home. Another study of young adults finds that men consume about 12.3 drinks and women consume about 9.3 drinks before they leave for a night out (Ostergaard and Andrade 2014a). A corresponding study on young adults finds similar results, with men consuming 9.8 drinks and women consuming 7.3 drinks before their nights out (Ostergaard and Andrade 2014b). Although young adults often engage in predrinking regardless of their student status, studies have shown that college and university students tend to drink more than their non-college peers (Dawson et al. 2004; Kypri, Cronin and Wright 2005). For instance, Vander Ven (2011) described the U.S. college party scene as a ‘drunkworld’ in which students drink excessively to *get* *wasted*. Vander Ven finds that, although the drinking culture is social and can give students opportunities to support one another, the scene encourages highly excessive drinking patterns that can lead to negative consequences. Some of the hookup culture literature has also found an association between hookups and the rise in binge drinking on campuses (see Heldman and Wade 2010 for a review). Other studies find that the amount of alcohol consumed by students is a predictor of hooking up and can contribute to risks to young women’s safety (Fielder and Carey 2010; Reid, Elliot and Webber 2011).

Similar to other research (see Keough 2016; LaBrie et al. 2012; Ostergaard and Andrade 2014a; Ostergaard and Andrade 2014b; Vander Ven 2011 for examples), I find that some of my participants drink to reduce social anxieties before going out to the public hookup scenes. For instance, although it was not discussed by all of my participants, a few of the women explicitly said that they drank to deal with the particular social anxiety of the unwanted male attention they knew they would experience at the club. Monica said that,

I would argue that the reason I pre-drink, and I usually always do, is because that’s the only way for me to handle club and bar culture… I need it to have fun. I need to really not be too aware of the male gaze.

Similarly, Gwen added,

You definitely have to be drunk in my opinion… to handle it because the self-consciousness would really get to me. I don't think I've ever gone out sober, but then it just sounds strange, it's like, well then why are you going out and putting yourself in this situation in the first place if you have to get drunk to enjoy it?

In Wade’s (2017) study of U.S. hookup culture, the women in her study did not mention harassment when describing their reasons for getting drunk during the pre-stage of a night out, though she states that getting wasted can make women easy prey for men. All of the women I spoke to described that at the club there are usually many groups of women dancing together, some women dancing with men, and a lot of men standing around the bar or edges of the dance floor, which can make some women self-conscious. Therefore, although only a few of my participants explicitly said that drinking is a strategy to deal with potential emotional and physical risks, my participants' descriptions of the unpleasant aspects of the hookup scene suggest that there is an implicit understanding of the type of social risks they expect when going out and that drinking may alleviate some of their anxieties.

Interestingly, three of my participants are abstainers and do not drink. One said she has never consumed alcohol and two said that they stopped drinking after their first few years at university. Eve explained that “I don’t really drink anymore, I just love dancing with my friends so the music is enough for me.” Robyn’s description mirrored Eve’s, “I don’t really drink anymore, I kind of swore off it after a few years.” Research has discussed that the symbolic function of being drunk – or sometimes even just pretending to be drunk – in hookup culture can downgrade the meaningfulness of a hookup (Wade 2017). Eve described that she sometimes acts drunk to not be self-conscious when dancing freely with her friends since men tend to spend a lot of their time at clubs watching women on the dance floor, which can make her uncomfortable. Like Gwen and Monica's description of their discomforts in the scene, the abstainers also discussed struggling with the types of interactions they have with men in these spaces. They understand the role of alcohol in helping women not worry as much about the unwanted male gaze and just enjoy partying with their women-centered friendship groups. Alongside their sex-positive attitudes in which women encourage their friends' desires to hookup, all of the women I spoke with also understood that participating in the in-person spaces of hookup culture also means dealing with unwanted behaviours by men against themselves or their friends.

Although some women do abstain, drinking alcohol is a common practice when participating in the hookup scene at Stoney University. The majority of drinking takes place during the pre and my participants steadily increase their alcohol consumption before heading out. Carrie described that before they leave the pre, she and her friends want to be "drunk enough that it will hit you so you’re super drunk at the bar. So you drink a lotlike just before you leave, so you still feel fine, you're able to walk straight, you look put-together." Shania agreed and, partially joking, partially serious, said that, "I don't want to get so drunk that I don't know where my shoes are - if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, it's like a topper before you get in the Uber," Carrie said.

"Yeah, that would be like right before you leave, and before that, we drink beer, beer is my drink of choice," Alicia exclaimed. Giggling Carrie added that "my friends drink cider, so not too strong but still decent, and one of my friends is a huge wine drinker, she really likes wine so she'll have an entire box [of wine]. Classy, right?" Though none of my participants said that they personally consume an entire box of wine before leaving their house, drinking culture certainly has its place in the Stoney University party scene. There is, however, a delicate dance of drinking just enough to still have fun without going over the edge and being ‘wasted’ before leaving the pre.

Most of the women described managing their alcohol consumption due to their concerns about getting too drunk and ruining the night for their friends. For instance, Avril described that her friends take care of each other during their nights out,

Since my friends are really close, we all have to make sure we're okay. One time, my friend [drank too much and] was getting really sick and we had to cancel our plans and stay back. So, I think you have to be at the same level as everyone else. You don't want to be sloppy and make everyone else have a bad time because they're taking care of you.

Since bouncers are often the gatekeepers to entering clubs and bars, drinking too much can result in the risk not being allowed inside. Avril’s explanation above highlights a consistent theme throughout my participants’ narratives – sticking together to keep each other safe and helping each other if someone gets sick. My participants described that they want to loosen up before going out, but they do not want to spoil the night for their friends who would feel beholden to stay home to care for their sick friend who was too wasted. Not everyone is successful in getting drunk but not wasted, but there is an active attempt to avoid getting wasted to avoid potential negative consequences to their safety and their ability to have fun as a group. I find that the drinking-related strategies that undergraduate women employ suggests that enjoyment and managing risks are not separate tasks - often going hand-in-hand - and are always a group endeavor among women.

## "The Scene Itself is Just a Bunch of Guys Trying to Grab You": Risks and Women-Centered Strategies to Mitigate Risks

In the clubs and bars that make up the in-person hookup scene of Stoney University, my participants expressed that it is almost inevitable that they will experience unwanted sexual touching and harassment. In this section, I first discuss these risks and then the strategies to try to manage risks. Although the women in my study had many stories that suggest that sexual assault is a risk in hookup culture, most often, the women’s stories illuminated nuanced and grey areas of sexual violence and harassment. For instance, women consistently described unwanted sexual advances by men who were difficult to rebuff and the normalcy of non-consensual touching of their bodies by men on the dance floor. To manage these risks, I find that women take on social roles for caretaking within their friendship groups to attempt to prevent unwelcome sexual attention, facilitate desired sexual attention, and use technology to maintain contact with friends in case help is needed.

## Non-Consensual Sexual Encounters in the Hookup Scene

Regardless of whether women want to seek hookup partners or dance with their friends, my discussions with undergraduate women about their experiences in the in-person hookup scene always progressed into stories that show how gender beliefs in the club normalize sexual harassment and unwanted sexual touching. Monica sarcastically summarized that the goal of her evenings out is to “not get groped by men” that she is not interested in and that “the moment you go on [the dance floor] men start circling you… I feel like the majority of the night you spend dodging people or getting them off you.” Shania also explained that,

There are girls who so clearly just want to dance and these guys are like, just because she’s here and she doesn’t have a guy already attached to her that gives me the right to go up, grab her, make out with her… the initial interaction is usually a waist grab.

Nicki added, "I’m looking for is someone I’m physically attracted to… and if they’re genuinely having a good time. But you can’t tell though when people come up and grab you from behind, you know?” Alicia also said that, “they’ll just come over and touch you in places you don’t want to be touched and it’s really disrespectful and I get really annoyed.” Norah agreed and explained that,

Yeah, that’s my experience. I tend to go out every week and every week some guy will come over and touch your bum and just grab you and it’s not nice, especially because you can't see them. At first, you're not even sure if you feel it because it's so subtle, like they’re testing the waters.

Alicia described that during her first time out at a club,

Someone was brushing up against me and I wasn’t sure what was happening, it was my first time out. He was just like brushing up more and more and harder and harder against me and it became more obvious that something bad was happening. Then, one of my friends saw and freaked out, and he just laughed and made a lewd tongue movement and disappeared. That [guy] was such a creep.

Non-consensual groping and touching of their bodies permeated my participants’ stories of their experiences at the club. As Gwen said, “The scene itself is just a bunch of guys trying to grab you.” Recent research finds that there is a complex dynamic between the sexual rituals of hookup culture and women’s experiences with unwanted sexual advances, particularly on the dance floor (Ronen 2010). For instance, in her analysis of the practice of ‘grinding,’ a form of sexualized dancing common at clubs, Ronen (2010) argues that grinding is more than just a form of dancing, rather, it is a manifestation of traditional gender beliefs and heterosexual scripts in the contemporary sexual and romantic rituals among young adults. Ronen finds that there are rituals and coded displays on the dance floor and that traditional gender beliefs impact interactional dynamics.

The unfortunate and troubling reality of participating in the club scene is that the traditional gender beliefs that guide consensual interactions, such as the expectations that a man will approach a woman first, can also contribute to the normalization of non-consensual sexual interactions. Traditional gender beliefs on the dance floor both demonstrate and reinforce gender inequality in the sexual arena of university hookup culture. Similar to my research, Ronen (2010) describes that the script and norm of men approaching women, typically from behind and touching them without verbal or non-verbal consent, reflects how male desire and pleasure are privileged in these spaces. I find that, in a club or bar setting in which dancing is the primary social ritual, there are many ways in which men invoke their power over women, though this typically occurs through physically imposing themselves on women’s bodies on the dance floor.

Interestingly, none of my participants discussed their negative experiences as sexual assault, though Nicki recalled a frightening instance during one of her nights out,

The older I’ve gotten the better [the club experience has] gotten. Although I’m pretty sure I was roofied last year. Well, I was pretty drunk but I’m very good at knowing where I’m at [in my level of intoxication]. I was at a bar and I started making out with a guy and he got a drink for me and I remember having it and the next thing I remember I was passed out in the bathroom and security was calling me a cab. Like, there’s no other instance where I’ve gone from kind of drunk to blackout drunk.

