love me tinder,
love me sweet:
reshaping the college hookup culture
Are “hookup” apps leading, ironically, to a revival of dating culture on college campuses? While doing research for our forthcoming book with Ken-Hou Lin on online dating, Romantic Apartheid: The Enduring Racial Divide in the Era of Online Dating, we find that dating apps are providing a way to bypass the romantic gate keeping that campus party culture has long dominated. Many students are now leveraging these apps to circumvent the worst of the college hookup scene. Yet, online platforms also introduce new challenges.

Women and racial and ethnic minorities, in particular, resent how the disinhibitory effect of cyber-communications can expose them to a wide range of racialized and sexist online interactions. However, dating apps give these students greater control over partner choice empowering them to set the context of a first meeting, which is a unique advantage of online dating that tempers the negatives for many of those we interviewed. Despite their drawbacks, these new technologies have the potential to make college intimacy not only safer but also more fulfilling for a larger cross-section of students than traditional hookup culture.

The U.S. college hookup scene: a background

Many studies have documented the post-1970s rise of hookup culture on college campuses, which have become the dominant context through which the average student initiates intimacy. While researchers note some positive aspects of hookup culture (e.g., sexual exploration and empowerment), they are counterbalanced by a number of other problematic tendencies, such as misogyny, risky sexual behaviors, and an alienating social hierarchy. As a reflection of larger cultural influences, it is perhaps not surprising that hookup culture is both heteronormative and male-centered. However, the drunken conditions under which many hookups occur, at best, highlight the privilege of men’s pleasure over women’s pleasure and, at worst, facilitate sexual assault and rape. A minority of students report unambiguous enjoyment of hookup culture, while most others are ambivalent, made uneasy by its celebration of selfish and transactional behavior toward others. Among some of the others, it is correlated with depression and lowered self-esteem.

Despite these findings, there is a popular allure to hookup culture, and it is widely accepted as part of the U.S. college experience. While studies show that many college students participate in this culture, there is significant social exclusion. A large minority of American students opt-out, either because they find it distasteful or feel excluded from conventional standards of “coolness” or attractiveness. Studies show that there are important social class, race, and sexual identity dimensions to who decides to opt out. In our interviews with undergraduate students, we find that online dating apps not only provide minority groups an alternative social pathway, but also that most women see dating apps as more liberating and appealing than the hookup scene.
students have ample access to same-age singles in their day-to-day college social lives. In fact, the main goal of online dating sites and apps has been to recreate the college dating market for twenty- and thirty-somethings, most of whom no longer have access to a pool of potential dates in their post-college work orbits. In a recent industry survey conducted by ABODO, entitled Swipe Right For Love? many were taken by surprise to learn that 70% of college students report using online dating platforms. We, too, find that dating apps are ubiquitous on college campuses. One lesbian-identified student we interviewed spoke to the pervasiveness of dating apps: “On the bus in the morning, there are people just Tinder, swiping. It’s crazy... People say whenever they need a poop break, they just go on Tinder.” A white man estimated the prevalence as, “Oh, I’d say it’s 100%.”

How do students first start using these platforms? We find that students of all backgrounds approach these platforms as an easy and self-proclaimed “lazy” way to test the dating waters upon entering a new university setting. For some, dating apps lead to humorous group bonding activity as students engage in “group swiping” or “tindering” with friends. Friends often “app play” on one another’s accounts, poking fun at profile details, co-creating profiles, and laughing over messages exchanged. Even when apart, students described taking screenshots of dating app profiles or their online interactions and sending them to friends. Although we generally think of online dating as being quite private, the performative aspects of one’s profile display and the selection processes that go into swiping are often quite public within one’s social networks on college campuses.

Moreover, even in a very large university setting, the likelihood that one will see someone from an app on campus or have a friend of a friend in common is much more common than in the urban, non-college user settings where we also conducted interviews. One Asian American student purposely ignores the profiles belonging to classmates when she “tinders” in order to avoid an awkward interaction with someone in class who may not have reciprocated interest on the dating platform. Conversely, many students told us that they rely on online dating profiles to make large universities seem smaller and to determine who in their classes is available or, in the case of gay students, who is “out.”

