A Focus Group Study Exploring Perceptions of Online Hookup App Use Among Heterosexual Women

Lauren N. Maziarz[1]

Department of Public and Allied Health, Bowling Green State University

Abstract

Online dating platforms have become a more common way for adults in the United States (U.S.) to find both romantic partners as well as sex partners. While certain hookup apps, such as Grindr, market towards men who have sex with men (MSM), other platforms, like Tinder, tend to attract people who identify as heterosexual. Eighteen self-identified heterosexual college women participated in one of four focus groups between April and October 2019. Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by the research team and themes were analyzed after all focus groups were complete. Four salient themes emerged which included concerns about meeting in person for the first time, apps making it easier to find partners, apps promoting hookup culture, and differences in perception depending on which gender you identify as. There are perceived advantages to using apps to find a partner but also hesitation. Future research should focus on the extent to which heterosexual women are using hookup apps to find sex partners and how these apps affect the sexual health and mental wellbeing of self-identified heterosexual women.

Introduction

Online dating platforms are increasingly common in the United States (U.S.) with three in 10 American adults saying they've used a dating site or app at some point (Vogels, 2020). Hookup or dating apps, which are also known as geosocial networking apps, have been discussed as giving rise to "hookup culture" (Ay-Tayyib et al., 2009; Cabecinha, et al., 2017; Rosenfeld, 2017) where individuals have more non-committed sexual encounters and fewer long-term partners. It should be noted that hookups are not a new phenomenon, however. For example, historical reports show the expansion of cars and movie theaters in the 1920's gave rise to young adults leaving home and engaging in freer sexual expression (Garcia et al., 2013). While some research has shown hookup encounters can negatively affect both mental and physical wellbeing (Garcia et al., 2012), hookups have also been considered by some to be a part of an adult's normal sexual exploration where individuals can go through a phase of hooking up only to later end up in a committed relationship (Bogle, 2008; Rosenfeld, 2017).

A Vanity Fair article by Nancy Jo Sales (2015) claimed that Tinder was the end of dating as we know it, calling this newfound era a "dating apocalypse." Sales quotes one male who remarks

on going on two or three Tinder dates a week, sleeping with 100 girls in a year. Of course, Sales' arguments are anecdotal and to what extent hookup apps are driving a trend towards less committed relationships is largely undetermined. While the studies are few, data by Rosenfeld (2017) shows that more than 80% of unpartnered heterosexual adults in the US have not met for a date or hookup in the last year. Furthermore, those who did use Tinder met an average of five people for sex or romance over the last 12 months (Rosenfeld, 2017), far fewer than what Sales is claiming in her expose.

There is also considerable variability in who reports using these platforms. Being younger, male, and identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) increases the odds of using social media platforms to find a partner (Vogels, 2020) with LGB adults reporting use twice as often as those who identify as straight (55% versus 28%, respectively) (Vogels, 2020). These data are corroborated by Rosenfeld (2017) who found both unpartnered LGB men and women were more likely than heterosexual men and women to report finding a partner on a dating or hookup app. For women who identify as heterosexual, hookup or dating app use to find a romantic or sex partner is not widely reported. Of the 11.4% of unpartnered heterosexual women who met at least one person for dating, romance, or sex in last 12 months, 22% of these dates were met through a phone app (Rosenfeld, 2017). Furthermore, at least one study correlated using hookup apps with increased sexual risk behavior among women such as less condom use and concurrent substance use (Cabecinha et al., 2017), although a selection bias could be confounding these associations, as those who use the apps may be more sexually active than those who use other means of finding sexual partners.

Certain apps such as Grindr market towards men who have sex with men (MSM), while other online dating platforms, such as Tinder, tend to attract people who identify as heterosexual. Even though reported app use is lower among heterosexual women (Barrada & Castro, 2020), the perceptions surrounding app use are largely unknown. In other words, why aren't heterosexual women using apps to find sex or romantic partners as often as other demographics? While at least one other study comparing heterosexual and non-heterosexual men and women has shown that there are perceived advantages for finding partners online, such as easier communication, more familiarity, and increased trust (Seal et al., 2015), data are lacking in terms of perceptions of hookup app use, as opposed to other online platforms, as a means for finding partners. Thus, the purpose of this study is to further explore the perceptions of heterosexual women regarding their use of online dating apps as means for hooking up. The researchers were interested in the following research questions: 1) How are women utilizing dating and hookup apps for finding romantic versus sex partners? and 2) What are the perceptions of self-identified heterosexual women when using online dating or hookup apps for finding romantic and/or sex partners?

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited at a mid-size public university in the Midwest via posters distributed across campus as well as through a university-wide campus email which announces daily events for students, faculty, and staff. Interested participants were asked to call a research assistant to register for a focus group and were encouraged to use a pseudonym when registering

to ensure confidentiality. Flyers stated the researchers were recruiting self-identified heterosexual women at the university, although the research team did not screen further for sexual orientation after participants registered. The first focus group was held in April 2019 (n=8) with three other focus groups held in October and November 2019 (total n=10) for a total sample size of 18.

