“I DON’T HOOKUP, I NEVER HAVE, BUT MY FRIENDS, THEY ALL DO”: TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES OF COLLEGE HOOKUP CULTURE

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by

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Resisting gendered stereotypes…………………………………..23

VI. DISCUSSION…………………………………………………………26

Theoretical Contributions……………………………………………………26

Pragmatic Contributions……………………………………………………………29

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION………………………………………30

VIII. CONCLUSION……………………………………………………………31

REFERENCES……………………………………………………………………………32

APPENDIX

A. TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS…………………………………………………………34

B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL…………………………………………………………35

C. TABLE OF FINDINGS……………………………………………………………37
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Introduction

A majority of both college men and women report they have participated in at least one hookup during their time at college (Aubrey & Smith, 2013). The term “hookup” lacks a standard definition and is widely left up to individual interpretation; however, it has key characteristics, such as noncommittal expectations and casual sexual practices, which set a specific cultural mindset for those involved (Currier, 2013). Hooking up marks a change in social trends around how college-aged students choose to engage with one another in a sexual manner, shifting towards hooking up without the precursor of a relationship. For college women, in particular, hooking up is a deviation from the gendered expectation to enter into a defined, committed relationship; that is, hooking up allows college women greater access to sexual agency (Aubrey & Smith, 2013).

Heteronormative hookup culture is grossly gendered, highlighting a dichotomy between how men and women experience it (Currier, 2013; Rupp, Taylor, Regev-Messalem, Fogarty, & England, 2014). Yet, although hookup culture has grown in popularity, extant research has remained focused on normative sexualities to the detriment of non-normative sexualities. This gap in the research is problematic because for queer women, the intersectionality of gender and sex potentially creates its own unique context within the larger culture of hookups (Kazyak, 2012).

To this end, the current study focuses on queer women’s perceptions of hookup culture, their understanding of similarities and differences between heteronormative and
queer hookup culture, and their personal experiences and attitude about the culture and how it relates to sexual identity exploration and formation. Analysis of in-depth interviews with queer college women point to intersecting tensions that exist in queer hookup culture, including: (a) a tension between the pragmatics of exploiting sexual freedom and dissociating from hookup culture; (b) a tension between unbounded identity tourism and bounded bisexuality identity; and (c) a tension between conforming to and resisting gender stereotypes.

In the following sections, I highlight the literatures on queer theory and hooking up among college students. I then introduce findings of a qualitative case study that utilizes semi-structured interviews to investigate queer women’s understandings, perceptions, and experiences of hookup culture on college campuses. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical contributions and pragmatic implications of this research.

**Literature Review**

**Hooking up among college students**

Hooking up is a current trend that has grown in popularity among college students, replacing the traditional dating and courtship practices of prior eras (Reid, Elliot, & Webber, 2011). As the climate shifts away from committed, long-term romantic relationships, both male and female college students are engaging in hookups (Currier, 2013). College students are more prone to have casual sexual interactions before or beyond the context of a relationship rather than dating first and deciding later whether or not to participate in intimate correspondence (Reid et al., 2011). Indeed, Aubrey and
Smith (2013) report that anywhere between 50% and 85% of college women and 60% and 85% of college men have been involved in a hookup.

Hookups generally share some common underlying assumptions. Hookups are perceived to cause minimal emotional damage, provide entertainment and amusement, allow for control over one’s sexuality, and facilitate sexual freedom, all under the presumption of a casual “no strings attached” relationship; these underlying assumptions of hookups underscore an actual culture rather than simply recognize a set of behaviors (Aubrey & Smith, 2013). However, the term “hookup” is also somewhat ambiguous which allows room for alternative experiences and interpretations (Currier, 2013). In brief, there is the potential that not all subpopulations of students will perceive hookup culture in the same way.

Further, hookup culture is arguably gendered, serving men and women differently and rendering gender-specific social consequences (Currier, 2013; Rupp et al., 2014). For instance, hookups among college students typically take place in an alcohol-fueled environment, such as a fraternity party or a bar where loud music encourages sexualized dancing and dim lighting interferes with visibility in a crowded space (Martin, 2015; Rupp et al., 2014). In heteronormative hookups, men are also the dominant focal point and are commended for their participation whereas women who participate are primarily objectified and held to a double standard for their “scandalous” behavior (Rupp et al., 2014). Yet despite this double standard, college women are still veering away from the formalities of dating and engaging in informal and noncommittal intimate interactions in
ways that are beneficial to their personal interests and lifestyle development (Aubrey & Smith, 2013).

More specifically, two prominent components of hookup culture that may entice female participation include control over one’s sexuality and the sexual freedom that participants have in their ability to experiment (Aubrey & Smith, 2013). For college women especially, hooking up can facilitate feelings of power and the freedom to explore sexual inclinations and self-identity (Aubrey & Smith, 2013). Whether a woman is already aware of her same-sex sexual preference or is in the process of coming to understand herself differently, Aubrey and Smith mention (2013) that the hookup scene can be used as a means of exerting sexual freedom while diminishing negative repercussions possibly attached to such behavior (Rupp et al., 2014).

However, most research about how women experience hookup culture focuses on the social double standards, unintended negative emotional consequences, lack of sexual satisfaction, and failure to cultivate a committed relationship (Reid et al., 2011). This is potentially problematic, because as Reid et al. (2011) suggests, women may benefit from hooking up by using it as a way to maintain independence. Similarly, Aubrey and Smith (2013) argue that women can feel empowered by a hookup. However, current research repeatedly recognizes hookup culture as a predominantly heteronormative domain with a narrow gendered script.