Our student interviewees say they use dating apps because they either consider themselves “too shy” for the party scene or because they dislike the drug and alcohol dynamics at play there. A number of students described lower anxiety in online dating because rejection is both more indirect (e.g., nonresponse) and takes place outside the purview of others. A man told us, “At least for me it’s been a big thing for my self-esteem and confidence. I feel like if it weren’t for Tinder, I would feel a lot less comfortable meeting people just in person.”

Indeed, there is something about getting matched on a dating app, where both people must swipe right on one another to indicate mutual attraction, that holds powerful sway in the backdrop of the indifferent hookup culture. In the average

hookup, mutual attraction is not necessarily articulated and norms dictate that participants should show less interest in one another afterward than they might show a distant acquaintance. One student described fraternity parties on her campus where hookups are common: “The hookup culture is a big thing and it sucks. No one cares, and there is no commitment. You’re just kind of giving up your worth for nothing because you feel like you have to.” By contrast, online dating apps take on an almost quaint earnestness. One must put the time into assembling a profile and, in so doing, signals an interest in making a romantic connection. After a successful match, the couple then moves on to a series of online interactions before an eventual face-to-face meeting. Given this multi-stage process, it is harder to claim that one’s interest was a drunken mistake or the result of “beer-goggling” as is so often the case in hookups. Students told us they found this basic premise a refreshing contrast to the uncertainty and alienation of the hookup. One student prefers meeting men on the app as opposed to the usual “going to a party, drinking, and making out with some kid who wouldn’t talk to you the next day in class.” Another student found it difficult to go back to the random hookup culture after using dating apps, noting that at parties, “there’s also more chance that you can have absolutely nothing in common. They’d be the kind of person I swipe no to and I didn’t read their bio so I wouldn’t know.” Unlike older online daters we interviewed, who say that some friends and family see it as a venue for the desperate, students see little stigma in online dating. Given the pervasive cool aspect of the hookup, the lack of perceived stigma stands in marked contrast.

expressing one’s sexual desires and boundaries

While the hookup commonly takes place under the influence of alcohol, first “tinder dates” usually take place sober, often at a public space such as a café. Moreover, initial meetings are preceded by a week or two of what we call “cyber courting.” This is when potential partners move off the dating platform to texting, Snapchating, or some other social media, allowing couples to get to know each other and occasionally facilitating...
cyber-sexual interactions prior to their first face-to-face meeting. While hookups are hallmarked by the unaccountability of drunken spontaneity later followed by posed detachment, dating apps establish a mutually clear romantic motive from the beginning. This motive then unfolds into a normative sequence providing both structure and exit opportunities at various levels as the interaction intensifies. This iterative communication process stands apart from college hookup culture, which tends to silence open dialogue around affirmative sexual consent, much less discussion of sexual tastes and boundaries.

Comparing her party hookups to her interactions using her dating app, one student summed it up like this: “...going out and hooking up with someone drunk is just not going anywhere, not benefiting anyone. But I feel like if you’re just starting sober and you’re meeting someone because you already know you’re attracted to each other and you also have something in common, ‘cause you decide to meet them, it’s already going in a better direction.” This is not to claim that dating apps are never used under the influence of alcohol, as they most certainly are. However, the stages leading up to the face to face meeting allow for the emergence of incompatibility clues; this is why only about one-fourth of matches ever lead to a face-to-face meeting, according to the students we interviewed. One student said, “I know I haven’t met up with anyone drunk, but I feel like I’ve gotten [Dating app] messages late on a Saturday night where I’m assuming people are...which I would never answer to and I wouldn’t go meet someone for the first time drunk the way that you would just at a party.” Women tell us that they like this aspect because they can weed out bad actors from a distance, rather than confronting bad behavior in an uncomfortable or even dangerous face-to-face sexual situation.

