



Hooking Up & Women

By Maggie Higgins

Hookup is one of the most common and confusing terms being thrown around on college campuses today. You can ask students, staff members, faculty and researchers to define the word and you will certainly get the same number of different definitions as people you asked. Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both*, writes:

Hooking up can consist entirely of one kiss, or it can involve fondling, oral sex, intercourse or any combination of those things. It can happen only once with a partner, several times during a week or over many months. Partners may know each other very well, only slightly or not at all, even after they have hooked up

regularly. A hookup often happens in a bedroom, although other places will do: dance floors, bars, bathrooms, auditoriums or any deserted room on campus. It is frequently unplanned, though it need not be. It can mean the start of something, the end of something, or the whole something. (2007)

To define the hookup is to strip it of its meaning; the very essence of the hookup is that it is so vague and open to its participants' interpretations. By not defining the hookup, students are able to give it meaning when they want it to mean something and dismiss it as meaningless when they don't want it to mean something (Stepp, 2007).

The ability for each individual to interpret their own meaning can become especially destructive when feelings are involved. While one student might define a sexual encounter as meaningless, their partner may have attached a great deal of meaning to it and expect a relationship to ensue. However, hooking up is commonly utilized as a way to relax, have fun and enjoy no-strings-attached sexual play, a nice study break if you will, it is

Staff Article

hard to know when it's for fun and when it's for real. The new rules and social pressures are changing the landscape of dating and mating for students, and no one is certain how to navigate these treacherous times. For college women, this creates especially difficult circumstances, as they are taught from young age to be a "virginal whore," and sex is an act to be both guarded and feared.

Peggy Orenstein (1994), in her book *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap*, talked to eighth graders who fear sex and the "slut" label it is certain to bring. In an interview with one junior high student, Orenstein uncovers a great truth in the hookup culture: "It was like I said 'yes,' because I didn't say 'no.'" The notion that females must verbally state that they do not want to engage in a sexual acts is false. If women think silence is consent, and men take silence as consent, both genders are in great danger for the legal repercussions of their actions. Silence is not recognized by courts as consent for sexual engagement. In addition to the potential legal

consequences, young girls are learning early that to engage in any sexual behavior is to be a whore, and once they start, stopping is impossible (Orenstein, 1994).

The line between "popular" and "slut" is drawn in the sand for females of all ages. The pressure placed on women to be both sexy and virginal is incredible. Girls learn as young as junior high that they must, or at least appear willing to, engage in sexual acts in order to increase their social capital. The media tells them that they should appear "raunchy, willing, wild," yet remain pure and wholesome (Levy, 2005). Further complicating the matter is that while girls are expected to be sexually willing, they are also taught that they should not enjoy or seek pleasure from hooking up. To desire or expect pleasure from a hookup is socially unacceptable and frankly, unladylike. Levy (2005) writes, "it would be 'weird' for a teen girl to pursue sexual gratification." Sexual desires are seen as natural in boys, but "containable" in girls (Orenstein, 1994). Furthermore, Tolman (1994) argues that girls

Staff Article

are trained to not express desire; therefore, any preparations for sex, such as obtaining birth control, are frowned upon, because it would mean “an admission of desire,” and female sexual desire is rarely a factor in adolescent girls’ sexual behavior (1994). Finally, for girls sex is a submissive act: “from the very beginning of their experiences as sexual beings they [girls] are conceiving of sex as a performance you give for attention, rather than something thrilling and interesting you engage in because you *want to*” (Levy, 2005).

In a study on college women’s attitudes toward sexual intimacy Shannon K. Gilmartin (2006) found that college women dissociate themselves from the sex acts they engage in as they progress through college. Because women learn early in their college careers that “sex is no big deal,” they develop strategies to protect themselves emotionally. A common strategy is to divest emotionally from the act of sex. Gilmartin found that freshmen women were likely to say that sex was “no big deal,” meaning that they could go without it and that

they had no strong desires either way. Often, sex was not viewed as “worth the risk” for these women; they categorized sex as risky; they spoke of the fear of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, emotional dependency, and being labeled a whore. One year later these same women felt sex was not serious, but rather that it was comfortable, fun, emotionally detached from love, and, most importantly, “incidental.” These women said sex “just happens,” as if they had no control, no agency, over their bodies and their sexual encounters.

Unfortunately, while this may have saved their feelings in the short term, it is emotionally damaging in the long term. Sexual agency is “a sense of autonomy over one’s body and desires –is an essential component of a healthy adult self” (Orenstein, 1994). By removing themselves emotionally from the sex act, as well as engaging for their partner’s pleasure, and claiming that sex “just happened,” they take no ownership of the sex

Staff Article

acts, their sexuality, and ultimately, their bodies.

The reality of the hookup culture and the situation young women are in is this: girls are taught as pre-teens they should be sexy and wholesome. As early as junior high girls know that they should hookup, or at least appear willing to hookup, as per the media and social pressure. They are also told if they do engage in sex acts they will be labeled a whore and shunned. All the while, girls' physical development brings natural sexual curiosities and desires but they are not to act on their own sexual urges. Sexual urges are for males, and females should use their sexuality to please males, but most certainly not to explore their own wants (Pipher, 1994). This trend continues through high school and by the time they reach college they have spent six to eight years trying to be sexy and sexually willing, while maintaining purity and managing the many fears associated with sex. All the while, they have suppressed their own sexual desires

because they were taught female sexuality is not to be explored.

The development of sexual identity in a culture that places the "sexy virgin" on a pedestal is confusing to young women and damaging to their development as healthy, sexual beings (Tolma, 1994; Orenstein, 1994; Levy, 2005). Sexuality is a normal and natural part of the female self (Levy 2005; Tolman 2005; Orenstein 1994). Unfortunately, young women have never been told it is okay to embrace their sexuality, so they have little to no understanding of their own wants, needs, and frankly, their own bodies. The hookup culture can be interpreted a number of ways; "depending on your point of view, they're [women] either mimicking the male behavior – a kind of 'I'll see your bet and raise you one' – or enjoying their bodies in ways their mothers never did" (Stepp, 2007). While some women may feel liberated and empowered by their sexuality, most young women have been so confused for so long they are incapable of truly enjoying and taking ownership of their

Staff Article

sexuality. This is why they dissociate from sex (Gilmartin, 2006), and essentially, dissociate from this part of themselves.

Women should be cognizant of the social pressures to hook up, the media images that promote the sexy virgin, and we should try to see beyond these images. We must find and praise strong, female role models who have a healthy sexual identity and connect our students with them. Most importantly, we should not blame ourselves for the culture we are trapped in; instead, we should expand our own knowledge and break the cycle of damaging social pressure that hurts young women.

References

Gilmartin, S.K. (2006) "Changes in Women's Attitudes Toward Sexual Intimacy." *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 16,(3), 429-454.

Levy, A. (2005). *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of the Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press.

Orenstein, P. (1994) *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap*. New York: Anchor Books.

Pipher, M.P. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Stepp, L.S. (2007). *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*. New York: Riverhead Books.



© All staff articles are used by permission of the respective author(s). Copyright belongs to the University Life Café. No part of this may be used without authorization.