Nicki related being given a date rape drug matter-of-factly. Like many of the other women who discussed their negative experiences, she paused during moments of uncomfortable laughter while recounting what had happened. Her tone gave the impression of uneasiness about the event and relief that she had not been sexually assaulted while also sounding unsurprised that she had this experience. In describing gender dynamics in university hookup culture, Nicki used an animalistic, “hunting ground” metaphor to describe men and women’s interactions. On the razor's edge of seriousness and joking, Nicki stated that in hookup culture, “the hunting goggles are always on.” My research suggests that non-consensual sexual encounters are normalized and expected by women navigating the in-person hookup scene.

It is important to clarify that my participants said that not all men behave badly, however, the commonality of their stories of non-consensual sexual encounters demonstrates how the social norms of the in-person hookup scene privilege men’s desires over women’s safety and enjoyment. Based on their descriptions, I also expect many men do not only do not think they are perpetrators of violence or harassment and that most men would feel shocked that they have made women feel uncomfortable. My participants repeatedly stated that, although they give non-verbal cues, they often feel too uncomfortable to explicitly and verbally say, ‘no’ in these types of situations, suggesting that traditional gender beliefs are impacting women’s agency during these non-consensual sexual encounters (Ronen 2010). Traditional gender beliefs shape how men and women behave in these spaces and are embedded in hookup culture.

## Social Roles to Manage Risks and Seek Desired Partners: Shields, Wing Women, and House Moms

To try to reduce risks and help their friends seek desired hookup partners, undergraduate women at Stoney University take on the social roles of *shields*, *wing women*, and *house mom*s. First, to mitigate the risk of unwanted sexual advances in the hookup scene, women will play the role of *the shield* to safeguard their friends from unwanted sexual touching on the dance floor. Most often, women do this by dancing in a circle formation and if an undesirable man approaches one of their friends from behind, they will pull their friend away and use their body as a shield, placing themselves between the man and their friend. Robyn explained that, “the last time I went to a club a lot of the girls looked very uncomfortable with the guys who would come up would put their arms around their waist from behind or beside.”

"So you can't stop them! It's like a surprise," Nicki cut in. Shania replied, "so most of the time girls dance in circles, so then [guys will] come up behind them and you don't even know they're there until a girlfriend says so and helps you move away from him." Robyn agreed and continued, “Yeah, and I would go up to a girl and be like, ‘Hey, are you uncomfortable?’ and usually I'd get a big expression like, ‘no I'm not!’ Even if I don’t know them, I’ll step in and put myself in between them and be like, ‘they’re not interested, you can move on.’” When I asked how men react, Robyn said, “the guys will look shocked and indignant about it, but they get the message and leave them alone, well, *usually* they leave them alone.” Similarly, Eve said that men will “just start dancing behind you and you don't always notice,” to which Monica replied that when this happens, “you literally get your girl and you move or you get to the point where you’re nudging [the guy] away.”

Consistently, women describe how they physically use their bodies as shields to prevent undesirable men from reaching their friends while on the dance floor. Some of the literature on shows that undergraduate students rely on a safety net of other drinkers and non-drinkers to minimize risks and that drinking provides young adults with the opportunity to support one another through taking on roles like caring for friends who have had too much to drink (Vander Ven 2011). In my study, women act as shields to maintain their bodily autonomy by dancing in a circle with their friends who all keep an eye out for men approaching their friends from behind. Women participate in the hookup scene collectively, helping to keep each other safe so they can enjoy their nights out dancing with one another.

Second, the *wing women* are friends who help to facilitate and encourage a desired hookup. Norah explained that “I personally don’t [go out to hookup] but my friends do and they’ll be like, ‘ok, John is going to be there’ and we have to wing woman her.” When I asked what being a wing woman entails, Carrie told me that your friends “kind of promote you in like the best way possible to the guy.” Alicia added that a wing woman is “like your back up and your girls are also there to save you when things go wrong.” My participants consistently spoke about helping their friends find hookup partners as a form of women-for-women support system. Through their depictions of being a wing woman to their friends, they emphasize their comfort, respect, and encouragement of their friend's sexual pursuits.

Last, my participants described that they or one of their friends plays the role of the *house mom*. This caregiving role refers to the friend in the group who is the most protective and nervous about her friends, playing a sort of motherly social role. The house mom makes sure to check in with friends throughout the night and if they go home with someone at the end of the night for a hookup. House moms tended to be described as women who are either not single or not interested in hookups. The women in my study emphasize that ensuring their friends’ safety at the end of the night is very important to them, so when women are leaving the club, the house mom plays an important role in keeping her friends safe. Shania described that "I'm the house mom and I will grill you for where you're going because I want to know my ducklings are safe," Carrie also added that,

It also depends on how drunk my friend is. [For example], if they’re too intoxicated there’s no way that they’re going home with someone. [I will be like], ‘you’re coming home with me.’ Just cause of what can happen.

Norah also described that,

Sometimes there will be a case that my friend wants to go home with a guy, but I'm not comfortable with that because I'd rather someone be with her. So we have this pact that you can only go home with a guy if we know their address, their name, or if we're friends with him on Facebook, just in case because you just don't know.

Norah explained that technology is important to keeping her friends safe when they go out to the in-person spaces of hookup culture, reflecting how women use technology in-tandem with their in-person experiences. House moms use technology to stay connected with their friends who are leaving for a hookup after the bar. Speaking about her friend who is the group’s house mom, Jennifer said that,

If I've ever gone to a guy's house after the bar, my friend makes me share my location services. Even if its 3:00 am in the morning I will text them and say, ‘I arrived at this guy’s house’ and if I haven’t already, I will tell them his name, address, and my location.

When a house mom’s friend goes home with someone, she tasks herself to keep her friend safe through collecting details often through using technology and getting their phone number, adding them on Facebook, and checking in on their friend's whereabouts on Snapchat. Although collecting this information and checking in on their friend does not guarantee their friend’s safety, it is nonetheless one of the many ways that women understand the potential risks and try to manage risks to allow for women to have a fun night out while trying to keep their friends safe.

It is important to make clear that, although women are employing these strategies this does not mean that they always work. Nonetheless, women collectively employ these strategies as they navigate the hookup scene to attempt to stay safe and also have fun, taking on different caregiving roles within their friend groups as a strategy to seek enjoyment while also trying to keep each other safe. My findings highlight that partying in the scene and initiating a safe and desired hookup is a group effort in which women take on different social roles during their night out to support their friends. These roles are fluid and women describe how they often take on multiple roles as shields, wing women, and house moms during their nights out to seek enjoyment while dancing with their friends, help their friends find a desirable partner and, most importantly, keep their friends safe on and off the dance floor. Their stories also demonstrate that participating in university hookup culture can be a fun and positive experience, but it is not without risks.

## Conclusion: The Role of Women’s Friendships in Hookup Culture

In this chapter, my research shows that hookup culture – and even hookups themselves – cannot be understood only as an individualistic practice exclusive to sexual partners. Instead, hookup culture is constituted by women-centered rituals and practices as much, if not more, than sexual encounters with men. Women-centered friendship groups are not simply a social group that exists in the margins of hookup culture: they are what facilitates hookup culture and make hookup culture feel safe, enjoyable, and worthwhile.

Through examining women-centered friendships navigating the in-person hookup scene at Stoney University, I make two important contributions to the current literature. First, my research shows that hookup culture should be understood as being constituted by and heavily organized around women-centered friendship groups who support each other as they navigate the hookup scene. The current literature has focused on understanding the dyadic relationships between men and women in hookup culture, and yet when I spoke with women at Stoney University about hooking up and their nights out, it was not their encounters with hookup partners that dominated our conversation. Instead, it was their friendships with other women – making women-only plans on Facebook messenger, getting ready together during the pre, fending off unwanted advances towards their friends on the dance floor, facilitating desired sexual hookups, and texting their friends after they have left for a hookup to confirm their friend feels safe and is enjoying herself - that were the focus of our conversations. I was struck by the overall theme of women-centered rituals, mutual support, and taking on social roles for caregiving, in which women function as a group to facilitate safe and desirable sexual practices. Their shared experience leads to powerful narratives of women coming together to look out for each other while trying to have fun, despite the commonality of unwanted male advances during their nights out. My research therefore reveals the broader social context of hookup culture as constituted by women-centered friendship groups that produce hookup culture and facilitate its practices.

Second, my research confirms that the in-person hookup scene is gendered in such a way that non-consensual sexual encounters are normalized and expected by women. My participants’ discussions of *persistent* unwanted advances and touching of their bodies in the hookup scene suggest that there are broader systemic issues of harassment and violence towards women in hookup culture. These findings also suggest that hookup culture is contributing to rape culture on campus. Rape culture refers to the various issues and structures that allow for different forms of sexual harassment, violence, assault, and rape to be expected, excused and normalized (Giraldi and Turner 2017). In a rape culture, sexual violence, particularly towards women, is perceived as an inevitable fact of life, leading women's experiences to be trivialized and, consequently, underreported (Giraldi and Turner 2017). Our conversations showed that undergraduate women are aware that the pursuit of their sexual pleasure and social enjoyment simply exist alongside non-consensual sexual encounters. My participants expressed that unwanted sexual advances and touching of their bodies make them uncomfortable, but they describe these instances as an inevitable consequence of participating in the hookup scene.

In this chapter, I briefly discussed the ways that women use technology throughout their nights out in the hookup scene, for instance, to plan the pre-drink and to stay connected with friends who separate from the group for a hookup at the end of the night. This suggests that technology is infused with in-person encounters and is important to connect women to their friends in hookup culture. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to examining the promises of new technology in hookup culture, such as dating and social media apps. Similar to women-centered friendship groups, I discuss how new apps are important to developing a more accurate understanding of the broader social context of hookup culture.

# The Promises and Perils of Dating in the Digital Age

Technology has played an increasingly important role in the romantic or sexual lives of emerging adults since the turn of the 20th century (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). For instance, earlier technological advancements like access to cars, motion pictures, and home telephones contributed to a cultural shift from a courtship culture to a dating culture that allowed for a newfound freedom in the romantic lives of emerging adults (England and Thomas 2006). More recently, Ansari and Klinenberg’s (2015) study of ‘modern romance’ finds that swiping left and right on dating apps,[[13]](#footnote-13) deciphering text messages, and debating whether to add someone on Facebook have become the new dominating social practices of dating in the digital age. Both the early and contemporary examples show the promises and possibilities of technology, which can dramatically change how couples meet and sustain sexual and romantic relationships (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012).

