

## ABSTRACT

**Title of Thesis:** DRINKING, TEXTING, AND HOOKING UP: THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE ON GETTING TOGETHER WITH MEN IN COLLEGE

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We interviewed heterosexual, single, female college students about their experiences with the initiation of non-platonic interactions in college. Data was analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methods. Results of this study indicate that women in college may value friendships and social networks over romantic relationships. Findings further suggest that women's actions and hopes for non-platonic interactions are affected by their perceptions of what men in college want and also by peer norms. Women in this study reported that they are seeking companionship and reciprocated feelings from their non-platonic interactions. This manuscript discusses the ways in which findings from this study support existing literature and also identifies some new findings related to college student norms, behaviors, and hopes. Non-platonic communication, colloquial language, and hookup culture are also discussed in more detail.

DRINKING, TEXTING, AND HOOKING UP: THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE ON  
GETTING TOGETHER WITH MEN IN COLLEGE

by

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

As communication among adolescents and young adults is happening more and more through the internet, text messages, and other media (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012), it is important to consider the role that these modes of communication are playing in flirting interactions. “Flirting” is the term traditionally used to describe behaviors that communicate non-platonic interest and facilitate non-platonic interactions. While “flirting” may be an insufficient term to describe the modern communications that occur between college students as they move from platonic into non-platonic interactions, the literature on flirting provides a foundation for understanding this type of communication.

Researchers have defined flirting from various perspectives, which underscores the ambiguity of this concept. Henningsen (2004) defines flirting as the way in which one person communicates sexual or romantic interest in another person, whether or not they intend to follow through in pursuing a romantic or sexual relationship. Abrahams (1994) defines flirting as, “messages and behaviors perceived by a recipient as purposefully attempting to gain his or her attention and stimulate his or her interest in the sender, while simultaneously being perceived as intentionally revealing affiliative desire” (1994, p. 283). Both definitions allow for the person engaging in flirting behavior and the recipient of that flirting behavior to have unique interpretations of the same flirting interaction. According to these definitions, perception is what defines whether or not a given interaction constitutes flirting.

Other researchers define flirting in terms of the purpose it serves in interpersonal interactions. Frisby’s (2010) definition links flirting to its outcome, stating, “in the early stages of romantic and sexual encounters, flirting is a tactic that can be used to facilitate

interpersonal events”. Weber, Goodboy and Cayanus (2010) indicate that flirting happens at the outset of a

relationship, or at the point where romantic or sexual expectations begin. Their article posits, “The act of flirting is an initial communication encounter that revolves around sexual and relational expectations (England et al., 1996; Henningsen, 2004) and constitutes one way to establish intimacy, sexual intentions, and relational definitions (England et al., 1996) and can be the first step in a long-term relationship (Koeppel et al., 1993; Levine et al. 1994)” (Weber et al., 2010). Both of these purpose-driven definitions imply that flirting is a means used to intensify the nature of a relationship in some way.

Regardless of whether researchers have defined flirting by perception or intention, they have acknowledged that miscommunications happen in flirting interactions (e.g. Abbey, 1982; Abbey, 1987; Henningsen, 2004; Henningsen et al., 2006; Lindgren et al., 2007; Lindgren et al., 2008). Gender differences in perceived intent of flirting can lead to a broad range of consequences, some of which may be undesirable (Lindgren, Parkhill, George & Hendershot, 2008). In general, women report a wider range of motivations for flirting than men, who tend to view flirting behaviors as more sexual than do women (Henningsen, 2004). Both men and women understand that some of these cross-sex differences exist, but cannot accurately alter their own perceptions and responses to the other sex in a way that reflects this understanding (Lindgren, 2009). Unlike many other behaviors and forms of communication, flirting is often purposefully vague and implicit rather than direct and explicit (Lindgren, 2009). The ambiguity of these behaviors makes it difficult to ensure that a specific behavior or conversation will be perceived in the way it is intended.

Misperceptions are both common and problematic in flirting interactions, sometimes leading to undesired outcomes for at least one person (Abbey, 1982; Lindgren

et al., 2008). Misperception occurs whenever the actor attempts to communicate one intention and the recipient of that action perceives a different intention (Henningsen et al., 2008). For example, if a woman's intention is to be friendly and she is perceived as seductive, she is being misperceived, regardless of how her behavior might be interpreted by an objective observer. Misperceptions are particularly important in understanding flirting because they tap into the internal as well as external processes that influence flirting communication. Therefore, a successful flirting behavior must seem congruent with the actor's intention and also be accurately perceived by the target individual.

While theory and research show that miscommunication between the sexes is often rooted in gender roles and expectations, there is little information on other variables that may influence flirting interactions. For example, the context of a flirting interaction may influence both intentions and perceptions of people engaging in flirting behaviors (Henningsen, 2008). While research to date has studied flirting as a single phenomenon, it is important to understand how flirting plays out within a variety of unique contexts (Henningsen, 2008).

The role of context is especially important in college settings (Lindgren, 2009). The college environment can provide new sources of romantic and sexual partners, increased chances for engaging in sexual behavior, and new opportunities to test out different identities and behaviors (Winefield, & Harvey, 1996 cited in Lindgren, 2009). With the increase in use of the internet, text messages, and other media for communication among young adults (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012), it is important to consider the role that these modes of communication are playing in flirting interactions. Young adults commonly use texting and sexting in romantic relationships, which have



not yet been studied as contexts for flirting (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). Additionally, the pressure of “hooking up”<sup>1</sup> in college influences the way that students pursue romantic relationships and sexual encounters. Bradshaw et al. (2010) found that both men and women prefer traditional dating to hooking up, yet students report having nearly twice as many hook-ups as dates.

Oswalt (2005) found that sexual regret commonly occurs because people’s decisions are inconsistent with their values, the individual has a different goal than his or her partner, alcohol plays a role in the interaction, or condoms were not used during intercourse (Oswalt, 2005). Oswalt’s primary reasons for sexual regret are highly relevant in the college setting. Additionally, each could be easily affected by the perceived norms or pressures that influence individual behavior. For example, alcohol is commonly involved in sexual or romantic interactions in college (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Since condom use is associated with sexual communication efficacy, negotiation of condom use may become more difficult during alcohol-related sexual encounters (Lewis, Logan, & Neighbors, 2009). Therefore, to understand the underlying causes of sexual regret, it will be important to understand how such influences affect college students’ non-platonic interactions.

In the current study, the overarching goal is to seek information about the antecedents and contexts for flirting interactions that lead to desirable and undesirable outcomes. Whether flirtation is effective or ineffective, it impacts the subsequent outcomes of an interaction (Frisby et al., 2010). Given that younger adults are more

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<sup>1</sup> Bradshaw et al. (2010) define “hook up” as, “ ‘a sexual encounter which may or may not include sexual intercourse, usually occurring between people who are strangers or brief acquaintances’ (Paul et al. 2000, p. 76)”. There has been little consensus around its meaning (Bogle, 2008).

susceptible to relationship stress than older adults, it is especially important that college students understand how to navigate flirting interactions (Lindgren, 2009).

Understanding college students' sexual goals and communication strategies may also improve educational and intervention strategies for dating issues (Lindgren, 2009).

Counselors at colleges and universities need more information about these phenomena since relationship stress has been shown to result in negative mental health outcomes for students (Abowitz et al., 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008).

Flirting research to date has been mostly limited to experimental situations that induce or simulate a flirting interaction in a laboratory setting (e.g. Abbey, 1982; Frisby et al., 2010; Henningsen, 2004; Henningsen et al., 2006; Henningsen et al., 2009).

Researchers have studied perception of flirting and sexual interest in the context of contrived in-person interactions, videos, and photos, but all were in hypothetical scenarios where the individual did not have real romantic interest in another person (e.g. Abbey, 1982; Frisby et al., 2010; Henningsen, 2004; Henningsen, et al. 2006; Henningsen et al., 2009). These methods ignore potentially influential real world contextual variables. One exception is Lindgren's 2009 study of college students, which used semi-structured interviews with focus groups. While this study looks at real life experiences of college students, Lindgren (2009) acknowledged that a focus group may not yield data that represents the individual's internal experience.

Real-life flirtation happens within a social context (Henningsen et al., 2008), across various modes of communication (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012), and often involves some level of attraction (Abrahams, 1994). Many existing studies asked for ratings from an observer rather than a participant in the interaction; while this research is valuable for

its internal validity, it ignores the distinct nature of real-life encounters and thus lacks external validity. Additionally, student preferences for modes of communication are constantly changing and require regular, periodic research (Robinson & Stubberud, 2011). While there is research about college students' use of social media and text messaging as a means of communication, no research on types of communication used to initiate sexual or romantic interactions could be found.

The current study is designed to fill in some of the aforementioned gaps in flirting research through a qualitative research methodology that examines the flirting experiences of college students. Unlike the previous studies, this study collected data about contextual variables and what role they play in flirting interactions for college students. While there is not one clear definition of flirting across the extant literature, for the purpose of this study, flirting is broadly defined as any interaction that participants perceive to contribute to the initiation of a non-platonic interaction. Participants provided information about the outcomes of flirting interactions, which has only been indirectly addressed by Lindgren's 2009 focus group study. While the participants in this study were all heterosexual female college students, their perceptions of men in flirting interactions will also be gathered. Given the paucity of literature in this area, a qualitative approach is well suited to provide the level of context, detail, and insight that is needed.

Qualitative research pays particular attention to the ways in which individuals construct meaning from their experience. To truly understand the norms around college student flirting, it is imperative to use the language of current college students. Given that norms and meanings of terms used to describe college student sexual/dating behavior, such as "hook-up", are not clearly defined and are fluid between groups and

over time, there is a need to see what terms mean at a certain time and in a certain context. If language were provided for the participants, as in a quantitative survey, important data might be lost by forcing students to use terminology that is not accurate or true to their experience. Qualitative research is ideal for exploring constructs that have not been explored previously or that are not clearly defined, and can assist in defining those constructs (Hill et al., 2012). Consensual qualitative research (CQR) is especially relevant for this area of inquiry because it is concerned with the problems in communication that stem from individual perception and agreement on vocabulary.

The CQR approach systematically requires consensus among multiple researchers at each step of analysis, which will help to legitimize findings and reduce bias (Hill et al., 2012). Additionally, CQR provides a rigorous methodology to differentiate between themes that are common and less common in order to provide a rich description of the participants and to contribute to building theory (Hill et al., 2012). Since we already know that flirting can be vague, implicit, and situation-specific, (Lindgren, 2009) it was important to employ a methodology that allows the researcher to separate idiosyncratic findings from those that can be used to build theory. The existing theory in flirting research only allows us to identify that communication problems exist in cross-sex flirting interactions (e.g. Frisby et al., 2010; Henningsen et al., 2008). Through this study, we asked about the contextual variables at play that determine whether or not a college student's actions in a flirting situation match her intentions, and examine what the implications of this might be.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

This review will first examine the literature about the behaviors, attitudes, values, and norms that characterize the collegiate social environment in the United States, with a specific focus on the culture that surrounds college students' romantic and sexual relationships. These relationships are built and maintained through in-person interactions and through technology such as mobile communication and social media. Next, this review will examine research on the role of perception in cross-sex communication, gender differences in sexual communication, and flirting. Finally, a rationale will be presented for the use of consensual qualitative research methods. This literature review will focus primarily on the past 10 years, given that college social environments, modes of interpersonal communication, and dating norms have shifted over time.

### **Changes in the College Social Environment**

Romantic relationships are central to the social experiences of college students. In the past, the notion of courtship provided a clear script for romantic interactions and created a logical path to marriage (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). While marriage is still a post-college goal for most college students, many current college environments do not endorse peer norms that would logically lead to a marriage soon after college (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). According to the most recent National College Health Assessment data, 51.4% of college students report that they are not currently in a relationship, 36% are in a relationship but not living together, 12.7% are in a relationship and living together, and only 6.6% report being married/partnered (American College Health Association, 2012).

Since the 1960s, the patterns and norms of college social relationships have shifted significantly. Social movements such as feminism, the sexual revolution, and the delayed time frame for marriage have contributed to this shift (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). For example, a 1984 study that surveyed women who are or previously were married about their personal experiences with sex, dating, and marriage found that 51% of women who got married between 1945 and 1964 had already lost their virginity prior to marriage, compared to 72% of women who got married between 1965 and 1984 (Whyte, 1990). Additionally, of the women who had premarital sex, only 17 percent of brides married between 1945 and 1964 had sex with someone other than their eventual husband, compared with 33 percent of brides married between 1965 and 1984 (Whyte, 1990). The median age for marriage is now higher than ever, at 26.5 years for women and 28.7 years for men (Pew Research Center, 2011), while the average age that women become sexually active is 17 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). These findings indicate that marriage and sex are becoming increasingly disconnected, with sex happening earlier and marriage happening later in the lifespan.

Over the last two decades, there has been increased societal acceptance of sex outside of a committed relationship and cohabitating prior to marriage, as well as a reduced stigma of having children before getting married (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). At the same time, the advent of personal communication technologies has transformed the way that young people interact with one another. Given these changes, researchers have become interested in determining whether or not traditional dating scripts are relevant on today's college campus, and have found conflicting evidence (Bogle, 2008; Holman, 2012; Paul & Hayes, 2002). Despite the fact that not all students on college campuses

engage in hookup behavior, it seems to be emerging as the dominant script for male and female college students initiating sexual or romantic relationships (Bogle, 2008).

The vast majority of colleges and universities in the United States today are co-educational institutions. Policies that once deterred men and women from having casual sex, such as in loco parentis responsibilities of university officials (e.g. house mothers), single-sex dorms, and curfews are much less prevalent today than 20 years ago (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Now, the pervasive “having fun” mentality, which places a focus on short-term satisfaction with limited time investment in romantic relationships, has become a priority for many college students (Bogle, 2008). As a result, many current college students are not investing as much time in traditional dating scripts and traditional relationships during college as in past generations (Bogle, 2008). The “self-development imperative” espoused by current college environments contributes to this trend, encouraging students to focus on their growth and development as an individual in pursuit of autonomous success (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). This drive to focus on oneself and one’s career has been posited by some to explain the delayed timeline for marriage as well. In 1960, 59% of adults ages 18-29 were married, while today that number is only 20% (Pew Research Center, 2011). This decrease may reflect the trend that many adults are waiting to marry until after they have completed their education and begun their own career. There is also some evidence to suggest that adults may be encouraging college age youth to delay marriage, without providing clear guidance on how to pursue healthy intimate relationships during or after college (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). The lack of a clear script for healthy romantic relationships impacts all college

students, as it creates a social environment in which the lines between platonic, sexual, and romantic relationships are blurry.

### **Hookup Culture**

For both genders, the focus on individual goals and career advancement can lead to a preference for less committed relationships or for hookups over long-term relationships (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Paul, Hayes and McManus (2000) found that 78% of both male and female college students report that they have hooked up, although the researchers did not define what this term may have meant to their participants. The term “hookup” has different interpretations and can be applied to a variety of sexual encounters, which will be explored later in this review. The advent and increasing popularity of this term over the past ten years are indicative of a marked shift in the overall acceptance of casual sexual encounters. Social norms as well as popular media serve to enforce “hookup culture” as an accepted part of college student life (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriweather, 2012).

Grello et al. (2006) surveyed 382 undergraduate students at a large public university about the circumstances surrounding their experience with casual sex. The participants were all heterosexual, unmarried, traditional-age college students. Of participants who reported having sexual experience, more than half reported that they had engaged in sex with a non-romantic partner. The majority of both males and females who engaged in casual sex reported knowing that the encounter was casual and having no expectations for a romantic relationship. Instead, they expected that the encounter was either a one-night event or that it was the start of a series of casual sexual encounters with that partner. The study found that casual sex occurred more often between “friends” than



strangers, and was commonly related to early sexual transition, drug use, alcohol consumption, and engaging in first sex. Mental health outcomes differed by gender; males who engage in frequent casual sex reported the lowest levels of depression, whereas women who frequently engaged in casual sex reported the highest levels of depression. Casual sex was differentiated from romantic sex in drawing these conclusions; romantic sex was not associated with depressive outcomes. The authors note that the association of casual sex and depressive symptoms in females warrants further study. In order to prevent unwanted outcomes, the authors also promote future research that identifies the specific context that promotes casual sex and other risky behaviors.

### **Alcohol Consumption in College**

Several studies have linked instances of hooking up to alcohol consumption (Bogle, 2007; Bogle, 2008; Grello et al., 2006; Paul, McManus & Hayes, 2000; Ven & Beck, 2009). In Grello et al.'s (2006) study, 65% of students surveyed reported consuming alcohol prior to engaging in their most recent episode of casual sex. Paul et al. (2000) looked at the frequency of alcohol consumption as it relates to hookup behavior in college students and found that students with a history of hookup behavior including sexual intercourse show the highest frequency of alcohol consumption; students with a history of hookup behavior that does not include intercourse report a lower frequency, and students who do not hook up report the lowest frequency. A subsequent open-ended survey of 187 college students found that the script for hookups typically involves an interaction with a potential partner being facilitated by alcohol consumption (Paul & Hayes, 2002). The same study found that students perceive that 67% of hookups

occur at parties (Paul & Hayes, 2002). Fielder and Carey (2010) found similar results in their study of 140 mostly female college students, in which self-reports indicated that alcohol consumption predicted hookup behavior. These researchers posit that alcohol may facilitate hookups by lowering an individual's inhibitions such that he/she is more likely to approach and attempt to pursue a potential partner. On the other hand, they acknowledge that alcohol may lower inhibitions such that an individual is more likely to give in to real or perceived social pressure to engage in sexual activity.

In an effort to understand the ways in which college students use alcohol as a tool to facilitate, explain, or justify engaging in casual sexual encounters, Vander Ven and Beck (2009) examined 469 college students' accounts of what happened the most recent time they were intoxicated (referred to as "drinking stories") and obtained 32 interviews from students at three universities. The researchers found that alcohol consumption and intoxication were used to justify casual sexual encounters both before and after the encounters occurred (Vander Ven & Beck, 2009). Additionally, college students who drink alcohol may view it as a disinhibitor that can increase the potential for sexuality (Vander Ven & Beck, 2009). Students reported that they enjoy this loss of inhibition, and that it affords them permission in terms of social acceptability of actions that may not be acceptable if performed in a sober state (Vander Ven & Beck, 2009). College students in this study viewed alcohol consumption and hooking up as behaviors that occur naturally together; their co-occurrence fit with common scripts of the college environment (Vander Ven & Beck, 2009).

Given the clear link between alcohol consumption and hookup behaviors, it is important to acknowledge the prevalence of alcohol consumption on college campuses.

The National College Health Assessment survey asked undergraduate students from 141 U.S. colleges to report their own alcohol use within the last 30 days and to report how often they perceived that the typical college student consumed alcohol within a 30-day period. A majority (64.9%) of college students reported consuming alcohol within the past 30 days. In contrast, these same students estimated that 95.1% of typical college students had consumed alcohol within the same time frame. This suggests that college students overestimate the prevalence of their peers' alcohol consumption. This overestimation may be indicative of cultural norms around alcohol in the college environment; the influence and importance of peer norms will be discussed later in this review.

While the health risks associated with alcohol consumption - especially binge drinking - are numerous, this review will focus on the impact of alcohol within romantic or sexual encounters. Alcohol can cause cognitive impairment in that it becomes difficult to differentiate friendly cues from sexual ones in a cross-sex interaction, which can lead to men misperceiving ambiguous or even dismissive cues as sexual interest (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007). Miscommunications resulting in unwanted sexual behavior are an obvious example of a way in which alcohol can be dangerous within the context of sexual and romantic life.

### **Technology**

Changes in technology over the past decade have given young people the ability to immediately communicate with one another through a variety of media. The majority of college students in the United States use social networking sites such as Facebook. Additionally, text messaging is becoming the most popular form of interpersonal

communication among teens and young adults (Lenhart et al., 2010; Nielsen Online, 2009 as cited in Drouin & Landgraff, 2012, p.444). Recent reports show that 66% of 18-29 year olds in the U.S. have smartphones, granting them immediate access to these communication options and others such as Twitter and e-mail. In a May 2011 survey, smartphone users reported that texting and taking photos are the two most common activities they perform on their phones. Texting remains much more popular among young adults compared to older adults; young adults aged 18-24 exchange an average of 109.5 text messages per day. (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012)

In 2003, Thurlow examined actual text messages that a convenience sample of first year college students in the United Kingdom had either sent or received within the past week. The resulting 544 text messages were then analyzed and coded for content. On average, text messages were 14 “words” and 65 characters long (abbreviations such as “u” and “lol” were counted as words). Individual text messages varied widely in length. The researchers developed nine categorizations of text messages based on what they regarded to be the primary function of each communication. At least two thirds of all messages were explicitly relational, ranging from making social arrangements to friendship to sexual or romantic exchanges. One of these categories was sexual orientation, defined as messages with explicit sexual overtones. Another was romantic orientation, defined as dealing primarily with romantic expressions of love, intimacy, and affection. This study has some limitations in terms of its applicability to understanding the text messaging behaviors of U.S. college students in 2012, given that it took place in the UK in 2003 and used a convenience sample of freshmen. However, given the paucity of research of this kind and the importance of text messaging to college students’ social

communication, it provides an important foundation for understanding how young adults communicate via text message. (Thurlow, 2003)

While there is little empirical research addressing the link between college students' flirting behaviors and text messaging, internet blogs and popular media have suggested that there is a strong link between personal communication technology and the shift in dating norms and scripts. The accessibility, mobility and ease of communication creates the expectation that young adults can and should communicate and respond immediately, no matter where they are or what they are doing. Thurlow (2003) notes that text messaging provides a unique sense of both intimacy and distance. The ability to send rapid, brief messages allow the sender to feel what Thurlow refers to as a "sense of anonymity" that emboldens senders to say things they would not ordinarily say face-to-face, despite the fact that their identity is known through their phone number. In addition to this sense of anonymity, text messaging also provides an opportunity for communication that feels more covert and illicit (Thurlow, 2003). For example, two people standing in a crowd may be able to text secrets back and forth. In these ways, text messaging offers, "an attractive combination of mobility, discretion, intimacy, and – indeed – fun – illicit or otherwise" (Thurlow, 2003, p. 12). In an earlier study, as many as 52% of people who send text messages reported having sent a text message to say something that they would not ordinarily have said to that person face-to-face (Brown, 2002 as cited in Thurlow, 2003). Unlike instant messaging or spoken conversation, text messaging provides greater flexibility in terms of how and when to respond (Thurlow, 2003). Given the prevalence of alcohol consumption on college campuses, this can lead to communications when at least one person in the conversation is intoxicated. The

combination of personal communication technology and increased prevalence of hookup behavior has created an entirely new context for cross-sex communication among college students. In order to understand this new context, exploratory research is needed.

### **The Culture of Sex and Dating in College**

#### *Hooking Up*

While research indicates that hooking up began to be prevalent on college campuses in the 1960s, (probably with the advent of birth control pills) hookup culture first gained widespread national attention in 2001 with the publication of “Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Mating and Dating Today”, a report released by the Institute for American Values (Bogle, 2008). The Institute for American Values conducted a series of in-depth interviews with female college students followed by a survey of over 1000 unmarried, heterosexual college women. The resulting report had several important findings related to the changing climate of college students’ romantic and sexual relationships. Results indicate that the culture of sex and dating has changed in a way that may not be beneficial to students, particularly women. Overall, there is a marked increase in ambiguity within romantic relationships on college campuses such that students are not clear on norms or expectations, and the lack of guidance from adults is becoming problematic. The authors offer recommendations based on their findings. (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001)

Due to the politicization of issues such as sex and marriage, it is worth noting that the Institute for American Values identifies itself as non-partisan, has a stated mission of “focusing on American values”, and expressly works to “increase the proportion of U.S. children growing up with their two married parents” (Institute for American Values,

2012). Based on the information gathered in their interviews with students, the authors conclude that many college students have the goal of eventually getting married, and would like to meet a spouse while at college. However, the researchers posit that students' involvement in relationships with very little commitment or that become serious very quickly may limit students' ability to explore options for a successful marriage partnership. Another obstacle is that aspects of the college social scene have changed in ways that make finding a spouse more difficult, such as the increasing number of women on college campuses compared to men. In terms of culture and expectations, "hooking up", or engaging in a sexual encounter without commitment, is pervasive on college campuses; it has a strong influence on campus culture despite the fact that most college students do not hook up. This report pointed out the ambiguity of "hooking up" and the multiple meanings of the word "dating". "Dating" no longer necessarily implies going out on dates; it may indicate a serious relationship in which significant amounts of time are spent together in residences, it could mean "hanging out", or it could even be synonymous with "hooking up". In this survey, college women reported that it is rare for men to ask them out on formal dates or to acknowledge explicitly when they have become a couple. Additionally, survey findings indicate that women often initiate a conversation to establish whether or not they are a couple, and when the woman asks, the man makes the decision. While these patterns are evident within this research, there are not clear norms within on-campus culture that guide students' decisions in terms of love, sex, and relationships. The absence of courtship culture has given way to hooking up, hanging out, and fast-moving commitments without dating (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001).