Students describe the series of exchanges that follow a match as a low stakes way for them to try their “dating persona” out. One said, “So, I feel like in a certain way you kind of get a little bit of the thrill of I’m flirting and I’m kind of making my moves. And you get practice for then going and doing that in the real world, I would say.” For some, this stage of the relationship may provide a safe space to communicate one’s sexual boundaries, which have implications for building a culture of affirmative consent, a practice colleges struggle to inculcate among their student body as campus sexual assault has become an urgent, high-profile concern. Most students we talked to described dating apps as a way to find both sexual pleasure and relationships.

Most students we talked to described dating apps as a way to find both sexual pleasure and relationships. On average, heterosexual students report having sex on their third date. Men often report that they would be up for “Netflix and chill” (sex) at first meeting, but, as one told us, “there’s no such thing as a hookup site for straight men and women, because straight women can turn any hookup site into a dating site.” In this way, dating apps allow straight women more control in shaping the romantic dynamic and shifting the first meeting to neutral territory. Most men say women looking for a one-night stand on dating apps are not very common. One joked: “It is so rare that when someone does do that, I’m like, this person is probably mentally unstable. So that I don’t go through with it—it’s scary and not how I wanna die.”

Speaking of safety, straight women describe the lengths they take to ensure that the first meeting is safe, even though they are dating fellow students. These precautions include taking screenshots of their dater profile and sharing it with friends, telling their friends where they will be, and giving them a time to expect them back. Others describe sneaking photos of their date’s face or license plate, or even having a group of friends secretly dine at the same venue to keep watch. Such safety measures point to the dark side of heterosexual romance, yet women paradoxically describe a feeling of empowerment by being able to control the location and context of their first meeting. For example, one Hispanic woman told us she feels safer online dating because “As a woman, at least you have more control. You could tell them, ‘Okay. I will meet
you at this time, at this place.’ And you [the woman] can choose the place.” This control, she pointed out, contrasts to a bar or party situation where, “maybe they do something to [the] drink or maybe you’re just already really drunk and they could try to pull you off somewhere, get handsy—you have a lot less control.”

Straight white men rarely volunteered concerns about their own safety. More often, they concern themselves with sending nonthreatening signals to their date to show that they are not a “creep.” However, we noticed that men of color more often express concerns about safety, which may reflect their relative lack of entitlement to safety that straight white men take for granted.

One straight Black dater told us that his worst fear would be to enter an unknown woman’s house only to be attacked and robbed by a group of men. Another straight black dater told us, firmly, that “men are victims, too” and explained how he also implements safety strategies, such as sharing his date location with a friend on “standby.” LGBTQ daters also discussed safety concerns; however, most stressed how online platforms had increased their sense of personal safety significantly. They provide a queer-friendly space in which to identify others, avoiding the danger of “putting themselves out there” publicly or running the risk of misidentify-

Similarly described their initial foray into online dating as the “first opportunity to be able to think of myself in a romantic or sexual context,” where they learned to articulate themselves as a desiring person.

Students of color, who sometimes describe feelings of isolation as racial minorities on largely white college campuses, use dating apps to expand their dating pool. A black lesbian student noted that dating apps provide her with a venue to meet people from her community and escape the whiteness of the campus party scene. Some people we interviewed found specialized dating apps to be especially empowering. For example, many heterosexual women prefer the woman-centered Bumble dating platform that requires them to initiate first contact with men. However, daters of color often experienced such niche websites to be white-centered and even exclusionary. While some report using minority-specific dating apps, such as Black People Meet, many minority daters told us they prefer nonspecialized dating apps for the exposure greater overall diversity. One Hispanic woman said: “I like the diversity on Tinder a lot more. I have multiple different types of guys I like racially, and there’s a lot more racial diversity.” A straight black male student noted that he far prefers mainstream apps because there are more black women on the site: “There’s an app that I used awhile back and I was swiping for like two to three weeks or something like that and it was mostly white girls and none of them swiped for me. Only one black girl on there was matched to me. It definitely had to do with race.” Notably, black gay men told us they found the popular gay dating app, Grindr, to be far too white and rampant with the objectification of black bodies. Instead, they often use other mainstream apps and websites with more racial diversity and expanded profile content.