Technology is always full of promise. In this chapter, I will examine three promises of technology to undermine some of the traditionally gendered aspects of hookup culture and the extent that technology lives up to its promises. One of the promises of new dating apps[[14]](#footnote-14) is that they may be giving undergraduate women more choice and the ability to be selective about who they allow into their dating pool. The second promise is that technology may be unsettling the traditional, gendered order of hookup culture in ways that allow women to take control over their interactions and feel like they have more enjoyable and safer social interactions online. Third, there is the promise that technology may be facilitating new strategies to help women feel safe and enjoy themselves when meeting online matches in-person. Through examining the promises of new technology, I ultimately show that there are minor benefits, however, new technologies often fail to achieve their promises and, in other cases, introduce new and unforeseen problems for women in hookup culture.

## Technology: A New Frontier for Hookup Culture Research

As I outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, there is a growing body of research on new technology to meet and engage with romantic and sexual partners, and yet, research has only begun to examine technology as important to understanding the broader social context of hookup culture. This is partially because the largest dataset on hookups in the United States, the *Online College Student Life Survey*, was collected just before the emergence of new dating apps like Tinder. Nonetheless, research – including Chapter Four of this dissertation - shows that the in-person hookup scene is organized around traditional gender norms in which heterosexual men's desire is privileged over women's pleasure and safety (Ronen 2010; Rupp et al. 2014). It is therefore important to examine whether technology is helping to challenge some of the traditionally gendered aspects of hookup culture. Thus, before analyzing my findings, I will first address some of the current literature on hookup culture and dating apps that informed this chapter’s research objectives.

Based on the literature on dating apps and hookup culture, there are reasons to expect that technology may be improving undergraduate women’s experiences in hookup culture. First, research shows that there is a larger pool of potential partners online, which can help people to be more selective (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). For instance, Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) find that online dating provides access to more potential partners and allows people to meet partners beyond their local communities. Some of the research, however, suggests that dating apps lead to ‘choice overload,’ in which young adults are not settling down because there is too much choice (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). By contrast, Rosenfeld (2017) has argued that choice overload theory has been overemphasized in the current literature. As I described in Chapter Four, women navigating the in-person hookup scene do not have control over who has access to the scene and often feel uncomfortable explicitly rejecting men who approach them on the dance floor. Therefore, dating apps may make women feel they have more control over who has access to their dating pool through their ability to ‘swipe left’ and reject undesirable matches.

Second, meeting partners online may allow women to resist traditionally gendered sexual scripts and avoid some of the gender-based risks found in the in-person hookup scene. Research shows that gendered sexual scripts shape the expectation that men must approach women on the dance floor and initiate sexual encounters (Ronen 2010). This, consequently, reproduces a culture that also normalizes women’s objectification and non-consensual touching of women’s bodies by men (Armstrong, England and Fogarty 2012; Rupp et. al. 2014). Alternatively, although research shows that women encounter unwanted sexual advances while using dating apps (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; Thompson 2018), dating apps are increasingly regulating user activity to try to make their platform safer. For instance, Tinder prevents individuals from sending photos on their messaging system and Bumble does not allow men to message women first to give women more control over who they interact with. Further, unlike meeting men ‘IRL’ (in-real-life), women are able to block men on most dating apps or websites and on social media, thereby preventing men from messaging them further, which can protect women from further harassment (Walker 2018). People on dating apps are also physically separate and can only interact after both parties have consented to be matched, which may make women feel that their online interactions are safer than the in-person hookup scene.

Last, research shows that the social norms and practices of hookup culture contribute to women’s experiences of sexual assault in the party scene (Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006). Similarly, my research shows that gender-based risks are normalized and expected by women in the hookup scene. Alternatively, technology allows women to vet their matches online, provides a digital lifeline to friends, and encourages more traditional dating practices. Technology, therefore, may be making in-person meetings feel safer and more enjoyable. Current research and my findings in Chapter Four reveal that there are gendered norms that guide men and women’s interactions in such a way that women feel uncomfortable rejecting unwanted male advances and feel that non-consensual sexual encounters are inevitable and expected risks during their interactions with men. This leaves a lot to be desired by undergraduate women in terms of their sense of safety and enjoyment. Whether new technologies live up to their promises and improve women’s experiences, however, is yet to be known.

In this chapter, I draw on my focus group data to examine three promises of technology in the context of university hookup culture and investigate the following questions: (1) Are new technologies for dating/hooking up enabling undergraduate women to feel they have more choice and can be more selective over who they interact with and allow into their dating pool? (2) Is their use of new technologies making undergraduate women feel more comfortable rejecting the dominant, gendered sexual scripts of the in-person hookup scene and feel less at-risk of unwanted sexual encounters during their social interactions online? (3) What are the implications of new strategies and gender-based risks that undergraduate women experience when meeting matches in-person? In general, my research shows that there are some benefits for women, but ultimately my findings reveal the resilience of the traditional gender norms that structure women’s experiences in hookup culture and reproduce gender-based risks. Throughout this chapter, my research also continues to contribute important insights regarding the diverse manifestations of sexual harassment and non-consensual sexual encounters in university hookup culture.

## The Promise of Choice and Ability to be Selective while Swiping Left and Right

The current literature suggests that women do not have much control – if any - over who has access to the hookup scene (Wade 2017) and, in Chapter Four, I also find that women are generally uncomfortable explicitly rejecting undesirable men who approach them on the dance floor. One of the promises of technology is that dating apps may be allowing undergraduate women to be more selective over the types of men they interact with since they may feel more comfortable rejecting men online. In this section, I discuss how men’s profile pictures fall into gendered tropes and that women are rejecting traditionally gendered and hyper-masculine self presentations online. Through this analysis, I find that my participants feel as though they have some control over who can interact with them online and they can be selective over the types of men they consent to being matched with.

## Swiping Left for Traditionally Gendered and Hyper-Masculine Presentations of Self

Of the common profile pictures that my participants described, I find that they tend to reject photos that reflect traditionally gendered displays of masculinity and hyper-masculine presentations of self. The most common profile picture trope that was discussed in every focus group is 'the fish guy.' As Lauren described, the fish guy refers to photos of men “at the end of the dock and they're just holding a dead fish. I hate that [type of photo]. I feel like it's on every profile.” The women in my study describe the fish guy in tones that ranged from mocking to abject repulsion. Carrie said "Fish photos are a Tinder inside joke for women." When asked why they thought men post these types of photos, Monica sarcastically said, "The fish thing comes from them trying to look like they are providers. I've had someone tell me that! But it's like 'this is not an era where you need to fish for me, honey.' But it's so common!" The interpretation of the fish guy as attempting to show their ability to be a provider may not be all men’s intention. Regardless, it reflects some men's interest in a traditionally gendered activity. Fish photos produce associations to traditionally gendered masculine values, attitudes, and beliefs that are unattractive to my participants.

Second, although discussed with far less contempt but more concern than the fish guy, another common profile picture trope is photographs of men’s exposed abdomen or 'six-pack abs'. My participants brought up the ‘abs guy’ in every conversation about online profiles and I was surprised to learn that none of my participants seeking men said they would swipe right on the abs guy, unless it was taken at a location where men would reasonably be without their shirts, such as a photo of them at the beach or a swimming pool. Kelly explained, "I don't like topless pictures [of men], I don't like that at all." When asked why my participants do not like the abs guy, Jessica stated matter-of-factly that, "Those pictures mean that they just want a hookup." Mandy also said "there's different kinds of pictures people post if they just want to hook up. Like if they post sexualpictures, like of their abs, they just want to hook up." Similarly, Eve said that "For me, personally, the whole torso shots are sort of a turn off just because I'm not very [sexually] experienced myself, so I wouldn't want someone like super experienced…those ones I usually say no to." Women seeking men consistently interpret the abs guy as being highly sexual and exclusively interested in meeting women for a hookup. Even among my participants who are interested in having a hookup, they explained that they will still swipe left on the abs guy since they are concerned that, if a hookup is expected from the start, this may lead to risky situations when they meet in-person.

Based on some of the insights from the masculinities scholarship, these types of photos communicate a traditionally masculine or hyper-masculine presentation of self to women online (Pascoe 2012). Of course, identity is not monolithic and masculinities scholars have criticized gender scholars’ tendencies to rely on rigid categories to understand masculinity (Pascoe 2012; Bridges 2019). However, on dating apps, users have to convey aspects of their identity and what they desire in a small amount of space and others must try to interpret the meanings of other users’ identities as they – often rapidly - swipe on Tinder. This aspect of dating apps can reduce people to a small fraction of their selves for better or worse. I find that my participants are not opposed to men, masculinity, or masculine qualities; rather, it is the displays that communicate that they ascribe to a traditionally dominant, heteronormative form of masculinity that is unappealing to them.

## Swiping Right for “Nice Guys”

In contrast, I find that there is a ‘nice guy’ trope that women in my study favoured. The ‘nice guy’ is another gendered self-presentation that differs from some of the traditional gender displays men use online. It is interpreted as conveying kindness, respectfulness, playfulness, and creativity. For instance, men who display photos with animals - dogs in particular - get a lot more traction from the women in my study than hyper-masculine presentations. In one conversation, Monica said that "I even know people who take pictures of their friends' dogs!" and Eve replied that men will write, "this is my friend's dog, for all the ladies out there," which they both found humorous and charming. The women in my study generally interpret dog photos positively and as demonstrating kindness and friendliness. However, Gwen, who values creativity and uniqueness, said a dog photo "signifies that they're kind of *basic*,” which is disparaging slang for someone who is bland or whose interests are too mainstream. Nonetheless, I find women in general favour these types of photos. Regardless of whether these types of photos are a strategic choice by men, my participants interpret these presentations as reflecting kinder, less risky choices. The hookup culture literature suggests that the hookup scene privileges traditionally masculine or hyper-masculine men, in part, due to the dominance of fraternities and fraternity men who control access to the party (Wade 2017). My participants’ preference for photos that convey kindness and their rejection of hyper-masculine photos shows how dating apps may allow them to more easily reject traditional gender displays of masculine identity on dating apps.