Several days prior to the focus group, each registered participant received an email reminding them of the date and time. Upon arrival, participants were given a name card where they could list a pseudonym if desired, an informed consent document, and a brief demographic survey. Participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, and they could leave at any time or not answer a particular question. Additionally, due to the nature of focus groups, anonymity was not guaranteed; however, participants could choose to use the pseudonym they registered with or another pseudonym of their choosing. The moderator reminded each group that the discussion should remain confidential and asked that no information shared during the sessions be discussed outside of the focus group. Participants were offered a $10 Visa gift card for their participation and pizza was provided as an additional incentive.

The primary investigator (PI) moderated all focus groups to improve congruence across sessions. Seven semi-structured questions were used to moderate the focus groups and included questions on perceptions of hook-up app use, gender differences in perceptions of use, and perceptions of sexual risk when meeting a partner found on a hookup app. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, no theoretical framework was used to guide creation of the moderator guide. Each focus group lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by a research assistant and notes were taken to assist with data transcription. Audio files were subsequently destroyed after all data were transcribed. The University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the protocol before recruitment began.

Data Analysis

Described by Braun and Clarke (2006), an inductive thematic analysis approach was used to organize and identify themes both within and between focus groups. After reviewing the transcribed data, initial codes were generated by the researchers before beginning thematic analysis. Overarching, broad themes were then used to group several individual codes into one theme. Researchers developed codes and broad themes individually and used discussion to reach 100% agreement before the themes were applied to all data. Across all focus groups, four major themes were identified (e.g., Lack of Safety and Concern for Wellbeing, Easier to Navigate Relationship Dynamics, Apps Promote Hookup Culture, Using Apps is Different for Women).

Results

On the demographic survey, most participants identified as White (83.3%) between the ages of 18 and 22 (M=21.05) (see Table 1). While 72.2% of participants (n=13) said they had used an app to find a romantic partner, only five participants (27.7%) said they had used an app to find a sex partner.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Ever Used Data App to Find Romantic Partner	Ever Used Dating App to Find Sex Partner?
P1	37	White	Y	Y
P2	21	White	Y	N
P3	20	White	Y	N
P4	21	White	N	N
P5	19	White	Y	N
P6	19	White	Y	N
P7	22	White	Y	Y
P8	*	*	*	*
P9	19	White	Y	N
P10	21	Asian	Y	N
P11	20	White	Y	Y
P12	20	White	*	*
P13	18	White	*	*
P14	23	White	Y	N
P15	19	White	Y	Y
P16	21	White	Y	N
P17	20	White	Y	Y
P18	18	Hispanic/Latinx	N	N

*Participant chose not to disclose

Lack of Safety and Concern for Wellbeing

Within and between groups, the first theme of lack of safety and concern for wellbeing emerged and spoke to feelings of fear of not knowing who they might meet online. Participants expressed thoughts of reticence at meeting individuals without having a chance to vet a partner first in person. One participant noted, "…you never know who you could be meeting online…someone might be like, 'oh maybe you shouldn't do that because they could give you an STD or they could not be who they say they are'" (P16). Another participant stated a similar sentiment, saying, "It seems like it would be the most dangerous way because you don't know who they are and you don't know who's behind the photo, you know, and if you do go to meet them, it could be some crazy person" (P5). Additional feelings were shared from another participant, who stated "…I wouldn't just meet someone for the first time at three in the morning or something. I definitely think that's where the safety comes into play because you don't really know this person" (P3).

There were also concerns about how to verify identities. Two focus groups noted that Snapchat (Snap, Inc.©) can be used for real time communication before meeting someone for the first time as mentioned by one participant, "… [one way] is getting other forms of social media when you start talking to them. Like Snapchat and obviously Snapchatting them. Actually seeing their face." (P16). As noted by a different participant, last names are not typically given on hookup apps so using other forms of social media, like Snapchat, allows for verification instead

of getting "catfished" (P15), which is when an individual uses fake pictures or information, usually from another individual, to create new identities online.

Easier to Navigate Relationship Dynamics

The second theme that emerged both within and between focus groups was one that spoke to a sense of apps being easier for fostering communication than in-person conversations. It was remarked by several participants that there are few options for meeting partners outside of online apps, "I think an app is easier because in person people have to actually go talk to each other, and that's really hard for our generation" (P2). Another participant commented, "It's really good if you're shy because you can meet new people, they use it as like a pass time. They're just like 'oh just swiping…'" (P11). Another participant said, "I think it's a pretty convenient way, outside of that, the only other ways I can think of if that's what you're looking for is bars" (P1).

