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Professor Mescher

First Year Seminar

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Hooking Up to Alleviate Mental Isolation

The effects hookup culture has on society are plentiful, but why it exists in the first place is still largely a mystery. Because of all of the negative outcomes, hooking up is a risk that people take. Risk taking is becoming so generalized that it is coming to be seen as a normal part of the developmental process of “growing up” (Shapiro 145). Yet, much of the reasoning behind these acts goes unknown. College students have an especially high predisposition to engage in these risky behaviors due to all of the changes, independence, and new found responsibilities they are managing. Are these acts a cry for help, an act of rebellion, or do they simply not understand the consequences? At this turning point in a person’s life, one defining emotion that can be felt is loneliness. Because of the high correlation between loneliness and number of risks taken for students, studies have been conducted in order to link the two. Based upon the results of these studies and the themes of the material read and discussed for class, I argue that loneliness is one of the main causes of hookup culture.

I decided to focus on this topic because I believe we sometimes fail to touch on the true, underlying causes of hookup culture in class. We speak frequently about the effects this culture has on a campus and the associated risks, but we tend to brush over how our society allowed this to become so present— especially if it is not benefitting people emotionally or physically in the long run. I think we fall short on this topic because we fail to truly analyze a key factor that contributes to hookup culture, and this makes it challenging to get to the heart of the issue. We

must find other ways to manage the loneliness that hookups are intended to minimize. I have always been a strong believer in treating the cause of a problem, not the symptoms. If one simply treats the symptoms of a problem, the problem can re-occur. With hookup culture, we must attack it in the same way. One cause that can be seen both referenced in our class reading and stated explicitly in the research I conducted is the mental isolation young adults feel among each other.

Loneliness is a common emotion felt among college students. Going away to college typically involves uprooting a student's entire life and placing them in an unfamiliar situation with strangers, which creates a sense of "anxiety and apprehension" (McBroom 45). This is typically the first major environmental and social shift in a student's life, and a university can only do so much to ease this transition. In addition to the anxiety and apprehension felt due to being surrounded by strange places and people, an increasingly competitive atmosphere is becoming prevalent on campuses. This competition is due to an external locus of control. Students first fight for admittance to their university by striving to be better than their peers. Next, they fight to be better than others in order to receive scholarships and maintain good grades. They fight to be better than others to get job offers, be successful in sports and gain the respect of professors. The issue with this is not only that competition is not a solid foundation for relationships, but students are also doing little for the sake of themselves. Students should focus on doing their best in order to be the best version of themselves, not to be better than everyone else.

Another area in which competition is seen in young adults that negatively affects levels of loneliness is social media. An article in "Computers and Human Behavior" states "the current generation may be the loneliest ever," and they attribute this to the competition that social media

fosters (Pittman 160). Competition is not an effective method of facilitating friendship, for if one is constantly trying to be better than his or her peers, they will have little empathy towards them: something necessary in building and maintaining meaningful relationships. Students may face social isolation due to the anxiety and apprehension that accompanies the competitive atmosphere surrounding both campus and their online worlds.

Universities have made an effort to provide students with safe, alcohol/drug-free ways to build relationships with others in a non-competitive atmosphere, but the efforts made do little to combat what media has made so popular and appealing (parties, alcohol, sex). Students believe alcohol “relaxes them, reduces their anxiety, improves their moods, and helps them become better contributors to interaction,” making it seem like a great solution to reducing the anxiety and apprehension that encourages loneliness (McBroom 51). The most obvious solution for loneliness is to build more meaningful relationships with peers. If students see alcohol as a means of facilitating this interaction, then it should be no surprise that study results show that there is a relationship between loneliness and alcohol consumption (McBroom 60, Plugge 147).

While intoxicated, people tend to act on their desires without anything holding them back. As seen in previously highlighted studies, loneliness tends to be a main contributing factor in alcohol/drug consumption; therefore, it can be assumed that the desires one has include feeling a connection with someone. One may think that if they are able to lock someone into a friendship or relationship while intoxicated, they will still have the friend or partner after sobering up. However, simply getting someone’s phone number is not the most socially accepted and popular way of doing this.

One way of feeling a connection that could potentially help with loneliness and a behavior that media makes students believe is expected of them, is hooking up. Some decide to

go for this more direct and intimate relationship with a person by engaging in sexual activity to not only find pleasure in that moment, but also hopefully guarantee that that bond formed will remain once they return to their normal state. There is a model called The Loneliness and Sexual Risk Model (LSRM) that identifies a cycle in which loneliness prompts an individual to consume substances which prompts sexually risky behavior. It describes “compulsive sexual behavior is driven mostly by anxiety reduction mechanisms, rather than by sexual desires” (Torres 65). Because of this, it should be no surprise that there is a relationship between alcohol consumed and level of sexual risk and number of sexual partners (Plugge 147).