My participants’ descriptions suggest that the unique social practices of online dating can help women feel comfortable being selective about who they ‘swipe right’ for and allow into their dating pool. By contrast, Ansari and Klinenberg (2015) have argued that when people are in a bar or nightclub they are essentially swiping left or right internally, using similar visual cues to decide whether or not they are interested in others around them. This suggests that there is less difference between online and offline spaces than one might think, however, my research suggests that there is an important gendered component missing in this notion. Specifically, as I described in Chapter Four, in the in-person hookup scene men initiate interest on the dance floor by approaching women from behind and touching their bodies without their consent. Alternatively, on Tinder, there is not the same immediate risk of non-consensual physical touching, which is a notable difference. Users can swipe right on someone’s profile – thereby *consenting* to interact with them.

Further, some research suggests that the abundance of options online can lead to choice overload and can discourage people from settling down (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). By contrast, my research suggests that an abundance of choice can be a good thing since it can give women the freedom to not settle on profiles they feel are risky or inappropriate. In the in-person party scene, women are not able to prevent men they find undesirable or inappropriate from entering the space. Online, women can ‘swipe left’ and this prevents individuals from being able to interact with them on the app, thereby eliminating a layer of undesirable interactions. Hence, my research suggests that traditionally gendered or hyper-masculine photos are viewed as out of touch with what women are looking for and as more risky choices. Therefore, in my case, technology lives up to its promise to allow women to be selective and feel comfortable rejecting undesirable men through their swiping practices.

## The Promise of Technology to Help Women Resist Traditional Gender Norms and Avoid Unwanted Sexual Interactions

Researchers studying university hookup culture have consistently found that traditional gender norms structure men and women’s interactions in hookup culture, ultimately serving men and reproducing the dominant gender order (Currier 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Rupp et al. 2014). For instance, in the in-person hookup scene, traditional gendered sexual scripts normalize the expectation that women wait to be approached by men on the dance floor (Ronen 2010). The seemingly benign gendered sexual script of who initiates interactions can also contribute to the normalization of unwanted sexual touching of women’s bodies by men.

Since women may have more choice and can be more selective of who they allow in their dating pool, there is the potential that technology is unsettling the dominant gendered order of hookup culture in ways that encourage women to reject traditional, gendered sexual scripts and feel like they are having positive and safer social interactions with potential partners online. Despite this promise, in this section I first show that traditional gender norms still shape undergraduate women’s interactions online. Second, despite some of the recent regulations in dating apps to improve women’s safety in their online interactions, I find that there are new forms of non-consensual sexual encounters in online interactions.

## Traditional Gender Beliefs Shape Interactions Online

Women may have some control through their swiping practices online, however, my analysis of women’s experiences after being matched reveals that their control is limited and traditional gender norms still ultimately structure the social order. In particular, I find that traditional gender beliefs and the heterosexual script in which men are expected to approach women on the dance floor are translated into this digital context. Traditional gender beliefs still structure men and women’s interactions, normalizing women’s desire to be "chosen" by men. As Kelly said, “for the most part women expect the guy to message first.” Avril agreed and explained that "I never message first, it's ingrained in me." Monica added, “I’m such a gender roles person. Unfortunately, he has to be the first person.”

I find that, even when given the option, women seeking men online are reluctant or uncomfortable subverting gendered heterosexual scripts. This is why my participants do not use Bumble, a dating app in which women have to send the first message. Christina said that,

I went through a phase where I loved Bumble. Then I got kind of annoyed having to be the only one who initiates a conversation. I wanted to feel desired, so I re-downloaded Tinder strictly for that validation… On Tinder, sometimes I'll bite the bullet and message him, but for the most part, I'm letting them message me first.

My participants recognize that their interactions maintain traditional gender norms and they think this can be problematic. However, flipping the script gives many of my participants a deep sense of discomfort. Often, women describe feeling anxious about “putting themselves out there,” being emotionally vulnerable and seeming desperate. As I described in Chapter Three, seeming desperate is highly stigmatized and judged in hookup culture.

My findings are similar to other studies that show how traditional gender beliefs and sexual scripts guide heterosexual interactions in the in-person spaces of hookup culture (Reid, Elliott and Webber 2011; Ronen 2010). My participants consistently described wanting to be chosen by men and rely on men to message them first, revealing that the traditional gender order is upheld by the actions of the women as well as men. However, despite seeming like an individual choice, their perspectives and behaviours are shaped by traditional gender beliefs that reproduce structural differences between men and women that, in turn, allow for the maintenance of the dominant gender order. As I described in the introduction of this dissertation, traditional gender beliefs refer to internalized cultural instructions on how to appropriately behave based on one's gender. Research shows that traditional gender beliefs negatively impact women’s sexual and romantic agency in heterosexual interactions, ultimately privileging men’s pleasure and desire (Ronen 2010). These interactions often appear natural, voluntary, and individual; however, they are a result of how gender structures hookup culture (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Even women who may want to resist traditional gender beliefs feel compelled to follow them because of the potential negative social consequences, such as seeming desperate. Therefore, I find that the traditional gender beliefs that guide women’s participation in the in-person hookup scene persist and are translated into the digital arena.

## Sexual Harassment in Online Interactions

Research has shown that the hookup scene is structured by traditional gender beliefs that guide men and women’s interactions, that privilege men’s pleasure and desires and normalizes their control over women (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010; Rupp et al. 2014). In Chapter Four, I found that the nightclubs and bars that students frequent at Stoney University are rife with non-consensual sexual encounters. Similarly, through examining undergraduate women’s experiences seeking men using apps like Tinder, I find that the negative consequences of the in-person hookup scene, in which women commonly experience non-consensual sexual encounters, are translated online where new forms of sexual harassment have emerged. In particular, my findings underscore two problems that technology has introduced for undergraduate women: unwanted sexually harassing messages and unsolicited sexually explicit photographs.

Similar to their experiences navigating the in-person party scene, undergraduate women have to deal with sexual harassment and unwanted male advances as normalized costs of participating in hookup culture. For instance, my participants had countless stories of unwanted sexually explicit messages that they attributed to being a consequence of hookup culture. Kelly said that when she was using Tinder,

There were just very blunt people on Tinder for the most part. [Messages] were just like, 'let's have sex' or 'let's bang this week'…there was not a lot of 'hey, how's your day?' It was all about hooking up.

Jennifer also said, "I get messages like, 'hey, nice tits' and I'll immediately un-match." Emma recounted that,

A guy once wrote me a message that ended in ‘do you want to suck my dick’ and I was disgusted. I was literally like, ‘no, just no!’ And here’s the thing… if you want me to sleep with you, be nice to me. Like, be a human being and then, maybe.

Christina also described that "I haven't had many terrible Tinder experiences, but this guy made three separate 'rapey' insinuations and when I called him out on it, he said he was just trying to sext with me." To this, Victoria replied, "I get those types of messages but I don't respond. I'm just like, oh that's a real shame you had to send that." When asked why they think men send those types of explicit messages, Avril said that she thinks that it is "their way of assessing what type of girl you are, the girls who would respond to that might be more open to the things that they're talking about." Many of the women agreed with Avril's theory that men send these types of messages to evaluate whether women are interested in having a hookup. However, of my participants that said they would be interested in seeking a hookup partner on Tinder, they were also offended and turned off by these messages.

Another form of online harassment women commonly experience online is receiving unwanted sexually explicit photos. During our discussions, I learned that social media apps are also used to interact with potential partners in hookup culture. Specifically, the social media platform, Snapchat[[15]](#footnote-15), is a popular app that students use after being matched on Tinder. These apps, however, have their own risks for women. Tinder no longer allows users to send pictures via their internal messaging system and my participants explained that this is, in part, to curb men's ability to send nude photographs and unsolicited ‘dick pics’ to women. The unintended result is that students now often relocate to Snapchat to message and share photos after being matched on Tinder. My participants said they enjoy receiving and sharing funny photos such as memes and GIFs[[16]](#footnote-16) on Snapchat; however, Snapchat is also where women will receive unwanted, sexually explicit photos. As Monica lamented, “Oh my god, the amount of time I get unsolicited dick pics. The moment they get you on Snapchat the dick pics come.” Monica said that she thinks men send these photos to indicate that they want to hookup, though they tend to be perceived as harassing by women who receive them.

There is minimal scholarship on the phenomena of men sending unsolicited dick pics to women. A few scholars have argued that dick pics should be examined within the sexual violence literature (Hayes and Dragiewicz 2018; Waling and Pym 2019). My research suggests that, whether it is their intention or not, men’s distribution of unsolicited photos of their penises to women online is a form of sexual harassment and sexual violence in the digital age. My participants do not think that sharing sexually explicit photos are inherently bad, rather, it is when they are *unsolicited* and *unwelcomed* that dick pics become forms of harassment and represent how men’s sexual desire is privileged over women’s sense of safety. Like all other forms of sexual behaviour and interactions, consent is the key element missing from many women’s experiences of receiving dick pics online.

My participants explained that some people – both men and women - are on Tinder to exclusively seek hookup partners and none of my participants said they would judge someone who only is seeking hookup partners. However, they asserted that there is a thin line between expressing an interest in hooking up and feeling like men were being intentionally offensive or harassing in the messages and photos they send. That my participants desire to be treated with a semblance of respect and kindness in their online interactions seems like it should not be a tall order. Yet, my participants' stories and tone when recounting their experiences of receiving sexually explicit messages and photos reveal that they are an unpleasant but normalized cost of using technology in hookup culture. As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, the connection between sexually harassing encounters and hookup culture reflects the broader problems of how normalized sexual harassment and non-consensual sexual encounters are in hookup culture. For women who are interacting with men online, the traditional, gendered norms that structure the in-person bars and nightclubs are ultimately reproduced in their online encounters.

## The Promise of Producing New Strategies to Mitigate Risks and Help Women feel Safe when meeting ‘IRL’

Thus far my research has revealed that undergraduate women must consistently manage various risks to their safety as they navigate the in-person and digital spaces of university hookup culture. In Chapter Four, my participants expressed that they have a set of strategies to try to stay safe when navigating the in-person hookup scene. In particular, I found that women-centered friendship groups are central to mitigating the risks of the in-person hookup scene and that women struggle to explicitly reject unwanted sexual advances or negotiate sexual consent in the absence of their friendship group.