### *Defining "Hooking Up"*

As stated previously, the term “hooking up” is ambiguous in terms of the context and behaviors that it encompasses, and has been defined differently by researchers. Paul, McManus and Hayes (2000) define a hookup as, “a sexual encounter which may or may not include sexual intercourse, usually occurring between people who are strangers or brief acquaintances” (p. 76). Bogle (2008) stated that “hooking up” is an ambiguous term that alludes to sexual behaviors ranging from kissing to having sex. More recently, Bradshaw, Kahn and Saville (2010) posited that “hooking up usually involves a casual friend or stranger for which no future relationship is anticipated” (p. 667). Fielder and Carey (2010) define hookups as, “sexual interactions between partners who do not expect a romantic commitment” (p. 1105). In general, researchers agree that hooking up encompasses a range of sexual behaviors and takes place outside of the context of a committed relationship.

While hookups are characterized by a lack of commitment, some individuals engaging in these behaviors would like to be in a relationship and may hope that the hookup will lead to one. In a survey of college students’ perception of potential risks of hooking up, 25.3% of women cited wanting a relationship and your partner not feeling the same way as a potential risk, and 19.3% of women indicated the risk of getting emotionally attached. On the other hand, 25.4% of men cited the risk of their partner getting emotionally attached, indicating that there may be a gender difference in real or perceived goals and expectations in the context of a hookup (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

While researchers have attempted to identify a working definition of hooking up, the term’s ambiguity is part of the reason it has become so popular. When students talk about “hooking up”, they are able to avoid revealing the specific sexual activities in



which they engaged. Additionally, the script for hooking up is ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so, such that the relationship between the people engaging in the hookup remains undefined after the fact (Bogle, 2008).

### *Role of Alcohol*

The role of alcohol in hookup behaviors may add to this type of uncertainty and ambiguity. As noted in the previous section on alcohol use in college, many researchers have linked alcohol consumption to hookup behavior (e.g. Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Garcia et al., 2012; Holman, 2012; Oswalt et al., 2005; Ven & Beck, 2009). Additional research indicates that alcohol consumption may not just co-occur with hookups, but also impacts the way that these interactions happen.

Bogle (2008) conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 76 college students and recent graduates regarding their sexual interactions on a college campus. She conceptualizes the results of her study from the perspective of scripting theory, a sociological approach purporting that cultural norms can dictate where, when, why, and how particular types of actions occur. Gagnon and Simon (1986) specifically extend this approach to sexual behavior, arguing that sexual behavior is socially learned. In Bogle's (2008) study, she attempted to identify and explain the hookup script, which tends to include alcohol. Bogle (2008) cautioned against the common interpretation that drinking leads to hooking up. On the contrary, she proposed that the culture of hooking up, which entails hanging out in groups at parties or bars, facilitates drinking. In turn, drinking may contribute to initiating and following through with a hookup (Bogle, 2008). Hookup culture stands in contrast with traditional dating culture, in which it might have been frowned upon to drink to excess on a date (Bogle, 2008).

Adding to research on the relationship between hooking up and alcohol consumption, Fielder and Carey (2010) examined the antecedents and consequences of hookups for first-year college students. They found that prior hookup behavior, peak intoxication level, and situational triggers were all predictors of engaging in hookup behavior. While it is understood and accepted that there is a relationship between alcohol consumption and hookup behavior, further research is needed to understand more about this relationship between alcohol and hooking up. Qualitative research that allows individuals to provide in-depth descriptions of their behavioral decisions, such as the current study, will contribute to this line of research.

#### *Role of Perceived Norms*

Given that beliefs about the behavior of one's peers may influence one's actual behavior, it is important to understand peer norms around flirting, sexual communication, and related behaviors. The effect of peer norms on college students' behavior is studied in the literature on hooking up as well as in the literature on alcohol use. In a study of 675 college students, Rimal and Real (2007) found that students who frequently discussed alcohol consumption with peers estimated that their peers consumed higher amounts of alcohol. Thus, the prevalence of conversation about a given behavior may influence the perception of how commonly the behavior occurs. Peer networks are highly influential in determining an individual's behavior, since membership in a social network of others who drink alcohol affords more opportunities to engage in conversations about alcohol consumption and to actually consume alcohol within that group (Rimal & Real, 2007). This same effect likely extends to other behaviors, such as

partying and hooking up as frequent discussions may make these behaviors seem more normative or typical.

The notion that peer social groups have a stronger influence on individual behaviors than do campus-wide norms may provide an explanation for the inconsistent findings between some researchers on the topic of college behavioral norms. Holman (2012) argued that, while hooking up exists and is somewhat common on college campuses, it is not the only cultural script that students use, and is not necessarily the dominant model, as some recent research would suggest (Bogle, 2008; Paul & Hayes, 2002). Students' accounts of their own intimacy behaviors and goals show significant variation, pointing to the idea that there may be important subcultures within the college student population that warrant further study (Holman, 2012). On the other hand, Bogle (2008) proposes that hookup culture will continue to dominate college campuses, as college students tend to over-estimate the prevalence of hooking up on their campus (Bogle, 2008).

#### *College Students' Romantic and Sexual Expectations*

Across the research in this area, college students who participate in studies that ask about dating and hookup behaviors clearly demonstrate an understanding of traditional dating scripts as well as an understanding of the concept of hooking up (e.g. Bogle, 2008; Henningsen, 2004; Lindgren, 2009). However, it is not clear if students' romantic and sexual goals are consistent with either one of these scripts. College students tend to differentiate a hookup from a relationship based on the willingness of both partners to refer to one another as boyfriend/girlfriend and based on the level of

exclusivity within the relationship (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). In other words, a relationship requires mutually identified exclusivity.

For both male and female college students, dating is preferable to hooking up when their goal is to pursue a relationship (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010). A recent survey of over 14,000 college students found that 37 percent of men and 47 percent of women were interested in pursuing some sort of relationship after their most recent hookup (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Thus, both sexes may be engaging in hookup behaviors when at least one individual would prefer is to engage in dating behavior.

Researchers posit that men and women show differences in sexual, flirting, and romantic goals. Bogle (2008) suggests that women hook up with the primary goal of entering into committed relationships, while men hook up with the primary goal of having sex. Reid, Elliott, and Webber (2007) asked 273 college students to analyze a written scenario of a heterosexual hookup followed by a sexless first date. Students reported sexual desire as the primary reason for both the men and women to engage in an initial hookup, which the researchers interpreted as an indication that both male and female college students are comfortable with both male and female sexual agency (Reid et al., 2007). In terms of desire for a relationship, however, students viewed men and women differently. Participants tended to assume that a woman would welcome initiation of a relationship from a man in this scenario, whereas a man would be equally likely to welcome or to reject the initiation of a relationship from the woman. Thus, participants supported the perception that women may enjoy having sex outside of a committed relationship, but hold onto hope that a hook up might lead to a relationship.

Reid et al. (2007) concluded that traditional gender norms, which involve the man initiating the relationship but also being less invested in it, seem to hold true in dating interactions in college, even if they are temporarily disregarded during a hookup. “Women are allowed to have fun at parties, but once it becomes a serious matter, traditional gender norms, which affirm men’s prerogatives, take precedence” (Reid et al., 2007, p. 564). Reid et al. (2007) theorized that women may enjoy hooking up, but might feel compelled to “engage in impression management to encourage her partner to see her as potential dating material” if and when the potential for a relationship arises (p. 564).

Bradshaw, Kahn and Saville (2010) surveyed male and female college students for their preference of dating versus hooking up across a variety of situations. Their research has similar findings to Reid et al.’s study, suggesting that even though gender roles have changed in some contexts, traditional gender roles are fairly intact in dating scripts (Bradshaw, Kahn & Saville, 2010). Results indicated that men benefit more from hooking up, while women benefit more from dating (Bradshaw, Kahn and Saville, 2010). The authors caution that women may be at an increased risk for experiencing depression, feelings of guilt, and rape if hooking up continues to be more frequent than traditional dating (Bradshaw, Kahn and Saville, 2010).

In general, there is some evidence that women report enjoying hookups, and some evidence that both genders would prefer dating in situations where they see potential for a relationship. The continued debate over whether or not college students want to follow traditional gender roles may be reflective of the previously noted notion that colleges lack clear norms and expectations in terms of romantic and sexual relationships.

### *Consequences of Hooking Up*

Researchers agree that hooking up can have negative consequences, especially for women. While hooking up is considered common on college campuses, there may be negative consequences such as exploitive sexual encounters, sexual regret, and higher levels of depression for women who engage in hookup behaviors (Bogle, 2008; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Grello, 2006). Drinking and hooking up can lead to miscommunications and adverse outcomes that range from hurt feelings to sexual assault (Bogle, 2008).

Several studies have looked at positive and negative outcomes of hooking up and dating, each with a focus on different types of outcomes. As mentioned previously, Reid, Elliott, and Webber's (2007) study focused on outcomes for women in terms of their ability to exercise power and autonomy. The authors acknowledged that both hookups and dates occur within the larger context of gender inequality, and conclude that norms around traditional dating may put women at a disadvantage, whereas hookup situations can allow women to exercise sexual agency. Thus, hooking up may have positive outcomes for women who view it as a casual encounter that is just for fun, and negative outcomes for women who are interested in pursuing a relationship.

Eshbaugh and Gute's 2008 study surveyed female college students about their sexual regret, sexual behaviors, and religiosity. The authors found that women are more likely to experience sexual regret at having performed a sexual act, as opposed to regret at having not performed one. Regret is described as the negative emotions a person feels when thinking about the impact of their past actions; these feelings may have a negative impact on that person's subjective well-being. Compared to other sexual behaviors, hookups were more predictive of sexual regret among the college women surveyed.

Additionally, hookups including sexual intercourse were more strongly associated with sexual regret than hookups not involving intercourse. The hookup behaviors that college women found most regrettable were engaging in intercourse with someone they had known for less than 24 hours and having intercourse with someone once and only once. Of the students surveyed, all of whom had engaged in sexual intercourse, 29% responded “yes” when asked if they had engaged in intercourse with someone they had known for less than 24 hours, and 36% responded “yes” when asked if they have ever had intercourse with someone once and only once. (Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008)

Fielder and Carey (2010) surveyed 140 college students at the beginning and end of their first semester, measuring their levels of distress and self-esteem at both time points. Results showed that engaging in penetrative sex hookups may lead to an increased level of distress for female students. This finding is juxtaposed against the results for male students, which indicate that men who have never hooked up show the highest levels of distress at both time points. While there are conflicting perspectives on the specific impact of dating and hookup situations for female college students, the questions being posed across the research in this area indicate that college students may not be getting what they want out of romantic, sexual, or dating relationships.

The disconnect between what students want and what they get may be due in part to difficulties with explicit communication when it comes to in-person sexual and romantic interactions, so it seems that partners are not communicating clearly about what it is that they want. College students’ flirting behavior is ambiguous by design, as individuals are trying to gauge the interest of the other person before making their own interest fully known (Lindgren, 2009). In order to understand how college students

communicate their sexual and romantic goals, there is a need to examine the ways in which college students are communicating with one another more generally.

### **Technology and Communication in College**

#### *Immediate Communication*

More than ever, college students today have the ability to communicate with one another in real time when they are not face-to-face. Personal communication technology (PCT) such as smart phones is becoming increasingly integrated into young people's social interactions. According to a 2012 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 95% of 18-24 year olds in the U.S. own a cell phone, and 97% of these cell phone owners send text messages. Two thirds of teens text every day (Common Sense Media, 2012) and 18-24 year olds send or receive an average of 109.5 text messages per day. (Pew Internet and American Life Project, retrieved 9/25/12) Given that cell phones and texting are nearly universal among college-age youth, it is important to acknowledge their impact on the college social environment.

Mobile communication enables communication to happen free from a specific context. This provides users with more freedom in terms of the ability to take calls and receive messages regardless of where they are, but simultaneously inhibits freedom because the users are accessible in a variety of contexts (Ishii, 2006, p. 347-348). This also changes the expectations for immediacy in reciprocal communication in that others are expected to respond whenever a message is sent, no matter where the recipient may be. Text messaging has not replaced face-to-face communication, but rather adds to the communication repertoire of young people (Thurlow, 2003). Since patterns of mobile media use are influenced by cultural factors such as age, education level, and peer norms



(Ishii, 2006, p. 361), it is important to understand the role that mobile communication plays in the unique culture of cross-sex relationships on a college campus.

Qualitative research suggests that the opportunity for thoughtful or controlled reflection on the content, wording, and composition of text messages contributes to a preference for texting over verbal communication (Reid & Reid, 2010). While nearly half of teens report that their favorite way to communicate with friends is in person, 33% of teens report that texting is their favorite mode of communication with friends (Common Sense Media, 2012). Many younger mobile phone users often prefer SMS<sup>2</sup> to voice calls for social contact (Haste, 2005). One study found that two-thirds of college students' text messages were explicitly relational in nature, and that text messaging is most gratifying for its users in terms of its utility in providing intimacy and social intercourse (Thurlow, 2003).

### *Social Media*

In contrast, social media provides a more public form of communication, allowing users to feel connected to many people at once. Seventy five percent of teenagers are members of social networking sites and 22% have Twitter accounts. Additionally, 23% of teens are considered “heavy” social media users, meaning that they use at least two forms of social media every single day.

Social network sites are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211).

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<sup>2</sup> SMS is an abbreviation for short messaging service; often used interchangeably with “text message”.

Facebook is the most popular social networking site in the United States (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). An online survey of college students' Facebook activity found that participants spent an average of just over an hour a day on Facebook; 80% reported logging in multiple times a day (Manago et al., 2012). Adults ages 18-34 have a mean of 318.5 Facebook friends (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012). Social networking sites like Facebook exist primarily to support existing real-life social networks, enabling students to socialize with one another even when they cannot be in the same place (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 221). These sites allow users to use the internet to accomplish tasks that are important to them in real life, such as staying connected with friends, making friends, sharing photos, and sharing their ideas with other people (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011). However, the unique platform of social networking affects how teens interact with each other. For example, 31% of social media users report having flirted with someone online who they would not have flirted with in person.

While students find these communication tools useful, they also force communications between individuals into a specific framework. For example, joining someone's network on Facebook makes you acknowledge that you are "friends" with that person, because "friends" is the language chosen by Facebook to indicate a connection. This connection thus imposes the label of "friendship" onto a connection that may actually be something else such as "acquaintance" or "hookup buddy". (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) While researchers have not explicitly addressed this connection, the increase in online "friendships" coincides with the decline of committed dating relationships among college students and the increase of cross-sex platonic relationships, or sexual

relationships without a romantic commitment.

An analysis of users' privacy concerns on social networking sites suggests that, due to increased trust in Facebook's authenticity and security, Facebook users are also willing to share more information than were users of previous social networking sites. One reason for users' increased trust in Facebook is its association with physical entities, such as universities. (Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini, 2008) An additional motivation for using Facebook is the way it makes users feel. Twenty nine percent of teenagers report that using social networking sites makes them feel less shy, 20% report that it makes them feel more confident, and 19% report feeling more popular as a result.

As outlined in this section, college students have many options for communicating with one another, and each of these modes presents unique opportunities and challenges. While many teenagers (29%) report a preference for in-person communication because they can better understand what people really mean, others express a preference for texting because it gives them more time to plan their response (16%) (Common Sense Media, 2012). In an effort to explore what contributes to successful communication across various contexts, this review will next examine other aspects of interpersonal communication that may contribute to the effectiveness of messages that are sent and received by college students.

### **Perceptions and Misperceptions in Cross-Sex Communication**

#### *Perception in Cross-Sex Communication*

Perception is another factor that plays an important role in all social interactions, as individuals attempt to interpret the meaning of social information. Often, the environment provides an individual with social cues that are ambiguous. People may

perceive the same social stimuli in vastly different ways as a result of internal or external individual factors (Strachman & Gable, 2006). Individuals often cannot separate themselves from their perception of another person and may project their own wishes, agendas and experiences onto a social interaction (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000). Thus, when presented with ambiguous social cues, the perceiver's internal goals and motives can influence how that information is processed (Strachman & Gable, 2006).

Strachman and Gable (2006) studied the impact of approach and avoidance motivations on undergraduate students' memory and evaluation of ambiguous social cues. Participants were given a written description of a dating situation that included positive, negative, and neutral events. The gender of the actor in the story was matched with the participant's gender, so that it would be easier for the participant to identify with the actor's perspective. After reading the story, participants were asked to recall and make judgments about the scenario presented. The authors found that participants whose primary desire was to avoid a negative outcome (avoidance motivation) actually ended up perceiving this unwanted outcome more often for the actor in the scenario. This finding indicates that these participants were anticipating poorer social and emotional outcomes for the actor. (Strachman & Gable, 2006) Researchers concluded that approach motivation (desire to achieve a positive outcome) is most beneficial for individuals when meeting a potential romantic partner for the first time, since this type of meeting is a "reward-rich" situation. In potentially romantic interactions, individuals may use avoidance motivation in an effort to defend against the possibility of rejection, but these findings indicate that this would not be the most effective strategy (Strachman and Gable, 2006). This study highlights one way in which a person's perception can contribute to

miscommunication. Although this study was not specifically examining flirting behavior, the findings are relevant in that they involve a cross-sex interaction in which at least one person is attempting to convey romantic or sexual interest.

### *Perception in Sexual Communication*

As noted in the Strachman and Gable's (2006) study, communicating romantic interest in another person can result in a variety of positive or negative outcomes. Knapp and Vangelisti (2000) also caution that perceptual distortions caused by the individual's internal drives are especially apparent during the early stages of romantic interest. While it can be risky for an individual to communicate interest in a potential partner, communication in this context is important in terms of achieving desired outcomes. For instance, the ability to accurately interpret another person's sexual interest is a necessary prerequisite for consensual romantic and sexual relationships (Lindgren & Shoda, 2007).

Many people navigate flirting interactions by engaging in behaviors that could be perceived as either friendly or as indicative of sexual interest, leaving the target to decipher the meaning of the actor's ambiguous behaviors (Henningsen, 2004). While this may serve to save face for the actor, who is concerned with both getting a desired outcome and avoiding rejection, it puts an extra burden on the target to accurately perceive a behavior that is intentionally ambiguous. This becomes increasingly difficult in cross-sex interactions, since there are differences in how the same flirting behavior is perceived by males versus females (Henningsen, 2004). In a qualitative focus group study of first year college students' experiences and perceptions of sexual communication, Lindgren et al. (2009) found that both male and female college students preferred indirect and nonverbal communication strategies to communicate sexual intent,

as opposed to direct communication strategies. For example, eye contact and “accidental” touching were frequently cited indicators of sexual interest, while crossing one’s arms and avoiding eye contact were cited as indicators of disinterest (Lindgren, Schact, Pantalone & Blayney, 2009). Additionally, women favored indirect communication when expressing disinterest in someone, but would eventually use direct, overt communication if needed to convey this message (Lindgren et al., 2009).

Levesque (2006) studied brief interactions between men and women who were meeting for the first time during the study, which was conducted in a laboratory setting. Participants were 43 men and 43 women, who rated themselves, their assigned partner, and their interaction on sexual traits and other personality traits immediately following the interaction. This study found that physical attractiveness is highly correlated with interpersonal perceptions (Levesque, 2006). For women, a man who is perceived to be physically attractive is also perceived to possess additional positive traits (Levesque, 2006). For men, however, physical appearance was only seen as a cue for making inferences of a sexual nature. In Lindgren’s (2009) focus group study, women reported wanting to be liked for who they are as an individual, and thus perceive men’s interest in them as interest in who they are. Contrastingly, men reported that they gauge a woman’s sexual interest based on how interested she appears to be in having sex in general. In other words, men did not focus on whether or not a potential female sexual partner was attracted to them as an individual, but instead on whether or not she seemed interested in a sexual encounter at all (Lindgren et al., 2009). Generally speaking, men and women use different cues to make judgments about sexual traits, and further research is needed to determine the cause of this gender difference (Levesque, 2006).

Research points to the possibility that gender socialization plays a role in the formation of sexual judgments, and thus could account for this difference in how sexual judgments are made (Levesque, 2006). Lindgren et al. (2007) studied college students' perceptions of sexual intent within the behaviors of targeted individuals, and observed that targets who were strangers were perceived more sexually than targets who were identified as people who the participants already knew. This has implications for the importance of examining the interactions between potential romantic partners when they first meet, since misperception is more likely to occur when two individuals do not know one another.

Peer norms within the college environment may also influence expectations between individuals as they interact for the first time. Simply being in college (as opposed to high school) changes expectations, as evidenced by Lindgren et al.'s 2009 focus group findings. First semester freshmen undergraduates in this study reported that their perceptions about sex in college differ from the perceptions they held in high school, just a few months earlier. For example, they perceive casual sex as more common and accessible than it was in high school. Additionally, they perceive conversations about sex as more common and therefore less associated with being promiscuous. (Lindgren et al., 2009) Interestingly, both sexes also report waiting longer to have sex with a partner and an increased interest in long-term relationships compared to high school (Lindgren et al., 2009). Participants reported that women's personal boundaries of what is acceptable sexual behavior are the primary determinant of sexual behavior in college. This is contrasted with external forces such as religion, parents, and friends that were important determinants of sexual behavior in high school. (Lindgren et

al., 2009) The implication of this finding is that peer norms become increasingly important in the college setting.

While peer norms are important for both sexes, norms may differ for men and women. As noted previously, research has consistently shown gender differences in perception of women's sexual intent during cross sex interactions, such that men tend to rate the same behaviors as more sexual than women do (e.g. Abbey, 1982; Farris, Treat, Viken, and McFall, 2008; Levesque, 2006). While there is disagreement about the reasons behind this finding, it is important to understand how ambiguous behaviors might be perceived by the other sex so that both sexes can achieve their desired sexual or romantic goals. Male and female college students differ in their sexual goals, with men reporting sexual intent for flirting behavior (Henningsen, 2004) and women reporting that they are less flexible than men in how far they are willing to go sexually (Lindgren, 2009). Students of both sexes report that they approach potential sexual partners with an understanding of their own goals and expectations. For example, women reported that they knew "how far" they were willing to go sexually, and men reported that they expected women to be the ones to control the level of sexuality (Lindgren et al., 2009). In contrast, men tended to report that they always wanted to have sex, and women supported this characterization (Lindgren et al., 2009). As sexual goals may differ between genders, it follows that their perception of sexual intent will also differ (Lindgren et al., 2007). In fact, gender was a reliable predictor of sexual intent perception in Lindgren et al.'s (2007) study of college students, such that men rated higher levels of sexual intent than women did.



Other researchers posit that men may perceive a woman's disinterest, but proceed in attempting to court her anyway (Farris et al., 2008; Jacques-Tiura, 2007). Given that men are more sexually motivated in potentially romantic interactions (Lindgren, 2009) and that perception may be biased based on a person's internal motivations and goals (Strachman and Gable, 2006), men's difficulty in discerning friendly from flirting behavior may result in an overperception of sexual interest.

### *Theories of Gender Difference*

Theory has also been used to make sense of the gender differences that researchers have observed in a variety of cross-sex interactions over the years (e.g. Abbey, 1982; Henningsen, 2004). For example, Henningsen (2006) sought to explain the differences in perception of sexual intent between males and females using Cognitive Valence Theory (CVT), a concept developed by Peter A. Andersen (1989). CVT posits that intimacy levels increase during in-person interactions as a result of individuals continuously calibrating the intimacy level of their responses to the other person in the dyad in order to maintain a socially comfortable level of interaction (Henningsen, 2006). In addition to interpersonal cues, individuals engage cognitive schemas that help them determine the appropriateness of one response over another. Cognitive schemas provide a framework through which the individual filters responses through their schemas of contextual, relational, and cultural appropriateness (Henningsen, 2006). CVT also highlights the importance of individual variables that affect how a specific person will receive a particular message. Namely, personal predispositions, the physical or psychological state of the individual, and interpersonal valence will affect an individual's perception of a given message (Andersen, 1989 as cited in Henningsen, 2006, p. 822).

Based on CVT, Henningsen hypothesized that gender differences in sexual perception would occur at cognitive and perceptual levels. His study of brief interactions between male and female college student participants in a laboratory setting provided evidence to support this hypothesis. Specifically, women reported displaying fewer sexual cues than men perceived them to display within the same interaction. Additionally, reported and perceived sexual interest was significantly associated with sexually motivated behaviors. Henningsen concludes that miscommunication is at least partially responsible for the consistently observed gender differences in perception of sexual interest. Thus, the perceptual component of CVT may provide a broader understanding of miscommunication in cross-sex interactions. (Henningsen, 2006) While the CVT framework is helpful for thinking about cross-sex miscommunication conceptually, Henningsen (2006) acknowledges that causal inferences cannot be made on the basis of his study. Since the experiment was conducted in a laboratory setting with random pairing of cross-sex individuals, the level of sexual interest was low, meaning that results cannot be generalized to situations where the level of sexual interest is higher.

Henningsen (2006, 2010) has identified the need for theory to interpret the causes of cross-sex miscommunications in flirting interactions. Given that his research has demonstrated variability of cross-sex interactions across contexts, and given the unique nature of social relationships on a college campus, exploratory research is needed in order to provide direction for theory that applies specifically to heterosexual flirting interactions in the current college environment.

The majority of research on gender differences in college student sexual behavior and goals to date has been quantitative with only a few studies utilizing qualitative

methodologies. Lindgren et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study to obtain a more in-depth understanding of college students' sexual communication and sexual goals.

Participants in this study were 29 first year undergraduate students who engaged in single-sex focus groups. Lindgren et al. specifically examined how these students' experiences and perceptions of sexual communication and sexual goals were affected by the transition from high school to college. The rationale for Lindgren et al.'s study is also supportive of the current study; in order to identify targets for educational interventions around sex and dating issues, it is imperative to first understand students' sexual goals and sexual communication strategies (Lindgren et al., 2009).

