

Communicating consent:

A comparative thematic analysis of sorority and fraternity hookup culture

By

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## **Abstract**

The current study was conducted at a southeastern, four-year university, and the participants were members of Greek life (social fraternities and sororities) at the university. The purpose of the study was to examine the hookup culture within these social entities as a process. Specific attention was paid to the consumption of alcohol and how it was reported by both men and women, the use of both verbal and nonverbal communication, and the analysis of Altman's and Taylor's Social Penetration Theory to explain components of the hookup culture being explored throughout the study. The study consisted of 33 fraternity men and 23 sorority women.

The hookup culture is an accepted component of the college experience, especially in Greek organizations (Danube, Vescio, & Davis, 2014; Fielder, Walsh, Carey, & Carey, 2014). Research has been conducted on this particular culture mainly focusing on concepts like the frequency of alcohol consumption, date rape, and regret. The current study explores alcohol consumption in relation to the participants' perception of consent from a personal and policy perspective. Also, the current study explores nonverbal and verbal communication, focusing specifically on how the two types of communication are utilized throughout the process in regard to perceptions on consent. The present study explores why the lack of verbal communication leads to awkward situations, which will be explained utilizing Altman's & Taylor's Social Penetration Theory (1973).

## **Literature Review**

### **What is the Hookup Culture?**

College is often characterized as a time of sexual exploration, and social settings such as social Greek organizations provide a convenient avenue to conduct such an exploration (Danube, Vescio, & Davis, 2014; Fielder, Walsh, Carey, & Carey, 2014; Katz & Schneider, 2013; Manthos, Owen, & Fincham, 2014; Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011). Casual sex, or "hooking up," can be defined as "when two people get together for a physical encounter and don't necessarily expect anything further" (Manthos, Owen, & Fincham, 2013, p. 819; Owen & Fincham, 2011, p. 323; Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011, p. 334). People throughout society, over time, have various definitions of what

‘having sex’ or ‘hooking up’ actually means, implying a wide range and combination of sexual acts that could constitute the action of having sexual relations, solely dependent upon an individual’s personal definition of the concept (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). For the purpose of the current study, the following definition of ‘hooking up’ has been utilized to give participants and interviewers an operational definition to consider:

Hooking up can consist entirely of one kiss, or it can involve fondling, oral sex, anal sex, intercourse or any combination of those things. It can happen only once with a partner, several times during a week or over many months. Partners may know each other very well, only slightly, or not at all, even after they have hooked up regularly. A hookup often happens in a bedroom, although other places will do: dance floors, bars, bathrooms, auditoriums or any other deserted room on campus. Feelings are discouraged, and both partners share an understanding that either of them can walk away at any time. (Stepp, 2007, p. 24)

The hookup culture as a whole can be categorized by several different elements depending upon the scope of the focus. For the current study, literature was examined involving the aspect of consent, focusing specifically on how consent operates in terms of sexual roles, nonverbal and verbal communication, alcohol consumption and consent, and Social Penetration Theory, which will be utilized to explore the hookup process further. Each of these categories provides detailed accounts of how the hookup culture functions in that particular capacity.

### **Sexual Roles**

Lai & Hynie (2011) state, “A sexual standard is an expectation or set of rules for behavior that people are expected to uphold, the violation of which results in negative evaluations” (p. 361). American society, specifically, has a rather set way of thinking about how men and women should act as sexual beings (Sprecher, Treger, & Sakaluk, 2013). Men are often taught to be “masculine” and to reject “femininity” (Danube, Vescio, & Davis, 2014). A sexual double standard is often perpetuated by both sexes but for different reasons. Men are more likely to initiate casual sex than women (Wentland & Reissing, 2011; Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). This occurs because of the way men and woman are treated in regards to their sexual actions. Either sex can participate in the same sexual action (i.e. oral, anal, or vaginal sex), but men would receive a higher status while women were scorned (Jonason & Marks 2009).