In class, we focus heavily on the impact hookup culture has on society. Through this research project, I have been able to analyze the causes of hookup culture in more depth. We talk of how social media affects a person, yet fail to go in depth about how this encourages hookup culture. Loneliness is the emotion felt by students that link these two things. One book read in class that most stands out to me when relating social media and how it causes loneliness to hookup culture is “The Happiness Principle.” Freitas shows this connection between the two through her interview with Emma. Emma explains how “if you’re not in a Greek organization, it’s extremely hard to make friends” and how even “if you are in a Greek organization, it’s extremely hard to make friends” (Freitas 2). Emma goes on to explain the pressures put on by fellow sorority sisters and how they don’t truly care about each other. It is merely show and competition between them, whether it be face-to-face or via social media (Freitas 3). Even in Greek life, where friendships are advertised as guaranteed, loneliness is prevalent. Also, this loneliness stemming from social media is not only seen in sorority girls. Even men in their twenties are using various social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook to post selfies, such as Jackson in “The Happiness Principle” (Freitas 86). A vast majority of our

generation is effected by social media's isolating properties, despite its original intention being to do just the opposite.

Yet, as Freitas states in her other book, "The End of Sex," many students "cited alcohol as the determining factor in hookup culture." This suggests hookup culture has been created in an evolutionary sense: it was not simply born. Without media, loneliness would be decreased. Without loneliness, people would feel less inclined to self medicate with drugs and alcohol. Without having inhibitors such as alcohol to allow people to act "purely on desires and impulses," as Vander Ven explains, students would be less likely to engage in brief, meaningless, sexual encounters (Vander Ven 55). The idea of this progression is enforced throughout our course and across our readings. With loneliness being a catalyst of hookup culture, it is important to consider how this affects both us personally, and the greater good, and how we can go about making it less of a worry for future students.

Using hooking up as a method of alleviating loneliness is not an effective solution or method to alleviate mental isolation among students, due to the fact more harm is done than good. Aside from the more physical consequences associated with hookup culture (unplanned pregnancy, STD, rape), mental consequences can actually have a negative effect on a person's level of loneliness. If one is rejected after hooking up with a person, he or she will feel more lonely as a result of the rejection. This loneliness can encourage them to use substances more, leading to more hooking up, thus completing the behavior cycle (Torres 65). This is a positive feedback cycle and will continue to promote loneliness with no solution. This hurts an individual by sending them deeper into a state of loneliness, and the greater good by further advertising unhealthy methods of managing loneliness. In order to truly alleviate the loneliness felt by an

individual and others in society and allow them to flourish on an emotional level, the LSRM cycle must be broken (Torres 66).

Reaching out to one another and finding ways to make students understand that truly, we are all in this together, is necessary in order to begin to break this cycle. Camaraderie must be built instead of competition. Recent acts on social media by celebrities and companies have been made in an attempt to begin to facilitate this shift, yet more direct influence is needed. One company in particular that is aiming to better social media in a way to make girls feel less isolated socially is Aerie. Aerie began the #aeriereal campaign where they encouraged people to post photos without retouching by not photoshopping any of their models. This helps people on social media, specifically women, feel less alone in their body-image struggles and gives them a platform in which they can share their feelings instead of internalizing them, leading to isolation. We need more campaigns like this by popular brands and people to motivate people to speak up about the things surpassing their feelings, leading them into isolation— we need people to realize that the struggles we face in our daily lives are not limited to just them. If this were to happen, ultimately, people would be able to relate on a better level and build relationships with each other: reducing loneliness overall.

One thing that could encourage students to build friendships and manage loneliness in without partaking in risky behaviors is for the University to host more events similar to Muskies After Dark. This event does a wonderful job of keeping students safely on campus during particularly popular nights for risky behavior to take place (Friday, Saturday). This also shows kids that they can have fun and make friends without alcohol and hooking up, and this works to break the LSRM cycle (Torres 65). By making these events available during more nights, kids would have opportunities to opt-out of the media-popularized events taking place off campus. By

engaging students more often in a way that allows them to practice building relationships with peers while sober, they will feel less lonely, therefore feel less inclined to seek out relationships in questionable ways (drinking, hookups).

Another way in that the University could act to counteract the prevalence of loneliness is to help alleviate the competitive nature of academics. Allowing for more pass/fail opportunities could help students maintain a healthier attitude towards competition and the nature of grades among peers. Schools as prestigious as the Ivy Leagues (Brown, MIT, Harvard) have been utilizing this method of grading for many years, and their prestige is just as high and their students are just as smart. One could argue that the quality of work may decrease with the adoption of this system, but there are other ways to ensure that progress stays consistent. Comments from professors, recognition for above average work, and scholarship opportunities for stellar work (similar to the library FYS scholarship) would offer incentives for quality work, and this would be a more effective way to accomplish this. Without the classic A, B, C, D, and F, students would face less stress and allow them to connect with peers on a deeper level and not see them purely as competition.

If students are hooking up in order to feel less lonely in the moment then it is important to teach them healthy ways to manage their emotions. Hookup culture is not the solution for their feeling of isolation, and the results of attempting to self-medicate by means of drugs, alcohol, and hooking up are catastrophic to students both physically and mentally. Through mutual understanding, empathy, making healthy coping mechanisms available, and pressure from society, it is possible to help students feel less isolated, thus making it less likely that they engage in risky activities. Hookup culture can be eliminated, but loneliness must be addressed in order to achieve this.

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