The demographics of the sample in Lindgren's study mirrored the demographics of the large, public university in the Pacific Northwest from which it was taken. Male and female participants were all heterosexual first year students who received course credit in return for participating in focus groups; the participants did not know one another prior to participating in the study. Participants were asked not to discuss specific personal sexual experiences, not to use names, to talk one at a time, and not to talk about the session after it ended. Instead, they were instructed to talk about how people their age talk about sex in general. Groups first engaged in an icebreaker and watched a clip from a romantic comedy in an effort to prompt discussion.

The authors found that disinterest was typically communicated at first through indirect communication, and direct verbal communication was used only as "a last resort". Men acknowledged that they sometimes ignored the indirect communication of disinterest, while women reported that men did not pick up on their disinterest cues.

Another gender difference was that men cited style of dress as an indicator of sexual interest, whereas women did not. So, while women in college may feel confident they are not engaging in flirting behaviors, men may still interpret them as flirtatious based on the way they look or dress.

As mentioned previously, Lindgren et al. found that both male and female students perceived that sex was much more accessible and that casual sex was viewed as more acceptable in college than in high school. While men expressed more interest in casual sex as well as the excitement and challenge involved in pursuing these encounters, women reported more interest in long-term relationships. Additionally, women acknowledged their role as sexual gatekeepers, contrasted with men's acknowledgement of their role as sexual initiators. The authors had not anticipated such traditional views, and they posited that concerns about self-presentation within the focus group could have contributed to the views that were expressed. This limitation highlights the need for equally thick data to be gathered from individual college students in an environment where they feel free to express individual views without the potential for social judgment.

Additional limitations to this study provide opportunities for further research. While the use of a romantic comedy and the instruction to avoid personal information may have encouraged dialogue among these participants, there is also the potential that they skewed the direction of the conversation and primed students to give certain types of responses. The instruction to avoid personal disclosure in front of one's peers may have suggested to participants that the topic is taboo and not to be openly discussed, potentially creating an impression that the researchers were seeking socially appropriate or acceptable answers. Another limitation of depersonalizing the conversation is that it is

unclear whether or not women and men were satisfied with their pattern of communication. In order to reduce cross-sex miscommunication, it would be important to know, for example, whether men would prefer or respond more accurately to direct communication from women.

The current study provides an important extension of the information Lindgren elicited in focus groups. The authors cautioned that the group dynamic may have influenced the nature of comments and also may have suppressed disagreement from those with different perspectives or those who are less vocal. In contrast, individual interviews might allow for individual difference in behaviors, views, and values to emerge. By creating a private, confidential environment, participants may feel more open to discuss personal experiences and obtain a wider variety of honest responses. Individual interviews may also illuminate perceptions that women have, but choose to keep from others, during flirting interactions. Further, interviews may also provide a more accurate reflection of the actual behavior of those individuals. As evidenced in previous studies presented in this review, external behaviors alone are sufficient for understanding cross-sex communication because internal processes such as motivation, intent, attraction are important in understanding the level of sexual interest in a particular partner during a particular interaction.

### **Flirting**

Henningsen (2004) defines flirting as the way in which one person communicates sexual or romantic interest in another person, whether or not they intend to follow through in pursuing a romantic or sexual relationship. In Henningsen's 2004 study, he concludes that observed differences in males' and females' perceptions may be due to the

fact that men and women attribute different motivations to the same behaviors, such that men tend to perceive sexual motivation for flirting more often than do women. From this finding, he draws conclusions about how these differing perceptions can contribute to miscommunications in cross-sex interactions. (Henningsen, 2004, p. 481)

Abrahams (1994) defines flirting as, “messages and behaviors perceived by a recipient as purposefully attempting to gain his or her attention and stimulate his or her interest in the sender, while simultaneously being perceived as intentionally revealing affiliative desire” (Abrahams, 1994, p. 283). Both Abrahams’ and Henningsen’s research look at flirting behavior in terms of perception. Their studies apply the concept of perception to outside observers, who are not actually involved in the flirting scenarios, and draw inferences about how actors might perceive behaviors within a situation, rather than studying perception specifically from the target or sender’s perspective.

While Henningsen and Abrahams’ research defines flirting behavior by intentions and perceptions, other researchers define flirting in terms of the specific purpose it serves in interpersonal interactions. Some research examines flirting in terms of the outcomes it facilitates in interpersonal relationships (Frisby, 2010), while others define flirting as what happens at the outset of a relationship, when sexual or romantic expectations start (Egland et al., 1996; Henningsen, 2004; Weber et al., 2010). Given that this study views flirting as any behaviors that contribute to the beginning of a non-platonic interaction, both perspectives provide relevant background for this line of research. What unifies these definitions is the idea that flirting has a purpose, regardless of the results it yields; it is a means of intensifying the nature of a relationship in some way.

### *Flirting Behaviors*

Flirting interactions typically begin with very subtle indicators of interest, and the level of expressed intimacy increases as partners begin to show mutual interest in one another (Moore, 2010). Flirting behaviors are often intentionally ambiguous (Moore, 2010). This ambiguity of intention may allow both the sender and recipient to avoid rejection if the desire to flirt is not reciprocal. However, miscommunication in flirting interactions has typically been studied in terms of misperceptions, placing the onus on the recipient of a flirting cue to accurately assess the flirter's intentions (Henningesen, Kartch, Orr & Brown, 2009). Depending upon intent, perception and contextual factors, the same behavior may be interpreted as flirtatious or platonic across different interactions.

Researchers agree that flirting behaviors and friendly behaviors overlap, and that there is not consensus about the meaning of these behaviors (Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2008; Henningesen, 2004; Lindgren, 2009). For example, Farris et al. (2008) state, "Women may smile, sustain eye contact, increase physical proximity, or touch their partner to convey romantic or sexual interest", but go on to note that these same behaviors may also be used to convey platonic interest. In a review of nonverbal courtship behavior, Moore (2010) notes that other commonly observed and agreed upon flirting behaviors include laughing, repeated eye contact, smiling, and brief or sustained touching.

Successful navigation of social interactions requires an individual to understand the actual cues that people use to express interest or boredom as well as the cues that are popularly believed to convey these emotions (Fichten et al., 2001). Fichten et al. (2001) examined

verbal and non-verbal behaviors in both intimate and non-intimate interactions, asking participants in the study to classify which behaviors indicate interest in another person. Participants were recruited from a convenience sample of 84 Canadian adults ranging in age from 18-45 years. Subjects engaged in 12 item structured interviews, answering questions about the types of cues that they use and that others use to indicate interest or lack of interest. Results showed that participants were able to describe behaviors that indicated interest more easily than those that indicated boredom. Most interest cues that participants identified were nonverbal, such as leaning in, touching, and smiling (Fichten et al., 2001).

During telephone interactions, subjects reported relying on a wider variety of audible cues, such as asking open-ended questions or talking about personal topics, than during in-person interactions, when they were able to rely on non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and eye contact, as additional indicators of interest (Fichten et al., 2001). This has implications for the ways in which flirtations over social media, text message, or other brief written forms of modern communication may be interpreted or misinterpreted by a person of a different sex. That is, brief written communications, which are common among college students, provide neither audible cues nor non-verbal cues, leaving these messages more susceptible to miscommunication.

#### *Gender Differences in Flirting Interactions*

Current research on flirting is rooted in Antonia Abbey's seminal study, "Sex Differences in Attributions for Friendly Behavior: Do Males Misperceive Females' Friendliness?" (1982). Abbey started this line of research based on her own experience of having men misinterpret friendliness as implying sexual interest, and it was the first



study to examine the ways in which gender differences might systematically create miscommunication in flirting interactions. She sets out to test the more general hypothesis that a person of a different sex may misinterpret friendly behavior as sexual interest.

The participants in Abbey's study were 144 undergraduate students. Two male and two female participants were grouped into the same session and were informed that "the purpose of the experiment was to determine the ways in which the topic of conversation affects the smoothness of initial interactions" (p. 832). Two of the participants, one male and one female, were assigned to the role of observer; the other two were designated as actors. The observers observed a conversation between the actors. The actors did not know they were being observed. After the conversation, all four participants answered questions about each of the actors' personality traits and how each actor was trying to behave during the interaction. In addition, observers were asked if they thought the actors were sexually attracted to one another, and actors were asked about the potential for sexual interest in their partner. Finally, the actors were asked to respond "yes" or "no" to whether or not they would like to interact with the same partner for the next part of the experiment.

Consistent with the researchers' hypothesis, males (in both the actor and observer role) rated female actors as more seductive and promiscuous than did females. Compared to female observers, the male observers also reported being more sexually attracted to and eager to date the other-sex partner. No sex differences were found in male and female participants' ratings of the female actor's flirtatiousness, which Abbey characterized as "the mildest trait term" in the study. Actors and observers of both sexes

rated the female actor as more flirtatious than the male, which the authors interpret as an indication that the word “flirtatious” has a feminine connotation.

Abbey concluded that the hypothesis that men misinterpret women’s friendliness as sexual interest was supported by the findings of this study. However, the authors also acknowledge that the bias may be due to a general tendency for males to perceive the world in more sexual terms than women do, regardless of whether they are rating the behavior of a man or of a woman. Abbey called for future research to address the underlying causal factors that contribute to the observed male over-perception bias, as well as the specific circumstances that elicit this bias.

This study broke significant ground in establishing a basis for future research on flirting, and its limitations suggest avenues for subsequent studies. In the 1982 study, researchers randomly assigned cross-sex pairs, and conversations lasted only five minutes in a laboratory setting. These conditions may not have provided ample time or a sufficiently relaxed setting to foster flirting behaviors, particularly for individuals who may be nervous in this type of interaction. Thus, it could be that women’s or men’s perceptions would change if the context of the interaction were different and more closely resembled real-life interactions. Since the purpose of research is to draw inferences that will hold true in reality, it will be important for research to look at Abbey’s hypotheses in naturalistic contexts.

#### *Contexts of flirting interactions*

Flirting happens in a variety of contexts and in many different ways, and context affects the way flirting happens as well as the way it is perceived (Henningson et al., 2008). Despite the fact that research indicates flirting is an intentionally ambiguous, yet

purpose-driven behavior, most of the research to date has been based on observations and self-reports of behaviors, rather than focusing on the internal thought processes and motivations that influence flirting interactions.

Henningsen's 2004 study sought to identify and understand the various motivations that drive flirting behaviors for men and for women. This study built upon the findings from Abbey's 1982 study, and is one of the only studies to date to look at the meaning behind flirting behaviors. Previous research had focused on flirting as a behavior that was intended to promote sex or dating, but Henningsen took a broader view of the possible reasons people flirt. Henningsen's definition of flirting includes behaviors with and without sexual motivation. He acknowledges the ubiquitous nature of flirting, and divides flirting behaviors into those that are "courtship initiating" (sexually motivated) and "quasi-courtship" (not sexually motivated). He hypothesized that men would report more courtship initiating or other sexually-driven flirting motivations, while women will report more quasi-courtship, non-sexual flirting motivations. Henningsen (2004) also hypothesized that the observed difference in male's and female's perceptions may be due to the fact that men interpret flirting as having a sexual motivation, whereas women may attribute a different motivation to the same behaviors.

Participants in Henningsen's study were 200 college students enrolled in communication courses at a Midwestern university. Participants were given blank sheets of paper and were asked to write a script of a typical flirting interaction between a male and female, indicating specifically what both parties would say and do, including verbal and nonverbal behaviors. They were also asked to identify which behaviors were engaged in by the male and which were engaged in by the female. Next, participants

were asked to circle all behaviors listed that they would classify as flirting. Finally, participants were given the list of six possible flirting motivations and were instructed to code the circled flirting behaviors according to which motivation they believed the person in the interaction was most likely experiencing at the time that he/she engaged in a given behavior. Participants were restricted to assign only one motivation to each behavior, and to categorize any behaviors that did not fit the listed motivations as “other”.

Participants received a list of six possible motivations, and only a single motivation could be attributed to each flirting behavior. In addition to his primary hypotheses about sexual and non-sexual motivations, Henningsen examined four other possible flirting motivations: exploring motivation (behaviors to determine if a target is interested); fun motivation (that flirting is simply a fun, enjoyable form of interacting); esteem motivation (driven by the desire to build up one’s own self-esteem); and instrumental motivation (flirting to receive some sort of desired reward or service that is not related to increased intimacy with the target). The study examines whether men and women differ in their attributions of flirting behavior to each specific motivation.

Men reported significantly more sexually motivated flirting behaviors than did women, which was consistent with the study’s hypothesis. Women attributed more relational motivation to flirting behaviors than did men, also as predicted. No significant gender difference emerged for exploring motivation, instrumental motivation or esteem motivation. Women reported more fun-motivated flirting behaviors. The most frequently reported motivation for flirting behavior across the sexes is relational (attempting to promote a closer relationship), followed by sex (sexual intent) and exploring motivations.

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By addressing the meanings that individuals attribute to behaviors, Henningsen's (2004) study explored a more nuanced explanation for Abbey's (1982) observation that men tend to over-perceive women's friendly behaviors as sexual. He agreed that men may in fact be misinterpreting the woman's intent, but concluded that this may be because women have more varied reasons for flirting than do men. From these findings, the author draws conclusions about how these differing perceptions can contribute to miscommunications in cross-sex interactions. (Henningsen, 2004)

This study has implications for future research on flirting in that it begins to develop a much-needed understanding of the internal processes that happen during flirting interactions. Henningsen acknowledged that the use of hypothetical scripts makes it impossible to discern whether the results in this study are measuring the way flirting happens in real life. Thus, there is a need for research that takes information from real-life examples. Henningsen also encourages future researchers to examine the range of possible causes for communication errors between men and women, including misperception, miscommunication, and attempted communication. Given the conclusion that men and women hold some different ideas about flirting and enact these behaviors for different reasons, it will be important to examine the experience of one gender without attempting to combine data from individuals of another gender. By using only females in the current study, we gain a more in-depth understanding of the female college student perspective on flirting interactions.

### **Need for Qualitative Research**

Many researchers who study college students' sexual and romantic communication highlight the need for a more nuanced, in-depth understand of college

students' sexual and romantic lives (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Jacques-Tiura, 2007) as the majority of the extant literature has relied on self-report surveys. In order to obtain this more complex understanding, researchers need to consider situational factors such as alcohol, mobile communication, and peer and dyadic interactions that can lead to misperception in real-world settings (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007). While laboratory experiments are valuable for their ability to control for the variables of interest and extraneous variables, results may not generalize to actual flirting interactions. Survey studies in this area are limited by self-report and instrumentation. Qualitative research is helpful to clarify findings from quantitative data, to address limitations in the existing measures, and to provide a narrative context for individual findings.

Within a real world context, women have a higher risk than men for negative outcomes as a result of cross-sex interactions. Quantitative surveys confine the participants to the words chosen by the researcher to describe their, sometimes painful, experiences. Even qualitative surveys do not allow the same room for clarification and expansion of a participant's ideas that is afforded by a semi-structured interview. A study yielding deep, rich data about the female perspective may be able to provide a greater understanding of when and how miscommunication happens for these women, and could help researchers identify potential areas for future research and intervention.

### *Research on Hookup Culture*

The majority of existing research on college students' sexual decision-making and sexual behavior is quantitative. Thus, the voices of college students themselves are underrepresented in the literature (Lindgren et al., 2009). In order to develop targeted

educational and health-related interventions, we must first understand what students want or intend and how they communicate (Lindgren et al., 2009).

Reid et al. (2007) conclude that there is a need to assess the meaning that hooking up holds for students, as compared to other forms of intimacy, in order to understand heterosexual hookups in a way that is more nuanced and rooted in the context. There is a need for research on this topic that includes more information about context, internal thought processes (i.e. motivation) for hooking up. Also, research needs to include more real-life examples and reliable accounts of what is happening. Given that many hookup encounters are reported to happen spontaneously, in-depth examination of the individual thought process is necessary to understand how and when students make decisions about engaging in this type of behavior. Consensual qualitative research methods yield this type of information in order to better understand the pressures and perceptions related to various sexual and romantic behaviors, as well as the internal feelings they evoke in the individual.

Several studies (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Fielder and Carey, 2010) have used convenience samples of predominantly white, heterosexual, first year students. While this research should be expanded to more diverse populations, it is also important that the results of this study are grounded in the existing research, given the small sample size and unique nature of this study relative to those preceding it. Therefore, the decision was made to use a sample of heterosexual women for this study.

Although researchers have examined who engages in hookup behavior and what may happen during and after a hook up, relatively little is known about the factors that facilitate or inhibit dating and hooking up (Bradshaw, Kahn & Saville, 2010). This

suggests a need to examine not only the risks and benefits of various sexual and dating interactions among college students, but also the other details surrounding the choices college students make in these interactions. Qualitative interviews are ideal for soliciting this type of information about real life situations, from the perspective of the actors. A limitation of much research on hooking up is that the definition of hooking up may differ from researchers to participants, and from one participant to the next (Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville, 2010, p. 668). Qualitative research would allow participants to use their own language to describe situations that may fall under the umbrella of hookup behavior. Additionally, a more in-depth understanding of the forces and motivations that lead college students to hookup or dating behaviors is needed. (Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville, 2010, p. 668)

A theme of this literature is that, while there are emerging ideas about hookup culture as a script for romantic and sexual relationships on college campuses, the prevalence of ambiguity and uncertainty is even more pervasive. Therefore, obtaining a more thorough understanding of the perceptions, meanings, values, and actions associated with modern sexual and romantic interactions on college campuses will provide a valuable contribution to the literature. Given what is already known about these interactions among heterosexual dyads, the importance of gender must be taken into account. Existing research has established that women are disproportionately affected in a negative way by sexual and romantic relationships in college, and as a result there is perhaps a stronger foundation in the literature on women as compared to men. Qualitative interview data can also supply rich context for how and when cross-sex miscommunications happen, and may provide insight into the meaning that individuals



ascribe to various cross-sex interactions. Information from these interviews can provide a foundation for understanding how cross-sex communication can be made more effective.

### **Chapter Three: Statement of the Problem**

Research has shown that men and women communicate differently when it comes to flirting and sexual communication (LaFrance et al., 2009). For example, women report smiling and being polite in order to be friendly, but friendliness is over-perceived as flirtatiousness by males (LaFrance et al., 2009). Additionally, sexual communication across both genders is often intentionally vague and less explicit than other types of dyadic communications (Lindgren, 2009). This is evident among college student populations, as a large proportion of sexual communication takes place within the context of hookup culture between people who do not have an established relationship and have not discussed any parameters of their relationship. Research suggests that there is often an apparent incongruence for college students between sexual/romantic intent and sexual/romantic behaviors (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Research has shown that miscommunication, relationship stress and unwanted sexual encounters can lead to negative mental health outcomes for students (Abowitz et al., 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Grello et al., 2006). There is a need for research to explore where, when, and how some of these miscommunications occur. A key purpose of this study is to investigate how the modes of communication that are being used for flirting, such as text messaging, social media, in-person, or other types of interactions, play a role in contributing to or alleviating miscommunications. Another important purpose of the current study is to examine the internal and external experiences of college

students in flirting interactions in order to see what informs and influences their behaviors that lead to effective or ineffective communication, as well as what happens as a result of flirting interactions.

Consensual qualitative research is used in situations where theory is to be built from the information gathered during interviews; thus, researchers approach a topic with as little bias or as few expectations about outcomes as possible (Hill et al., 2012). In light of this, research questions are more appropriate than hypotheses for this study.

Research questions for this study were designed to address the existing gaps in current flirting research. Bogle (2008) is the only study that has gathered qualitative information directly from college students about their experiences of sexual and romantic encounters in college. This study will focus more specifically on the initial interactions that men and women have one another, and will ask questions that reveal more detailed information about what happens at this stage of a relationship.

In addition to seeking information about personal experiences, Rimal and Real (2007) emphasize the importance and relevance of seeking information about the perceived norms that exist on college campuses. While Bogle's study did ask about some college relationship norms, it did not specifically address the norms of initial flirting interactions. Research on flirting (e.g. Henningsen, 2004; Abbey, 1982) has established that men often misperceive women's intentions in flirting interactions, and that women flirt for a variety of reasons. This study seeks to illuminate more information about women's motivations for flirting, and hopefully gather data to provide a more complex understanding of how certain flirting behaviors or certain contexts might be associated with specific intentions. Finally, given that women experience negative mental and

sexual health outcomes from miscommunication within sexual and romantic relationships, this study examines the outcomes college students experience as a result of initial interactions. The goal is to illuminate early signals that might indicate whether or not a woman is getting what she wants out of an interaction with a man. The current literature on flirting often discusses miscommunication and other ways in which flirting is ineffective. To obtain a broader understanding of flirting, this study also sought information about what flirting behaviors were perceived as effective by women, both from their experience as actors and targets within flirting interactions.

**Research Question 1:** How do women college students describe and perceive the process of initiating non-platonic relationships?

**Research Question 2:** What do women report about the role of context in initiating non-platonic relationships between college students?

**Research Question 3:** What do women report are the norms regarding non-platonic relationships among college students?

## **Chapter Four: Method**

### **Design**

This study used consensual qualitative research (CQR), a rigorous methodology designed to obtain consistent data across individuals while also examining individual experiences in-depth (Hill et al., 2012).

### **Participants**

**Interviewees.** The population of interest for this study was heterosexual female college students who had experience with flirting in college. Fourteen participants were

interviewed for this study. One interview was not used because of recording problems. A second interview was not included in the data because her interview revealed that she did not meet the criteria for a inclusion as a participant in this study. As mentioned previously, it is important that subjects participating in semi-structured interviews have relevant experience with the topic of the study as well as the ability to discuss this topic in-depth. The participant whose interview was discarded mostly spoke in generalities, rather than from experience or observation. As a result, she had trouble elaborating on responses even with the assistance of prompts. For example, she reported that she could not think of more than one person who she had been interested in during college, which made it difficult for her to respond to the interview protocol. In response to the post-interview survey prompt, “In the past three months, I have been in situations where there are opportunities to flirt, date, or hook up...” she responded ‘about once a month’, which was less frequent than all other participants in the study. An adequately homogeneous sample is an important consideration for analysis within consensual qualitative research (Hill, 2012). This participant’s lack of experience with non-platonic interactions also led to responses that were different from those of other participants.

Twelve participants were included in the final analysis, which is consistent with Hill et al.’s (2012) recommendation of including 8-15 participants for studies that conduct one or two interviews per participant. Also consistent with the Hill et al. (2012) recommendation of recruiting a homogeneous sample, participants were female undergraduate students who self-identified as single and heterosexual.

Participants were recruited from upper-level psychology courses at the University of Maryland. They received extra course credit for their participation. In the recruitment

materials, potential participants were informed that they would be asked to talk about interactions with men in college (See Appendix A). Sample questions were given to help participants understand the nature of the questions that would be asked. Students in classes such as Helping Skills and other counseling-oriented courses were targeted in an effort to recruit participants who would be able and willing to discuss internal and external cognitive and emotional experiences.

CQR calls for participants who have an in-depth knowledge of the subject being discussed. To achieve this type of sample, participants were screened prior to the interview to ensure that they were not currently in a committed relationship, had opportunities to flirt within the past three months, and were open to entering into a relationship within the next 12 months. Students who did not meet these criteria were told that they were ineligible for this study. Additionally, semi-structured interviews on this topic required the ability to articulate inner experiences, self-reflect, and think about the subjective experiences of others. In order to target students who had the necessary willingness and skill to discuss this topic, participants were recruited from psychology courses, such as Helping Skills, that require some element of interpersonal knowledge or training. Since no studies to date have asked participants to report on their own real-life flirting experiences, there is not a direct precedent for inclusion criteria. Lindgren (2009) recruited a convenience sample of primarily first-year students, but this was not a desirable model to emulate given the potential threats it poses to external validity.

**Judges.** The first step in CQR analysis is assembling a research team. Team members were recruited through campus-wide announcements for graduate and undergraduate students who were looking to gain experience in psychological research.

Team members who responded to this advertisement were interviewed and informed about the general expectations of the study. An additional team member was selected because she was a fellow graduate student of the principal investigator. The research team ended up consisting of two faculty auditors and 5 full-time University of Maryland students; 3 undergraduate students and 2 doctoral students in Counseling Psychology.

All members of the research team self-identified as female and heterosexual. The primary research team consisted of a 29-year-old, white, single, doctoral student in Counseling Psychology, a 28-year-old, white, married, doctoral student in Counseling Psychology, an adopted Korean-American, married, part-time undergraduate student in her late 30's, a 19-year-old, white, undergraduate student in a committed relationship, and a 26-year-old Hispanic, undergraduate student in a committed relationship. The 19-year-old team member lived adjacent to the University of Maryland campus, while other team members commuted to campus. Having the perspective of undergraduate students as team members helped the team interpret colloquial language used by undergraduate students. The research team was required to read Hill et al.'s 2005 article, *Consensual Qualitative Research: An Update* and review exemplar studies that have used CQR. Faculty auditors also provided guidance about the research process.

**Auditors.** The auditors provided detailed feedback about the analysis to the research team at every stage. The auditors' task was to ensure raw material was in the correct domain, that the data was accurately represented by the core ideas, and that the cross analysis elegantly and faithfully represented the data (Hill et al., 2012). For this study, the auditors were two faculty members who were already familiar with the study

but were not otherwise involved in data analysis. Using external auditors, as opposed to a person within the research team, helped to avoid groupthink (Hill et al., 2012).