Other participants commented on how using apps allowed for a freer sense of self with one participant stating, "I did do the dating app thing, when I did do it, I was able to talk more than I do in real life, so I was living this life I've never lived" (P5). Another participant discussed how using apps increased their confidence while dating, stating,

> If you were to go to the bar you don't have the control as much. I don't have as many cards in my hands as I do on the app, like I can choose to respond to who I want, but if I'm at a bar, then I have to be on it…I think [using these apps] has built my confidence a bit. I've become more comfortable stating my expectations, knowing what I want from whatever type of relationship I'm getting into, whether that's one night or more than one night. (P3)

Participants also noted decreased fears of being rebuffed when meeting online, saying, "[Meeting in person] is more natural and all that stuff but there is a lot more risk in rejection there…less bravery that you have to do" (P2).

Apps Promote Hookup Culture

The third emergent theme across all focus groups was an idea of a promotion of hookup culture, where people who use social media apps are looking for sex, not a romantic partner. Certain apps, such as Tinder, were noted as being stigmatized, especially for women. One participant commented, "…I think that when I'm using Tinder my intent is not that I'm going to be romantically involved with this person. It's usually like, would I want to hook up with this person once?" (P3) while another participant said, "so personally I have three dating apps. Tinder is more if you want a hookup, Bumble is kind of more for dating. And then I have this one called Hinge, which is like just strictly dating" (P9). Another participant stated,

> I think also especially with Tinder and stuff I kind of have a stereotype that people on there are just kind of looking for hookups. I haven't used Tinder but I wouldn't expect people on there to be looking for committed relationships. (P4)

Using Apps is Different for Women

Finally, the fourth emergent theme across all focus groups spoke to perceived differences for men and women when using apps, where there are different social standards depending on which gender you identify as. One participant stated, "…in the guys' bios the first thing is like, 'I'm just looking for a hookup.' And you would never see that on a girls' profile…" (P15) while another said, "I feel like women use it a lot more for the actual relationships, but men use it not for relationships, for hookups" (P9). Another participant elaborated to say,

> I mean that's the social norm that women aren't supposed to go on dating apps to just hookup or to have sex for pleasure, like it's supposed to be that you want to get into a relationship before you have sex like 'oh you want to be in a relationship before you have sex' or you're seen as a whore…but I think no matter what men are not judged for that… (P3)

Another participant commented on gender disparities when voicing intentions to engage in casual sex, saying, "…overall if my friend said she was getting on Tinder to get some dick, then I'd be like, 'Sure go for it.' You might as well. Half the guys are on there for that anyways" (P16). Participants also noted that admitting to using the apps may go against preconceived personal perceptions as discussed by one participant, "I feel people would question if I said I'm only looking for sex, especially because that would probably go against perceptions of me" (P14).

Discussion

What emerged from the data was a complex picture of how women both personally use as well as perceive dating and hookup apps. Participants noted clear reticence shaped by concerns for personal safety and hesitation based on societal norms of what is considered "acceptable." Not all hookup apps were perceived equally, however, as certain apps like Tinder had noted stigmas depending on which gender you identify as. Women expressed frustration with the bold way in which men may declare they want a casual sex partner on app profiles while noting the reverse would bring ridicule and shame. Engaging in more sex-positive discussions on dating app use could help normalize app use, even if women continue to be stigmatized for wanting casual sex.

Hookup apps were also viewed as an easier way to find a partner versus meeting someone face-to-face, and in fact may even act as a social buffer to decrease anxiety. As at least one other study has shown, this may be an inherent advantage of meeting people online (Seal et al., 2015). Since only 5 women admitted to using hookup apps to find a sex partner, it is unclear if these feelings center around hookup apps, where the intention is finding a casual partner, or dating apps, where the focus is on finding a romantic partner. Generational differences were also noted where starting a conversation with a stranger face-to-face was viewed as harder for younger women. Due to their ubiquity, social media platforms, including hookup apps, may have circumvented in-person conversations for younger adults, although it is unclear how this translates into decreased anxiety surrounding meeting new people.

While use of apps for finding romantic partners was common among young women in our study it is unclear how these apps are being used to find sex partners. Our findings show that delineating intent of app use (romantic partner versus sex partner) may be an important factor in determining when and how heterosexual women are using these platforms, which is dissimilar from other studies (Rosenfeld, 2017; Vogels, 2020). Going online with an intent to find a sex partner versus going online to find a romantic partner and then having sex should be conceptualized as two different activities. It is also unclear to what extent the perceived advantages to using apps to find a partner outweigh the hesitations, whether it is concerns about social acceptance or perceived risk of who they will end up meeting in person.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, due to the qualitative nature of this research, no causation can be inferred from the results. Further, the small sample size and lack of diversity among participants means the feelings and thoughts expressed may not be representative of all college-aged heterosexual women. Given the nature of focus groups, group bias and social desirability of responses is also a risk. Some women may have felt uncomfortable expressing their intentions of using apps to find a sex partner and thus did not engage in conversations related to their actual use. Future research using a mixed methods or quantitative approach should focus on how often hookup apps are being used to find sex versus romantic partners and how these apps affect the sexual health and mental wellbeing of self-identified heterosexual women.

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