In one notable exception, Rupp et al. (2014) explore how queer college women at politically progressive college campuses on the West Coast experience hookup culture.
Findings point to an open platform for women to explore their sexuality “beyond the closet” (Rupp et al., 2014). In this context, women can exercise more sexual fluidity and undo gender norms by reaching beyond binary sex and gender categories (Rupp et al., 2014). The authors contend that research about the college hookup culture scene should explore non-normative sexualities. More specifically, they call for research that considers how queer women engage in hookup culture in different regions of the country because the intersection of sexuality and gender performance can vary in style and acceptability among urban and rural, and progressive and conservative communities (Kazyak, 2012). The current study seeks to address this gap by focusing on queer college women in a Midwest college town.

In the next section, I elucidate the underlying assumptions of queer theory which guides this study.

**Queer theory**

There are three critical assumptions of queer theory that guide this study. The first assumption concerns sexual variance, which challenges the concept of normativity, specifically heteronormativity (McDonald, 2015). By heteronormativity, I mean the dominant cultural endorsement and acceptance of heterosexual interactions and relationships as being “natural” (McDonald, 2015). Historically, “queer” has been used as a negative term to define something as different, wrong, or abnormal, and heteronormativity has been used as the dominant society’s standard to weigh that which
is “good,” “normal,” and “moral” (McDonald, 2015). Queer theory problematizes this heteronormativity.

Second, queer theory addresses how heteronormativity manipulates and controls the Western world by upholding a dominant gendered standard with binary sexual categories (Rupp et al., 2014). Queer theory deconstructs this hegemony of gender norms in which men are permitted and expected to enact hegemonic masculinity and women are meant to be submissive and traditionally feminine (Currier, 2013; Rupp et al., 2014). To this end, queer theory challenges these stringent categories by suggesting that identities are fluid, flexible, and organic in nature (McDonald, 2015). Heteronormativity is rooted in the categorization of gender roles, however, Butler (2006) contests that these identities themselves are an illusion. That is, gender is a constructed performance that dominant cultural norms conflate with biological sex. Western culture has designated certain practices in each heterosexual binary sex category and deemed them as “natural” to that gender (Butler, 2006). For example, masculinity is defined in terms of being “strong, ambitious, successful, rational, and emotionally controlled” and femininity is constructed around the characteristics of being “physically attractive, emotionally expressive, nurturing, interested in aesthetics, and concerned with people and relationships” (Wood, 2015, p. 22). Based on these descriptions, actions and interests deemed appropriate for each gender category uphold standards for how “real men” and “real women” should behave and think (Wood, 2015, p. 22).
Third, queer theory adopts a primarily anticategorical conception of identity. That is, identities should be viewed as partial and multiple (McDonald, 2015). From this perspective, Western society’s traditional categories, which recognize people as either heterosexual or homosexual, are constraining and serve to funnel behaviors into binary groups with expected norms within each category (McDonald, 2015). The division of sexuality into two polarizing groups based solely on people’s biological sex and gender identity limits options and fails to represent the continuum of sexuality and identities (Tyson, 2015). As mentioned by Tabatabai (2012), even the Kinsey scale, meant to represent the fluidity and mobility of sexual identity, problematically reinforces categorization by putting homosexuality on one side and heterosexuality on the opposite end of the scale.

To combat this inclination to funnel people into narrow categories, queer theory introduces the idea of a fluid dynamic to one’s sexuality, claiming that sexuality is ever-changing and pieced together into a person’s self-concept (Tyson, 2015). With the deconstruction of sexuality categories and the dismantling of masculine/feminine gender roles, queer theory promotes individuals’ creativity and exploration into unconfined sexual identities (Tyson, 2015), making this a perfect theory to illuminate how queer women understand hookup culture.

**Summary and Statement of Research Question**

In summary, extant research about hookup culture has privileged a heteronormative context, unpacking the ways in which heterosexual college students
interact in the culture and the implications this has on their sexual practices. The current study expands on Rupp et al.’s (2014) work by exploring the understudied population of queer women within the larger context of hookup culture. Guided by queer theory, this study relies on the following research question: (RQ) How do queer college women understand hookup culture? The next section addresses the methodological approach used to investigate this research question.

**Method**

Qualitative research requires the researcher to submerge themselves into the context of their field of interest (Tracy, 2013). The purpose is to try to understand the culture at hand and increase the base of knowledge for future inquiries about different cultures and populations (Tracy, 2013). The main strength of qualitative research is its phronetic approach which focuses on self-reflexivity, thick description, and context (Tracy, 2013). Qualitative research, as explained by Tracy (2013), is ideal for those who are interested in investigating an area that sparks personal interest. Qualitative research also works to propose hidden issues and lay the foundational groundwork for future structured research methods (Tracy, 2013). Most importantly, high quality qualitative research focuses on participants’ experiences, personal viewpoints, opinions and meanings, all taken in consideration to understand the surrounding world, cultures, and contexts (Tracy, 2013).

This qualitative study is an investigation of queer women at two Midwest universities. The study focuses on unpacking the implications and experiences of hookup
culture on college campuses as understood by queer women in the student body. Launched during the Spring 2016 semester, the study analyzes the participants’ exploration of their sexuality at college, their perceptions of other queer women in regards to hookup culture, and the contrasting heteronormative and societal expectations for gender and sexuality.