## **Measures**

### *Screening*

A screening measure of demographic information was given to participants who volunteered for the study. Participants were selected for interviews based on their responses to questions on this survey. In order to be selected, participants must be between the ages of 18 and 22, female, heterosexual, full-time students, living on campus or in housing adjacent to campus such as The View or sororities, and single. (*See Appendix B for screening survey.*) Nine students did not complete the online survey after viewing the consent form, which includes a brief description of the study and the nature of the questions. One student who met the criteria and completed the survey indicated that she was “not at all motivated” to participate in the study. The study description may have pulled for participants who are interested in the college social experience. Three students indicated that they did not meet all of the criteria for the study.

### *Semi-structured Interview*

Consensual qualitative research uses semi-structured interviews to gather data (Hill et al., 2012). This means that interviewers follow a list of questions and also use probes as needed throughout the interviews to clarify, obtain more information, and yield a clearer or more thorough response. A broad, less personal question was intentionally asked at the outset of the interview in order to introduce and define the topic, as well as to ease into the personal nature of the interview. The interview questions listed were asked in the order listed here:

1) In general, how do your male friends in college communicate their interest in a woman? In general, how do your female friends in college communicate their interest in a guy?

2) Think about a time you were interested in someone and you let that person

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know. How did you communicate with him? Describe what happened. (If not addressed in open-ended response, use prompt: What were you interested in pursuing with them?)

3) Think about a time when you wanted to show interest in someone and it didn't work out. How did you communicate with him, if you did? Describe what happened.

4) Think of a time when someone expressed interest in you and you were also interested in them. How did that person communicate with you? Describe what happened.

5) Think of a time when someone expressed interest in you and you were not interested in them. How did that person communicate with you? Describe what happened.

6) Is there anything we haven't discussed related to flirting between men and women in college that you think might be important?

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This list reflects the final version of the interview protocol that was used in the study. The interviewer used probes for questions 2, 3, 4, and 5 to obtain information about the antecedents of the events being described, the behavior itself, and consequences of the events and behaviors. Probes were used in all questions in order to obtain information about verbal and non-verbal behaviors, internal thoughts and feelings,



assumptions made about behaviors, and context in which the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors occurred. Probes for more information might include phrases such as, *Would you explain further?*, *Could you give me an example of what you mean?*, *Could you say more?* and *Please describe what you mean.*

Interview questions were initially formulated on the basis of existing research and with the study's research questions in mind. These initial questions were further screened and revised based on input from a focus group (see Appendix D). Participants in the focus group were three volunteer participants from an education course at the University of Maryland, all of whom were white, heterosexual, females. One focus group member was in a long-term committed relationship at the time of the focus group; she is an active participant in Greek life on campus. The other two students were single at the time of the study; both have played on a varsity sports team and identify student-athletes as their primary social group. The study's primary investigator led the focus group. Participants provided input on how they might answer the proposed interview questions and confirmed that questions were clear and understandable. The focus group participants also provided relevant slang and suggestions for additional areas of inquiry within the area of college students' sexual and romantic relationships.

In a semi-structured interview format, the interviewer has the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and prompts in order to yield a more complete and thorough response from the participants. During the first interview, the participant was responding to questions about her hopes with answers about her expectations; the interviewer's direct questioning about what the participant hoped for in a specific non-platonic interaction was not getting a clear response. To better understand the participant's hopes and desires,

the interviewer asked the following questions: “When you came in as a freshman, what did you imagine or hope your dating life in college would be like?” and “So now, looking back at your four years, what’s your overall impression of how it went?”. This participant also talked about what she wants out of a relationship now and moving forward into graduation. In the subsequent interviews, it seemed valuable to get a similar perspective from participants, so a final question was added to the interview protocol: “What do you hope non-platonic interactions will be like after college?”. In all subsequent interviews, these three questions became part of the uniform protocol in an effort to contextualize and add depth to the participants’ stories.

Interviews were audio recorded and saved as password-protected electronic documents. Interviewees were contacted via email to set up a time for the interview. An hour and a half was allotted for each participant’s interview, and interviews lasted anywhere from 30 to 75 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a private room in an on-campus building. Once interviews had been recorded, the audio files were saved under a pseudonym for that participant. Only the principal investigator kept access to the list of participant names and corresponding pseudonyms in order to ensure that interviewees received extra credit for their participation.

#### *Post-Interview Demographic Survey*

After their interview, participants were given a survey to obtain demographic information. This information was used to help contextualize findings during analysis, but was not used as inclusion criteria. The post-interview survey asked students about their race/ethnicity, sexual experience, relationship experience, and extracurricular activities. These characteristics were of interest to the researchers because they may

provide relevant context to the data, but were outside the scope of interview questions. *(See Appendix E for complete survey)* The reason for collecting this information post-interview is to reduce participant assumptions about the nature of the study and to avoid unnecessary researcher bias during the selection process and interview.

The two graduate student team members conducted in-person interviews with participants. The interviewers reviewed and agreed to follow an interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D). Interviewers agreed to wear casual clothing, such as jeans and a sweater. The interviewer who is married removed her wedding ring for all but one interview. In these ways, the researchers attempted to create a uniform experience for participants as much as possible.

## **Procedures**

### **Recruitment**

Students in upper-level psychology courses were given the opportunity to volunteer for this study in exchange for extra credit. Students were informed that this study is concerned with interactions between men and women in college. When a student volunteered for this study, she was asked screening questions in order to ensure that she was eligible to participate. Eligible participants were contacted via email in order to arrange an interview time.

### **Interviews**

Interviews took place in a private room within the Counseling Psychology department at the University of Maryland College of Education. The interviewer reviewed a copy of the informed consent with each participant and reminded participants that the interview would be audiotaped. The interviewer began recording after informed

consent was reviewed. Interviews were scheduled for 90-minute blocks of time and lasted anywhere from 30-80 minutes.

### **CQR Process**

As interviews were completed, they were transcribed by members of the primary research team. Once they were transcribed, another team member checked each transcript for accuracy. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts in order to protect confidentiality of the participants and anyone else mentioned in the audio recording. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant, which was used to identify cases throughout the remainder of the research process.

The data obtained from these interviews were analyzed using the three main steps of CQR: developing domains to group the data, summarizing this data as core ideas, and using cross-analysis to identify themes across participants (Hill et al., 2012). At each step of this process, individuals brought their ideas to the group and the ideas were discussed until a consensus is reached (Hill et al., 2012). Throughout the process of analysis, an auditor reviewed conclusions made by the primary research team (Hill et al., 2012).

**Training Judges.** Members of the research team were all required to read *Consensual Qualitative Research: An Update* (Hill et al., 2005) and to review selected chapters of *Consensual Qualitative Research* (Hill, 2012). Prior to beginning the work of transcribing interviews, an initial team meeting was held to discuss the CQR process. All team members were present and participated. Members signed a confidentiality agreement in order to ensure that information revealed in interviews would remain confidential within the research team.

At each step of analysis, the auditors, who were experienced in CQR, were consulted to ensure that the research team was approaching the analysis process correctly. Additionally, the entire team met in person to begin each step in the coding process in order to ensure that everyone was on the same page. As questions arose throughout various steps in the process, the principal investigator consulted with the Hill (2012) text and with the auditors.

**Bracketing biases/expectations.** CQR requires that biases held by the researchers are taken into account. Researchers must report potential biases when writing the manuscript in addition to openly discussing their biases with one another throughout the consensus process. (Hill et al., 2012) Before reviewing data, the researchers must meet to reveal and discuss their individual biases that may influence data interpretation. Hill (2012) defines biases as personal issues that interfere with a researcher's ability to objectively interpret data (p. 61). Addressing biases helps ensure that data is being interpreted as it would by another group of researchers, and also enriches the level of discussion and process within data analysis (Hill, 2012). This information must be recorded and taken into account when reporting results of this study. Members of the research team must set aside these biases as much as possible in order to facilitate a more objective analytic process. Before the first team meeting, all team members read Hill's (2012) chapter on Biases and Expectations in order to understand the rationale behind the discussion of team members' perspectives and experiences that would be forthcoming.

Prior to transcribing interviews, the research team met in person to discuss the research methodology, perspectives on the topic, and to reveal potential biases. This 4-hour meeting was also designed to help the research team get to know one another in

order to facilitate teamwork and communication. The meeting began with casual conversation as team members introduced themselves to one another. After a few minutes, team members all took the same survey (See Appendix F), which was designed by the principal investigator to address potential sources of bias within this study. The survey asked team members about their demographic background, relationship experience, educational experience, cultural values, and beliefs about college students. The principal investigator informed team members that she would have access to all responses in the event that this information would be relevant later in the research process. Team members were not obligated to share all of their responses, but the questions in the survey were used to create self-awareness and facilitate a discussion of biases after everyone had answered them. The team discussed the meaning of the term “bias” in the context of this study; all team members would be coming from a unique perspective that would create a bias, but bias was not meant to be seen as something negative. The team also discussed how their answers to these survey questions might be related to the way they perceive and interpret the data in this study.

Team members agreed that they would be cautious of over identifying with some of the women’s stories as a result of being from the same gender and sexual orientation as the participants. The 19-year-old team member acknowledged that she might identify closely with the experiences of the participants, and may have automatic judgments about whether their stories are typical or atypical. In contrast, the other team members acknowledged that they might need to avoid assuming that their understanding or experience of being college-age was relevant to the stories participants share. One team member revealed that her little sister was the same age as the participants, which could

cause her to see participants as “cute” or “immature”. At the same time, she acknowledges that she remembers feeling like an adult when she was that age. The oldest team member worried that she might second-guess herself in interpreting what students say, since she feels removed from this generation and from college student experiences. This same team member did not attend a four-year university or live on campus.

Given that this study was focused on college campus norms, team members also discussed their experiences of campus life. The two doctoral students spent the past 10 years working and studying on various college campuses. The three other team members have previously been enrolled in community colleges, which they describe as having an older, more diverse, and smaller student population when compared to the University of Maryland undergraduate experience.

Team members discussed their personal relationship histories. One person has been in a series of 2-3 year relationships since she was 17, so she does not see herself relating to being single. A married team member said that she may assume that stories of hooking up may seem more fun to her as compared to married life. She also believes that hookups can lead to serious relationships, since this happened to her. The other married team member says that she would be encouraging of college students to have fun at this point in their life rather than rush to settle down.

Team members talked about the ways in which their parents’ experiences and views might impact their perspectives. The principal investigator acknowledged that college was an expected part of her upbringing and that her parents saw college as a time for fun and experimentation. Two other team members said that their parents met in high

school and that they felt pressure to find a partner during college or before. Another team member described that her mother emigrated from Puerto Rico to come to college, worked hard to get through college, and did not see college as a time for fun but as a time for hard work.

The team discussed their views on alcohol. Three team members acknowledge that alcohol is a large part of their social life. One team member does not drink often because she has a negative physical reaction to alcohol. Another team member used to drink more than she does now, but still drinks socially. The team discussed that understanding one's own views on drinking might help in accurately and objectively interpreting drinking behavior reported by participants.

Team members talked about what they believe women in college want out of non-platonic relationships. The two team members who conducted interviews believed women might not have been willing to admit that they wanted a committed relationship, since they had not been able to find one. The interviewers acknowledged that this was a bias they would try to be aware of during the interview process. Other team members indicated that they were not sure what college women want, but that it would likely vary from one participant to another and might not be consistent across college women in general.

Team members discussed their expectations about what college women would report in this study. Most team members predicted that these women would view men as primarily interested in having sex rather than in building a relationship. One team member countered that she knows men in college who are interested in having



relationships. The principal investigator stated that men in college are looking for a woman to take care of them, and two other team members agreed.

The team discussed that they should avoid referring to interviewees by any sort of stereotype. Instead, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant so that it would be easier to refer to a specific interview without creating bias or compromising confidentiality. Interviewers acknowledged that it would be helpful to reveal their perceptions of the interviewee based on the in-person meeting, if and when these perceptions might influence the way interviewers code the data. The two interviewers discussed that they would have a unique perspective on the participants' stories because they will have seen the participants and will have assessed their level of attractiveness, likeability, and other personality variables that would be beyond the scope of the study.

In order to avoid the influence that any of the aforementioned biases may have on the coding process, team members were required to provide words directly from the participants to support their interpretation of the data. Additionally, the auditors, who were not involved in the initial coding process, provided a check to any biases held by the coding team.

**Addressing power differentials among judges.** At the outset of the research process, the principal investigator informed the research team that they would all be participating as equal contributors to the CQR process. Throughout the research process, explicit measures were taken to address potential power differentials among judges that may exist due to age and experience level. For example, the team alternated who took what role in group meetings so that everyone had a turn as the person typing, the person

leading conversation, etc. Additionally, pairings and small groups were rotated systematically so that all team members worked with all other team members.

**Developing domains.** Domains are defined as, “topics used to cluster data” (Hill et al., 2012, p. 200). Responses to open-ended questions were categorized into domains (topic areas). Researchers coding the data were not permitted to have a pre-existing list of domains that they believed would emerge; rather, domains were constructed using only what was found in the data. Team members individually reviewed transcriptions of interviews, segmented the data independently, then came together as a team to achieve consensus. Once this had been completed for several cases, the remainder of the interviews were coded by pairs of researchers. The pairs rotated so that individuals were not always paired with the same team member. Through discussion, the team reached consensus on the domains that best fit the responses.

**Constructing core ideas.** Next, team members worked in pairs to construct core ideas from the data. Core ideas are, “summaries of the data that capture the essence of what was said in fewer words and with greater clarity” (Hill et al., 2012, p. 200). Like domains, core ideas are taken directly from the data and should be free of bias and assumption as much as possible. Researchers began by discussing core ideas for a single case as a team, and talking through each one until consensus was reached. These core ideas were then sent to the auditors for feedback. Based on feedback from the auditors, the team revised the core ideas for their first case as a team. When the team understood and agreed upon the revised process for developing core ideas, team members began to rotate the task of writing core ideas. Pairs of team members would develop core ideas for a case on their own and then compare them to create a consensus version of the core

ideas for that case. Throughout this step, consensus was required to arrive at the final wording. (Hill et al., 2012)

**Auditing of domains and core ideas.** Throughout this analysis, the auditor reviewed conclusions made by the research team in order to ensure that the data was being faithfully interpreted. Specifically, core ideas were developed for each transcript and then were sent to both auditors. Approximately half of the transcripts went to one auditor first and half to the other. Auditors communicated their thoughts about the research team's coding and about the other auditor's comments in writing. When audits came back to the team, the final consensus version was created as audits were accepted or rejected by one or more team members who had originally coded the transcript. The conclusions developed by the research team will provide a basis for the Discussion section of this manuscript.

**Cross-analysis.** Finally, the team conducted a cross-analysis, which developed categories and subcategories to describe consistent findings across cases (see Table 5.2 for a complete list of domains, categories, and subcategories). To do this, core ideas were placed into categories and subcategories. Results that apply to all cases or to all cases but one will be classified as "general" results. Results that apply to at least half of the cases will be classified as "typical". Results that apply to at least two cases but fewer than half of the cases will be classified as "variant".

**Auditing of cross-analysis.** Results of the cross-analysis were sent to a first auditor as they were completed. Team members reviewed and incorporated feedback from the first auditor before sending data to the second auditor. The second auditor reviewed the revised cross-analysis, including comments that the team had not yet chosen

to incorporate. Once the cross-analysis had been reviewed by both auditors, the research team made final decisions about which changes to accept and reject. The product of this process was a consensus version of the cross-analysis.

**Reporting the data.** Following cross-analysis, labels were assigned to each category within each domain in order to explain the extent to which the category represented the participants in this study. In accordance with CQR methodology, the labels “general,” “typical,” “variant,” and “rare” were used to indicate level of representativeness. Hill et al. (2005) recommend using “general” to label categories that include all or all but one of the cases (i.e., 12 or 13 cases), “typical” to label categories that include more than half of the cases up to all but one of the cases (i.e., 7-12 cases), and “variant” to label categories that include at least three cases but fewer than are needed to qualify as “typical,” (i.e., 3-6 cases). Findings that were only relevant to one or two cases were placed in an “Other” category within their respective domains and are not reported.

## **Chapter Five: Results**

The nine domains that emerged from the data were: (1) Perception of college student norms within non-platonic interactions (2) Perception of female college student norms within non-platonic interactions (3) Perception of male college student norms within non-platonic interactions, (4) Participants’ personal experiences in college, (5) Criteria for what college student women want, (6) How college students use colloquial language related to sex/dating/relationships, (7) Perceptions of college dating/relationships prior to freshman year, (8) Reflections on college relationship history, and (9) Perceptions of what dating/relationships will be like after college.

Demographic information obtained in the post-interview survey provides background information about the participants. This background information will be presented first, followed by a description of the findings by domain.

### **Background Data**

Demographic information about participants was obtained through the post-interview survey as well as during the semi-structured interview. Table 5.3 contains demographic information for all participants as well as information about their social and sexual experiences. Of the 12 participants, two identified as Black/African-American, 1 identified as Hispanic, 1 identified as White and Hispanic, and 8 identified as White. Interviews were conducted during spring semester; at the time of the interview, 9 participants were seniors and 4 were juniors. Greek life was the most commonly reported extracurricular activity, with 25% of participants reporting involvement in Greek life.

All participants reported having some sexual experience. All 12 reported that they had engaged in oral sex, and only one student had never engaged in penis-vagina intercourse. All students also reported engaging in some drinking behavior, ranging from 1-2 times a week to 3-5 times a week. Although all participants identified as “not in a committed relationship”, 10 students reported their current relationship status as “single” and 2 reported their relationship status as “hooking up with someone”. In terms of past relationship experience, 11 of the 12 participants reported that they have been in an exclusive relationship in the past, though the duration and timing of their past relationships were varied. More detailed findings about participants’ personal backgrounds and relationship goals are summarized in Table 5.1.

<b>Table 5.1: Demographic Background of Participants</b>		
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>

Black/African American	2	16.7%
Hispanic	1	8.3%
Hispanic and White	1	8.3%
White	8	66.7%
<b><i>Involved in Greek Life</i></b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	3	25%
No	9	75%
<b><i>Relationship Experience</i></b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Never been in an exclusive relationship	1	8.3%
Last exclusive relationship was more than 2 years ago	2	16.7%
Last exclusive relationship was more than 1 year ago but less than 2 years ago	2	16.7%
Been in an exclusive relationship within the past 6 months	6	50%
No response	1	8.3%
<b><i>Would like to engage in the following behavior within the next 60 days*</i></b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Meet an attractive person of the opposite sex	12	100%
Kiss a person of the opposite sex	8	66.7%
Hook up with someone ("hook up" includes any behavior ranging from making out to having sex with someone outside of an exclusive relationship)	4	33.3%
Go on a date with a person of the opposite sex	7	61.5%
Start hanging out with a person I am interested in	6	58.3%
Be in an exclusive relationship with someone	2	16.7%
<b><i>Class status</i></b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Senior	9	75%
Junior	3	25%
<b><i>In the past three months, I have been in situations where there are opportunities to flirt, date, or hook up...</i></b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Weekly	9	75%
More than once a week	3	25%
About once a month	0	--
<b><i>Length of longest relationship</i></b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No response	1	8.3%
Never been in a relationship	1	8.3%
Less than 1 year	2	16.7%
1 year – 1 year 11 months	5	41.7%
2 years – 3 years	2	16.7%
3 + years	1	8.3%
<b><i>Relationship Status</i></b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Single	10	83.3%
Hooking up with Someone	2	16.7%

<b><i>Ever engaged in penis-vagina intercourse?</i></b>	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>
Yes	11	91.6%
No	1	8.3%
<b><i>Ever engaged in penis-vagina intercourse with a partner who you were only intimate with one time?</i></b>		
	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>
Yes	6	50%
No	6	50%
<b><i>Ever engaged in oral sex?</i></b>		
	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>
Yes	12	100%
No	0	--
<b><i>Ever engaged in oral sex with a partner who you were only intimate with one time?</i></b>		
	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>
Yes	4	33.3%
No	8	66.7%
<b><i>How often do you consume 2 or more alcoholic drinks in one night?</i></b>		
	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>
Never	0	--
1-3 times a month	3	25%
1-2 times a week	7	58.3%
3-4 times a week	2	16.7%
<b><i>Are you currently taking birth control?</i></b>		
	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>
Yes	2	16.7%
No	9	75%
No response	1	8.3%

*\*Note: Participants could indicate more than one response for this item, and therefore the percentages do not add to 100%.*

Participants offered additional information about their lives in the process of responding to questions from the interviewer. For example, participants talked about their cultural backgrounds, their social activities in college, and provided information about the men with whom they were involved. This data will be included in more detailed descriptions of individual cases within this chapter and again in the discussion chapter.

The research questions outlined in the Methods chapter are rooted in the extant research and were used to develop the interview questions for this study. An important aspect of CQR is to use the research questions to guide the interviews while at the same

time allowing for the participants' stories to emerge. As expected, findings that emerged from participants' responses do not directly correspond with each of these research questions, and are thus more accurately reported when grouped by domain. Presenting the data in its clearest format, rather than attempting to conform it to an *a priori* conception, is consistent with the inductive approach of consensual qualitative research methods (Hill, 2012). Based on the recommendations of CQR, categories are classified as "general" if they applied to 11-12 cases, "typical" if they applied to 7-10 cases, and "variant" if they applied to 3-6 cases (Hill, 2012). Categories applying to 1 or 2 cases were excluded. Table 5.2 shows the general, typical, and variant findings within each domain.

**Table 5.2**

*General, Typical, and Variant subcategories of college women's perceptions of non-platonic interactions in college*

<b>Domain/Category</b>	<b>General (11-12 cases)</b>	<b>Typical (7-10 cases)</b>	<b>Variant (3-6 cases)</b>
<i>1. Perception of college student norms within non-platonic interactions</i>	Students get together (anything from flirting to having sex) when intoxicated (11)	Women and men flirt through non-verbal signals (8) Texting is a common media for communicating interest (8) Students' relationship norms are defined by their social group (7) Students get together because of proximity and/or convenience (10) Parties and bars are common places for people to get together (7)	Communicating interest can be ambiguous, confusing, not straightforward or result in miscommunication (6) Facebook is a common media for communicating interest (3) Students perceive that potential partners are limited to their social group (6) Hookups are a normal part of initiating relationships in college (6) The college environment does not foster lasting relationships (4) Individual differences affect how students approach non-platonic interactions (6)
<i>2. Perception of female college student norms within non-platonic interactions</i>		Women show interest in men through traditional flirting (7)	Women like attention from men (4) Women dislike unwanted attention (4) Women want interactions with men to be more than just hookups (3) Women expect men to initiate interest (6) Women show interest by being open to the man's advances (6)



			Women feel negative emotions (shame, regret, worry) after sexual behavior (3)
<i>3. Perception of male college student norms within non-platonic interactions</i>		Men initiate non-platonic interactions (10)	Men prefer hookups (sex) to relationships (3)
<i>4a. Participants' personal experiences in college: Antecedents to non-platonic interactions</i>	Met through mutual friends (11)	Met in class or campus activity (9)	Met at a bars (5) Met at a party or other social event (6) Met because they lived near each other on campus (6) Attracted to partner because they share common interests (3) Physically attracted to partner (6) Attracted to partner because of his personality (6) Participant was not initially attracted to potential partner (3) Participant knew the man was interested in her (6) Participant was concerned that non-platonic relationship would affect existing friendship with partner (5)
<i>4b. Participants' personal experiences in college: Process of initiating a non-platonic interaction</i>	Participant struggled to be direct when communicating disinterest (11)	Man was verbally direct/clear about interest (9) Man initiated non-platonic contact with participant (10) Participant did not understand what a man was thinking or intending (9) Participant communicated disinterest by avoiding the person or being less friendly (8) Participant communicated disinterest through direct communication (8)	Participant was verbally direct/clear about interest (5) Participant created proximity to the person/made herself available (4) Woman showed interest by being responsive/ friendly/flirty (4) Participant perceived that the man did not share her interest in a non-platonic relationship (3)
<i>4c. Participants' personal experiences in college: Behaviors within/ during non-platonic relationships</i>		Participant's relationship was affected by her social environment (9)	Frequency of interaction with a partner indicates exclusivity (3) Participant prefers to have an emotional connection with a sexual partner (3)
<i>4d. Participants' personal experiences in college: Result of a non-platonic interaction</i>		Hooked up (10) Communicated via text / Facebook (10) Went out on dates/spent time together (10) Woman lost interest (7)	Explicit conversation about how the relationship would/would not progress (6) Male partner stopped communicating (3) Alcohol played a role in facilitating non-platonic interaction (5)
<i>5. Criteria for what college student women</i>		Someone to provide companionship (7)	Nice, caring, respectful, loyal partner (6)

<i>want</i>		Do not want to pursue someone in vain (7)	<p>Attractive partner (3)</p> <p>Partner who is willing to communicate interest (3)</p> <p>More interaction than a random hookup (5)</p> <p>To be physically intimate with someone she has feelings for (5)</p> <p>Not looking for a relationship because they are moving and/or graduating (3)</p> <p>Closure, although it can be difficult to achieve/navigate (4)</p> <p>To be single rather than in a relationship (3)</p>
<i>6. How college students use colloquial language related to sex/dating/relationships</i>	<p>“Hooking up” is a vague term, and was defined by participants as anything from kissing to having sex (11)</p> <p>The meaning of the term “hook up” varies depending on the person using the term (11)</p>		<p>When talking about a hookup, women in college need to clarify what “hookup” means (4)</p> <p>People use slang as a way of being intentionally vague about their sexual encounters (4)</p> <p>“Hookup culture” includes social environments and casual sexual encounters (3)</p> <p>Friends with benefits”, “dating”, “hanging out” and “one night stand” describe relationships that are not committed or exclusive (3)</p>
<i>7. Perceptions of college dating/relationships prior to freshman year</i>		Hope to find a committed relationship (7)	<p>Influenced by TV or movies (3)</p> <p>Assume that there are lots of opportunities to get into non-platonic relationships with men (3)</p> <p>Expected and wanted casual experiences (hooking up, texting, etc.) (5)</p>
<i>8. Participants’ reflections on their college relationships</i>		Participants want to find commitment rather than casual relationships (7)	<p>Learned what they want and what to look for in a relationship/partner (5)</p> <p>Men in college did not meet their criteria for a partner (4)</p> <p>Random hookups did not lead to commitment (4)</p> <p>Friends try to help one another navigate relationships (3)</p> <p>Women want an emotional connection with their partner (3)</p> <p>Participants regret choices they made that did not lead to a relationship (3)</p> <p>Participants perceive that men have more power than women in relationships (4)</p> <p>Being single provides women with more independence (3)</p> <p>Clear endings make it easier to move on (3)</p> <p>College allowed participants to embrace opportunities to be</p>

<p>9. <i>Perceptions of what dating/relationships will be like after college</i></p>	<p>social (4)  Women perceive that men in college are more interested in sex than relationships (3)  Wants to be in a more serious relationship (6)  Concerns about meeting someone (4)  Expect and hope that men will be mature and commitment-oriented (3)</p>
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Note: Frequencies for each subcategory are provided in parentheses.