It is common practice for both men and women in relationships and dating to believe that men are responsible for initiating contact with women. Women are then meant to follow the male’s lead in the scenario. Men often have this view because the relational social script frames the situation so that women are seen as a subordinate, meaning it is the man’s role to initiate relationships of any nature (Morgan, Johnson, & Sigler, 2006; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). Casual sex is often requested more of women but initiated more by men (Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009). Fraternities, in particular, are notorious for being known for cases dealing with sexual aggression, but individuals are often punished rather than the fraternity as a whole (Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991). Of course, fraternities by no means are the only category of males that demonstrate aggressive behaviors or characteristics, but the culture surrounding Greek

life do enable this behavior (i.e. drinking large quantities of alcohol, sexualized entertainment among members). Typically, as noted, men are known to be the sexual aggressor, but that idea is not always seen as inappropriate; it is actually seen as a normal way of behaving for men (Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991; Hickman & Muelenhard, 1999; Higgins, Trussell, Moore, & Davidson, 2010; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). The disconnect with men being the primary aggressor in hookup relationships occurs when a miscommunication or misinterpretation occurs between the male and female participants, which could lead to various negative outcomes for both parties involved.

### **Verbal and Nonverbal Communication**

The hookup culture is a process that, in theory, should use verbal communication consistently, but both past and current research suggests otherwise, stating that nonverbal communication often used. To better understand this process, it is crucial that one understand how consent is attained or not attained, what nonverbal and verbal communication actually entails, and how men and women differ in understanding the communication practices expressed when providing consent or what is thought to be consent.

### **Verbal consent versus nonverbal consent.**

Consent is a topic that has proven on numerous occasions to be very difficult to understand and to define (Hickman & Muelenhard, 1999). The following policy is what is in place at the university where this study occurred, of which a majority of students were misinformed or completely unaware:



An informed decision, freely given, made through mutually understandable words or actions that indicate a willingness to participate in mutually agreed upon sexual activity. Consent cannot be given by an individual who is asleep, unconscious, or mentally or physically incapacitated, either through the effect of drugs or alcohol or for any other reason, or is under duress, threat, coercion, or force. Past consent does not imply future consent. Silence or an absence of resistance does not imply consent. Consent can be withdrawn at any time. (Middle Tennessee State University, 2016)

This general consent policy clearly defines what the university feels consent consists of. How consent is obtained by the active parties is one of the key problems that occurs for students participating in the hookup culture. A study surveyed 3,186 college students within four public universities. Shockingly, one half of the participants stated that consent could be implied rather than given explicitly through verbal communication. Mixed messages, inadequate communication skills, and lack of verbal communication are key reasons why casual hookup encounters could lead to harmful results (Higgins et al., 2010).

Hickman & Muehlenhard (1999) reported after their study that participants utilize various forms of communication to express consent including, direct verbal signals (“Yes I will have sex with you”), direct nonverbal signals (no response given), indirect verbal signals (“Do you have a condom?”), and indirect nonverbal signals (undressing, touching, etc.). After surveying 378 participants, they found that both male and female participants indicated that they consented by giving no response, or, in other words, they did not resist

the sexual encounter. They argue that men and women are literate enough to understand the different methods of 'consenting.' They found that men and women share similar ideas of how to interpret various ways of consenting. This implies that miscommunication because of gender differences is less likely to cause situations like sexual assault and rape, meaning that men who are sexually aggressive are much more likely to be the cause of these types of situations. Unfortunately, the fact that most participants indicated that not resisting was a main way of giving consent does not help the idea that aggression is the cause of most harmful situations. Participants not acting at all could be a reason aggression is potentially the root of the problem (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999).

Another interesting component of consent is how participants know the other party is giving his or her consent to participate in the act of hooking up. Beres (2010) outlines various ways participants gauge how willing their partner is to have sexual intercourse. Similar to the current study, Beres conducted 24 interviews discussing sexual relationships, focusing primarily on casual sex. Beres outlines the following categories defining partners' willingness to have a sexual encounter: tacit knowing ("just knowing"), refusing sex (using tacit knowing to come to the conclusion the other party is not interested), and active participation (usually strong nonverbal signals). Similar to Hickman & Muehlenhard (1999), Beres indicates that direct nonverbal communication (just knowing/not resisting) are normative practices among participants in the hook up culture.