**Participants**

This study includes a total of 11 participants. At the time of this study, 5 participants identified as female, 4 identified as cis-female, and 2 identified as non-binary/fluid/female. In regards to sexual identity, 3 participants identified as bisexual, 3 identified as lesbian, 4 identified as queer, and 1 identified as queer/polysexual. This set of participants was composed of 10 undergraduates and 1 graduate student. Seven of the participants identified their race/ethnicity as White/Caucasian, 2 identified as African-American/Black, 1 identified as White-Latina, and 1 identified as Caucasian-Italian. See Appendix A for Table of Participants.

**Procedures**

The 11 in-depth interviews were conducted from September 2016 to February 2017. First, to recruit participants, I constructed a flier advertising the nature of the research study. The fliers were distributed around highly populated areas at a large Midwest university campus and the surrounding community. Fliers were also strategically distributed to select classrooms, student organizations, and residence halls. For example, several were posted outside of gender studies lecture halls and LGBTQ
student meeting locations. Additionally, email notifications were sent to the PRIDE! and LGBTQ Student Center listservs to recruit participants. I also employed snowball sampling to recruit the remainder of the participants. As a result, 1 participant was recruited from a Midwestern university different from the other 10 participants. I identified initial participants that fit the criteria of the study and then asked them to refer a friend, colleague, or acquaintance (Tracy, 2013). This method is typically used to gain access to hidden populations (Tracy, 2013).

The interviews employed a semi-structured protocol and were recorded using an independent recording device. To ensure confidentiality, private rooms were utilized while the interviews were being conducted. Data consisted of 11 in-depth interviews that yielded 124 pages of single-spaced pages of text. Interviews lasted from 28 to 61 minutes with an average of 45.5 minutes and focused on participants’: (a) personal background and sexual identity formation; (b) perception of hookup culture on college campuses; and (c) personal stories and opinions about involvement in hookup culture. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and masked for confidentiality. All procedures were approved by my university’s institutional review board. See Appendix B for Interview Protocol.

Data were analyzed using a two-phase inductive technique that includes open and axial coding (Tracy, 2013). With the research question in mind, I went through all transcripts line by line to generate a list of open codes, and then collapsed these open codes into broader categories. Queer theory was the guiding theory, focusing on the
deconstruction of heteronormative boundaries and recognizing the fluidity and layering dynamics of sexual identity. I documented the relationships among open codes to develop the broader themes that explore queer women’s ability to exert sexual freedom while participating in hookup culture on a college campus. Sample open codes include queer hookup culture characteristics, purpose of hookup culture, and generational considerations. The open coding process required multiple modifications as a coding scheme was formulated.

During the axial coding process, I identified connections among the codes to develop a cohesive analysis of the data. I particularly focused my attention on tensions, contradictions, and ironies in the data. For example, participants repeatedly mentioned a tension between freedom to explore sexually and disassociating from hookup culture. Many participants also expressed support for experimentation, however, they struggled to fully accept such openness because this experimentation potentially conflicted with bisexuality. This raised speculation about people’s motivations and intentions for experimentation.

Over the duration of the interviewing and analytic processes, I engaged in memoing, or systematic note-taking about the analysis, to connect information, unveil relationships, and create themes (Tracy, 2013). I utilized multiple strategies to ensure the generated findings represented the data. First, I considered the plausibility of my findings through comparison to previous research. For example, extant research states that hookup culture is a platform for women to exert more sexual control and freedom and
participants in this study supported that notion. Second, I accessed participants’ tacit knowledge, or “the issues that are assumed, implicit, and have become part of participants’ common sense” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). For instance, participants were familiar with the term hookup culture and were able to readily give their personal thoughts on what a hookup entailed. Third, I consulted with my advisor about each step of the data gathering and analytic processes. She was familiar with the study but could also offer an objective view of the data.

**Findings**

The purpose of this study was to analyze queer college women’s perceptions and comprehension of college hookup culture. To this end, this study was guided by the following research question: (RQ): How do queer college women understand hookup culture? The analysis revealed three overlapping and intersecting tensions: (a) a tension between the pragmatics of exploiting sexual freedom and dissociating from hookup culture; (b) a tension between unbounded identity tourism and bounded bisexuality identity; and (c) a tension between conforming to and resisting gender stereotypes. See Appendix C for Table of Findings.

**Sexual Freedom-Disassociating Tension**

The first tension highlights how participants enjoy the freedom to explore their sexual identity within the context of hookup culture. However, several participants simultaneously denounce their direct involvement or enjoyment from participating in a hookup and express interest in relationships instead. In other words, participants report
feeling that college is a sex positive environment, meaning sexual interactions are encouraged and not perceived negatively writ large, however, they also reject their personal involvement and interest in hookup culture. Therefore, this tension has two corresponding sub-themes that articulate (a) the pragmatics of exploiting sexual freedom; and (b) how participants dissociate from hookup culture.

Exploiting sexual freedom

The first part of this tension refers to how participants view hookup culture as a practical means of exploring their sexual identities to better understand their personal needs, partner preferences, and queer identity development. In regards to hooking up, heterosexual students may also benefit from reduced parental supervision, however, for queer students, being away from parents at college allows them to engage sexually with other queer students, helping to further develop their own sexual identity via queer exploration. When asked why hookup culture exists on college campuses, many participants mention how it further aided them in understanding their sexual identity. For example, Rowan, who identifies as a lesbian, says:

I didn’t know I was into women until I had a sexual experience with a woman. If I hadn’t had the freedom to experiment and to fully be able to be like, okay, I like women, I’m okay with liking women. It opened the gates for me.