### Summary of Findings

Following the procedure of Consensual Qualitative Research, participants' responses were coded into core ideas, retaining their own words whenever possible, and these core ideas were then categorized into domains, categories and subcategories. Nine distinct domains emerged from this data. The domains that describe what participants viewed as typical college student behaviors are divided into what participants perceive as norms about non-platonic interactions in college (domains 1-3) and what participants actually experienced during their own non-platonic interactions (domain 4). Domain 4 provides information about the factors that facilitate or inhibit dating and hooking up, which has been missing from the extant literature (Bradshaw, Kahn & Saville, 2010). Domain 6 provides valuable information for interpreting participants' responses, as it identifies participants' definitions of colloquial terms used in the interviews. The next group of domains (5, 7, 8 and 9) provides information about participants' thoughts and feelings about dating and relationships. Domain 5 outlines what women want, domain 7 describes women's perceptions of college dating and relationships prior to freshman year, domain 8 describes participants' reflections on their college experiences, and domain 9 contains perceptions about what dating and relationships will be like after college. Many of the categories and subcategories across domains mirror one another, and it is worth

paying close attention to these overlaps as well as these differences. Considering these domains together allows us to see a clearer, and likely more accurate, picture of what participants report as happening on their college campus. This summary will focus on findings that were general (11-12 participants) or typical (7-10 participants).

*How college students use colloquial language related to sex/dating/relationships*

This domain is presented first, since its findings will help to contextualize the use of the word “hook up” in other domains. Participants generally reported that “hooking up” is a vague term in that it can have a variety of meanings, though participants in this study generally defined this term as anything ranging from kissing to having sex.

Participants also generally stated that the meaning of the term changes as a function of the person who is using the term; in other words, individuals have their own perceptions of what the term means when they use it.

One participant explained the meaning of “hook up” in different contexts:

“Well to me it means to have sex, but like when I came to college people were like ‘oh did you hook up with him?’ and I was like, ‘oh my gosh who do you think I am?’ and they were like, ‘no hook up just means kissing’ and I was like, ‘okay well yeah’ [laughs]... Ok, so to me and back home to everyone it means sex, apparently here it means just kissing [laughs]... It’s kind of annoying cause I usually have to clarify what I mean... It basically could mean like anything sexual related like, um, but usually here they just mean kissing cause that’s like he first step, but like anything after that in between sex, it means all of that basically.”

Another talked about the varied meanings and ambiguity of the term:

“For some people it’s like sex, and for some people it’s just kissing so it just really varies, but what I think is definitely that hooking up is – it’s not – it’s a very casual thing and indicates that it’s casual - I typically think it’s just kissing. Yeah that’s how I usually – yeah hooking up, I feel like you wouldn’t be able to get away with doing it in public. Like kissing someone in public. But I don’t think – I think that’s as far as it goes. But I think the ambiguity of the word, the term – I think it’s on purpose because you don’t necessarily tell people what you did.”

A third participant stated:

“It can be anything from like making out to sex. I don't I use it loosely because like it just is a vague term...everybody uses it differently so I can't really like - I don't even use it to mean one thing because it doesn't... I'll use it to mean different things but then I'll talk to different people and they'll use it just to mean sex or somebody else will use it just to mean making out.”

Variant findings in this domain may provide further context for how women in this study described “hooking up”. Four participants reported that women in college need to clarify what they mean by “hookup” when talking to one another, and four participants also reported that people use slang as a way of being intentionally vague about their sexual encounters. Some participants (n=4) brought up the broader notion of “hookup culture”, which was described as including social environments and casual sexual encounters. This summary will serve as the definition of the terms “hook up”, “hooking up”, and “hookup culture” as they appear throughout the results and discussion of this paper.

*Perception of college student norms within non-platonic interactions*

Domains 1, 2, and 3 provide information about students' perceptions of norms among college students within the context of non-platonic interactions. Domain 1 contains perceptions about college students in general, while domains 2 and 3 address gender-specific norms. In terms of contexts for meeting a potential partner, participants in this study generally reported that men and women engage in non-platonic interactions, ranging from flirting to having sex, when they are intoxicated. Participants typically reported that partners meet one another as a result of proximity or convenience, and that parties and bars are common places to get together.

For example, one participant stated:

“In college like, usually you're around each other a lot, because, we all, I live on campus so we all are, we all see each other a lot, especially in my building, so you kind of just go from hanging out a lot and being friends to, umm I guess if you go out, my group of friends goes out, goes to bars, not all the time but we do socially drink so I'd say like people hang out a lot in our friends for a little while and a lot of times when they go out I guess that's kind of when it turns into something non-platonic.”

Another student described a typical scenario of how a man and woman in college would meet:

“In the scenario that I'm imagining, usually they meet at like a party. They would be drunk and they would just go for it. I mean that... just like go right into it

(laughs) I mean they would just do it (laughs) like they would just I guess start making out with each other ... and then it might escalate to something more.”

In terms of how college students communicate with one another, participants typically reported that both genders flirt through non-verbal signals, and that texting is the most common media for communicating interest (as opposed to phone calls, emails, Facebook, etc.). Texting is classified as a form of verbal communication.

Participants also typically reported that students’ relationship norms are defined by the norms of their social group, which could be based on their involvement in a campus activity, their race, their religion, or other factors that determine who they spend time with in college. In sum, it seems normative that students meet one another through their social groups when they are intoxicated, and then text. However, these norms may change depending upon the norms of an individual’s friends in college. For example, one participant explains:

“I think at least in my group of friends or my social circles that people in committed relationships is rare to my knowledge...I think it just goes back to how it's the norm that you're not supposed to be like emotionally committed to someone or invested in someone and...I guess that could even be like frowned upon to want something more than like purely hooking up situation.”

#### *Perception of gender-specific college student norms within non-platonic interactions*

Participants reported fewer gender-specific norms, and only one typical finding emerged for each gender. Women were typically perceived as showing interest in men through typical flirting. Examples of typical flirting described by participants included

eye contact, complimenting someone, talking to a potential partner more, and “being flirty”. For male gender norms, participants typically reported that men in college initiate non-platonic interactions. As one participant explained,

“Normally I feel like it’s like the guy makes the first move, and I think that that’s just kind of like like, obviously not the way it has to be at all, but I feel like like in general that is. It’s normally the guy pursuing the girl versus the girl pursuing the guy.”

Another stated:

“I mean I know for like girls that go out and stuff to the bars and everything, like even if a guy, even if you like dance and you talk or whatever, and a guy gets your number, there’s definitely no guarantee that he’s going to like initiate anything after that, and it’s sort of like, it’s almost like you’re not really supposed to initiate something after that, you know the idea is kind of like, if he’s interested then he will make the move and everything.”

According to participants’ responses, initiating an interaction might occur in the form of sending a text, initiating a hookup, or asking a woman to dance. In general, traditional gender norms seem to be reflected in participants’ perceptions of current gender norms in college.

#### *Participants’ personal experiences in college*

Domain 4 describes participants’ personal experiences of non-platonic interactions in college. Participants were asked to talk about multiple experiences with men in college, so this data represents each participant’s experiences with at least three



separate partners during college. The domain was divided into four categories, with each category representing a time within the progression of a non-platonic interaction.

#### *Antecedents to non-platonic interactions*

Domain 4a represents the antecedents to an interaction; in other words, what conditions created the scenario in which a participant first met or first interacted with their potential partner. In terms of how partners met, students generally reported meeting a partner through a mutual friend and typically reported meeting in class or through a campus activity. There were nine variant findings in this domain, which include what attracted the participant to their partner, what deterred a participant from a potential partner, and other ways that participants met potential partners. Here, one participant describes her experience of meeting a potential partner:

“We had our senior dance, and I was there with my friends, and I saw this guy that I knew from freshman year, and we hadn’t talked in a while but we just said hi and stuff, and then, so I realized that I wanted to dance with him but that – it wasn’t – there wasn’t really a chance probably that he was gonna like just randomly come up and ask me if I wanted to dance. So I – he passed me in line, I was like trying to think of a way to sort of initiate that without making him feel like he had to or whatever, so he passed me in the line and then I just like called him over and I said <laughs> I was like, “if you want to dance with me just let me know” and that’s all I said... a little later he asked me to dance, and then we danced and stuff.”

#### *Process of initiating a non-platonic interaction*

Domain 4b describes the process of initiating the non-platonic interaction, focusing on factors and behaviors that happened as the participant and potential partner were communicating interest. Participants also typically reported that men initiated non-platonic interactions and that men were verbally direct and clear about their interest. At the same time, women in this study typically reported that they did not understand what a man was thinking or intending at some point within a non-platonic interaction. One participant describes the process of initiating a non-platonic relationship with someone who she dated for 8 months during her freshman year:

“I had feelings for him first and he sort of he like doesn't talk about like emotions or feelings ever so it's really like tough to get it out of him but one night I just sort of...it's tough to remember cuz I like sort of blocked it out cuz it was so difficult for me...but I just remember we were sitting in his room and I guess I was sitting next to him and I told him – well, no, I guess you know what we kissed each other before we started dating it just like happened one day and then I guess we just kissed every once in a while and then we decided like we should talk about what that was and then we decided that, ‘oh you know do you want to do this?’ Like oh yeah ok so then (laughs) so we did.”

When communicating that they were *not* interested in someone, participants generally reported that they struggled to be direct. When they did communicate disinterest, participants typically reported avoiding the person, being less friendly, and using direct communication. For example, one participant shared:

“I guess we knew we were exclusive because we saw each other all the time ... we never actually explicitly said that we are exclusive, but I feel like it was kind of assumed. And we would hang out all the time, go out to eat together, I mean he wouldn't pay, he only paid the first time but it would like we would go out just the two of us. So it kind of seemed like something more than just friends with benefits I guess.”

Another participant stated:

“I just avoid him like the plague...I just feel awkward being like, ‘Hey I don't like you, go away.’ So I just avoid him, which I don't know if that's good or not... Sometimes we'll go to the bar and he'll grab me by the waist and try to dance, and then I'll just be like ‘no’ and walk away.”

*Participants' personal experiences in college: Behaviors within/ during non-platonic relationships*

Domain 4c provides participants' descriptions of behaviors that they perceived within or during a non-platonic interaction; this category accounts for what happens after some level of interest has been established within a non-platonic relationship.

Participants typically reported that their non-platonic relationships or interactions were affected by their social environments. For example, participants talked about the effects of gossip from their peers, the structure of social events, and the changes that occur as a result of semester and holiday breaks in college.

One participant describes the influence of her friend group and how it might differ for other people she knows in college:

“I guess we [in my friend group] drink socially so if you’re in a group where like, like my, we have one roommate who is really very, she’s very religious, she’s Catholic and so like she obviously doesn’t drink, doesn’t go out so, I mean I don’t really know much about her group but I can imagine it be very different for things to go from non-platonic to, or platonic to non-platonic or whatever.”

Another participant describes another aspect of peer norms:

“I think at least in my group of friends or my social circles that people in committed relationships is rare to my knowledge...I think it just goes back to how it’s the norm that you’re not supposed to be like emotionally committed to someone or invested in someone and...I guess that could even be like frowned upon to want something more than like purely hooking up situation.”

*Participants’ personal experiences in college: Result of a non-platonic interaction*

Finally, domain 4d addresses the results of participants’ non-platonic interactions. This category describes what happened as the result of initial flirtations in addition to what happened after a series of interactions. Participants typically reported that hooking up, communicating via text or Facebook, and spending time together were results of their non-platonic interactions. One participant described her communication with a partner at the outset of a non-platonic relationship:

“Mostly through text message I would say, but then it would be – a lot of it would be like, you know, “what are you doing” and then “what are you doing tonight” and then we would end up meeting and then we would be talking in person. I feel like especially in the beginning we didn’t have like normal conversations about

other things, it was mostly just like logistical things like, making plans like and then you would talk.”

Another participant shared her experience communicating with a potential partner:

“Between when he asked for my number and when I saw him again I was just like wondering like, oh, maybe he’ll text in like a minute, but maybe he won’t and like just like having no idea what’s gonna happen is like... it’s just very like, time consuming, like, mentally consuming.

It was also typical that participants lost interest in their partner after one or more non-platonic interactions. So, students tend to meet one another in the course of their normal social lives, and progress from there in a variety of ways, depending upon individual characteristics and social circumstances.

#### *Criteria for what college student women want*

Domain 5 presents participants’ statements about what they currently want in a partner and in a relationship. Students typically reported that they want someone to provide companionship, and that they do not want to pursue someone who is not also interested in them. As one participant explained:

“I guess I was hoping for something more than just a hook up I guess, 'cause at that point, [it had been] two months so I figured maybe hanging out sober would be the next step. I like making new friends so even if, it didn't end up being anything close to relationship it would have been at least a friendship instead of just solely a hook up because now when I see him I don't even say hi. <Laughs>”

Another participant talked about her desire for communication and interest from a potential partner:

“The fun part I guess is like when someone is pursuing you... You’re like texting back and forth but it’s nothing serious...it’s just kind of fun.”

Domains 7, 8, and 9 describe participants’ perceptions of college and dating relationships prior to freshman year, looking back as seniors, and looking forward to life after college, respectively. Although each domain includes a variety of information about participants’ thoughts from each vantage point, the most common findings that emerged in these domains relate to participants’ hopes. One participant describes her perspective coming into college as a freshman:

“I think freshman year you have this, this standard of like, oh you meet a boy in college and then you end up dating them for a long time and then getting engaged and et cetera, et cetera. So, I think it was a, not an expectation but a, I can't think of the word, umm, I don't know what I'm trying to say.”

The same participant stated her expectations for non-platonic relationships after college:

“I guess I hope and expect to meet someone I could get that close with and you know have a relationship with... I have no idea how, when, around, hoping in the next two years.”

#### *Perceptions of college dating/relationships prior to freshman year*

In domain 7, participants typically reported that, prior to entering college as a freshman, they hoped to find a committed relationship. One participant described her perception of college as compared to high school:

“Like in high school I always thought the guys were immature, so I’m like okay, college is going to be my field it’s gonna be so much like mature guys and we’re going to have actual like intellectual conversations which that does happen, but not as much as I thought it would be. You know. I thought it just was gonna be a more mature setting. Which it was not as mature as I thought it would be...I think I expected to like go on dates... thought I’d be going on dates and trying new things kind of. And maybe develop into a relationship, but my first year I just planning on having fun, keeping it really casual.”

Another participant shared her feelings at the time she started college:

“I think I definitely wanted, I feel like I wanted to date, I wanted a boyfriend.”

*Participants’ reflections on their college relationships*

In domain 8, participants typically reported that they want to find commitment rather than casual relationships. As one participant explained:

“I feel like every time I want to talk to a guy we’re looking for two different things. Like I’m looking for like someone who’s going to be there after college because I’m obviously graduating soon and I feel like guys sometimes are looking for girls in the moment type deal. Like not even just girls they can like just have sex with, but girls like they can just talk to for the time being ... Looking back it’s been a pretty unsuccessful journey for college, but like I don’t know, I feel like each of the guys I gave a chance who were like worthwhile I guess, but I only really gave one guy a chance in college so maybe not.”

Another participant stated:

“Well, as far as my ex-boyfriend I'm still friends with him and I think that it was good for me to have had that experience because I definitely know what I want to put up with in the future cuz I put up with a lot of things that I shouldn't have and I know how important it is to enjoy my life by myself like as a single individual and not rely on somebody else for to be happy.”

A third participant reflected on her non-platonic experiences in college overall:

“There have been a lot of really quick like things and it just was a lot of like trial and error I guess that it took to just get to the end where the last relationship that I was in was good. Um, so I feel like it just taught me like what I want. And even seeing my friends' relationships and the experiences my friends have had with boys has taught me even more and just saying like, if I see that, that's probably what's going to happen to me .”

*Perceptions of what dating/relationships will be like after college*

One participant explained her perception of dating in college as compared to dating after graduating from college:

“I feel like when people get together in college it's like, unlike the way the real world actually works at all. Like my friends talk all the time about graduating and like, actually dating and actually like meeting people normally, but we also say like, how do you meet people that's not in college? Cuz I feel like you're thrown into situations where you're like forced to interact so many times and I feel like it normally happens kind of like backwards than it does in the real world in the sense that like, normally things start by like meeting at a bar and then hooking up



or whatever, whereas in the real world it's like you meet and then get to know each other and then you get to that point.”

While there were no general or typical findings in domain 9, six participants reported that they want to be in a more serious relationship after college, four students reported concerns about meeting someone after college, and three students reported that they expect and hope that men will be mature and commitment-oriented. One participant articulates her uncertainty about what dating and relationships will be like in the future:

“I don't know where I'm gonna be but I like to meet different people and I don't know...[I'd like to] eventually find someone that I do want to be in a relationship with and then seriously interested in who's also seriously interested in me (laughs)... I'm not sure where I'll meet someone. I mean I, in my head it's probably gonna be like at a bar or through a mutual friend, I guess like a set up situation could also happen. I don't know, I guess.”

Taken together, these findings create a picture of what women who are juniors and seniors in college want. So, overall they wanted companionship and had expected to be in relationships in college, have found some meaning within their college experiences, and imagine that dating and relationships will be different after college.

### **Prototypical Cases**

Two cases will be presented in order to provide context for the domains, categories, and subcategories outlined in this paper. The research questions that guided this study hoped to find how flirting in college was impacting women as well as what

behaviors were viewed by them as effective. Participants' complete stories help to bring these answers to life by illustrating patterns and perspectives, building on the core ideas that are represented in isolation through the domains. Contextualizing these findings will also help create a cohesive narrative that connects the distinct ideas outlined by categories and subcategories. These two cases were selected in order to represent two dimensions of the female college experience. Other participants in this study tended to fall somewhere in between these two women in terms of satisfaction with their experiences and confidence in approaching non-platonic interactions.

### ***Participant C***

**Personal background.** Participant C is tall and athletic with long brown hair. She is a senior in college and is Brazilian. She plays intramural sports and reports that she has opportunities to meet men on a weekly basis. She consumes two or more alcoholic drinks 1-2 times per week.

**Perceptions of college norms.** Participant C describes that flirting and showing interest "beyond being friends" is the first step in how a man and woman in college get together. This might be demonstrated through a touch, an intense look, or saying something forward over text. She thinks that people text as the primary form of communication at the beginning of a relationship. She doesn't text her male friends very much, but she will text someone a lot more if she is interested in him.

Participant C describes the pattern she sees for people getting together in college. She believes people get drunk, hook up, and then get to know one another. Participant C was asked what she means when she refers to "hooking up". She believes that the term hook up is very broad and could mean anything from making out to having sex. She says

that she thinks hooking up first is “backwards” compared to “how it used to be”. She thinks that there are some people in college who will hook up with people they just met, and others who would hook up with friends or people they already know.

She believes that men and women play different roles. Men are the ones that usually initiate the hookup and are more forward than women. When asked what the woman’s role is, Participant C answered, “I guess the role of the girl...um...I don’t know if there’s really a role I can think of, but I think the girl is the one to decide whether she wants to hook up or not”. She also thinks women show interest by texting the person they are interested in. She believes that men want women who are hard to get, but that a lot of girls are “too easy” and college men are used to hooking up with college women “pretty easily”. She thinks that playing hard to get makes guys more interested because they are not used to it.

Participant C also acknowledges that there is variation in how men and women get together in college. For example, she knows girls who have been the one to initiate non-platonic interactions with men. She also knows people who have gone on dates “instead of the normal college hook up”. She describes the difference between people who hook up before getting to know someone and people who go on dates:

“It depends on like where your mentality in relationships is. Like for example if you’re not really looking for a relationship but ... you want to hook up or you want or you don’t you don’t really want a relationship but you want a hook up you wouldn’t... mind just hooking up. But ... I think people who are more mature and are looking for real relationships don’t necessarily do that all the time.”

**Personal experiences.** Participant C has normally been with men who she already knew prior to getting together or people who she met through a mutual friend. Her interest in people has come from spending more and more time with them; she does not typically become interested when she first meets someone.

If Participant C had sex with someone, she would say “I had sex with them” rather than use the term “hooked up”. She knows some people who say hooked up and mean sex, and some people who say hooked up and mean intense "make out session." When she is talking to her friends, they will use the term “hook up” but then talk more about it and use the actual terms detailing what they did. When she is talking with people with whom she is not close (e.g. friends in class) she would not say anything about details of a hook up.

She is not currently taking birth control pills. Her last exclusive relationship was between one and two years ago, and her longest relationship lasted one year. She reports that she has had oral sex and penis-vagina intercourse. She has also had at least one experience of oral sex and penis–vagina intercourse with a one-time partner.

Participant C communicates interest by texting someone more and asking to hang out. She might tell them “we should do something soon” or “I had a lot of fun with you we should do something again”. P will also be more flirty (e.g. laughing, more physical), but not as touchy as a guy would be to indicate interest. Like other girls she knows, Participant C believes it is more comfortable when guys make the first move. When a guy is flirting with Participant C (e.g. touching her), she will touch back if she is interested, but not too much because she feels that she needs to be a little more submissive and hard to get.

Participant C described her interactions with five different men, who will be referred to as R1, R2, R3, R4, and R5, representing the order in which they were discussed during the interview.

R1 is the person Participant C is currently interested in. They met through a friend at a concert about a month before the interview. She thought R1 was cute. Noticing that he was about her height, she wished he was taller. She spent time with him and some other friends at her place and talked to him over drinks. While talking to R1, Participant C discovered that they both played soccer and was attracted to that. R1 got her number and texted her the next day. She has not seen him since then, but they continue to text occasionally. While she is not sure if he is “completely interested” in her, she believes that some of his behaviors indicate interest. First, when they text one another they talk about making plans and express a desire to see one another. Second, she texted him one evening and he responded the next day saying it was nice to hear from her. R1 has not followed through with seeing Participant C and tells her that it is because he has been working, travelling, or fell asleep too early. R1 is not a college student, and she does not think that he is going out and looking for girls every night. Most recently, R1 told her that he could not go to a concert with her, but she was encouraged that he said he wanted to go. She would like to spend time with R1 soon and get to know him, and expects that they will hang out soon. She does not plan on hooking up with R1 until they go on a few dates and has enough time to figure out whether or not she is interested.

R2 and Participant C met at a bar her junior year. He approached her and said, "you are absolutely beautiful." They danced and talked that night. When Participant C learned that R2 had graduated college and working at a consulting firm she thought that

he was smart, sophisticated, hot, and “perfect”. She describes what happened at the end of the night, from her perspective:

“He definitely he wanted to hook up because he had asked to go back to my place and at first I was like ‘no I don’t wanna I just met him I don’t wanna bring him back to my place’. But I was kind of like, ‘uh I am really attracted to him I kind of wanna hook up with him, but like I don’t wanna bring him back’ so I... actually said to him... ‘I’m not gonna have sex with you just so you know’. And he was like, ‘ok that’s fine...I wasn’t thinking that’ and I was like, ‘ok just putting it out on the table’. So he did come back with me and we drank a little more and we talked and we hooked up - hooked up as in like made out maybe a little more - but didn’t hook up too much.”

He slept over and stayed at her place watching TV until about 1pm the next day.

Participant C was surprised that she started “really liking” R2 after one night. She thought he was interested in her as well because they talked on the phone almost every day and he came to visit the following weekend. She reports that they were “acting like boyfriend and girlfriend”, as exemplified by hanging out in a group of her friends and kissing in public.

However, R2 stopped talking to P after a few weeks, which left her confused, anxious, and nervous. She wondered why he was not answering her, since she thought R2 liked her and it had felt normal when they were together. The last time she saw him, they kissed and he said he would call her later. He did call, but then stopped responding to her texts or provided only short responses. She did not want to look desperate, and consulted

her friends. Her friends told her that R2 was blowing her off and being a “typical guy”. A few months later, R2 connected with one of Participant C’s friends and told the friend that he felt badly but was not looking for a girlfriend at the time and did not know how to tell Participant C. Knowing this information, Participant C suspects that the relationship progressed faster than R2 wanted. She was mad at R2 and believes that he handled the situation the wrong way. She wishes that R2 would have communicated honestly to her that things were going too fast and that he was not ready for a relationship. If he had done this, she would not have had to try to read his mixed signals and would not have felt so confused.