Now, I will first examine the promise of technology to produce a large set of strategies to help women mitigate risks when meeting online matches in-person or ‘IRL’ (in-real-life). I find that there are three prominent strategies women employ: vetting their matches on social media, remaining engaged with friends online during a Tinder date, and vetting matches in-person by going on a date as opposed to a hookup. Then, I examine some of the new and unforeseen risks for women dating in the digital age. My data cannot say for certain whether the aforementioned strategies are making undergraduate women safer but, based on my participants’ descriptions, these strategies often introduce some new and unforeseen risks. I discuss how, regardless of how effective they are, the need and existence of their strategies illuminates how gender-based risks remain a common and expected possibility for women in hookup culture. In particular, I finish this section by discussing my participants’ fears that sexual violence tends to be perpetrated by ‘strangers’ to emphasize that hookup culture is risky for women regardless of how they are meeting partners or the strategies they employ.

## Strategies to Mitigate Risks when Meeting IRL

In the absence of their women-centered friendship groups, the most frequently discussed strategies to mitigate risks are: vetting their match on social media before meeting in-person, remaining connected to their friends when meeting their matches in-person, and going on a date in a public place as opposed to meeting in a private location for a hookup.

The first strategy undergraduate women employ to try to mitigate risks is vetting their match on social media. My participants describe using platforms like Snapchat and Instagram to evaluate their matches before deciding to meet in-person. Avril explained that she uses social media to “vet my matches… we’re in the Stoney University bubble so I will most likely have a connection with that person. It’s a good reassurance [before] meeting up with someone.” Christina explained, “You’ve got to [go on Instagram] see if their Tinder photos look like them. Then you’ve got to do more research online, like if you have mutual friends. It’s a security thing.” My participants vet their matches by identifying whether they have mutual friends on Facebook, ask personal questions, send photos back and forth on Snapchat, and will review their match’s Instagram pictures to evaluate their online persona. Similarly, in Walker’s (2018) study of women using the website *Ashley Madison*, she finds that women understand the many risks of meeting men in-person for the first time, so the women in her study extensively vet their matches. Walker explained that, “the women in this study approached vetting cautiously and with the awareness that people online are not always who they claim to be” (p. 23). Though vetting is a standard practice, Walker cautions that vetting online certainly does not guarantee a positive or pleasurable in-person encounter.

The second strategy women employ is using apps to stay connected with their friends. One way they remain connected with friends is over text messages. My participants’ described asking their friends to call or text them while they are on a date and, if the date is not going well, their friend will call and pretend that there is an emergency. Carrie said that when she meets someone from Tinder,

I always have a plan B. I always have a friend that knows where I am and I’ll give her a letter and if I text her that letter she will call and be like, ‘you have to come over, something just happened’ and I’ll [say to my date], ‘sorry, I’ve got to go.’

This strategy gives women a plausible and polite excuse to leave a bad date, which makes them feel safer than an explicit rejection.

Another way that undergraduate women use technology to remain connected to their friends when they meet a match in-person is through using a location-sharing app. My participants described using the *Snapmap* feature on Snapchat and the *Find my Friends[[17]](#footnote-17)* app. Melanie explained that,

Thinking about online safety… my best friend met her current boyfriend on Tinder. Before, she called me and said, “I’m going on a date from Tinder. Check my Snapmap for where I am and if you text me and I don’t answer in 5 minutes then call me. If I don’t pick up, call the police and tell them where I am on my Snapmap.

Geri said that one of the limitations of Snapmap is that, “on Snapmap you can only see if you’re logged onto Snapchat, but on ‘Find my Friends’ you can see where your friends are at any time.” Victoria agreed and said, “In my group, we all have “Find my Friends.” When asked to describe Snapmap, Emma explained, “every time you open up ‘Snapchat map’ it will attach [your avatar] to where you are and people can zoom in and see [where you are], which is a little bit creepy.” Victoria giggled and explained that "My friend will text me randomly and be like 'are you at Costco?’ You can see where everyone is.” My participants did explain that they are able to put their Snapmap on ‘ghost mode,’ which makes their avatar invisible to some people or all people on Snapmap and allows them to be selective over who can see where they are. Melanie explained that in her Snapmap, “All of my friends [avatars] are in red jumpsuits, so we can find each other quicker. It’s very handy.” By contrast to the in-person hookup scene I described in Chapter Four, they are not physically with their friends while on a Tinder date, so they try to stay connected to their friends using technology when meeting their online match in-person. My data cannot say for sure whether this strategy is actually protecting women from being assaulted or abducted, but this strategy nonetheless makes my participants feel safer since their friends know where they are.

The final strategy to stay safe when meeting IRL for the first time is to go on a date. At Stoney University, women often insist on meeting their match for a date in a public place, such as at a restaurant, café, or bar. They tend to spend their time talking and getting to know one another as opposed to engaging in heavy drinking and partying at a club or meeting someone in a private location. For instance, Gwen said that,

I think there’s a lot of implicit meaning on where you decide to meet up or how the conversation has been going. If you decide to meet up midday and go to the movies or something, you know they’re not expecting sex. Whereas if you’re more meeting for drinks or at night… then it might be different.

Monica added, “to go off of [Gwen’s point], I feel that if a guy asks me out for coffee or tea as opposed to drinks, I’m more likely to say yes.” Carrie explained that she feels less safe “when there’s alcohol involved” and that it is “nicer when you can sit down and be in an environment that you can have a full-on sober conversation." Alicia responded, "Yeah, you want to get to know them. A coffee works for me on a date [from Tinder]." The hookup scene has been described as a ‘drunk world’ by sociologist Thomas Vander Ven (2011) and I described in Chapter Four that many undergraduate women drink alcohol to 'loosen up'. I expected that my participants would also drink alcohol on a Tinder date for a similar reason of wanting to loosen up or emotionally manage the potential awkwardness of a date. Instead, I find that my participants strategically avoid heavy drinking and sometimes avoid spaces that involve drinking. Though there may be similar risks of non-consensual sexual encounters on dates, the women described being much more cautious about alcohol consumption on a Tinder date.

Further, going on a date was described, matter-of-factly, as one of the most effective strategies to vet an online match before being alone in a private space with them. Even if they ultimately just want to hook up, undergraduate women will still often go on dates to assess the risk of a potential hookup and establish a stronger acquaintance as opposed to meeting in a private space with a stranger. Meeting in a private space is described as highly risky, so a date allows women to further vet their match in a public in-person location. For instance, Nicki said that she sometimes only wants to have a hookup with an online match but when she meets someone IRL for the first time, "I wouldn't off-the-bat hook up with them. I would go on a date with them to get to know them more." By going on a date, they can meet in a public place where they can get to know the person more and with a sense of safety since others are around them. Even for my participants who only want to hook up, a date adds a layer of security and seemingly transforms the stranger they met online to someone known to them, and therefore, someone safer.

Like I discussed in Chapter Three, hooking up has not replaced dating in hookup culture and, in the case of online dating, my research reveals that dating and hooking up are mixed strategically to improve women’s safety. Some of the hookup culture literature also finds that traditional dating practices do tend to lead to better romantic and sexual encounters for women than hookups (Bogle 2008). In my case, I find that when undergraduate women meet online matches in-person, a common way they try to stay safe is by going on a date because they believe it will lead to a safer experience.

## Slipping into the DMs, Bad Dates, and Stranger Danger: The Manifestations of Gender-Based Risks of Dating in the Digital Age

Undergraduate women understand that there are gender-based risks in university hookup culture, including risks of sexual harassment and sexual assault so they have strategies to try to mitigate those risks. Some of these strategies, however, can introduce new or unforeseen risks that require a cost-benefit analysis by the women who employ them and illuminate the diverse manifestations of potential risks that women face in hookup culture.

During our discussions about the *vetting matches strategy*, my participants illuminate how it does help them get to know their match, but what is also inherent to this approach is that sharing personal information is a two-way street. In order to get information, my participants described that they also must divulge personal details of their own lives to strangers online. Women do this by putting personal information on their Tinder profiles or by allowing access to their other social media accounts after matching. This can put women at risk of being stalked or harassed in other online spaces.

Monica explained that one of the consequences of sharing information is that “if your Instagram is on your Tinder profile, they’ll sometimes just slip in your DMs”[[18]](#footnote-18) unsolicited. Victoria also said that all of her friends get many “cringy messages” on social media and insisted that the risks of online dating are “not just about dating apps, it’s also social media” to which Geri replied, “Yeah, I get the creepiest DMs on Instagram.” The strategies that women use to make dating safer can also put them at risk of being cyber stalked or harassed online. It is important to clarify that many of my participants are aware and concerned about providing personal details online, but that they have a cost-benefit frame of mind in which concern about the risks of meeting a stranger outweighs the potential consequences of giving out personal information. Ultimately, their conversations reveal that even the strategies to stay safe can lead to new risks, emphasizing how inherently risky hookup culture can be for women.

Similarly, my participants’ discussions about using a location-sharing app and wanting their friends to know where they are if they have been taken against-their-will by a Tinder date highlights how risky hookup culture is for women. They described this worst-case scenario in a matter-of-fact tone and, to put it lightly, it reflects how women cope with the potentially disturbing and life-threatening possibilities they simply have to accept as a risk of being a woman dating in the digital age. My participants understand the most severe risks to their safety and are doing what they can to stay safe – not necessarily from the harm itself – but from being harmed and then alone without anyone knowing where they are.

Likewise, going on a date is not a guarantee of safety, let alone enjoyment, and my participants had numerous stories of bad Tinder dates. For instance, Christina recounted that "I recently went on the worst Tinder date ever," and described that she met a Tinder match at a restaurant and her date was abrasive and aggressive towards her. She said that,

It was an all-around bad situation. I wanted to get out of there but he [lived in another part of the city and] had parked at my house before the date. As we were walking to my home, he stops me on the side of the sidewalk to kiss me and in my head, I was like 'did you really think it went that well?'… and then he got frustrated that he wasn't being invited in.

Christina described kissing her Tinder date - not because she wanted to - but because it felt like the path of least resistance to end the encounter as quickly and safely as possible. All of the ‘bad Tinder date’ stories were troubling, though my participants clarified that there are varying degrees to how bad a Tinder date can go. For instance, Britney recounted that,

This is an extreme case… a friend went on a Tinder date and it seemed really normal until the end when he was very persistent [about taking her home]. So, because she turned him down, he followed her home. And then she got into her house and her neighbours called and were like, 'someone just broke into your basement, you need to sneak out of the house.’ So her Tinder date broke in and had the intention of wanting to hook up with her. And this guy has done that numerous times.