Rowan credits her sexual enlightenment to the sexual freedom she experienced in hookup culture which allowed her to confidently confirm a queer identity. Other participants mention the influence of college on their participation in hookup culture. For instance,
when asked where the idea of hookups came from, Brennan, who identifies as a lesbian, states:

From being horny teenagers and wanting to get straight to the sex, and I mean, a lot of it just comes from being on a college campus, honestly. I mean, you have so much freedom, you have so much free time, it’s, and I mean we all have desires, we all have needs, like it’s just something that happens a lot more easily now than it used to.

College is a first step of independence for many students beyond the watchful eye of parents and guardians. This type of environment can allow for increased freedom of choice and actions, particularly in terms of sexual activity (Aubrey & Smith, 2013). By this, I mean that the college experience can facilitate sexual identity exploration, especially for those who may identify as something other than heterosexual. In the following quote, Ainsley, who identifies as a lesbian, attributes hookup culture to several factors including being away from parents while at college:

I think it’s being on a college campus, you’re around all your peers of the same age, there’s no parents around, there’s freedom, and you’re trying to figure out how to navigate yourself as an adult. It’s like, I have all this freedom, what do I do with it? I can do whatever I want, I can have sex with all these people, it’s fun, and yeah, that’s why.

Ainsley talks about the sexual freedom college students are able to exert as a byproduct of being on a campus where students are learning to become independent and taking control of their lives and decisions. In hookup culture, students are able to explore their sexual desires, especially those queer students whose parents may have not been supportive of their sexual identity.
Last, Hadley, who identifies as queer, mentions how changing generational attitudes and the intersectionality of queer hookup culture, together, provide a space for queer individuals to more prominently explore and understand their sexuality. She states:

“so I think that’s why hookup culture, queer hookup culture for our generation is much like, because our generation is the number one generation of coming out so you’re gonna get all of that trying to figure out who you like, trying to figure out who you want. Just like dating, trying to figure out what you like, trying to figure out who you want, but you need to figure that all out for your sexual identity, too.

In sum, this part of the exploiting sexual freedom-disassociating tension addresses how queer women report being supportive of the idea of exerting control over one’s sexual interactions and using this time at college as a platform for personal expansion. Participants recognize the importance of having the freedom to explore one’s sexuality in order to develop a sense of identity, and emphasize that a lack of parental supervision and the endorsement of sexual expressiveness creates the appropriate environment for queer women to develop and explore their sexual identities more liberally.

*Disassociating from hookup culture*

The disassociating part of the tension reveals contradictions; some participants admitted to engaging in hookup culture while also downplaying their experience(s) and interest in hookup culture. That is, many participants report that they prefer dating culture over hookup culture, and although they do not condemn others’ behaviors, they implicitly relay a negative attitude towards hooking up.

Several participants report that although they had participated in a hookup themselves, they prefer to not be associated with hookup culture. Hadley says, “I don’t
hookup, I never have, but my friends they all do.” However, Hadley then comments about one hookup she had:

…the first time we slept together, then never again. But I wasn’t, it’s weird because that was the first time that I’ve ever done something like that and it’s funny because it’s the last experience I’ve had at all.

In this way, Hadley talks about her hookup experience but also reinforces the notion that it is not her usual type of behavior. Several participants held the same stance in that they do not prefer hookups but have in fact participated in hookups themselves or endorsed the behavior for others. Finley, who identifies as queer/polysexual, expresses her personal interest in a type of middle ground interaction that seems to lie between hookups and relationships:

I thought hookup culture might be for me because I’m really not interested in a relationship, but being intimate with people I don’t really know kind of makes me uncomfortable. And it’s not that I believe that it’s wrong, I don’t think that it’s for me. So I prefer to get involved with people I know pretty decently well but not in the confines of a relationship.

Here Finley articulates her ambivalence about hookups in that she does not want to be in a committed relationship, but she does want sexual intimacy. In this way, she describes this grey area between hookup and dating cultures as a transgressive space at the margins of each.

Taken together, the exploiting sexual freedom-disassociating tension suggests that hookup culture allows queer women to explore their sexual identities and preferences, however, multiple participants sent conflicting messages about their beliefs and personal behavior. In brief, participants express their support for the unabated freedom of sexual
exploration while simultaneously rejecting their own participation in the very culture that encourages that type of behavior.

**Unbounded Identity Tourism-Bounded Bisexuality Tension**

This tension articulates how participants accept sexual fluidity as an unbounded identity that transcends hetero/queer boundaries, but also recognize bisexuality as a bounded identity with defined characteristics. This tension explores a clouded area where the distinguishing boundaries lie between (a) unbounded identity tourism; and (b) bounded bisexuality identity in hookup culture.

**Unbounded identity tourism**

Sexuality exists on a spectrum that suggests that sexual identities are not stagnant but rather flexible and change over the course of a person’s lifetime (Tyson, 2015). In this study, participants want to recognize the experiences of those who are bi-curious and questioning, attributing this to a sense of “identity tourism” in which individuals fluidly move along the queer spectrum. At the same time, this type of identity ambiguity is met with skepticism because fluid sexual practices, for women at least, are more aligned with heterosexual hookup culture.