Participant C had a boyfriend who attended community college and lived at home (R3), but she did not elaborate on this relationship during the interview.

Participant C describes her interaction with R4 as a “college drunken hookup”. She met R4 because he went to high school with one of her friends. She thought he was cute, and one night they “ended up kissing”. After kissing, they exchanged numbers. Participant C thought that they were both interested in each other. Although they texted each other, R4 only texted her at night to ask about going out on Thursday through Saturday. When she saw R4 out, he would not really talk to her, which confused her. She thought that he must not have much confidence in himself. In her own words, Participant C describes how the situation evolved over time:

“I definitely thought he was really cute and I would still text him and wanna see him, but then when everyone was actually together he wouldn’t really like directly talk to me or ... make any initiation so it was it was weird. I kind of shrugged my shoulders about it and I was like, ‘ok he’s

immature'. That went on for awhile - he would just drunkenly text me and ask me to come out or call me at two in the morning afterwards and be like, 'what are you doing' so it was just a dumb drunken like texting relationship... I only hooked up with him a few times but hook up as in just like kiss... I always thought he was cute, but he definitely was not my not dating material."

When Participant C first realized she was not interested in R4, she continued to answer his texts because she felt bad and thought that he was a "cool guy". Eventually, the late night calls and texts "got really old" and she stopped responding. R4 continued to call and send these texts the following day and the following weekend, despite the lack of response from Participant C. Participant C sometimes responded to R4's texts saying that she could not meet up, but "maybe some other time". Sometimes R4 would stop texting and calling for a bit, but then he would try again. She thought that R4 was a "little desperate" as his attempts to contact her continued for about 6 months.

Participant C's experience with R5 was different from the others because she was never attracted to him. She met R5 the night before she was interviewed. R5 was at the table next to Participant C and her friends at a bar. R5 struck up a conversation by asking Participant C about her tattoo. Participant C described that she was talking to him to be nice, but knew that she was not attracted to him. She described him as a "big tall black guy" in his later twenties with a long earring, which was not her style. Participant C realized that R5 was hitting on her when she revealed that she was Brazilian and R5 responded by saying, "Brazilian girls are beautiful". R5 said "thank you" and they continued talking. R5 continued to compliment her and she tried to stop talking to him.



She attempted to end the conversation by looking away and talking to her friends, but she could still see him looking at her. When her friend called her, she pretended that it was her boyfriend who was coming to pick her up from the bar. She told R5, “it was nice to meet you” and he initiated a hug with her. She hugged him back and he told her, “tell your boyfriend he’s a lucky guy”.

Participant C feels that she had the “typical college experience” of going out, drinking, and hookup with guys. In addition, she also had a boyfriend in college and had experiences dating where the man was genuinely interested in her and they went out on dates. She describes being asked out and going on dates as the “more old fashioned way”. She is content with the fact that she has had a variety of experiences.

**Hopes and goals.** When Participant C graduated high school, she thought she would find a serious boyfriend in college. She went to high school in the same state as the state university she attends, and believed that college would be a time for her to meet different kinds of people from other places. She hoped that she would instantly connect with someone she met in class or campus organization, but now thinks that this was an unrealistic idea.

Participant C thinks that the “hook up scene” of college gets old. She did not think that she would have "hooked up with random people" like she did in her sophomore and junior year of college. As a freshman, she was not interested in that scene at all and did not sleep with anyone. She did not feel “ready” to “start hooking up with everyone”, but explains that she became immersed in the college scene and “that’s just how it went”. She described her experience as “typical” in that she went out to drink some nights and

hooked up with men. While she says this experience was “okay”, she does not do this anymore since it did not make her feel good about herself.

Participant C is typically interested in men who are older and who have graduated college. Each time she begins a new story about a man she is interested in, it starts with her noticing that he is “cute”. In each scenario, she is in a setting among friends and she and the man of interest begin talking. Next, she decides if she is more interested based on his interests and his level of achievement.

R4 did not meet Participant C’s criteria for what she was seeking because he would only text her at night asking if she was “going out” and did not take initiative to make a move when they were together in person. She thought it was obvious that he was just trying to hook up with her when she would receive texts from late at night followed by missed calls from two or three o’clock in the morning when she “knew he was wasted”. She is looking for a man who is confident enough to make a move.

Despite the fact that she was not attracted to R5, she liked the way he approached her, and would like men to put themselves out there and take a risk to initiate conversation in a similar way. She prefers being approached by someone in person instead of being pursued over text. Participant C feels that it conveys genuine interest when someone wants to know something about her and physically pursues her to start to a conversation, such as by tapping her on the shoulder.

In the post-interview survey, Participant C reported that she would like to meet an attractive person of the opposite sex, kiss a person of the opposite sex, go on a date with a person of the opposite sex, or start hanging out with a person she is interested in within the next 60 days. This is consistent with what she reported in the interview, that she is at

the point where she wants a man to ask her to get a drink or dinner and does not want to hook up with guys. She does not believe that hooking up is a way to build a relationship. She is in a place where she wants to be interested in someone sincerely. She wants to spend time with a person who is open to a relationship, but will not beat herself up if it does not happen. In reflecting upon her college experience, Participant C explains:

“These are the years to experiment and see what you like and what you don’t, you know? And I think I got a little bit of that and I think that I know what I really want and what I wanna do and how I wanna meet someone and how I wanna start a relationship. And I think I only know that because of my past experiences.”

Participant C met a variety of men at times when she was hanging out socially with friends. She has hooked up with people she met at bars, has gone on dates, and has rejected unwanted advances. With each person, she was able to quickly assess what did and did not interest her, and had an understanding of what she wanted to happen going into the interaction. She experienced a variety of communication challenges within these interactions, and assessed the best way to navigate them by relying on her own knowledge and also relying on her friends. Participant C’s current interest is in pursuing a relationship, and she is looking for markers of a partner that can provide that.

### ***Participant D***

**Personal Background.** Participant D identifies as white and is of average height with long brown hair. She arrived to the interview wearing a hat with Greek letters on it. She is in a sorority and is president of a club on campus. She has opportunities to meet men more than once a week and consumes two more alcoholic beverages 3-4 times a

week. In the next 60 days, she would like to meet an attractive person of the opposite sex, kiss a person of the opposite sex, or hook up with someone (meaning anything from kissing to having sex). She is not currently taking birth control pills. Her last exclusive relationship was within the last 6 months, and her longest relationship was in high school, lasting 6 months. She reports that she has had oral sex and penis-vagina intercourse. She has also had at least one experience of oral sex and penis–vagina intercourse with a one-time partner.

**Perceptions of college norms.** Participant D thinks that the way people get together in college can be “really different” depending upon “the type of person you are”. In Greek life, she sees people typically get together by hooking up first at a party and later deciding to hang out when they are sober. There is a “stigma” that men in fraternities do not ask women on dates, and this has been true to her experience. She has never heard of anyone she knows going on a date, but she thinks that there are people in college who do go on dates.

Participant D thinks that the norms are different if you do not drink in college or if you are more religious. She supports this claim by mentioning that she knows a religious couple who recently got engaged as well as a few people in her classes. She perceives that religious students who are graduating are thinking about getting engaged, whereas Participant D is not thinking about that at all.

As a freshman, Participant D used the term “hook up” to mean making out with someone. Now, she assumes that when someone uses the term “hook up” it refers to going home with someone and having oral sex or vaginal sex.

In senior year of college, she thinks non-platonic interactions generally begin with two people talking. She thinks that some women are more flirty than others; she says these girls “like to push” and will make it known if they want something to happen. Participant D contrasts these more forward women with other people who will have a conversation, dance with or talk to someone for a while, and then decide to “go further”. The norms for getting together were different when Participant D was a freshman. Here she describes it in her own words:

“It was crazy like very Freshman, like everyone was so drunk, like grinding with ten people and making out with everyone and it was just like a very like – that kind of scene. And I think that’s still here obviously, but I guess a little bit when you’re older it’s a little bit different. Like you at least try and talk to someone first...as seniors it’s weird just to be grinding with everyone you see.”

Participant D sees men initiating contact with women more than women initiating contact with men, and believes that it is the man’s responsibility to show more interest. While she acknowledges that no one likes to be rejected, she also believes that men are more used to being rejected than women. Participant D thinks men show interest through initiating conversation, asking someone to dance, or buying a woman a drink at a bar. In contexts where “it’s not just about being drunk”, such as class, a man might ask a woman for her phone number or suggest something to do together, like lunch or a movie.

Participant D imagines that when men in college talk about hooking up, they say everything that happened in a way that is “worse” than the way women talk to one another about hookups. She hates how girls are called sluts when they have sex with lots

of guys, while guys are still just guys, and hopes this will change after college. She thinks that men in college are always looking for someone to hook up with wherever they are. She later notes that the men she is referring to are the men “in college that are social”, which is who she knows. She says that this group includes athletes, club sports players, men in Greek life, and people who go out drinking during the week. She believes that a lot of men in college are nice individually, but are not nice when they are in a group such as a fraternity. Participant D thinks that guys would be more respectful if they asked about having sex, asked about using condoms, texted girls the next day, and said hi to the girls they hooked up with when they see them walking around campus. P thinks some people value sex a lot. P is less attached but she still feels like sex is something personal and girls deserve more respect than they get.

Participant D believes that people in college do not ask for consent before having sex, and that men just “do it”. In her interview, she talks about how this relates to sexual assault, and how this might be different outside of college. She also thinks that men in college are less likely to ask if a woman wants to use a condom compared to men outside of the college environment. Participant D knows women who did not pay attention to whether or not a condom was used because they were drunk, and also says that most women she knows have taken Plan B (the morning-after pill).

Participant D also talked about sexual regret. She perceives that different people have different beliefs about how far they want to go with someone or how many people they want to hook up with. Therefore, after having sex, some individuals might experience regret and others “don’t care”. She believes that women will regret a hookup

if they believe they will be judged for it. She believes that men will talk explicitly about hookups with one another, which makes her uncomfortable.

Participant D has seen a variety of things happen between two people after they hook up. Some people never talk or see each other again. Others do not communicate with one another, but might hook up again if they run into one another in a social environment. She also knows people who do communicate with one another after a hook up by texting each other. She thinks that when women hook up with someone they want attention from the man in the form of having him initiate contact the next day, usually over text. She describes that people show interest after hooking up with someone by texting the other person.

**Personal experiences.** Although Participant D states in the interview that she has never had a boyfriend, she indicated that she was in an exclusive relationship within the past 6 months. Participant D prefers that the man is assertive and shows interest. She describes her personal behaviors:

“Since I’m not an aggressive person, I don’t ever try or ever hit on anyone. I don’t know what that really means. I don’t ever like seek out people... maybe I’m too afraid to be rejected or I don’t really know how. But I think like, so for me it’s different because I don’t – I put in no effort kind of. Just because I’m kind of laid back.”

She has had many experiences where men have approached her at a bar and danced with her, and she will tell them no and possibly excuse herself to dance with her friends.

In terms of sexual experience, Participant D talks about sexual interactions outside of a committed relationship. She describes mixed feelings, ranging from some

specific experiences of sexual regret to an overall appreciation for the experiences she had in college. She talks about one time when she had sex with someone and did not realize that he was not wearing a condom. Participant D explained that she assumed he had put the condom on himself, since she would not know how to put a condom on her partner. She thinks that she “should” say stop, but she did not in this instance. She thinks it is important to give consent, but also states that this often does not happen as men “just go for it”. She typically gives consent through her actions, such as taking off her clothes, but believes that communication could be clearer if it was verbalized. Participant D explains that there are more negative consequences for women than for men, such as getting pregnant.

Participant D explained that she could not recall some details of her experiences during the interview because she had been so intoxicated during the situations she described. She talked about non-platonic interactions with three different men, who are presented in the order they were discussed in the interview and will be referred to as R1, R2, and R3.

Participant D met R1 because she lived around him freshman year. They hooked up, including oral sex but not vaginal sex, a few times. This was the first time she had ever given oral sex, and she felt embarrassed and awkward. Afterward, she worried that she was bad at it. She did not want him to tell his friends about it, and was worried about her image.

She did not see him again until her senior year; when she saw him again they had sex, and they had sex a few more times over the course of about 4 months. She was drunk every time they had sex this year, and thinks that she would not have pursued hooking up



with anyone on those nights if she had been sober. The first morning after they hooked up, she did not remember how it had happened. Each time after, their interaction began by seeing one another at the bar and saying, “hey what’s up?” followed by “Want me to get you a drink?”. They would then talk for 25-30 minutes at the bar before going home together.

Participant D would have liked if R1 had acknowledged her by reaching out to go on a date or even to just hook up again. She thinks that R1 perceives her as “easy”. Participant D wants to be acknowledged, even though she is not interested in pursuing R1. Participant D wonders if R1 thinks she is really easy.

Participant D was set up with R2 by her friends when she needed a date to a sorority event. She was nervous to be set up, so she began drinking before meeting him the night of the event in order to feel less awkward. Participant D and R2 hooked up that night, not including vaginal sex, and he texted her the following day. She thought it was nice that he asked her to get food with him, but they never went out together. They texted back and forth for a few days and would say hello when they saw one another on campus. She recalled that it would take R2 a long time to reply to texts, and that their texting consisted of short messages keeping one another up to date about what they were doing that day. When R2 had a fraternity event, he asked Participant D to go with him. They hooked up that night and continued to hook up without having vaginal sex for about three months. In retrospect, Participant D thinks that she did not really like R2 and was primarily interested in him because he was nice, he liked her, and it was convenient. She preferred having someone around to not having anyone.

Participant D and R2 fell out of touch over the summer. R2 began texting her this year, expressing interest in her by saying things like, “You’re so cute” and “We could have so much fun”, but she is not interested. If she is drunk, she will respond to his text to let him know she is not interested. Other times, she replies and tries not to “be mean”; she never ignores him because ignoring people makes Participant D uncomfortable.

Participant D describes hooking up with R3 soon after meeting him at a fraternity event. She woke up at his house the next morning, and while R3 was in the bathroom his roommate asked Participant D to have sex with him. Participant D explains her reaction to this situation:

“This kid is probably like out there but he literally just asked me to have sex? And I was like ‘no’. <laughs> And obviously me and the first kid weren’t going to like establish a relationship or anything, but it’s just kind of a weird thing to say... You know? Like I know who this is and he’s kind of out there – like a funny guy, it’s not out of character for him. But he was like serious too.”

Participant D explains further that this fraternity has a reputation for having attractive men who “probably have a lot of sex and stuff”. During the interview, Participant D worried aloud that she was making fraternities and sororities sound “stereotypical”, but also acknowledged that she was “being stereotypical”.

Participant D reports that she is glad to have had the experiences she did in college. She says that she had fun in college and does not regret sleeping with people because she believes she did not sleep with too many men and so she does not have a bad reputation.

**Hopes and goals.** Participant D states that she pretends to be disinterested in men, even when she is interested, if she knows it wouldn't work out.

Participant D describes her hopes for relationships in college prior to starting her freshman year:

I think before going into college...I was like, 'Oh I'm going to find this great boyfriend!' That's kind of what I thought at first but ... then I realized that's not going to happen – but not necessarily in a bad way. I don't want to have to be with just one person and I just feel that – I know that this is a really judgmental thing to say about relationships - but from my experience everyone I know in a relationship are really not as much fun.”

Participant D wants someone to show interest in her, and will pursue this even if she is not interested in that person. In her interview, she explains, “all I want is to talk or to have someone to text.” When a man shows interest in her, it makes her feel better about herself. Although she is graduating and therefore not looking for a relationship, she still wants someone to show interest in her and give her attention.

Participant D expresses that she does not like the effects of relationships in college, since she perceives that people in relationships do not go out as much and are not as much fun. She states that she dislikes public displays of affection, and perceives that boyfriends can be protective and “suffocating”, especially when their girlfriend is in a sorority. She does not want to be with just one person, and enjoys being able to go out spontaneously whenever she wants. She feels it is unhealthy when people can't break up

with their significant other because they do not have a support group outside of their relationship.

Participant D likes being able to tell her close friends what happened when she hooks up with someone. However, she describes that there are dynamics within fraternity and sorority life such that friends might have hooked up with the same person, and that both men and women gossip about who has done what with whom. In addition to gossip, people see the act of two people getting together as it happens, since people in these fraternities and sororities are going out to the same places. When Participant D's female friends see something happen between a man and a woman, they typically follow up with the woman to find out the details of what happened. In sum, Participant D wants to share her experiences with her friends, but also knows that people will want to talk about what she did, either with her or with other people.

Participant D perceives that the pool of eligible men to hook up with in college is too small to avoid hooking up with the same men as other women within one's social circle. She also feels better when she hooks up with someone she knows, as opposed to someone "random".

Participant D reported that she does not typically have feelings for men. She describes being interested in someone "for the second" when she hooks up with them, but explains that this is only because she does not have anyone else. As participant D states her desire for someone reach out, after a hook up, she seems conflicted and confused:

"I get a little bit emotionally attached but not because of like, not 'oh we had sex' versus like, 'oh well I like went home' – like that doesn't really bother me that much. It's more just like the thought that – it's kind of

weird for me to not talk at all though a little bit. Just because, I don't look – I'm not a clingy person. And I think that's part of my problem, I don't seek out, and I'm not clingy and I don't know, it's just convenient...I lost my train of thought. Yeah I mean, I was fine. I would have liked if he had reached out, not to go on a date. Like I didn't – even to just hook up again, something like that. Just to acknowledge that, ya know, 'hi I'm here', that kind of thing. And it is kind of weird because it's like you never talk to this person but you've hooked up a couple times. And randomly, so it's like weird situation. Sometimes, I don't really care that much but then there's part of me that's like oh is it just because he's like oh this girl is really easy right now or something? So it's kind of like, I don't, and I'm not getting – I don't have actual interest in this person, it's just the last person I hooked up with so..."

This quote illustrates one of many times in the interview when Participant D struggled to articulate what she wanted and how that might fit with how she sees herself as a person.

Participant D wishes that she had been less shy in pursuing men, since she would have liked to be steadily talking to more people during college. Instead, she was always single and never had anyone to invite to her sorority events. She wishes that the men she met and hooked up with had been more respectful. She believes that men could be more respectful by asking about having sex, asking about using condoms, texting the day after a hookup, and acknowledging women they see walking around campus. Overall, Participant D thinks it is "fine" to hook up with people, but that you need to get drunk in

order to justify your behavior. She thinks it is “bad” that she has to get this drunk in order to get to the point where experiences like those she has had will happen.

Participant D states that she would like to be in a relationship when she graduates. She knows that she does not want to be drinking as much or doing the same things she is currently doing with men, but also does not want to get married right away. She is not able to articulate what she does want beyond saying that she “would like to meet a few people”. Her thoughts about her future are vague, which is consistent with Participant D’s struggle throughout the interview to express her wants and desires. Participant D is certain, however, that she wants to keep in touch with her good friends after graduation, and that she would like to come back to visit campus periodically.

### **Chapter Six: Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the heterosexual college women’s perspective on antecedents, behaviors, and outcomes of communicating non-platonic interest in men in the college environment. To investigate this topic, information was gathered from interviews with 12 female, single, heterosexual college students. Using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology, 9 domains emerged from the data: (1) Perception of college student norms within non-platonic interactions (2) Perception of female college student norms within non-platonic interactions (3) Perception of male college student norms within non-platonic interactions, (4) Participants’ personal experiences in college, (5) Criteria for what college student women want, (6) How college students use colloquial language related to sex/dating/relationships, (7) Perceptions of college dating/relationships prior to freshman year, (8) Reflections on college relationship history, and (9) Perceptions of what dating/relationships will be like

after college. The term “general” is used to describe categories that are represented in 11-12 cases; “typical” is used to describe categories that are represented in 7-10 cases; and “variant” is used to describe categories that are represented in 3-6 cases. Categories that applied to fewer than three cases are not reported.

The findings will be discussed by topic area. First, I present background information about the participants, including demographic information, sexual and relationship history, social context, and social behaviors. This information provides a sense of who participated in this study, thus creating a context in which the findings can be interpreted. The participants represent a subset of the heterosexual, female, college population in that they are currently single, juniors and seniors, and were recruited from upper-level psychology and education courses. Next, data is discussed in terms of the conclusions that emerged from the data. At times these conclusions align with domains, and at times they cut across domains. This chapter will be organized by conclusions, but will also identify the domain(s) from which the data is drawn for each section. The prototypical cases presented in the results chapter will be discussed in light of these conclusions. Finally, additional findings about women’s colloquial language, hopes for college, retrospective view on their college experience, and hopes for the future will be discussed. Interviewers’ impressions of the participants are shared in order to provide a richer description and context for the participants’ stories. The complete findings will then be discussed in terms of their implications for practice. This chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations of this study and implications for future research.

### **Background Information**

Participants' demographic information, presented in Table 5.1, were compared to statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics in order to determine its representativeness. The sample for this study was 66.7% white, 16.7% black/African American, 8.3% Hispanic, and 8.3% white and Hispanic. These statistics were visually compared to the most recent reports from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on student demographics nationwide and demographics at the university from which the sample was taken. Overall, this sample was fairly similar in racial makeup to the university from which it was sampled and to colleges nationwide. One exception is that we had no Asian participants in our sample, which resulted in this population being underrepresented by our sample. Black/African American and white participants are somewhat overrepresented compared to the population from which these students were sampled, but is fairly representative given that the sample only consisted of 12 participants where even one participant can skew the sample.

Race as a factor in dating experiences was mentioned by both black/African-American participants, but was not brought up by the other participants. Culture and ethnicity were mentioned by a few participants during the course of the interview. For example, one Hispanic participant mentioned her country of origin as it affected how men perceive her, another participant mentioned that her parents "come from a different culture", and two other participants self-identified "white" participants also disclosed that they are Jewish, one of whom mentioned that she attended a Jewish high school.

One participant who identifies as Black/African-American discussed her race in the context of racial boundaries in relation to non-platonic relationships and stereotypes about black men that she perceives at the university. Her interview was the only one to



identify race as a salient component of non-platonic interactions. She explained that she and her friends talk about the fact that a “good black man is hard to find”, and that black men who are smart and do well in school like white girls, while black men who have lower GPAs and are “more urban” tend to like black girls.

Recent research has confirmed that race affects hookup and dating relationships in college (Brimeyer & Smith, 2012), and that black students are particularly socially isolated (McClintock, 2010). This provides additional support for Holman’s (2012) claim that the variation among students’ accounts of their sexual behaviors and goals may indicate that there are important subcultures that warrant further study.

In terms of relationship history, only one student had never been in an exclusive relationship. One participant did not report the length of her longest relationship, but the ten participants who did reported lengths ranging from 6 months to 3.5 years. Half of participants (n=6) reported that they were in a committed relationship within the 6 months leading up to the interview. Five reported that their last relationship was over a year ago, and one participant did not answer this question. In addition to the fact that this indicates a difference in relationship experience, it also serves as a reminder that participants have been single for different lengths of time and at different points during their college careers.

In terms of sexual experience, all participants reported having engaged in oral sex, and only one reports that she has never engaged in penis-vagina intercourse. Only two participants reported having *never* engaged in either one-time oral or vaginal sex whereas half of the participants (n=6) have engaged in *both* oral and vaginal intercourse with a one-time partner. Of the other four participants, three have only engaged in one-time oral

sex and one participant had only engaged in one-time vaginal sex. This indicates that it is common for women in college to have sex with one-time partners, and that oral sex is more prevalent than vaginal sex in these one-time encounters. Eshbaugh and Gute (2008) found that engaging in intercourse with someone they had known less than 24 hours and having sex with someone only one time were the most regrettable sexual behaviors for college students. Therefore, students' preference for oral sex in one-time encounters may be self-preserving within the context of one-night stands.

Participants also provided information about their social lives in college, including drinking behaviors, opportunities to meet men, and involvement in extracurricular activities. The majority of participants (n=7) reported drinking 2 or more alcoholic beverages 1-2 times per week. Three participants reported drinking less frequently (1-3 times per month) and two participants reported drinking more frequently (3-4 times per week). The two participants who reported drinking most often were involved in Greek life. These same participants reported having been in situations where there were opportunities to flirt, date or hook up more than once a week. The three participants who reported drinking least frequently were not involved in Greek life; their extracurricular activities included community service organizations, an art club, and a religious student center. This data seems to support participants' comments from interviews that Greek life involves more opportunities for drinking. In addition, all three of the participants involved in Greek life reported the goal of hooking up with someone within the next 60 days, whereas only one person outside of Greek life reported this goal. Taken together, this data suggests that Greek life on this campus encourages and facilitates "hookup culture".

## **Connecting Information Across Domains: Drawing Conclusions**

Information across domains can be combined and distilled into ten major conclusions, which create a more coherent understanding of the data and how it contributes to the literature.

This discussion will focus on ideas that were identified as “typical” in one domain and also identified as “typical” or “variant” in one or more additional domains. Only “typical” and “variant” findings are discussed because none of the “general” findings appeared in more than one domain. In interpreting the frequency data, it is important to consider that participants were not asked to comment on specific topics. For example, interviewers did not ask, “what technology is most commonly used to communicate interest?”. Therefore, the frequencies represent the number of participants who chose to include a specific piece of information as part of her story. It is possible that more participants would have agreed with some of these findings if asked directly to agree or disagree.