### **Gendered nonverbal communication.**

It is prevalent throughout research that consenting in hookup scenarios seemingly relies heavily upon nonverbal communication (Beres, 2010; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Higgins et al. 2010). Nonverbal communication can often be interpreted to have a particular meaning, when, in reality, the other participant meant something else entirely. Multiple studies have indicated that women are much better at evaluating the meaning behind nonverbal communication than men (Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2008; Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Morgan, Johnson, & Sigler, 2006; Schmid, Mast, Bombari, & Mast, 2011; Wood, 2011).

While the idea that women are better at decoding nonverbal messages is widely accepted, the reason behind why women understanding nonverbal communication is still under much debate. Gender socialization is one major theory, meaning that society grooms women to focus more on emotional elements to maintain social relationships, which would require them to pay attention and accurately decode nonverbal elements of communication (Schmid et al., 2011). This same concept of socialization teaches women to be friendlier than men in regard to how they communicate nonverbally (smiling, eye contact, etc.). Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall (2008) conducted a study to show that men are more likely to say women's friendliness immediately makes her sexually interested. There are various reasons why researchers think men are likely to mistake friendliness with sexual interest, one of which is men have a lower lenient decisional threshold, created by men being expressed as a dominant figure (Abbey, 1982). While it is widely noted that women are better at decoding nonverbal messages, it is noted that a woman's ability to do so could be seen as irrelevant. This is because men, as stated, are seen as the

aggressor, meaning that the man's ability to read nonverbal communication allows the initiating party (the man) to have a high probability to misreading a situation (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2008).

### **Hooking Up and Alcohol Use**

Alcohol is often a focus of interest when examining the hookup culture, often for various reasons, depending upon the study at hand. The current study has a direct focus on the frequency of alcohol use, the reason behind that usage, and how it has an effect on participants within the hookup culture in regard to their ability to consent as well as how that understand their partner's ability to consent. Each of these components gives significant information on the hookup culture as well as how the participants understand the process occurring from both male and female perspectives.

#### **Frequency of alcohol use.**

Research continuously has shown that alcohol, usually more often associated with heavy drinking, is directly connected with having casual sex (Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991; Copenhave & Grauerholz, 1991; Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006, Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; LaBrie, Hummer, Ghaidarov, Lac, & Kenney, 2014; Manthos, Owen, & Fincham, 2014; Ward, Matthews, Weiner, Hogan, & Popson, 2012). Also associated with this topic is the heavily researched idea that alcohol and drug consumption lead to participants in casual hookup situations to participate more actively in risky behavior. Research has found that many people participating in risky behavior would not do so if they were sober (Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; LaBrie et al., 2014; Manthos, Owen, & Fincham, 2014; Ward et al., 2012).

Labrie et al. (2014) surveyed 1,600 students in regard to the event where hooking up was taking place, focusing specifically on drinking patterns in these situations. They found that both men and women were much more likely to hook up with someone who did not know when he or she had been drinking. They also found that 34.4% of women would not have gone as far as they had in a hookup if they had been sober, while 27.9% of men answered the question similarly. Jozkowski & Wiersma (2015) conducted a similar study, analyzing alcohol patterns while also focusing on consent in regard to verbal and nonverbal communication. They found that alcohol has an impact on both men and women's feelings regarding hooking up, altering how they make decisions to have sex. Additionally, research has shown that one of the clearest indicators of hooking up is if participants have been drinking at social events before the sexual encounter (Copenhaver & Grauerholz, 1991; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015).

### **Alcohol and validity of consent.**

The relationship between consent and alcohol consumption is one that is difficult to comprehend within the confines of college campuses, specifically within Greek social organizations. When considering one's ability to consent, it is absolutely crucial that the context where consent is being given is observed; someone may not be able to consent given that he or she is intoxicated (Hickman and Muehlenhard, 1999). Multiple researchers have called for better learning programs on college campuses to teach students the effects of alcohol on their hookup partners as well as themselves, and also to teach students, specifically incoming freshman, what the concept of consent actually

entails based on legal definitions and policies (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; LaBrie et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2012).