In specific, participants discuss bi-curiousity in queer hookup culture as unbounded, sexual identity tourism that does not transgress heteronormative hookup culture. For example, Ainsley believes bi-curiousity is valid, but she explains her hesitation with its fluidity because of its heteronormative undertones:
I don’t think it should be like an identity just to excuse yourself like, “hey, I occasionally make out with girls at a party” and then, like, go back to your boyfriend the next day. I don’t think that’s how it should be but some people in my experience have done that but I think that’s just a mislabeling of the identity.

Here, bi-curiousity is an unbounded sexual identity. Ainsley mentions that a woman might engage sexually with another woman but then return to the safety and boundedness of heterosexuality. In a second example, Rowan cautiously supports experimentation:

I struggle with someone identifying as bi-curious. I think that if you are bi-curious, you’re just experimenting…and experimenting is awesome and experimenting is cool, but I think bi-curiousity implies a certain amount of tourism.

By tourism, she means experimenting with a queer identity without actually intending to commit to it and not experiencing any of the oppression that queer people endure. Emery, who identifies as bisexual, discusses her discomfort with bi-curiousity:

I guess it kind of feels like someone is dabbling in my lifestyle, in my life…what I have to deal with on a consistent basis, but they can just choose to like go back to their own life and not really have to deal with consequences…

Here Emery addresses the temporality and the safety of sexual identity tourism encapsulated in bi-curiousity.

To make sense of bi-curiousity, some participants want to know more about the intentions of individuals who embody this unbounded sexual identity. For instance, Keegan, who identifies as queer, says, “If you can, if you’re able to, I guess, split up a hookup for the attention of others from legitimate experimentation. Which I’m not sure where the line is there.” Here, she mentions the difficulty in discerning the line between heteronormative and queer hookup culture, an area that creates this tension around the bi-
curious domain. Several participants want to accept the fluid sexual nature of the queer identity spectrum, but are hesitant due to its implications. Emery adds:

You do what you think that you need to do, so like there’s like this part of me that struggles to want to be open to it and there’s this part of me that’s like, there needs to be some structure here. But I also recognize it’s a spectrum and whatever.

Despite personal hesitations, Emery still upholds the legitimacy of sexuality existing on a spectrum, however, identifying as bisexual herself, she expresses protectiveness over her identity and a need for defined boundaries between her identity and other fluid sexual behavior. In a second example, Carson, who identifies as queer, sympathetically explains why there might be resistance to this kind of sexually fluid behavior that can manifest in queer hookup culture:

So it kind of makes sense to maybe tour there and experiment. Like, I feel like that’s also a thing that has like a bad rap, especially amongst bisexual people who are like, hey, like I live this identity and you’re just shopping here for a while. But I also think that it’s not easy for everyone to just automatically know like this is who I am, this is what I’m attracted to. So like, I can see where trying out different labels for yourself and just different experiences makes sense.

Here Carson points to the advantages of trying out different types of unbounded sexual identities through tourism but also recognizes how this may be threatening to those who identify as bisexual. In sum, this subtheme articulates how some participants struggle to make sense of unbounded and ambiguous bi-curiousity.

**Bounded bisexuality identity**

The second part of this tension addresses the bounded nature of bisexuality and how it can serve as a pathway into queer culture. Indeed, many participants discuss the
“bi-bridge” in queer culture. For example, Rowan describes the bi-bridge as a space for queer women to move beyond the closet and into a queer identity:

Living in the bi-bridge gave me freedom to not identify as any, like have my sexual identity and also be political, but then I also…I don’t want it to seem like I believe that you know, multi-sexual people don’t exist. Because I mean my girlfriend is bi and so… I don’t want to invalidate people who identify as bi or pan or any kind of multi- sexual, cause that does exist, and it’s incredibly valid, but I think for a lot of monosexual or homosexual, monosexual people, the bi-bridge is a comfortable place to live for a little while while you’re still trying to figure everything out.

Thus, the bi-bridge allows women to move into assuming a queer identity and participate in hookups with other women in queer contexts. In this way, it is acceptable for those women who are coming out to take on a bounded queer identity that by nature, leaves room for gender preference flexibility. Lane, who identifies as queer/gay, further explains bisexuality as a bounded identity that coexists as a pathway into queer culture:

So those people who are “I’m gay for sure” or “I’m a lesbian for sure” may think it’s easier to come out as…bisexual because you have one foot in the door, you know, and one foot back in the closet or something.

Here Lane explains how someone might take on a bisexual identity to transition into queer culture. This is in contrast to bi-curiosity which offers a space to experiment with queer life in a heteronormative context. Another participant shares her experience with hookup culture and the realization that she did not identify as heterosexual, so she experimented with the bi-bridge. Rowan shares:

And it wasn’t until I then tried to be intimate with a man that I was like, “woah, this is not it.” And so then I started identifying as bisexual for a little while because it’s a, you know, a bridge for a lot of people who identify as entirely homosexual. And then I realized that I was just never going to be with a man.
Like ever. So then, and I was like, you know what? I’m a lesbian, and so I’m a lesbian.

Rowan talks about how she experienced bisexuality as a transitional step into the queer community. She mentions how the bi-bridge is helpful to a lot of people who may identify as queer but are not yet, or if ever, entirely committed to a monosexual lifestyle. Instead of ambiguously experimenting, she accepted the bounded identity of bisexuality and gradually developed sexual identity within the queer domain.