From the data collected in domains, 10 major conclusions emerged: (1) Hooking up is viewed as an accepted form of non-platonic interaction, (2) Alcohol is prevalent in non-platonic relationships, (3) Proximity and convenience are important when seeking or finding non-platonic relationships, (4) Texting is the expected means of communication between non-platonic partners, (5) College women struggle to be direct and clear about their non-platonic interest, (6) Women typically expect men to initiate non-platonic relationships, (7) Women typically report a desire for companionship and reciprocated feelings as a result of non-platonic interactions, rather than a desire for a specific behavioral outcome (i.e. hookup, going on dates), (8) Peer groups are viewed as influential in determining norms and expectations for non-platonic interactions, (9)

Looking back on past events, participants believe that their college social experiences were worthwhile and meaningful, (10) Women report that friendships and a group-oriented social life are more important than romantic relationships at this stage in development. These conclusions will be discussed in the order they are presented here.

**Conclusion 1: Hooking up is viewed as an accepted form of non-platonic interaction.** The most commonly used colloquial term during the interview process was “hook up”. Participants used this term when describing typical interactions between men and women in college and to describe their own experiences with men. Participants view “hook up” not only as the accepted term to describe non-platonic interactions, but also as an accepted behavior among college students. Participants used this term at first without clarifying what behaviors it refers to, how common “hooking up” is, or the contexts in which it might take place. Women in the study variantly discussed the meaning of “hookup culture” as including social environments and casual sexual encounters, as reported in domain 6. Domain 6 also explains participants’ perceptions of what the term “hook up” means. Participants generally agreed that hooking up is a vague term, and can refer to any sexual behavior ranging from kissing to having sex. This definition is consistent with the definition derived through Bogle’s 2008 qualitative study of college students, indicating that this phrase exists in the college vernacular across campuses and has lasted over time. Participants in this study defined the term by the sexual behaviors it encompasses. While some researchers (e.g. Fielder and Carey (2010) and Bradshaw, Kahn and Saville (2010) have defined a “hookup” as occurring outside a committed relationship, participants in this study did not associate commitment or lack of commitment with the term’s definition.

Participants also generally reported that the meaning of the term varies depending upon who is using it. Some participants reported that women need to clarify the meaning of the term “hook up” even when using it in conversation with their friends in college, which seems logical given that the meaning varies person to person. Relatedly, participants variably reported that college students use colloquial language as a way of being intentionally vague about their sexual encounters.

Participants variably reported that, prior to arriving at college their freshman year, they expected and wanted casual experiences in college, which included hooking up. As these participants had predicted, Domain 4 (Category D) indicates that hooking up was a typical outcome of the non-platonic interactions participants described. In fact, no outcome was more commonly reported than hooking up (communicating over text/Facebook and spending time together were equally common). When discussing college student norms, participants reported that hookups are a normal part of initiating relationships in college. However, the post-interview survey reveals that only 25% of participants in this study reported that they would like to hook up with someone within the next 60 days. (For the purposes of this question, “hook up” was defined as anything from making out to having sex with someone outside of a committed relationship.) Participants generally reported that the norm was for men and women to get together while intoxicated. Since alcohol lowers sexual inhibitions (Vander Ven & Beck, 2009), the presence of alcohol may explain the discrepancy between the prevalence of hooking up compared to the women’s reported desire to hook up. This is consistent with the finding that peak intoxication level and situational triggers were both predictors of engaging in hookup behavior (Fielder & Carey, 2010).

Alternatively, this discrepancy may be explained by participants' explanations of what they want. Domain 8 shows that participants typically want to find commitment rather than casual relationships, and domain 5 shows that participants typically want someone to provide companionship and variably want more interaction than a random hookup (the same finding is variant in domain 2). Women also variably reported that they wanted to be physically intimate with someone for whom they have feelings. At the same time, variant findings indicate that some women believe that men in college are not willing to provide companionship beyond a hookup. Domain 3 describes the norm that men prefer hookups to relationships, and domain 8 also describes women's perception that men are more interested in sex than in relationships.

Given that relationships between men and women are dyadic, it is not possible to say that women's perception that men prefer hookups over more committed relationships entirely explains the prevalence of hookups in college. The data also reveals that women variably report perceiving men as having more power in relationships which may contribute them participating in hookups, and that some women do want hookups rather than relationships. In addition, students generally report getting together when intoxicated. On the one hand, some women may be pursuing hookups as an end goal in non-platonic interactions. Or, women may be settling for a hookup because it is what the man wants, because their inhibitions are lowered from alcohol, or because it is the most likely way that the woman will gain attention and companionship from the man at that moment. Existing research discusses the potential for negative consequences from hooking up such as sexual regret, hurt feelings, exploitive sexual encounters, and higher levels of depression (Bogle, 2008; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Grello, 2006). In reflecting

upon their college experiences (Domain 8), participants variantly reported that they believed that random hookups did not lead to commitment.

In conclusion, it is not possible to say from the present study what factors are causal in making hookup culture prevalent, but the results of this study suggest that multiple factors are present and potentially influential on college campuses. Variant findings may indicate that different factors seem more relevant or salient to certain individuals or situations. While some women may want hookups, the majority of women in the current study indicated that they would prefer sexual encounters that lead to some level of commitment, involve some sort of emotion, and provide a sense of companionship. However, the prevalence of hookup culture and the perception that men are not interested in the same relational goals may create barriers – including lowered expectations – for women who want more interaction with a man than is provided by casual sexual encounters.

**Conclusion 2: Alcohol is prevalent in non-platonic relationships.** Domain 1 indicates that the only general finding related to college student norms is that men and women get together when intoxicated. While the finding that women and men typically meet at parties and bars does not explicitly mention alcohol, the presence of alcohol is implied in this finding and from other comments that the participants made about bars and parties throughout the interviews. Several studies have linked instances of hooking up to alcohol consumption (Bogle, 2007; Bogle, 2008; Grello et al., 2006; Paul, McManus & Hayes, 2000; Ven & Beck, 2009).

The progression that many women described for how men and women go from being strangers or acquaintances to getting together tended to include women being in an

environment where men and alcohol are present, and where both the man and the woman are open to the possibility of a connection. Fielder and Carey (2010) posit that alcohol may facilitate hookups by lowering an individual's inhibitions such that he/she is more likely to approach and attempt to pursue a potential partner. Overall findings indicate that women in college are interested in companionship. Therefore, it seems logical that they may be seeking companionship when they enter situations that include opportunities to meet and flirt with men in college, but that these goals are often discarded in the presence of alcohol and social pressures to hook up. Vander Ven and Beck (2009) found that alcohol consumption and intoxication were used to justify casual sexual encounters both before and after the encounters occurred, which is consistent with the accounts of some participants.

In the interviews, women did not tend to explain what they wanted out of a specific non-platonic interaction, even when asked directly. Instead of stating their desired outcome, they would typically restate to the interviewer what outcome actually happened. In a previous study, college students reported that the loss of inhibition they experience from drinking affords them permission in terms of social acceptability of actions that may not be acceptable if performed in a sober state (Vander Ven & Beck, 2009). Therefore, it is possible that their goals in the moment of the interaction are not congruent with their goals expressed at the time of the interview, and they may experience discomfort with expressing their "drunken desires" in the interview setting.

**Conclusion 3: Proximity and convenience are important when seeking or finding non-platonic relationships.** No participants in this study mentioned making any effort to seek out potential partners through avenues such as online dating or participating



in activities with the specific goal of meeting someone. Instead, it was typical that participants talked about the norm or expectation of meeting people when they happened to be in the same place, or when external circumstances brought them together. Participants typically reported that a norm in college is to meet someone at a party or a bar. However, when speaking from personal experience, participants only variably reported meeting a partner at a party or a bar. This discrepancy could represent a difference in perceived norms and actual behaviors, or could be attributed to chance. In a 2002 study, college students perceived that 67% of hookups occur at parties (Paul & Hayes, 2002), so an alternative explanation might be that some participants in this study avoided sharing stories of meeting men in parties or bars in an effort to come across as more wholesome in the interview.

In discussing their personal experiences (domain 4), participants generally reported meeting potential partners through mutual friends. This was the most common way for people to be connected with one another, which may be related to the variant finding in domain 1 that students perceive that potential partners are limited to their social group. Participants also typically reported meeting a person they were interested in through class or an activity on campus in domain 4.

In addition to the findings expressed through the domains, participants' accounts of communicating with someone about plans indicate that it is common for men to invite women to join them wherever they already are or at that specific time (e.g., go to apartment), rather than making future plans with the specific goal of spending time with the woman.

**Conclusion 4: Texting is the expected means of communication between non-platonic partners.** Communicating with a person over text or Facebook was a typical outcome of participants' initial non-platonic interactions with men in college, as reported in domain 1. Texting also emerged throughout the interviews as the most commonly discussed means of communication between men and women in college other than interacting in person. This is consistent with Thurlow's (2003) finding that text messaging adds to, but does not replace, the communication repertoire of young people. Facebook was also mentioned as a technology that is relevant to non-platonic interactions, but it was used differently than text messaging. For example, one participant in this study said that college students use Facebook to assess a person's looks. The use of Facebook to communicate was perceived by one participant as "creepy" because it meant that the man was "seeking harder" than if he had texted. This fits with the idea that women dislike attention that is perceived as too aggressive.

Ten Participants described meeting someone in person and exchanging numbers as a way of communicating interest. However, some of these participants mentioned that exchanging numbers was not sufficient to know whether a person was interested. Rather, sending a text the following day or soon after seemed to indicate legitimate interest. All twelve participants stated that they either text or exchange numbers with a potential partner. Text messaging was often described as the primary way of communicating after an initial non-platonic interaction and before meeting in person a second time.

Previous authors have concluded that text messaging provides greater flexibility in terms of how and when to respond to someone (Thurlow, 2003). Participants in the current study report that the timing of text messages are an important indicator of a man's

level of interest. Texting late at night and on weekends was usually interpreted as drunk texting, which often indicated to participants that the person was more interested in hooking up than in getting to know her, whereas texting at other times was seen as a sign of interest.

The content of the text messages also mattered to participants. Participants reported that they often analyzed the content of text messages in an effort to determine what the other person was thinking or how they felt about the person. In general, women perceived any communication as a sign of interest. Some participants described texting as something to occupy their time when they are bored and something that helped them feel companionship even when they weren't interested in the man texting. This may be explained by the idea that text messaging provides a unique sense of both intimacy and distance (Thurlow, 2003).

**Conclusion 5: College women struggle to be direct and clear about their non-platonic interest.** Expanding upon the Lindgren et al. (2009) finding that male and female college students prefer indirect and nonverbal communication strategies to communicate sexual intent, participants generally reported personal experiences in which they struggled to be direct when communicating that they were not interested in a potential partner. Participants typically communicated their disinterest by avoiding the person or being less friendly. While it was also typical for women in the study to communicate disinterest through direct communication, this was usually after they had tried to use more indirect methods. This is consistent with previous research indicating that women in college favor indirect over direct communication in communicating

disinterest, but will eventually use direct, overt communication if needed (Lindgren et al., 2009).

Data from this study reveals that it is typical for both women and men communicate through non-verbal signals, which is supported by existing research (Lindgren et al., 2009). Women also reported that indirect behaviors are common when indicating interest in a potential partner. Indirect behaviors might be verbal, such as talking to a person more but not expressing clear interest in pursuing the person, or nonverbal, such as giving a look or smiling. A variant finding from this study is that communicating interest can be ambiguous, confusing, indirect, and can result in miscommunication. This resonates with the literature on flirting, which emphasizes the prevalence of miscommunications between the sexes (e.g. Abbey, 1982; Abbey, 1987; Henningsen, 2004; Henningsen et al., 2006).

In addition to miscommunication caused by men misinterpreting women's intentions, women also typically reported that they did not understand what a man was thinking or intending during a particular interaction. Several participants described times when they did not know what a man was thinking because they had not heard from the person. Other participants described being unsure whether or not they had misread signals from men. Several men communicated in a way that the women perceived as conveying interest, but left them with some uncertainty about what the man wanted. This might indicate that men also use signals that are indirect, at least in the eyes of the women who are interpreting the signals. These findings have implications for college students' ability to find positive relationships in college, since the ability to accurately interpret another person's sexual interest is a necessary prerequisite for consensual

romantic and sexual relationships (Lindgren & Shoda, 2007). Since men and women slowly increase the intimacy level of their flirting signals incrementally as they begin to show mutual interest (Moore, 2010), indirect signals from one partner may lead to indirect signals from the other. This ambiguity allows both the sender and recipient to avoid rejection if their interest is not reciprocated.

Participants variantly cited the role of individual differences among women in determining how they approach non-platonic interactions. Participants mentioned knowing other women in college who were more assertive than they are in approaching non-platonic interactions. A variant finding in domain 8 was that participants sometimes enlisted friends to help navigate relationships. Participants reported learning from observation of their friends' relationship experiences. In addition, friends helped participants interpret signals from men and decide how to respond. As they struggle to communicate and to decipher signals from potential partners, friends may provide a source of support and assistance. For example, one participant talked about signaling to her friends whether or not a man who had started dancing behind her was attractive. Several participants commented on their own ability or inability to be assertive as a factor in determining how they communicate with men.

Individual differences may help to explain the variant finding in domain 4 that some women did engage in explicit conversations with their partner about how the relationship would or would not progress. Because not all of these women described in the interview were in terms of the relationship, it may be that these conversations occurred at a later stage in the relationship, rather than during the initial stages when direct communication seems to be most difficult.

Given that communication within and about non-platonic relationships is often ambiguous, it is important to define the terms being used as much as possible. Domain 4 addresses colloquial language used by participants during the interview process. The most commonly used slang terms across all interviews, “hook up”, is generally perceived as having a vague and situationally-dependent definition. Moreover, participants variantly mentioned that people use slang as a way of being intentionally vague about their sexual encounters. In this way, the slang of college dating reflects college students’ discomfort with direct communication about their non-platonic interactions.

**Conclusion 6: Women typically expect men to initiate non-platonic relationships.**

Domain 5 reveals that women typically do not want to pursue someone in vain. In other words, they want to ensure that their feelings are reciprocated before displaying interest in a potential partner. Variantly, women reported that knowing that a man was interested in her affected how she viewed that person. Here, a core idea from one interview explains how a man expressing his interest affected the participant:

R2 tried to initiate a conversation with P about their relationship status, but P did not want the relationship to be official because her friends hate him and would be mad at P if she and R2 got into a relationship again. So, she and R2 were "in this weird exclusive but not really exclusive period" for a semester.

In discussing their perception of norms in college, participants variantly reported that women expect men to initiate interest (domain 2) and that men do initiate interest (domain 3). Also variantly reported in domain 2, participants explained that women show

that they are interested by being open to a man's advances. Therefore, participants describe that it would be normative for a man to approach a woman if he is interested, and for a woman to either accept or reject his flirtation depending on whether or not the woman is interested.

Women variantly reported that they like receiving attention from men, but that they dislike receiving attention that is unwanted. Unwanted attention was typically described as attention that they perceived as "aggressive" or "desperate". So, although women expect men to initiate non-platonic interactions, they reported that they do not enjoy being pursued by men in just any manner. As outlined in domain 5, women variantly reported that they want a partner who is willing to communicate his interest (n=3) as well as a partner who is nice, caring, loyal, respectful (n=6) and attractive (n=3). Participants' assessments of attractiveness may be related to their assessments of other positive traits, since women perceive men who are physically attractive as also possessing additional positive traits (Levesque, 2006). In addition, personal qualities may be more important to participants than physical attractiveness.

**Conclusion 7: Women typically report wanting companionship and reciprocated feelings as a result of non-platonic interactions, rather than a desire for a specific behavioral outcome (i.e. hookup, going on dates).** Women typically report a desire for companionship, as shown in domain 5. Domain 5 also indicates that women variantly report the desire for a non-platonic interaction to be more than a random hookup (n=5) and to be physically intimate with someone for whom she has feelings (n=5). These findings are an important addition to the literature, which has previously discussed college students' relationship preferences only in terms of casual sex and dating. For

example, Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville (2010) report that dating is preferable to hooking up, but their study did not provide an opportunity for students to articulate in their own words what their ideal non-platonic interaction would look like. In the present study, many women describe that they want more intimacy, communication, and connection than is afforded by a random hookup, but do not express a desire to engage in traditional dating. Women do express a desire for companionship, sometimes in the form of a relationship, but more simply and more frequently in the form of reciprocated interest and communication.

While some women express a desire to be in a relationship, they also perceive that they are not in control of this outcome. Consistent with Bogle's (2008) finding that men hook up with the primary goal of having sex, women in this study variably reported that men prefer sex and hookups to relationships. Participants are concerned that the men they are interested in may not be looking for the same type of relationship as they are, and typically report that they do not want to pursue someone who is not interested in them. One participant shared a story about a time when she expressed interest in spending more time with someone with whom she had hooked up several times, and he reacted by pulling away from her. However, at the same time these women did not express concern that men will interpret their sexual advances or interest in hooking up as a desire for a committed relationship. It seems that their perception that men do not want relationships combined with their perception that men hold the power in the relationship serves to mute their own wishes.



In addition to concern that men will only be interested in hooking up, women also variably reported concern that escalating their relationship with a friend may not lead to a romantic relationship but instead may have a negative effect on the existing friendship.

Women variably reported in domain 5 that they prefer being single to being in a relationship (n=3). To contextualize these responses, women explained, “I thought I’d be going on dates and trying new things kind of, and maybe develop into a relationship”. It seems that participants are more interested in college as a time of experimentation and fun, and are willing to put their relationship goals on hold in favor of engaging with the college social world.

**Conclusion 8: Peer groups are viewed as influential in determining norms and expectations for non-platonic interactions.** Simply being in college as opposed to high school changes students’ expectations for non-platonic interactions (Lindgren et al., 2009). This is consistent with participants’ reports in the current study that their goals and expectations for non-platonic interactions changed after they arrived at college. Several participants mentioned that they had thought they would find a relationship in college, but changed their mind within the first year of school once they saw the college social scene, including that their peers in college were not in relationships. Instead of a relationship, many of these participants began to pursue more casual interactions with men.

The idea that peer networks are highly influential in determining an individual’s behavior (Rimal & Real, 2007) was expanded upon through the findings of this study. Participants typically reported that relationship norms in college are defined by one’s social group – this supports the idea that sexual behavior may be socially learned

(Gagnon & Simon, 1986). Participants' examples of social groups that they view as influential included racial groups, fraternities and sororities, and religious groups.

Participants variantly mentioned that their friends helped them to navigate non-platonic relationships, such as giving advice and or communicating with a man on their friend's behalf. This helps to explain how friends can have such a substantial impact on an individual's actions within a non-platonic relationship.

Participants also discussed meeting people as a result of being in the same place at the same time, which is a product of the college social environment. In addition to the prevalence of social gatherings such as parties and the bar scene, the college environment also impacts individuals' living situations, affecting who they are able to be near and when. Participants mentioned that they felt more comfortable having non-platonic interactions with people who were within their social circle, whether that person was a friend-of-a-friend or a member of a group that they knew, such as a fraternity. Participants seemed to have more apprehension when interacting with strangers (i.e. someone they met at a bar) and were less willing to allow an interaction to progress. This indicates that college women may be considering potential partners as more trustworthy and well-intentioned when an individual is a part of her social network.

Participants variantly reported that the college environment does not foster lasting romantic relationships. Since "the college environment" can be defined in many ways, it is important to look at the specific factors that went into this finding. It has been established that context affects the way flirting happens as well as the way it is perceived (Henningsen et al., 2008). The current study's participant responses further suggest that

meeting at a bar and hooking up are common aspects of meeting in the college environment and ones that do not facilitate lasting relationships.

Participants variantly reported that they were not currently interested in a relationship since they were moving and/or graduating soon (n=3). As they looked ahead to life after college, they also reported the belief that the social environment would be different. They variantly reported a desire to meet someone (n=4), to be in a more serious relationship (n=6) and that men will be more mature and commitment-oriented (n=3) after college.

**Conclusion 9: Looking back on past events, participants believe that their college social experiences were worthwhile and meaningful.** Many participants viewed casual non-platonic relationships as learning opportunities that provided them with experience and information that would be useful in future relationships. Literature to date has debated whether the schema of traditional dating relationships or the schema of casual hookups dominates college life, and has further considered which schema might be best for students' mental and physical health. This suggests that the premise of this debate may be flawed, as women might not want to choose just one schema or the other. Many women may instead view hookups as a step in their sexual and romantic development as well as an opportunity to have fun and gain sexual experience. Glenn and Marquardt (2012) speculate that the current college interactional environment may be a preparation for marriage. Participants in the current study discuss the notion of commitment and preparation for that step as being relevant to their college experience, and tend to view marriage as something that they will consider after they graduate.

Developmentally, college is one of the first times that individuals are required to build their own schemas for operating within the social world. Data from this study suggests that women entering college did not know what to expect about relationships and often had ideas based on movies or their parents' stories of their own relationship, and continued to adjust expectations as college progressed. Paradoxically, most of the women reported satisfaction with their college social experience, acknowledging that their goal of a relationship was not met, and yet they expect to resurrect this same goal as they graduate college.

**Conclusion 10: Women report that friendships and a group-oriented social life are more important than romantic relationships at this stage in development.**

Researchers to date have often focused on college students' preference for either hooking up or traditional dating, presenting these two social scripts as the complete list of options for non-platonic relationships. Data from this study instead suggests that college students may be in a developmental stage where non-platonic relationships are casual in nature and are not central to their social lives. Instead, women in college seem to be focused on their friendships and group relationships, since this is where they have expressed finding value and meaning within their social lives. Several participants mentioned the idea that being single was less boring and allowed for more opportunities to try new things, have new experiences, and meet people.

Some participants in this study discussed traditional dating experiences, while others discussed casual hook-up experiences. In both scenarios, the individual's overall social life, personality, and attitudes seemed to dictate what script they followed. All participants mentioned friends as playing a role in their social lives. Rather than focusing

on dating or hooking up as central to their social lives, it seems that non-platonic relationships are fit in around college women's social lives with friends. Some participants perceived that being in a committed relationship or part of a couple is boring, and that being single in college is more fun. This aligns with and builds on Bogle's (2008) idea that there is a "having fun" mentality that prevails among college students, such that "fun" is prioritized. This mentality may be characteristic of a new developmental stage that today's college students experience. I speculate that this stage allows individuals to develop close, meaningful relationships with friends that fill the role that might have once been filled by romantic relationships. That is, participants experience closeness, bonding, and a sense of purpose and meaning within friendships. It is possible that this will lay a foundation for future romantic relationships, and that friendship seems more "fun" and less vulnerable for college women. This conclusion warrants further research, and could have implications for the way in which researchers think and talk about college student romantic relationships.

### **Integrating Findings with Prototypical Cases**

The prototypical cases illustrate how the above themes can describe an individual's story, even when each story may include different experiences and result in a variety of outcomes. Both participants met partners while drinking, but for Participant D drinking seemed to play a larger role in her decision to hook up or not, while for Participant C the drinking was simply part of the social context. Drinking was part of the context that helped both participants meet potential partners, as it created an environment where it was convenient to meet eligible men. In terms of social environment, both participants had active social lives, texted with men they were interested in, and went out

to parties and bars with friends. Participant D was a member of a sorority, and Participant C was not. Being in a sorority seemed to create clearer norms for Participant D to follow, which influenced how and when she interacted with men. Participant C seemed to have met a wider range of men in a wider variety of contexts, and did not seem to have a schema to follow in terms of who to pursue, when, and how.

Both participants avoided being direct with a potential partner in different ways. Participant C avoided directly saying she was not interested, and waited until she had clear signs of interest from someone before directly showing interest in return. Participant D avoided interacting with men she might be interested in until alcohol was present to ease the situation. In addition to the struggle to be direct with men, Participant D struggled to be direct in articulating her own hopes, goals, and perspective during the interview.

Both participants described seeking companionship, though their standards for companionship were different. Participant C talked about wanting a more serious relationship, while Participant D talked about wanting attention from men in the form of a text message or simply acknowledging that she exists after a hook up. These women both made meaning of their non-platonic experiences in that they provided rationales for their behaviors. Participant D expressed a desire to stay focused on her friendships as an explanation for her lack of experience with intimacy and romantic relationships. In contrast, Participant C has taken lessons from her various non-platonic experiences that she plans to apply to future relationships.

### **Impressions From the Interviewers**

Given the discussion of indirect communication, the importance of context, and non-verbal signals throughout this manuscript, it seems fitting to discuss interviewers' impressions of the participants and their stories. This section describes the two interviewers' thoughts and reactions to the experience of interviewing participants in this study.

The women who participated in this study seemed generally open to and comfortable with the idea of discussing their romantic and sexual lives, with the exception of one participant who showed discomfort in discussing sexual experiences. While some women were more sexually explicit in their descriptions than others, all of the women were willing to discuss their sexual and emotional experiences. However, women seemed guarded when discussing their personal goals, hopes, and desires within non-platonic interactions. Women often did not provide direct answers to the prompts that asked them about what they hoped would happen or what they wanted from a specific interaction when talking about interactions that did not turn into relationships. As a result, the research team struggled to differentiate between hopes and expectations during the coding process. Below is an example of how one participant responded to a question about what she hoped would happen:

Interviewer: And so when you started talking to him, what were you thinking about? What were your hopes and expectations?

Participant: I don't know I like making new friends, I honestly if anything came out of it I just made a new friend. Probably to that extent because I didn't know if he had a girlfriend, if he had someone else he was talking to

or something along those lines. Turns out he had a girlfriend, but. (Giggle)

So, we were just, and we just ended up being friends.