Research also indicates that participants of the hookup culture acknowledge that they gauge a person's ability to consent based on how drunk they think the other person is at the time of the hookup. In past studies, fraternity men indicated that as long as a woman is not vomiting, acting somewhat rational, or flirting, then she was capable of giving her consent to have sex (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006; Jozkowski & Wiersma 2015). Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter (2006) give valuable insight in how fraternity men react to the idea of consent. They found that men often avoid directly asking women for consent because they fear rejection and the consent stopping, rather than just pushing nonverbal cues (i.e. taking off clothes, making out) to drive the hookup further. They also found that men are likely to interpret a woman standing close to them or simply paying attention to them as a sign of sexual interest. Research also indicates that participants in the hookup culture have expressed that it is much easier to determine someone's ability to consent if he or she was familiar or intimate with the person before the hookup encounter, meaning that it is less like an explicitly casual sex hookup (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006; LaBrie et al., 2014). This idea of intimacy making it easier to gauge a person's ability to consent to a casual sex hookup encounter corresponds directly with the social penetration theory.

### **Social Penetration Theory**

Social Penetration Theory (SPT), coined by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor (1973), describes the human personality as being layered like an onion. The outer layer is

composed of surface components of who a person is (gender, age, occupation, race, etc.), the middle layer is made of components slightly more personal that not everyone knows about the person (attitudes, religious or political preferences), and the inner layer is composed of extremely personal matters (emotions, values, etc.). This theory indicates that people become vulnerable to others by self-disclosing personal information to others around them, becoming closer and more personal with them. Disclosure occurs when someone chooses to volunteer personal information to another person and the action is reciprocated within a relationship. Intimacy is based on the depth of penetration that occurs in a certain category; a more intimate relationship requires the relationship partners to disclose personal information. Breadth is an equally crucial component of this theory, meaning that more intimate relationships must have penetration in multiple categories rather than just one or two. Griffin (2009) offers a summary of the theory:

Interpersonal closeness proceeds in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange, motivated by current and projected future outcomes. Lasting intimacy requires continual and mutual vulnerability through breadth and depth of self-disclosure. (p. 120)

Mark & Alper (1980) conducted a study with 50 high school aged students analyzing the motivation behind intimacy. In this study, they found that female students were much more likely to disclose stories that were intimate than male students. This study utilized Altman & Taylor's social penetration theory (1973), and their findings indicate that women are much more likely to strive to have more intimate relationships than men. Hensley (1996) goes into great detail describing the different types of

relationships people have, including strangers, casual acquaintances, friends, and intimate partners. Hensley gives an interesting account of how strangers interact:

In the main, the feedback of the stranger is likely to be nonverbal rather than verbal and any verbal comments are probably gratuitous. In terms of image accuracy, the reflected image of the stranger is easily dismissed. His reflected image is based on fragmentary data and, in any case, may rely more on educated guesses aided by psychological closure than on firm knowledge. (p. 301)

Hensley also describes that casual acquaintances are easily discounted, but not near as easy as it is to discount information from a stranger. Friends and intimate partners are people who have a much more vulnerable and intimate relationship. Ultimately, Hensley's account describes that the level of intimacy in a relationship is based on the level of information reciprocated among the individuals.

The chance of a relationship becoming more intimate hinges on someone doing a cost-benefit analysis of the rewards and set backs of the relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). SPT relies heavily on Thibaut's and Kelley's social exchange theory (1952), which basically means that people will try to determine the risks and rewards corresponding with the level of disclosure they are enacting, causing them to predict how the relationship is going to turn out in the long run.