While certain dating apps may be more useful to some groups than others, we also found that racialized gender marginalization is particularly pronounced in a cyber setting, where the online disinhibition effect unveils individuals’ prejudices that are otherwise kept hidden. Indeed, many students of color
we interviewed recounted receiving jarring messages filled with racialized sexual objectification, a reality that largely differentiates their experiences from that of white users, queer or straight. In many ways, this illustrates the contradictions of the “new” college dating scene. On the one hand, racial, gender and sexual minority students often resort to using apps to bypass marginalized treatment in the college party scene; yet doing so often forces them to confront a jarring norm of openly expressed racial-sexual discrimination by some on these platforms.

In spite of this, many non-white daters described how dating apps provide them with a renewed opportunity to resist white hegemonic ideals of beauty in a hybridized public-private setting. For example, one student described to us how he includes Afro-centric pictures to signal that he is primarily interested in black or like-minded women. As in Shantel Buggs’ 2017 work, our interviewees engage in racial politics in their vetting strategies for determining who is an appropriate match, such as pursuing daters whose profiles indicate support for the Black Lives Matter movement or avoiding those with pro-Trump symbolism. Other students expressed having initially started online dating with internalized white beauty standards only to find themselves re-asserting what they came to see as more culturally affirming and open racial preferences on dating apps. While it could certainly be the case that these preferences are shaped by the wider discrimination students of color encounter while using the apps, we also believe that these technologies are being leveraged in unique ways by marginalized groups to actively confront racial hierarchies of desire and identify themselves as desiring individuals on their own terms.

To augment our interview data with survey data on this phenomenon, we are collaborating with Paula England at NYU to renew the College Social Life survey, which ended in 2011. This survey was instrumental in documenting risky sexual behaviors among students at colleges and universities around the United States from the period 2005-2011. Our new survey module generates information about the role of dating apps and sexual interaction outcomes for comparison to non-dating app ways of meeting, such as vis-a-vis the party hookup scene, conventional dates, and in day-to-day campus interactions.

It is clear from research on college hookup culture that students long for more options; discontent with hook up culture is not new. Our archival research suggests that upon the advent of the world wide web, enterprising college students initially began to experiment with computerized dating programs just for this purpose. Between 1996 and 2002, college-specific dating programs such as Brown University’s HUGS (Helping Undergraduates Socialize) dating service, Harvard’s DateSite.com, Wesleyan’s WesMatch.com, and Yale’s Yalestation.com among others came into being at the same time that hookup culture was settling in as a normalized college social activity. Newspaper interviews with students during this period suggest that those early ventures were pockets of resistance to the mainstreaming of hook up culture. For example, when asked why he developed HUGS in a 1996 Providence Journal article entitled Brown Students Now Meet Their Matches Online-, Brown undergraduate Rajib Chanda said he saw it as an antidote to the typical practice at Brown in which “you meet, get drunk, hook up and then either avoid eye contact the next day or find yourself in a relationship.” He also hoped his dating program would remedy campus ethnic and racial segregation. Of WesMatch.com, its student founder said in a 2004 New York Times article, Are We a Match?: “We’re not just in it for hookups, we’re trying to foster real relationships, real compatibility.”

However, it would take almost two decades before online dating as a widespread practice swept college campuses. Landscape architects call the footpaths made by park-goers that veer off from paved pathways “desire paths.” We believe that dating apps have become the symbolic desire path for many college students because they allow them the option to bypass the romantic gatekeeping that campus hookup party culture has dominated for so long. Our research suggests that students today are pro-actively using online dating technology to generate new rules of intimacy. While imperfect, the use of such tools has the potential to destabilize hookup culture and lead to new, potentially healthier and inclusive pathways to intimacy. The issue that future research must begin to address, then, is how might we make this new, unavoidably pervasive form of intimate meeting, enjoyable, and equally empowering, for all daters.

recommended reading
Bogle, Katherine. Hooking up: Sex, dating, and Relationships on Campus (NYU Press, 2008).

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