To summarize, in identifying along the queer spectrum as bisexual, an individual is able to enter into the queer community and begin exploring themselves within the bounds of a queer identity that allows for flexibility. The bi-bridge exists as a queer space that facilitates a queer identity, but unlike bi-curiousity, which is tied to heteronormative hookup culture, bisexuality is a bounded identity that exists within the queer community.

**Conforming–Resisting Gendered Stereotypes Tension**

The third tension articulates how participants both conform to and resist gendered stereotypes with regard to hookup culture. To be specific, dominant gendered messages that restrict women’s sexuality may undermine queer women’s freedom to engage in queer sex. These messages fail to acknowledge women as sexual beings, and as Wood (2015) reports, society expects women to be more traditional and focus on “people and relationships” over casual sexual encounters. At the same time, queer hookup culture normalizes sexual activity for women and provides a space to resist limiting gendered
stereotypes. To this end, this tension focuses on how participants feel pressured to (a) conform to stereotypes, but also (b) resist gendered stereotypes.

*Conforming to stereotypes*

This subtheme points to limiting gendered stereotypes about women’s sexual behavior. That is, heteronormative hookup culture privileges and reveres men’s sexual activities. In this context, heterosexual men’s sexuality is the standard by which all sexual behaviors are measured. Here, women are discouraged from being overtly sexual and often denied sexual agency (Reid et al., 2011). Within heteronormative culture, college women are hooking up at an increasing rate and using hookup culture as a platform to exert more sexual initiative and control, however, this participation in hookup culture comes with a staggering gendered double-standard that has negative social implications for women (Aubrey & Smith, 2013; Reid et al., 2011).

First, participants mention that heteronormative hookup culture serves men and women differently and, although queer hookup exists in its own space, the gender expectations for women permeate across borders to affect queer women (Currier, 2013; Rupp et al., 2014). Indeed, participant commentary suggests the perception that they are constrained by heteronormative standards and stereotypes of sexuality. Keegan hints at the heteronormative assumptions of hookup culture that deny women sexual agency:

I think it’s really interesting and really great that you’re looking into queer female hookup culture specifically because I think typically when we think of queer people hooking up, we think of gay men and their non-monogamy and we don’t necessarily think of lesbians as sexual beings, because we think of, or I guess bisexual women or pansexual women, whatever, women who have sex with other
women, we don’t necessarily think of that as hookup culture, we tend to think of gay men as queer hookup culture.

According to Keegan, even in queer hookup culture, men are recognized as more sexual beings than women. Finley explains the difficulty for queer women who are at the intersection of gender and sexuality: “I think it’s harder for women to find other women to hook up with. I don’t exactly know the exact reasons for that. Maybe it’s the overall societal expectations that women don’t want sex as much as men do…” In a similar vein, Rowan comments upon the unique challenges for queer women in terms of gender socialization and stereotypes:

“But yeah, so I think that for LGBT women, not only are you struggling in the fact you’re LGBT but you’re also struggling with that you’re a woman and so socialization…but for women there’s just more baggage attached to it because of just that intersectionality.

Taken together, gendered norms that privilege heterosexual men’s sexuality and erase women’s sexuality are thought to be potential barriers for women, especially queer women, to freely engage in hookup culture.

*Resisting gendered stereotypes*

At the same time that participants feel pressure to conform to stereotypes, they also seek out spaces of resistance. That is, participants embrace queer culture as a sexually open and accepting domain, where casual sexual interactions are permitted and encouraged. For example, Keegan offers her insight:

“I guess it’s kind of a form of rebellion and I think millennials, in general, and I guess any young generation, even the baby boomers when they were in their 20s were rebellious. But it’s kind of a way to say “fuck you” to the social
constructions we have and to the different expectations we’re given about what our relationships would look like.

Here Keegan supports the potential of hookup culture to push back on traditional gendered norms and expectations.

In a second example, Jules, who identifies as bisexual, embraces hookup culture because it privileges the flexibility of her and other queer women’s behavior. She explains that hookup culture has opened a door for college women to be sexual beyond the confines of a relationship: “It really allows people to deviate from that culture that was like the only existing culture.” Jules mentions how hookup culture lets women explore beyond these gendered confines that the dominant culture creates.

This type of permissibility holds certain implications, specifically for queer women. Participants comment that hooking up is even more normalized within the queer community, which presents the perfect atmosphere for queer women to push against both gender and sexual stereotypes. Participants explain that queer people are more comfortable discussing their sexuality, existing as sexual beings, and maintaining a more positive perspective on sexual interactions. Here Ainsley talks about the queer community and its rejection of societal standards:

I feel like we’re more carefree [queer people] and don’t like putting restrictions on what we can and can’t do because we’re already getting that from the majority of society…we’re more welcoming and more accepting, like, yeah, we’re more sexual beings and we’re going to do what we want with it and you can’t tell me what to do.
In this way, Ainsley explains that the normalization of sexual activity within queer hookup culture can be a liberating tool to resist the pressure society places on queer women. Jules echoes this sentiment, saying:

I feel like, maybe within queer hookup culture, it’s something that’s a little bit more normalized…I feel like in queer hookup culture it’s something that is a little bit like, hookup culture's a little bit more understood and accepted I guess…I don’t want to make the assumption that in queer hookup culture, there’s a bit more communication but in my experience, queer people are a lot more comfortable talking about like their sexuality and like their sexual expression in general. So I feel like that might contribute to a little bit of a healthier hookup culture I guess, or maybe it’s just the more prominent one.