Specifically regarding the hookup culture, emotion and intimacy are often seen as taboo in all types of casual sex relationships. Jonason, Li, & Richardson (2011) state, "If booty-call relationships are more sexual than emotional, we expect individuals to attempt to maintain the primarily sexual nature by minimizing unnecessary time spent together"



(p. 487). Avoiding unnecessary contact (i.e. cuddling, pillow talk, etc.) will keep partners from experiencing unwanted emotional attachment. It is often perceived the reason for casual partners to terminate the relationship is because either emotions are developed by the other partner, or they desire the other partner to pursue a romantic relationship with them (Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009). Since participants in the hookup culture do not want emotional connections with their hookup partners, it is impossible for relationships to have any type depth or breadth in the social penetration of the relationship. However, there is some surface-level desire to know the hookup partner well enough so that the hookup can occur. SPT will be used to explore the level of information participants state that they need in order to consider hooking up with someone. The research questions that will be explored throughout this study are as follows:

RQ1a: How frequently is alcohol utilized during the hookup process?

RQ1b: Is there a difference between how men and women report alcohol use?

RQ2a: What effect does alcohol and the level of sobriety of both the participant and their partner have on the perception of consent?

RQ2b: What level of understanding do the participants have on the legalities of consent?

RQ3a: What role does verbal and nonverbal communication play within the hookup culture?

RQ3b: How can the lack of verbal communication be explained by Social Penetration Theory?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The sampling technique used in this study is called typical case (Creswell, 2007). This type of sampling allows the researcher to seek out individuals who are willing to participate and who represent typical people within their population. This type of sampling allowed interviewers to seek out participants by asking friends and acquaintances. Students in the class recruited friends and Greek members to participate in the study. Several students did not have connections with Greek members, so other classmates assisted them in finding a participant to interview. Each student interviewed one participant using an interview protocol provided to him or her by the professor.

Data was collected on three separate occasions. One data collection consisted of 10 interviews of fraternity men and was collected by a student completing an independent study with the professor. The student transcribed all 10 interviews he conducted. The second data collection was conducted in the professor's sexual communication course, focusing on fraternity men and used the same interview protocol from the first data collection.. Each student transcribed the interview he or she conducted. The combined fraternity men data consisted of 33 qualitative interviews that lasted between 22-94 minutes with an average of 52 minutes and resulted in 688 pages of transcribed data. The final data collection took place in the professor's sexual communication class in a subsequent semester and focused on sorority women using the same interview protocol. There were 23 students in the class, which resulted in 23 in-depth interviews. The interviews lasted between 29 and 125 minutes in length with an average of 51 minutes.

Each student transcribed the interview he or she conducted which resulted in 450 pages of transcribed data. The total data collected from all three collections was a total of 56 in-depth interviews, consisting of 1,138 pages of transcribed data. On average, interviews lasted 51.5 minutes.

### **Fraternity men.**

The participants in the first and second data collections were men involved in social fraternities at a southeastern university. Participants were between the ages of 18-28 with an average age of 22. Twenty one (64%) participants were Caucasian, 9 (27%) were African American, 1 (3%) was Hispanic, 1 (3%) was Asian American, and 1 (3%) was biracial (Caucasian and Native American). There were 18 (55%) seniors, 8 (24%) juniors, 5 (15%) sophomores, and 2 (6%) freshmen. Two (6%) of the participants had children. Thirty one (94%) participants had hooked up in the past and 2 (6%) had not. The number of hookup partners participants had before joining a fraternity ranged from 0-23 with an average of 7 hookup partners. The number of hookup partners participants had after joining a fraternity ranged from 0-23 with an average of 6. When it comes to getting tested for STDs, 1 (3%) participant had been tested four times, 2 (6%) had been tested three times, 3 (9%) had been tested twice, 10 (30%) have been tested once, 1 (3%) got tested yearly, 4 (12%) every six months, 1 (3%) wrote "sometimes," and 11 (33%) have never been tested.