As demonstrated through this example, at times it seemed like participants were not forthcoming about what they wanted if it was not consistent with the way a situation had turned out. In other words, hindsight seems to change their perspective on their own goals, or at least their willingness to state these goals aloud.

Participants also seemed to struggle over how to answer some questions. Often, participants' words would directly contradict one another, or they would take back something that they had just said. This presented challenges during the coding process, as the research team attempted to reconcile the true meaning of a participant's words. At times, the team referred back to the audio in order to listen for clues within the client's intonation. For example, one participant attempted to explain the influence of the environment on forming relationships:

"It's like there's never a time that you're gonna go to the bar and you'll form a lasting long relationship. I guess there's a time, but there's not that many times."

Another participant struggled to explain how she felt about a man she was previously interested in:

"I didn't feel strongly enough that it was worth sacrificing those other things for him so it was like the first time I like had freedom I guess in a while... but I guess like I still did have like emotional, I don't know, I still like had feelings for the high school boyfriend"



Some participants seemed uncomfortable with things they said aloud, as if they were hearing their thoughts for the first time or expected judgment, which may be related to the previous observation that women would make one statement and then counter it with a contradictory statement. One participant often commented that she was concerned about how her responses sounded to the interviewer. For example, this participant's interview included statements like, "that sounds bad," "You're gonna think I'm bad but..." "I feel like I'm feeding into stereotypes," and "I still don't want you to think...". These comments seem to relate to the broader theme that some women expressed regret or fear of judgment for their behaviors. However, some of these negative emotions may not have been captured in the women's words, since both interviewers felt that women were holding back in expressing their negative emotions, perhaps for reasons of self-presentation.

The interviewers shared a general sense that many of these women often played a passive role in their experiences, waiting for the men to make decisions about whether or not a next step would be taken to advance the relationship at a given moment. This was evident in the language that they used and the way that they expressed themselves, some of which is lost as the data is translated from its original format into domains and subcategories. However, it was also difficult to quote participants directly because they were not able to answer questions succinctly; instead, they seemed to finish different parts of the "quote" or go back to a point over the course of the interview.

There was variation among the women in their levels of attractiveness, confidence, and likability. While it was beyond the scope of this study to measure these factors quantitatively, they seem closely linked to how these participants might come

across in an initial meeting with a potential mate. It is worthwhile to note that the interviewers agreed that some of the more confident, likable, and introspective participants tended to report having had more positive experiences with men. Physical attractiveness level seemed less closely related, but all participants were viewed as at least average attractiveness.

A final observation is that participants may have not elaborated on certain things because of assumptions that the interviewers were young and therefore could understand and relate to their experiences. For example, no one explained the purpose of Facebook or how it works. In terms of language, no one defined hooking up without the prompting of the interviewer for clarification. People said things like, "you know" a lot. This seems to indicate comfort and ease with the interviewer, but may also mean that some pieces of information were simply not shared because of assumed similarity to the interviewer. In general, it was difficult to know what participants might be revealing or leaving out of their stories as a result of the interview situation.

### **Limitations**

The sample size and scope is a common limitation of qualitative research, since results of the study may have low generalizability. However, given that this research is designed to fill in gaps left by quantitative research, the focus of this study is on deep, thick data and building theory/themes rather than on breadth and generalizability. Since this sample included only women, future studies might focus on the perceptions of male participants. Women were chosen as participants for this study since research to date has focused more heavily on males' perceptions of female flirting behaviors (i.e. Abbey, 1982). Having twelve participants of the same sex did allow within-sex differences to

emerge from the data that would not have been seen with a smaller sample size. Other limitations related to the sample are related to the demographics of the students who volunteered for the study. While the racial composition of this sample was relatively similar to the broader college student population, college students are predominantly white (NCES, 2012) and research suggests that different racial groups have different dating experiences (e.g. Brimeyer & Smith, 2012). Therefore, this study might not have captured the experiences of Asian students, who were not represented in this study, nor of racial groups who are underrepresented across college campuses.

Participants volunteered for this study after learning some information about the interview topic, which may have created a self-selection bias. Participants were able to find this study through an online system that also offered opportunities to participate in a wide variety of studies happening at a research 1 university. Participants who chose this study may have shared some characteristics with one another that made them attracted to this study. Since the study required participants to answer questions about their own lives in an in-person interview, participants might have been more outgoing, social, or trusting than students who decided not to participate.

While this study collected demographic and background information about participants through the post-interview survey (See Appendix D), it might have been helpful to obtain additional data in order to situate the sample more clearly. For example, knowing how frequently participants had sex, how many sex partners they have had, and how many committed relationships they had been in would have provided valuable context for their stories of encounters with specific partners. Situating the sample in terms of romantic and sexual history could help researchers to understand patterns of

behavior more clearly. Additionally, this information could clarify whether the experiences described in interviews were typical or atypical in the context of a participant's experiences overall. Based on participants' accounts, many of these women report having sex only one or a few times with a single partner, meaning that they are not having sex regularly or often. Thus, women may have multiple or even many partners yet still have relatively few sexual encounters. While additional data is needed to confirm this speculation, this may indicate that the stereotype of women in college having a lot of sex because they have multiple partners is a misconception.

Another limitation of this study is the ability to obtain truthful and detailed answers to interview questions. Some research has shown that participants are more likely to give socially desirable responses in face-to-face interviews than in phone interviews (Wiseman, 1972 as cited in Hill et al., 2012). However, telephone interviews have also been criticized for creating distance between the researcher and participant (Hill et al., 2012). Given the personal nature of this topic, the interviewers were both females and were selected for their ability to speak comfortably about this topic as well as their level of counseling skills. In hindsight, it might have been helpful to do a follow-up interview with participants, at which point they might have had more time to reflect on the topic and also felt more comfortable being vulnerable to the interviewer. A second interview might also have provided more information about what was difficult for the participants to discuss in the first interview. Future studies should consider two interviews for research projects that discuss personal, complex, and potentially embarrassing topics.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

This study has illuminated the female perspective on the initiation of non-platonic interactions among college students. The qualitative approach was intended to describe women's perceptions of how relationships in college begin and to guide future research. It will be important to build upon the findings of this study in order to work toward specific interventions to help students improve relationship outcomes.

Given that white, female college students are consistently overrepresented in psychological research, future studies on this topic should attempt to recruit samples from a subset of the female population that may have different norms, such as African-American students. Given that both participants in this study who self-identified as Black/African-American brought up racial and cultural issues in dating, there is preliminary evidence that racial differences might result in meaningful differences in the narratives college women provide. In this study, Black/African-American women specifically expressed the struggle to find a man within their race, and an awareness of racial boundaries within dating on college campuses. This suggests that Black/African-American students face unique challenges when it comes to dating and operate within social groups that might not comply with the norms experienced by most college students.

As consensual qualitative research studies provide a theoretical foundation for further research, the findings of this study should be used to inform future research projects that are designed to gather data from a larger sample. Findings from this study should be examined in quantitative studies to see if they are generalizable across college student populations, to subpopulations of college students, and possibly to people outside of a traditional college environment.

Auhagen and Hinde (1997) emphasize the importance of considering both actors within a dyadic relationship. Therefore, one important avenue for future research is gaining the male perspective on the same topic. It would be interesting to see whether or not men raise similar issues to those raised by women, and to see whether or not their perceptions of the college experience match the perceptions of female students. In order to decrease negative outcomes of romantic interactions for both men and women, it will be helpful to first understand when, how, and where men learn the behaviors that they use in romantic contexts.

In order to identify targets for educational interventions around sex and dating issues, it is imperative to first understand students' sexual goals and sexual communication strategies (Lindgren et al., 2009). As this is the first study to examine flirting in college through the lens of counseling psychology, it is important to consider the implications that this study might have for counseling psychologists, as well as other mental health practitioners and college administrators who work with college students.

Understanding students' social context can provide valuable information about students' sexual and romantic lives. Women may feel social pressure to have romantic and sexual goals that are congruent with the norms that they perceive their peers are following. Given that women often have trouble expressing their desires, female students may need guidance in how to communicate directly with a sexual or romantic partner and men may need to understand their power within these interactions. In addition to addressing students' behaviors when interacting with a partner in person, it may be helpful to inquire about communication over text and how this might be impacting them.

When meeting with students, it may be useful to understand the meaning of the word “hook up”, and to understand the ambiguity of terms like this one. If students use the word “hook up” to describe a sexual encounter, counselors may want to verify what specific behaviors the client is referring to. This clarification might be important in determining whether a client’s behavior is similar or different across situations, and in assessing risk to the client’s sexual health.

This study has advanced what we know about the female perspective of flirting in college. This study illuminated the paradoxical finding that women want companionship and reciprocated feelings from men, but often do not pursue relationships in college as a result of gender dynamics and social pressures. Participants also highlighted the prominent roles that alcohol and texting play in facilitating non-platonic interactions. While hooking up is a common form of non-platonic interaction, there is not a clear schema of how a relationship might progress beyond the moment when two people meet one another. The data suggests that women are hesitant to put effort or emotion into developing relationships in college, but hope that college will be a time that they happen upon experiences that will build toward more serious, committed relationships in the future.

## Appendix A: Recruitment Documents

### Recruitment Email

Subject: Seeking Female Undergraduate Participants

Dear Student,

We are interested in learning more about heterosexual women's experiences with non-platonic relationships in college. We hope the results of this study will help us gain a better understanding of heterosexual college students' social experiences. I am recruiting students who meet ALL of the following criteria: single, heterosexual, female, age 18-22, living on or near campus, juniors or seniors enrolled full-time at the University of Maryland. **If this describes you and you are interested in discussing your experiences of social interactions with men in college, I invite you to volunteer by filling out this brief interest form:**

[https://umd.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_7ZloRMlzVxwiEqp](https://umd.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_7ZloRMlzVxwiEqp)

If you are selected to participate in an interview, you will be asked to engage in an in-person interview that takes about 1 hour, and a post-interview survey (less than 10 minutes). We will only be able to interview a limited number of participants. If you are not selected, it may be because we receive too many eligible applicants or because you do not meet the criteria for participation stated above.

You will receive extra credit from your Psychology instructor for participation in this study. Instructors will provide alternative extra credit opportunities for individuals who do not participate in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact [ross.study@gmail.com](mailto:ross.study@gmail.com).

Thank you very much for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Katherine Ross, Graduate Student Investigator

[klross@umd.edu](mailto:klross@umd.edu)

Professor Mary Ann Hoffman

[hoffmanma@umd.edu](mailto:hoffmanma@umd.edu)



### Recruitment Handout

You are invited to take part in a study of the social interactions of undergraduate women at the University of Maryland. This research is being conducted in the Graduate School of Education at UMD. We hope to learn more about young women's experiences in cross-sex interactions during their time at UMD. The results may help us gain a better understanding of heterosexual college students' social experiences. You will receive extra credit from your Psychology instructor for participating in this study. Instructors will provide alternative extra credit opportunities for individuals who do not participate in this study.

I am recruiting students who meet ALL of the following criteria: single, heterosexual, female, age 18-22, living on or near campus, juniors or seniors enrolled full-time at the University of Maryland. **If this describes you and you are interested in discussing your experiences of social interactions with men in college, I invite you to fill out an interest form here:**  
[https://umd.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_7ZloRMizVxwiEqp](https://umd.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_7ZloRMizVxwiEqp).

If selected for participation, you will be asked to participate in an in-person interview that takes about 1 hour, and a brief post-interview survey (less than 10 minutes).

If you have questions or concerns, please email [ross.study@gmail.com](mailto:ross.study@gmail.com). Your participation is completely voluntary.

**Appendix B: Online Screening Questionnaire (via Qualtrics):**

Screen 1:

Thank you for your interest in our study!

Please read the consent form below.

<b>Project Title</b>	<i>Social Interactions of Female College Students</i>
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	<i>This research is being conducted by Katherine Ross, M.S.Ed. and Dr. Mary Ann Hoffman at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are at least 18 years old and a female, heterosexual, junior or senior undergraduate student enrolled full-time at the University of Maryland. The purpose of this research project is to learn more about the social interactions and social experiences of college students.</i>
<b>Procedures</b>	<p><i>To volunteer for this study, you will complete an online survey to confirm that you meet the criteria listed above. There are a limited number of spots in this study, so you may not be selected if there are too many eligible volunteers or if you do not meet the stated criteria. If you are not selected to participate, your survey will be permanently deleted and you will not receive extra credit.</i></p> <p><i>If you are selected to participate, you will be asked to come in for an interview. The interview will last approximately 1 hour and will be held in a private room in the Benjamin Building. The interview will be audiotaped, and audio files will be kept confidential. The interview will ask participants about their experiences in cross-sex interactions in college and questions about non-platonic heterosexual relationships among college students in general. For example, the interviewer will ask questions such as, “Tell me the story of the last time you met a guy you were interested in.”</i></p> <p><i>Immediately following this interview, you will fill out a demographic survey on a computer, which will ask you to disclose your race/ethnicity, and will ask questions such as, “Have you ever engaged in oral sex?” These questions are asked post-interview in order to avoid unnecessary bias in the approach of the interviewer. All data will be kept strictly confidential, and your name will not be anywhere on this survey.</i></p> <p><i>In exchange for participation in the interview and post-interview survey, you will receive extra credit from your instructor.</i></p>
<b>Potential Risks and</b>	<i>There may be some risks from participating in this research study. Possible risks include recalling negative memories about previous social</i>

<b>Discomforts</b>	<i>interactions.</i>
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	<i>There are no direct benefits to participants. Possible benefits include positive feelings after sharing one's personal experiences. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how women on college campuses navigate their social environments.</i>
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<p><i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by password-protection of electronic files that may only be accessed by members of this research team. Additionally, your name will not be attached to your interview or survey data. Once the researchers have finished using this data, it will be destroyed.</i></p> <p><i>If a report or article is written based on this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i></p>
<b>Medical Treatment</b>	<i>The University of Maryland does not provide any medical, hospitalization or other insurance for participants in this research study, nor will the University of Maryland provide any medical treatment or compensation for any injury sustained as a result of participation in this research study, except as required by law.</i>
<b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</i></p> <p><b><i>Katherine Ross, M.S.Ed. or Dr. Mary Ann Hoffman 3414 Benjamin Building University of Maryland, College Park (301) 405-2858 ross.study@gmail.com</i></b></p>
<b>Participant Rights</b>	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742</b></p>

	<b>E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a></b> <b>Telephone: 301-405-0678</b>	
	<i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i>	
<b>Statement of Consent</b>	<i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</i>	
	<i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME OF PARTICIPANT</b> [Please Print]	
	<b>SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	

I have read the above document in its entirety and would like to continue.

I have read the above document and no longer wish to volunteer for this study.

*\*Note: If participant no longer wishes to volunteer, the survey ends here.*

Screen 2:

Your electronic signature (below) indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read the consent form from Question 1 or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will be able to download a copy of the consent form on the next screen.

Name (first and last)

Date

You may download a copy of the consent form now for your records. When you are finished here, move on to the next question.

<link to download Consent Form>

Do ALL of the following apply to you?

- 1) I am female.
- 2) I am between 18 and 22 years old.
- 3) I identify as heterosexual.
- 4) I am single (not in a relationship).
- 5) I live on campus or in adjacent housing such as The View, a sorority house, or a group house with friends from UMD.
- 6) I am a junior or senior at University of Maryland, currently enrolled as a full-time student.

Yes

No

How motivated are you to be participate in an interview in which you discuss past and current experiences of social interactions with men in college?

Extremely motivated

Somewhat motivated

Not at all motivated

At what email address would you like to be contacted?

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study.

You will receive an email from the research team within the next few days regarding your participation in this study.

## APPENDIX C: Focus Group Protocol

### **Focus Group Guide for Researcher**

- 1) Participants read over paper
- 2) What does flirting mean to you? What other words would you use to describe flirting? When you talk with your friends, or when others do, what phrases or terms do you use to talk about this type of interaction?
- 3) Go through each question
  - a. Is there anything you would add/change to make this question read more clearly?
  - b. Do you have any questions/confusion about what is being asked?
  - c. What do you think this question is about?
  - d. How would you answer this question? What types of things would you talk about in response to this question?
- 4) How honest would you be in your responses to a graduate student who you had met once? What types of details might you include or not include? Do the questions seem intrusive?
- 5) What questions would make you uncomfortable?
- 6) What would help to make you comfortable in answering these questions?
- 7) Are there questions that should be added in order to get at the type of information I am seeking?

*Throughout the focus group, keep in mind your research questions:*

Research Question 1: How do women college students perceive and think about flirting interactions?

Research Question 2: What is the role of context in flirting interactions between college students?

Research Question 3: What are the perceived norms of flirting among college students?

Research Question 4: What consequences do college students experience as a result of flirting interactions?

Research Question 5: What types of flirting behaviors are effective among college students? What types are less effective? Do effective behaviors differ based on gender?

### **College Student Flirting: Guide For Focus Group Members**

*This focus group will be audio taped. Please do not use any names during this discussion. Any information that you share will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this study.*

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of heterosexual female college students who are interacting with men for a variety of relational purposes such as flirting, dating, sexual activity, expressing romantic interest, etc. I am particularly interested in looking at intentions behind these interactions, perceptions within these interactions, and the actual behaviors that people are doing within the interactions.

The method that I am using, Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) asks broad questions. I will have participants who are similar to you in that they are heterosexually-identified, female college students. I am proposing to ask the questions listed below, and may also insert prompts into the interview such as, “Could you give me an example of what you mean?” or, “Could you say more?” as needed.

Read through the following questions. We will then go through them as a group in order to determine what changes might need to be made in order to yield the best answers and to make them as clear as possible.

- 1) In general, how are your male friends in college communicating interest in a person of the opposite sex? In general, how are your female friends in college communicating interest in a person of the opposite sex?
- 2) Think about a time you were interested in someone and you were successful in letting that person know. How did you communicate with him? Please describe what happened.
- 3) Think about a time when you were interested in someone and you were not successful in letting that person know. How did you communicate with him? Please describe what happened.
- 4) Think of a time when someone expressed interest in you and you were also interested in them. How did that person communicate with you? Please describe what happened.
- 5) Think of a time when someone expressed interest in you and you were not interested in them. How did that person communicate with you? Please describe what happened. I think you need to ask about specific ways to communicate such as texting, etc. They may not think of these when they describe their examples.
- 6) Is there anything we haven't discussed related to flirting between men and women in a college environment that you think might be important?

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

### Interview Questions

*During this interview, I will ask you questions about some broad scenarios. I will be looking for detailed answers based on your experiences, so as we talk I will prompt you for more information on the topic.*

1) Think about people you know who are in college and are in a non-platonic relationship with another college student. Walk me through a typical scenario of how two college students go from being strangers or acquaintances to getting together.

What happens first?

How does the girl communicate her interest?

How does the guy communicate his interest?

2) Tell me the story of the last time you met a guy you were interested in.

What were you hoping would happen?

What did you expect would happen?

What actually happened?

How did you feel about it then / how do you feel about it now?

3) Tell me the story about another time in college you were interested in a guy and it ended in a different way.

What were you hoping would happen?

What did you expect would happen?

What actually happened?

How did you feel about it then / how do you feel about it now?

4) Has there been a time when a guy was interested in you, but you weren't interested in him? Tell me the story of what happened with that person.

What were you hoping would happen?

What did you expect would happen?

What actually happened?

How did you feel about it then / how do you feel about it now?



5) When you came in as a freshman, what did you imagine or hope your dating life in college would be like?\*

6) Now, looking back at your four years, what's your overall impression of how it went?\*

7) What do you hope non-platonic interactions will be like after college?\*

*\* Asterisk indicates questions that were added to the interview during the data collection process.*

**Appendix E: Post-Interview Survey**

1. What is your race? (check all that apply)

Black or African-American, Non-Hispanic

White, Non-Hispanic

Hispanic

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please list all extracurricular activities you have participated in at UMD, along with dates of participation (i.e. Greek Organization, tour guide, Diamondback, Varsity Volleyball, any political organization, etc.)

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3. My current relationship status is:

a) Single

b) In a relationship

c) Hooking up with someone

d) Married

e) Widowed

f) Divorced

g) Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. In the past three months, I have been in situations where there are opportunities to flirt, date, or hook up:

- a) less than once a month
- b) about once a month
- c) weekly
- d) more than once a week

5. In the next 60 days, I would like to (circle all that apply):

- a) Meet an attractive person of the opposite sex
- b) Kiss a person of the opposite sex
- c) Hook up with someone (for the purposes of this question, "hook up" includes any behavior ranging from making out to having sex with someone outside of an exclusive relationship)
- d) Go on a date with a person of the opposite sex
- e) Start hanging out with a person I am interested in
- f) Be in an exclusive relationship with someone

6. How often do you consume 2 or more alcoholic drinks in one night?

- a) Never
- b) Less than once a month
- c) 1-3 times a month
- d) 1-2 times a week
- e) 3-4 times a week
- f) 4 or more times a week

7. Are you currently taking birth control?

Yes

No

8. Which statement best describes your relationship history?

- a) I have never been in an exclusive relationship
- b) I have been in an exclusive relationship within the past 6 months
- c) My last exclusive relationship was more than 1 year ago, but less than 2 years ago.
- d) My last exclusive relationship was more than 2 years ago.

9. How long was your longest relationship? (write N/A if you have never been in a relationship)

\_\_\_\_\_

10. Have you ever engaged in penis-vagina intercourse?

Yes

No

11. Have you ever engaged in oral sex?

Yes

No

12. Have you ever engaged in oral sex with a partner who you were only intimate with one time?

Yes

No

13. Have you ever engaged in penis-vagina intercourse with a partner who you were only intimate with one time?

Yes

No

**APPENDIX F: Survey for Discussion of Potential Biases within CQR Research Team**

1. What is your age (in years)?

2. Gender

Male

Female

Transgender

Other

I prefer not to answer

3. What was your high school experience?

Public

Private

Catholic

Home School

Other religious (please specify)

Other (please specify)

4. What is the highest level of education you've completed?

Some high school

High school graduate

Associates Degree

Some college

Bachelor's degree

Some graduate school

Master's degree

Doctoral degree

Other

5. Briefly describe your educational and work experiences between high school and present in a few sentences.

6. What is the highest level of education completed by at least one of your parents?

Less than high school

Some high school

High school graduate

Associates degree

Some college

College graduate

Graduate school

7. Do you have immediate family members (other than your parents) who have attended a four year college?

Yes

No

8. Turning to your youth, with whom did you grow up (please apply to your youth - from birth to age 11)?

With one mother and one father, who were in an in-tact relationship

With one mother and one father, who were divorced/separated

With two parents of the same gender, who were in an in-tact relationship

With two parents of the same gender, who were divorced/separated

With a single parent

With other family members as primary caretakers (i.e. grandparents, aunt and uncle, etc.)

Other (please describe briefly)

9. Turning to your adolescence, with whom did you grow up (please apply to your youth - from age 12 - 18)?

With one mother and one father, who were in an in-tact relationship

With one mother and one father, who were divorced/separated

With two parents of the same gender, who were in an in-tact relationship

With two parents of the same gender, who were divorced/separated

With a single parent

With other family members as primary caretakers (i.e. grandparents, aunt and uncle, etc.)

Other (please describe briefly)

10. What is your sexual orientation?

Heterosexual

Gay

Lesbian

Bisexual

Other

11. What is your race?

12. How religious do you consider yourself? (*answers on a continuum*)

Not at all religious

Very religious

13. How religious do you think others who know you very well consider you? (*answers on a continuum*)

Not at all religious      Very religious

14. How religious do you think people who don't know you very well consider you? (*answers on a continuum*)

Not at all religious      Very religious

15. What is your religion?

16. How do you define the term "hook up"? Be specific and explicit.

17. Are you currently in a committed relationship?

Yes

No

18. Have you ever been in a committed relationship?

Yes

No

19. How often do your friends consume alcohol?

Never

Less than Once a Month

Once a Month

2-3 Times a Month

Once a Week

2-3 Times a Week

Daily



20. How often do you consume alcohol?

Never

Less than Once a Month

Once a Month

2-3 Times a Month

Once a Week

2-3 Times a Week

Daily

21. In general, I think that heterosexual women in college (check all that apply)

Are looking to get into a serious relationship

Are looking to have sex

Are not interested in romantic relationships

Are not interested in sexual relationships

Are looking for companionship

Are looking to go on dates

Are looking to have men take care of them

Are looking to get attention from men

Other/Additional

22. In general, I think that heterosexual men in college (check all that apply)

Are looking to get into a serious relationship

Are looking to have sex

Are not interested in romantic relationships

Are not interested in sexual relationships

Are looking for companionship

Are looking to go on dates

Are looking to have women take care of them

Are looking to get attention from women

Other/Additional

23. In general, I think that heterosexual women in college (check all that apply)

Have more power than men in sexual interactions

Have less power than men in sexual interactions

Have equal power to men in sexual interactions

Have more power than men in romantic relationships

Have less power than men in romantic relationships

Have equal power to men in romantic relationships

24. When people talk about their problems, I think that it is (move the bar next to each word depending on how much you agree with it) (*answers on a continuum*)

Completely disagree

Completely agree

Useful for them

Weak of them

Brave of them

Helpful for them

Stressful to listen to

Interesting to listen to

25. Do you have experience with therapy or counseling? (provider or recipient)

Yes

No

26. List one thing you think this study will reveal about non-platonic heterosexual relationships in college.

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