Jules explains that in her experience of hookup culture in the queer community, not only is hooking up more prevalent, but it holds a different value, recognized by the queer community as an integral component of the culture. For queer women, this opens up an acceptable space for them to embrace their sexuality and subvert dominant gendered stereotypes.

In summary, queer hookup culture offers a unique space where queer women both conform to and resist gendered stereotypes. Dominant gendered messages about women’s sexual activity are derived from heteronormative standards yet affect queer women’s engagement in queer hookup culture. However, queer women have the chance to resist these gendered messages by immersing themselves into the queer community where such sexual behaviors are supported.
Discussion

Hookup culture is gaining in popularity on college campuses as it transgresses boundaries of sexuality. For queer women, hookup culture opens a platform for exploration and experimentation with sexuality. This study utilizes a tension-centered approach to better understand how queer women perceive, understand, and interact with hookup culture on college campuses. In the following sections, I outline the theoretical contributions and pragmatic implications of this study.

Theoretical Contributions

This study’s most significant theoretical contribution is the identification of gender differences between queer and heteronormative spaces in regards to women’s understanding of hookup culture. In other words, heteronormative hookup culture and queer hookup culture share similarities in regards to baseline characteristics but are also different in terms of enactment and implications. Aubrey and Smith (2013) reiterate how hookups are generally understood to be noncommittal, unemotional, casual sexual interactions, but there are distinct differences between heteronormative and queer hookups, especially in terms of queer women. As the exploiting sexual freedom-dissociating from hookup culture tension explains, queer women are enacting sexual freedom but some retain hesitations about committing to hookup culture practices. The dominant heteronormative environment privileges heterosexual people and their experiences (McDonald, 2015). This allows for men and women in mainstream heteronormative culture the luxury to freely select hookup partners from the larger
population. However, for queer individuals, the selection pool is considerably smaller and more difficult to identify in public spaces. For queer women, the population is another fraction size of that queer group. Thus participants navigate this tension between sexual freedom and disassociation with constrained caution as they exploit the benefits of hooking up while also hesitate to be associated with these practices.

Additionally, this study reveals key distinctions in gender roles and expectations in relation to hookup culture. As reported by Rupp et al. (2014) and Currier (2013), heteronormative hookup culture is influenced by hegemonic values, emphasizing the male’s pleasure and superiority and leaving women as a secondary consideration with the risk of increased negative social stigmatization. For instance, participants in this study perceive heteronormative hookup culture as “dominating” and holding a double standard for the stigmas attached to men and women; men are ultimately praised for the amount of hookups they engage in whereas women are shamed for the casual sexual interactions (see also, Aubrey & Smith, 2013). For queer women engaging in hookups with other queer women, the potential for a more egalitarian balance of power exists between the partners. To this end, in contrast to heteronormative hookups, queer women hookups are more normalized within the queer community and gender roles are more evenly shared between partners.

Relatedly, this study’s second theoretical contribution pertains to how queer women transgress hookup and dating cultures to enact a third space where a median of marginal overlap exists for people to balance sexual freedom with emotional connection.
Hookup culture has grown in popularity and become the dominant culture on college campuses, however, dating culture still exists in conjuncture with hookup culture (Reid et al., 2011). Participants in this study report a transgressive space where hookups and dating bleed into one another. Traditional dating and relationships are based on courtship practices and described by participants as having more rules and guidelines for appropriate behaviors and expectations. Hookup culture deconstructs those rules. Yet, the lines between dating and hooking up are blurred as participants report that hookups often become emotional. This is potentially problematic to those who are expecting a “no strings attached” arrangement, but if both parties mutually develop feelings, the potential exists for a relationship to form. A third, middle-ground option can also manifest. “Friends-with-benefits” may accurately describe the space that lies between the two cultures where two friends can become intimate but remain outside of an explicit dating relationship, or a hookup situation where partners continue to engage in casual sex but develop a friendship as well. For many participants, the desire to engage more freely in sexual experiences reflects Aubrey and Smith’s (2013) claim that hookup culture allows women to take control over their sexual interests, but as noted in this study, this grey area between dating and hooking up also allows queer women to retain an emotional connection.

The third theoretical contribution of this study acknowledges the unique positionality of queer women who can be doubly marginalized by both gender and sexuality. This study expands understanding of the intersectionality between identifying
as queer and being a woman who participates in college hookup culture. The conforming-resisting gendered stereotypes tension reflects how queer women are caught between society’s gendered conditioning of women’s sexual behaviors and the sexual acceptance of the queer community. To this end, as hookup culture grows in popularity and more women willingly participate for their own sexual initiative, this study aims to increase the knowledge base for how the intersection of these two factors create a platform for queer women to capitalize on the tension that supports social change while advancing their own identity development (Aubrey & Smith, 2013). This unique dynamic allows queer women to combat the stereotypes and pressures of identifying as a woman while simultaneously exploring their sexuality in a positive space.

Pragmatic Contributions

This study offers several pragmatic implications for how queer college women perceive and understand hookup culture on college campuses. Existing as more than just a trend or for entertainment purposes, hookup culture is a strategic tool queer women utilize to explore their own sexuality and reassert their sexual agency.