Going on a date as opposed to meeting for a hookup may make women’s experiences less risky since women who are experiencing a bad Tinder date can make a polite excuse and leave. However, Britney’s description of her friend being followed home after rejecting a Tinder date’s advances is a horrifying anecdote of the very real dangers women might face as they attempt to meet romantic and sexual partners.

Further, a main fear my participants have about online dating is that they are meeting a stranger. My survey respondents – as discussed in Chapter Three - and my focus group participants tend to believe that meeting online is less safe than meeting someone in-person, in part, because they think men who are strangers are significantly more risky than men who are known to them. Melanie said that "I feel like there's pressure" when people meet on Tinder and explained that after a recent Tinder date she went back to his residence and,

I ended up hooking up with him… even though I wasn’t totally into it. I felt like, ‘how do you say, ‘no’? … You feel pressured because you don't want to be that person who is like, 'actually, I may have given you the wrong impression.' You feel bad about that. Beforehand he literally said, 'no pressure, we'll just go back to my room and hang out,' so I thought nothing was going to happen. Then, he just kind of like, jumped me and I was like, ‘okay, I guess this is happening’. I remember that when we had sex that I didn’t want to do it. I made the ultimate decision to have sex, like he didn’t rape me or anything. But I can remember telling him, ‘I don’t really want to have sex’ but eventually giving in to it… I wish that it happened in a different way because it was awkward and I wasn't into it. It's kind of gross.

My participants did recount stories of unwanted sexual encounters with Tinder dates, but despite the prevalence of my participants' concerns about strangers, my research suggests that sex in which consent is pressured, presumed, or absent is not exclusive to people who are meeting strangers on Tinder. For instance, after Melanie described her experience feeling pressured by her Tinder date, Geri said that she had a similar story about visiting a friend in his dorm room under the assumption that they were going to study,

He laid on his bed and I sat at his desk and was like, ‘so, what do you have to study for’ and he was like ‘nothing’…I felt stuck… and we hooked up. But, I’m not saying, like, obviously I didn’t do anything I didn’t want to do but I didn’t think that’s what was going to happen going up there. We made out and did whatever but I didn’t have [penile-vaginal] sex [but] he wanted to, so I was like, ‘I’m going to leave, can you please walk me out,’ and he got all defensive and [inside my head] I was like ‘ok, get me out of here.’ But he was annoyed that he didn’t get sex…he was very mad.

Victoria then tentatively contributed her own experience about a work colleague,

I worked with [this guy] and he was into me and we would flirt over text and Snapchat and stuff. It was just super harmless… [One day,] we were alone together and we started hooking up. It was really slow because I didn't want to hook up with him…I was at his house and we were making out and it kept moving further and further and like right before, he literally started like taking off his pants, and I looked him dead in the face and I was like, ‘I feel like I’m going to regret it’ and he was like, ‘I don’t think you will’… and he didn’t care…and we did it, and literally the whole time…I wasn’t even thinking about what was happening, I was just telling myself not to cry and I didn’t know how to say no and stop it. So, I felt super pressured… and I started crying and I didn’t know why I was crying… I wish that never happened.

My participants’ stories of their non-consensual sexual experiences reflect the challenges and grey areas of sexual consent that women experience while they navigate university hookup culture. Other research has shown that university-aged women feel that agreeing to meet for a hookup is an assertion of consent that cannot be withdrawn (Hirsch 2018). My research supports this finding and reveals how women can feel pressured into sexual activity. My participants’ experiences also suggest that regardless of whether women are meeting strangers from Tinder or someone known to them there are always risks to their safety.

My participants think that knowing their match will lead to a less risky encounter and relied on their capacity to evaluate their matches as a strategy to stay safe, however, research shows that the belief that strangers perpetrate sexual assault tends to be misleading and inaccurate. For instance, data released by Statistics Canada shows that 82 percent of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone known to the victim (Brennan and Taylor-Butts 2004). Analyzing women’s beliefs in the stranger myth is not about judging them or minimizing their fears and concerns; rather, it is about showing how inherently risky hookup culture is for them regardless of what they do. My research suggests that the issue is not with women’s strategies – the issue is the fact that they have to have strategies in the first place and feel that their negative experiences are ‘their fault’. My research suggests that gender-based risks are normalized in hookup culture, resulting in women feeling like they have to engage in a multitude of strategies to stay safe and make peace with the possibilities of worst-case scenarios. My research suggests that individual women cannot change men's behaviour or the culture, so they do what they can to try to protect themselves and their friends.

## Conclusion

This chapter examines the promises of technology's emergence in hookup culture and reveals that technology may allow women to be selective of who they allow into their dating pool, and yet, it is certainly not breaking down traditional gender norms or eliminating risks for undergraduate women. In this chapter, I first show that undergraduate women feel as though they can be selective and that their swiping habits suggest that women are taking control over the types of men they allow into their dating pool. In particular, I find that they are rejecting traditionally gendered, hyper-masculine self-presentations in favour of men who display self-presentations that they interpret as conveying kindness, respectfulness, and playfulness. My research suggests that, since there are more potential partners online, technology can be beneficial since it allows women to be selective and feel comfortable to explicitly reject men they find unattractive or believe are more risky choices.

The benefits of technology, however, are limited and I find that women’s encounters ultimately follow traditional gender norms and include many unsolicited sexual messages. Despite being able to take control over who they swipe left or right for, my findings suggest that traditional gender beliefs still shape women's behaviours and expectations when they interact with matches online. Even when given the opportunity to initiate conversations with men or use apps like Bumble that are designed to give women control over their interactions, they consistently described wanting to be chosen by men. I find that the heterosexual scripts of the in-person hookup scene are present online in which men are expected to message women first like they are expected to approach a woman on the dance floor. As I described in Chapter Three, students are highly concerned about seeming desperate in hookup culture and my participants’ desire to be chosen reflects their understanding of the risks of subverting traditionally gendered scripts and seeming desperate. I also find that my participants experience many instances of harassing and sexist encounters during their interactions online.

Last, I examined the strategies women employ when meeting IRL and discussed some of the risks of dating in the digital age. Their depictions of consistently vetting their matches produced an image in my mind of needing to become amateur intelligence officers gathering intel on their matches and taking extensive precautions when meeting men in-person for the encounter to feel *relatively* safer. Their extensive descriptions of the many strategies they employ as well as their negative experiences also illuminate the diverse manifestations of non-consensual sexual encounters in hookup culture. Ultimately, regardless of whether they are with a Tinder match, a trusted friend, or a colleague, my research suggests that hookup culture is risky for women.

Therefore, I find that technology has the potential to undermine some of the traditionally gendered aspects of hookup culture, but only minimally. My findings reveal how enduring traditional gender norms are in hookup culture in both digital and in-person spaces. In university hookup culture, traditional gender norms structure undergraduate women's experiences and their expectations in ways that contribute to the normalization of non-consensual sexual encounters.

# Conclusion

The three substantive chapters of this dissertation examines how hookup culture has emerged in a different social contexts outside of the dominating fraternity culture on U.S. campuses and illuminates the broader social context of university hookup culture. Each chapter examines different research questions and makes unique contributions. Taken together, they collectively paint a dynamic picture of women’s experiences parting, hooking up, and dating at Stoney University in the current digital age. Here, I summarize the main findings of my chapters, discuss their contributions to the literature on gender and sexuality, and I discuss the limitations of my research and propose objectives for future research.

In my mixed-methods chapter on undergraduate women’s experiences dating and hooking up at Stoney University, “**Hookup Culture at Stoney University**,” I draw on my survey and focus group data to investigate whether hookup culture has emerged in a different social context from the dominating fraternity culture in the United States and student’s use of new dating/hookup technologies in this culture. First, I illustrated the characteristics, social norms, and practices of university hookup culture at Stoney University. Similar to the U.S. context, survey respondents and focus group participants had varying definitions of what constitutes a hookup, though undergraduate women generally agree that ‘something sexual’ will happen. Though the sexual practices varied, I consistently found that the social norms of hookup culture necessitate being casual and non-committed to avoid seeming desperate during and after their sexual encounters. In addition, I find that dating practices and hookup practices coexist in hookup culture, though dating practices are still expected to follow the social norms of hookup culture that necessitates ‘keeping things casual’ even if women want to be in a committed relationship. Similarly, fraternities do not govern the social landscape of hookup culture at Stoney University, and yet, I find a similar hookup culture has emerged in my Canadian case. Therefore, fraternities may lead to some of the negative aspects of hookup culture in the U.S. context, but they do not explain hookup culture's emergence. Last, I investigated the role of technology in hookup culture at Stoney University. I find that dating apps, Tinder in particular, are widely used. Technology, however, is not impacting the social norms of hookup culture that necessitate casualness. Rather, the use of these technologies mirrors the social norms of hookup culture.

By changing the social context from the U.S. context to analyzing hookup culture in a typical Canadian university, I make three contributions to the sociological understanding of hookup culture. First, by moving the analysis to a campus with no significant fraternities, I show that hookup culture is not dependent on this social institution. Second, despite some notable differences between Canada and the U.S. context, I do not find differences in the social norms governing hookup culture at Stoney University. I confirm that students are engaging in dating practices, however, dating practices nonetheless follow the social norms of hookup culture. Finally, I find that new dating/hookup apps are integrated into hookup culture, suggesting that hookup culture scholars should focus their attention on student’s use of these new technologies.

In “**Girls Night Out: Women-Centered Friendship Groups in University Hookup Culture**” I showed that women-centered friendship groups are vital to understanding the broader social context of hookup culture. Through examining the rituals and practices of a typical night out in Stoney University's hookup scene, I demonstrated the importance of women-centered friendship groups to women’s enjoyment, sense of safety, and to the maintenance of hookup culture itself.