First, several participants endorse hookup culture as a grounds for experimentation and identity development, although some personally held reservations about their own involvement. Participants advise queer women coming into college to use protection and communicate about their comfortability level with a partner before participating in hookup culture. Women who are unsure about their sexuality should seek out queer contexts, like clubs and organizations, to find other queer women to connect
and explore socially and sexually. Queer college women should not feel pressured to become involved in any sexual interaction they are not comfortable with, but they should also not shy away from the freedom and experimentation that hookup culture provides if they are interested. Conversations with sexual health educators should be ready to engage queer students around this topic, engaging in discussions about experimentation, boundaries, and consent.

Second, the unbounded nature of bi-curiousity lends itself to identity tourism. Participants in this study endorse freedom of sexual exploration, however, bi-curiousity is met with skepticism within the queer community due to its heteronormative ties. For women who are genuinely interested in queer identity experimentation and development, identifying as bisexual and potentially experiencing the bi-bridge is a path to further understand one’s sexuality. It is important for the queer community to acknowledge this grey area through events, programming, and interactions. For instance, round table discussions could focus on the bi-bridge, bi-curiousity, and bisexuality to promote understanding and perspective-taking. Further, discussions could also focus on the constraining stereotypes queer women face in terms of sexuality and gender.

Limitations and Future Direction

This study has some limitations, namely around number of participants and demographics of participants. Future research should capture the perspectives of more queer women and further investigate the role that race and ethnicity can play in mitigating and/or exacerbating the tensions outlined in this study. What is more, adding
the perspectives of queer men could offer points of comparison and divergence with the findings of this study.

**Conclusion**

Investigating queer women’s experiences with college hookup culture can expose different tensions that reflect how sexual orientation affects one’s perception and understanding of hooking up. This study provides a starting point to further explore the transgressions of hookup culture on college campuses, moving beyond heteronormativity by unpacking how queer women engage with and understand hookup culture in the context of queer spaces.


### Appendix A: Table of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Quinn</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>African American/Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Lane</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Cis-female</td>
<td>Queer/gay</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Finley</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Non-binary/fluid</td>
<td>Queer/polysexual</td>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hadley</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>White Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Jules</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Keegan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Emery</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Cis-female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Ainsley</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cis-female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>White-Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Rowan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Carson</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Non-binary/female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Caucasian/Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Brennan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cis-female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Study Title: “I don’t hookup, I never have, but my friends, they all do”: Transgressing the boundaries of college hookup culture

Principal Investigator: Dr. Suzy D’Enbeau

Student Researcher: Lauren Belack

Demographics
1. How old are you?
2. Where do you go to school?
3. What year in college are you?
4. What is your major?
5. Where are you from?
6. What is your race/ethnicity?
7. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

Gender Identity and Development
8. How do you identify?
   • Gender identity?
   • Sexual identity?

9. Have you always identified that way?
   • When did you first identify that way?
   • What was “coming out” like for you?

Hookup Culture
10. What do you think of when you hear the label “hookup culture”?
   • Where did these ideas come from?


12. What has your experience with hookup culture been like while in college?
   • Did these experiences involve any same-sex interactions?


14. Do you perceive any disadvantages of hookup culture? Please explain.

15. Do you think there is such a thing as queer hookup culture? Please explain.
• Do you think there are differences between “straight” and “queer” hookup culture? Please explain.

16. What advice would you give other queer women about hookup culture?

17. Is there anything you would like to add about hookup culture, in general?

18. What else would you like to add about how queer women experience college hookup culture?

19. Is there anything you wish I would have asked you that I did not cover?
### Appendix C: Table of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tension</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Exemplary Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Freedom-Disassociating Tension</strong></td>
<td>Pragmatics of exploiting sexual freedom</td>
<td>“I think it’s being on a college campus, you’re around all your peers of the same age, there’s no parents around, there’s freedom, and you’re trying to figure out how to navigate yourself as an adult. It’s like, I have all this freedom, what do I do with it? I can do whatever I want, I can have sex with all these people, it’s fun, and yeah, that’s why.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dissociating from hookup culture</td>
<td>“I don’t hookup, I never have, but my friends they all do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unbounded Identity Tourism-Bounded Bisexuality Tension</strong></td>
<td>Unbounded identity tourism</td>
<td>“I struggle with someone identifying as bi-curious. I think that if you are bi-curious, you’re just experimenting…and experimenting is awesome and experimenting is cool, but I think bi-curiousity implies a certain amount of tourism.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bounded bisexuality identity</td>
<td>“And it wasn’t until I then tried to be intimate with a man that I was like, woah, this is not it. And so then I started identifying as bisexual for a little while because it’s a, you know, a bridge for a lot of people who identify as entirely homosexual. And then I realized that I was just never going to be with a man. Like ever. So then, and I was like, you know what? I’m a lesbian, and so I’m a lesbian.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conforming-Resisting Gendered Stereotypes Tension</strong></td>
<td>Conforming to gendered stereotypes</td>
<td>“But yeah, so I think that for LGBT women, not only are you struggling in the fact you’re LGBT but you’re also struggling with that you’re a woman and so socialization…but for women there’s just more baggage attached to it because of just that intersectionality.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resisting gendered stereotypes</td>
<td>“I feel like we’re more carefree [queer people] and don’t like putting restrictions on what we can and can’t do because we’re already getting that from the majority of society…we’re more welcoming and more accepting, like, yeah, we’re more sexual beings and we’re going to do what we want with it and you can’t tell me what to do.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants were asked open-ended questions about how they identified their sexual orientation.\footnote{Participants were asked open-ended questions about how they identified their sexual orientation.} Pseudonyms have been used to mask participants’ identity.\footnote{Pseudonyms have been used to mask participants’ identity.}