First, I showed that women spend significant portions of their evenings dedicated to a women-centered bonding ritual called 'the pre' that immensely contributes to their sense of pleasure and enjoyment. I find that women support each other through 'getting ready' rituals in which they drink, socialize, and share their 'sexpectations' – their intentions of meeting hookup partners - and establish social roles before entering the hookup scene. Their stories of the women-only pre were consistently described through broad smiles and relaxed laughter, a striking difference from their future descriptions of the hookup scene where their pursuit of a fun night out inherently exists alongside risks like sexual harassment and unwanted sexual touching, These findings reveals how important this women-centered ritual is to women's enjoyment and to the maintenance of hookup culture. Second, I illustrated how undergraduate women take care of each other during their nights out, so they actively manage their alcohol consumption to 'loosen up' while not getting too drunk and negatively impacting their friend's night. Last, I analyzed the risks of participating in the hookup scene. I find that their pursuit of fun and enjoyment comes alongside potential risks and that traditional gender beliefs shape their interactions on the dance floor. In my conversations with undergraduate women, they illuminate the commonality of harassment and unwanted touching in the in-person spaces of hookup culture. In consideration of these risks, women take on different social roles and engage in group-level strategies to have fun, connect with desirable hookup partners, and try to keep each other safe.

This chapter makes important contributions to the current literature. First, I reveal that women-centered friendship groups are not only a principal social group that make hookup culture feel safer and more enjoyable, but they are also what facilitates and maintains hookup culture. I provide evidence that hookup culture research needs to change the level of analysis from the dyad of men and women to the larger social context of hookup culture and to reframe their focus to understanding hookup culture as constituted by the broader social context of friendship groups. My research illustrates that women participate in hookup culture as a collective, preparing to go out together, protecting each other from predatory male behaviours on the dance floor, brokering hookups for their friends, and advocating for the safety of their friends throughout the night. Further, by examining the traditional gender norms that guide men and women’s interactions in the hookup scene and how women take on different role to protect one another, I revealed that it is common for women to experience non-consensual sexual encounters in hookup culture to the point that these experiences are viewed as inevitable.

In “**The Promises and Perils of** **Dating in the Digital Age**” I reveal that, on one hand, the social practices of online dating allow women to remove men who display hyper-masculine self-presentations from their dating pool through the swiping process. Through the swiping process, women can be selective about who they match with online. These aspects of online dating allow women to feel they have control over the people they engage with. On the other hand, my participants’ narratives reflect how traditional gender beliefs and gendered sexual scripts still shape interactions online and sexist or harassing encounters are certainly not eliminated in online spaces. I also examined women’s experiences meeting online matches in-person. I find that my participants use various strategies to stay safe. Through discussing these strategies, they highlight how risky hookup culture is for women.

Ultimately, this chapter contributes needed research on technology in hookup culture. I reveal how that technology's emergence in hookup culture may have some potential benefits, but that the promise of technology to help undermine some of the traditional gendered norms of the in-person hookup scene, on the whole, is limited. Furthermore, my analysis of undergraduate women’s experiences using apps shows that undergraduate women have internalized the notion that they simply must accept sexual harassment and violence as a normalized price to their participation in hookup culture.

This dissertation makes a number of important contributions to the current sociological literature on hookup culture, but as with all research, it is not without its limitations. First, my data is not generalizable and my assertions are specific to this particular study. Hence, I am not able to make broad claims about the state of online dating and hookups in Canada or about hookup culture in Canadian universities in general. This limitation, however, provides an exciting starting point for future research that expands the survey data collection to universities Canada-wide to collect a nationally representative sample of students that would help produce a more statistically generalizable dataset. Second, in this dissertation, I focused solely on women’s experiences and perspectives. I was, therefore, unable to make direct comparisons between men and women, hear men’s accounts of how they perceive hookup culture, and understand men's intentions. Future research should endeavor to collect qualitative and quantitative data on undergraduate men.

Last, I recognize that I may receive criticism for not analyzing data directly from apps and websites like Tinder or OkCupid. However, my intention is not to quantify usage, evaluate women's online profiles, or engage with users directly on apps and websites. Although these approaches would certainly yield interesting results, the purpose of this project was to understand the shared process that women go through when they date and hookup in the in-person and digital spaces. I am aware that popular apps and websites go in and out of fashion and become outdated as new apps and more advanced technology emerge. I hope that the focus I have chosen will make the relevance of this research less app-specific and time-sensitive. By focusing on women's experiences and perspectives rather than specific apps and websites, this research on modern romance and sexuality will hopefully stand the test of time regardless of which website or app is in vogue.

Alongside research to address some of the limitations of this dissertation, there are three lines of inquiry that I also hope to pursue in the future. The first directly emerges from this study and will examine what goes on behind the closed doors of hookup culture. In this project, I intend to use the Dating in the Digital Age Survey and focus groups data to investigate women’s experiences and perspectives about their private sexual experiences. I will examine what sexual practices and activities women are engaging in during their sexual encounters. I will discuss the emotional implications of having sex that – by the social norms of hookup culture – must be ‘casual’ and ‘emotionally meaningless.’ I will also examine whether women are enjoying their consensual sexual encounters, their perspectives on good verses bad sex, and discuss their experiences of non-consensual sexual encounters.

Second, in order to more broadly understand how technology is impacting the social norms and trends in how couples meet and sustain relationships in Canada, a follow up project I hope to conduct in future will investigate how emerging adults are dating in the digital age *after* university to contribute new knowledge and build new theories on contemporary relationship formation in Canada. Outside of the university context, research suggests that emerging adults are remaining single longer, delaying marriage, and/or selecting common-law partnerships (Klinenberg 2012). These changes in relationship norms may be a result of emerging adults navigating love and relationships in a "singleton" culture that encourages living alone and remaining single, particularly in urban areas (Klinenberg 2012). This singleton culture may be explained by research that finds that young adults are deferring commitment and marriage to complete their education and pursue their career (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Klinenberg 2012). If marriage rates are on the decline -- or at least in delay -- and singletons and common-law couples are on the rise, it is likely that the ways individuals organize their sexual lives are different from previous generations. Further, it is important to investigate whether this singleton-centric dating culture is a ‘digital dating culture’ shaped by the norms of dating apps and digital spaces. Understanding how and why emerging adults use technology in their dating, sexual, and romantic lives can help sociologists understand more about the changing norms of relationship formation and the de-traditionalization of marriage and families. Therefore, for this project, I would extend my mixed-methods dissertation research to examine how emerging adults in Canada are dating in the digital age after/outside of university to learn how new dating technologies are impacting current relationship practices, social norms, and risks to safety and privacy.

Third, significantly more research is needed in the area of gender-based violence and sexual violence prevention in the university context to properly address and make effective policy suggestions to deal with sexual and gender-based violence on university campuses. I began conducting my focus groups around the same time that the New York Times and the New Yorker were exposing Harvey Weinstein for a number of accusations of sexual misconduct and the ‘Me Too’ Movement was taking off. Although this topic seems timely, there have been many past examples of gender-motivated violence on university campuses that have made mainstream headlines. Some examples of gender-motivated violence include the École Polytechnique Massacre in which an anti-feminist misogynist murdered fourteen women in December of 1989 in Montreal and the six students at the University of California at Santa Barbara who were killed by a man who had left manifestos with his intentions to murder sorority women as revenge against women who rejected him. There have also been many cases of sexual violence on campus that have also made headlines. For instance, Emma Sulkowicz became famous for carrying her fifty-pound mattress around campus until her graduation due to her belief that Columbia University mishandled her rape allegations against a fellow student – furthering the debate how campuses themselves deal with sexual assault. These debates were also reflected by the 2015 case, People V. Turner, that made international headlines when a Stanford University student, Brock Turner, was caught sexually assaulting an unconscious woman by two fellow students and ultimately served only three months in jail. His father infamously said it was “a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action.” The result of his case spurred public outrage while highlighting the commonality of rape culture on campus, class and race privilege, and the difficulties women face seeking justice after sexual assaults.

My dissertation research reveals that gender-based risks for women in university hookup culture are very real and alarmingly normalized. My participants had countless stories of sexual harassment online, pressured intimate encounters on Tinder dates, and often felt uncomfortable or unsafe rejecting unwanted sexual advances when alone with men. Therefore, another important line of inquiry for future research is to investigate the diverse forms of sexual assault, sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual encounters, and negotiations of sexual consent experienced by men and women at Canadian universities.

My research puts into question the effectiveness of ‘giving consent’ as the policy solution to ending sexual violence. I find that women are uncomfortable explicitly saying ‘no’ and rejecting men and often ‘give consent’ without wanting to engage in a sexual encounter. For instance, my research suggests that – regardless of whether they meet in-person or online- when they are alone with men they are at risk of giving sexual consent that is pressured, reluctant, or completely absent. Even when women do explicitly say ‘no’ to an unwanted sexual encounter, women commonly described men not hearing or respecting their rejection. Many of the social practices and rituals they engage in revolve around minimizing risks. The sexual culture of universities today necessitates casualness and avoidance of seeming desperate, which potentially hides and normalize experiences that might otherwise be viewed through the lens of sexual violence. Although I expected to find that sexual violence existed on university campuses, what I tended to hear from my participants were nuanced stories that highlight the normalcy of sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual advances and touching. What my research illuminates is that sexual violence and harassment are normalized in the sexual culture of universities in ways that mask some of the more nuanced forms of sexual violence, which are often not what we may traditionally think of when we think about ‘rape’ and ‘sexual assault’.

Although these stories were only briefly touched upon in my dissertation, while listening to my participants often heartbreaking and deeply concerning stories about reluctantly consenting to unwanted sex with a friend or co-worker, I was struck that they consistently emphasized that it was their decision ultimately to have sex and that experiences should not be considered rape or sexual violence. This also complicates our understanding of sexual violence and consent. My participants were very clear about not framing their experiences as a sexual assault, often describing that they ultimately gave in to having sex and therefore it is their fault or responsibility for giving in. During these types of discussions, it was sometimes difficult to separate my feelings about their experiences being groped on the dance floor, sent harassing messages online, or being pressured into sex from how they viewed their experiences. Many of the stories were told matter-of-factly, often through laughter.

Eradicating sexual violence on college and university campuses has been a longstanding goal of feminist activists, gender and sexualities scholars, and sexual violence prevention policymakers. Understanding how to deal with sexual assault survivors and perpetrators has been an ongoing challenge for university policymakers and lawmakers alike. The high rates of sexual assault in general, the ineffectiveness of the judicial system in dealing with sexual assault, and underreporting of sexual assault demonstrate that this is a social problem that requires far more analytical attention to propose nuanced, multi-faceted strategies to effectively impact sexual violence on campus. The recent SHIFT project in the United States has begun to more deeply investigate the nuances of sexual violence on campus, labeling and identity shifts after an assault, and sexual consent practices (see Hirsch et al. 2018b for an overview). This is an important start to understand the various dynamics of sexual violence on campus but far more multi-method and multi-site research need to be conducted and is an area in which I intend to conduct research in future.

To conclude, sociological research on hookups has insufficiently analyzed hookup culture in social contexts outside of the U.S. context with its dominant fraternity scene, the role of women-centered friendship groups, and the role of technology in hookup culture as all impacting the social organization of sexuality among undergraduate students who have grown up in this digital age. Despite the limitations, this project pushed the boundaries of what is currently understood about women’s experiences in hookup culture. By doing so, this dissertation extended the current knowledge within the sociology of gender and sexualities by exploring the broader social context of university hookup culture and revealing how sexuality is becoming reimagined and reorganized as technology continues to encroach on the most intimate parts of people’s lives.

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# Appendix A. Demographics

## Table 1. Survey Demographics (N=196)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Race/Ethnicity[[19]](#footnote-19) | Frequency | Percent |
| Arab | 2 | 1 |
| Black | 11 | 5.6 |
| Chinese | 1 | 0.5 |
| Filipino | 20 | 10.2 |
| Latin American | 4 | 2 |
| Mixed Race | 14 | 7.1 |
| South Asian (e.g. East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.) | 1 | 0.5 |
| Southeast Asian  (e.g. Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian, etc.) | 5 | 2.6 |
| West Asian (e.g. Iranian, Afghan, etc.) | 10 | 5.1 |
| White | 128 | 65.3 |
| Sexual Identity | Frequency | Percent |
| Heterosexual | 150 | 76.5 |
| LGBQ+ | 46 | 23.5 |
| Living Situation | Frequency | Percent |
| On Campus/Student Housing | 145 | 74 |
| Off Campus (Family) | 51 | 26 |
| Age | Frequency | Percent |
| 18 | 40 | 20% |
| 19 | 34 | 17% |
| 20 | 26 | 13% |
| 21 | 56 | 29% |
| 22 | 21 | 11% |
| 23 | 6 | 3% |
| 24 | 4 | 2% |
| 27 | 4 | 2% |
| 28 | 2 | 1% |
| 29 | 3 | 2% |

## Table 1. Survey Demographics (N=196) (Continued)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Faculty | Frequency | Percent |
| Social Sciences | 144 | 73.5 |
| Humanities | 18 | 9.2 |
| Business | 4 | 2 |
| Engineering | 2 | 1 |
| Health Sciences | 9 | 4.6 |
| Science | 15 | 7.7 |
| Arts and Science | 4 | 2 |
| Year in Undergrad | Frequency | Percent |
| First | 59 | 30.1 |
| Second | 28 | 14.3 |
| Third | 37 | 18.9 |
| Fourth | 51 | 26 |
| Fifth+ | 21 | 10.7 |

## Table 2. Focus Group Demographics (N=21)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Race/Ethnicity | n |
| White | 16 |
| Other (Filipino, South Asian, and West Asian) | 5 |
| Sexual Identity | n |
| Heterosexual | 16 |
| LGBQ+ | 5 |
| Year in Undergrad | n |
| First | 6 |
| Second | 2 |
| Third | 9 |
| Fourth | 3 |
| Fifth | 1 |
| Age | Mean |
|  | 20.6 |

The focus groups were made up of 21 undergraduate women at Stoney University. Due to the sample size, I have not displayed the characteristics and demographics of individual participants. I have also attempted to obscure any identifying information to ensure my participant’s privacy is upheld.

# Appendix B. ‘Swiping,’ ‘Snapping,’ and ‘Slipping into the DM’s’: The Language of Dating in the Digital Age

An ***app*** is short for "application" and refers to a specific type of software program. Typically, apps refer to software used on smartphones and mobile devices, including Androids, iPhones, and iPad's. Apps also are increasingly being formatted for online use via web browsers.

***DMs*** is Internet slang that stands for a ‘direct messages.’ On some social media platforms, such as Instagram, there is a tab that allows users to privately message any other users that have their DM settings open to other users of that platform. The slang expression, ‘*slip into the DMs*’ or ‘*slide into the DMs*” refers to sending someone a direct, private message on a social media app.

A ***meme*** is an image, often taken from the news, pop culture, or other media and are appropriated by individuals on the Internet who add text to create a catchphrase or slogan associated with the image that is often intended to be humorous, satirical or sarcastic.

A ***GIF*** is an animated image individuals create from other media that they share online.

***JSwipe*** is a dating app created for Jewish individuals looking for Jewish sexual or romantic partners.

***HER*** is a dating app created for lesbian, bisexual and queer identifying women.

***Bumble*** is a dating app in which women contact men first in heterosexual interactions. It was created to attempt to make online dating safer for women. There is no rule about who can message first for same-sex connections.

***Snapchat*** is a mobile social media app. Snapchat allows users to send messages (called Snaps) comprised of text, videos, and, most often, photos. Snaps are made available to the receiver for only a short period of time and disappear immediately after they are viewed.

***Snapmap*** is a feature on Snapchat that allows users to share their location with selected friends on the app. On Snapmap, users see a map of any location they choose or can look for their friend’s location, and they can see their friend’s online avatar based on where they are currently located on the map.

***Find My Friends*** is an Apple based location app that allows users to located friends and family from their Apple IOS devices that uses the GPS location of the other users iPhone. Once users have been approved by both parties and connected, the people connected on the app can track their friends location without them being notified.

***Swiping*** is the practice of moving your finger horizontally across your phone's screen when using a dating app like Tinder to reject or match with other Tinder users. Users ‘swipe left’ to reject someone and 'swipe right' to consent to be matched with someone.

***Tinder*** is a free app used to meet sexual or romantic partners. To use Tinder, individuals download the Tinder app on their smartphone and create an account through their Facebook account or their phone number. Once users create an account, Tinder allows users to indicate their preferred gender, age range, and location range of potential partners. Tinder users can also connect their profile to other social media platforms, like Facebook or Instagram. If a user signs up for Tinder using their Facebook account, Tinder will inform them if the other users have a mutual Facebook friend. Users can choose up to five pictures that are visible one-by-one at the top of the screen and a short ‘bio’ about themselves below the photos. Users tend to include minimal information in their bio, such as their name, age, how far away they are from other users, and perhaps their university, job title, and the number of mutual Facebook friends they have. Some other apps, like ***Hinge***, can have slightly longer bios but Tinder's format is fairly standard among dating and hookup apps. Once users have set up their profile, they can see other users profiles through the process of swiping. Users can swipe to the right of the screen to express "yes" they are interested in matching and swipe left to express that they are not interested in matching. If two users swipe right on each other, that is called a match. Once users are matched, they can message one another directly on the Tinder app. Users can also decide to exchange information and leave the Tinder app to continue their discussion on a different social media platform, like Snapchat, or through texting messaging.

1. Unlike the United States, colleges and universities are two different types of institutions in Canada. Universities are four-year post-secondary institutions that offer undergraduate (Bachelor’s) degrees in academic and professional programs, such as sociology, biology, history, and business. Colleges offer education and training in the trades and/or applied fields and tend to offer more specialized and career-oriented courses than universities. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bumble is a dating app in which women have to make the first contact with men. It was created to attempt to make online dating safer for women. There is no rule about who can message first for same-sex connections (see Appendix B). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An app is short for "application" and refers to a specific type of software program. Typically, apps refer to software used on smartphones and mobile devices, including Androids, iPhones, and iPad's. Apps also are increasingly being formatted for online use via web browsers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On dating and hookup apps like Tinder, images of nearby Tinder users emerge on your phone screen and the user can “swipe right” on their touch screen to communicate interest in another user and “swipe left” to reject them. Although this is a physical action, the term swiping has also been called a cultural term to refer to interest or rejection. (See Appendix B). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some examples include television shows like *Master of None* and movies like *Newness*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This study was reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. All student participation was voluntary. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This currently is changing with the new nationally representative ‘Sex in Canada’ project spearheaded by Drs. Tina Fetner, Melanie Heath and Michelle Dion at McMaster University. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The legal drinking age differs provincially in Canada. Ontario, where this study was conducted, has a legal drinking age of 19 years old. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A trigger is something that sets off a memory, flashback, or sensation that returns a person to a traumatic event. I have had training working with and talking to women who have experienced sexual assault. As the moderator of the focus groups, I was cognizant of potential triggers to maintain a safe and inclusive space for participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Students were able to select all options. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tinder is a free app used to meet sexual or romantic partners. See Appendix B for a detailed description of the app. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Students were able to select all options. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Swiping’ refers to the practice of moving your finger horizontally across your phone's screen when using a dating app like Tinder to reject or match with other Tinder users. Users ‘swipe left’ to reject someone and 'swipe right' to consent to be matched with someone. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. My participants often used the language of ‘dating apps,’ however, women are not using apps like Tinder to just go on dates. They can be used for dating, hookups, and seeking committed partners. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Snapchat is a mobile social media app. Snapchat allows users to send messages (called Snaps) comprised of text, videos, and photos. Snaps are made available to the receiver for only a short time and disappear immediately after they are viewed. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A meme is an image, often taken from the news, pop culture or other media, and is appropriated by individuals on the Internet who add text to create a catchphrase or slogan associated with the image that is often intended to be humorous, satirical, or sarcastic. Similarly, a GIF is an animated image that individuals can create from other media that they share online. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Snapmap* is a feature on Snapchat that allows users to share their location with selected friends on the app. On Snapmap, users see a map of any location they choose or can look at their friend’s location, and they can see their friend's online avatar-based on where they are currently located on the map. Similarly, *Find My Friends* is a location-sharing app that allows users to locate friends and family from their Apple iOS devices that uses the GPS location of the other user's iPhone. Once users have been approved by both parties and connected, the people connected on the app can track their friend's location without them being notified. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 'DMs' is Internet slang that stands for 'direct messages.' On some social media platforms such as Instagram, there is a tab that allows users to privately message any other user that has their DM settings open to other users of that platform. The slang expression, 'slip into the DMs' or 'slide into the DMs’ refers to sending someone a direct, private message on social media. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. There were no survey respondents who identified as Canadian Aboriginal/Indigenous (e.g. First Nation, Inuit, Metis), Japanese, or Korean. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)