Twelve (36%) participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship and 21 (64%) were not. Thirty-two (97%) participants said they planned on getting married in the future and one (3%) did not. In regard to religiosity, 2 (6%) participants were

“very religious,” 5 (15%) were “quite religious,” 19 (58%) were “moderately religious,” 4 (12%) were “a little religious,” and 3 (9%) were “not at all religious.” Religious affiliation of participants included 3 (9%) Protestant, 5 (15%) Catholic, 14 (42%) Baptist, 1 (3%) Jewish, 1 (3%) Buddhist, 1 (3%) Protestant, 1 (3%) Christian, 1 (3%) Church of Christ, 2 (%) nondenominational, and 8 (24%) with no religious affiliation. Political orientation for participants included 14 (42%) participants as conservative, 13 (39%) as middle-of-the-road, 5 (15%) as liberal, and 1 (3%) with no response.

### **Sorority women.**

The participants in the third data collection were women involved in social sororities at a southeastern university. Participants were between the ages of 19-23 with an average age of 21. Fifteen (65%) participants were Caucasian, 5 (22%) were African American, 1 (.5%) was Hispanic, 1 (.5%) was biracial (Caucasian and African American), and 1 (.5%) was Guatemalan. There were 10 (43%) seniors, 8 (35%) juniors, 4 (17%) sophomores, and 1 (.5%) participant was not currently enrolled in classes. None of the participants had children. Nineteen (83%) participants had hooked up in the past and 4 (17%) had not. The number of hookup partners participants had before joining a sorority ranged from 0-10 with an average of 2 hookup partners. The number of hookup partners participants had after joining a sorority ranged from 0-22 with an average of 4. When it comes to getting tested for STDs, 3 (13%) participants got tested yearly, 4 (17%) every six months, 2 (1%) had been tested twice, 4 (17%) have been tested once, 7 (30%) have never been tested, 2 (1%) have gotten tested but did not specify how many times/how often, and 1 (.5%) did not respond.

Twelve (52%) participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship and 11 (48%) were not. Twenty-two (95%) participants said they planned on getting married in the future and one (.5%) did not respond. In regard to religiosity, no participants considered themselves “very religious” but 7 (30%) were “quite religious,” 10 (43%) were “moderately religious,” 4 (17%) were “a little religious,” and 2 (1%) were “not at all religious.” Religious affiliation of participants included 5 (22%) Protestant, 1 (.5%) Catholic, 8 (35%) Baptist, 2 (1%) Methodist, 3 (13%) Christian, 1 (.5%) nondenominational, and 2 (1%) with no response. Political orientation for participants included 8 (35%) participants as conservative, 10 (43%) as middle-of-the-road, 4 (17%) as liberal, and 1 (.5%) with no response.

### **Analysis**

This study utilized a comparative thematic analysis, which can be further explained by the Grounded Theory Approach, created by Glaser & Strauss (1967). They state, “In discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept. The evidence may not necessarily be accurate beyond a doubt (nor is it even in studies concerned only with accuracy), but the concept is undoubtedly a relevant theoretical abstraction about what is going on in the area studied” (p. 23). Therefore, this analysis was created by examining qualitative data collected, establishing themes from the data, and then using direct quotes to support the emergent themes.

The data was analyzed in two sections, divided by the fraternity men’s transcripts and the sorority women’s transcripts. Each set of data was examined separately in order

to discover underlying themes for the different sexes. Themes must be found within the data by researchers; van Manen (1990) stated, “Thematic analysis refers then to the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (p.78). Both sorority women and fraternity men experience the same situations within the hookup culture, but the interpretation of the events occurring could be different. The sorority women’s transcripts were first examined and themes discovered were color-coded as discovered. Similar actions were taken from the fraternity men’s transcripts. I utilized a color-coding system through Word by highlighting different themes in a range of colors, allowing the coding to be completed electronically. The sorority women and fraternity men were evaluated separately. After the data had been completely analyzed, each color was given a title and was copied and pasted into its own Word document, keeping the men and women separated to create a comparison of the two groups. After evaluating all of the transcripts, the major theme regarding consent was evident within the data. The highlighted portions of the transcripts regarding consent were then further analyzed and broken into two subthemes: verbal vs. nonverbal consent and consent and alcohol.

It was discovered that the fraternity men and sorority women had experienced similar situations, conversations, mindsets, standards, and regrets while they are a part of Greek life at their southeastern university. This analysis was constructed by utilizing phenomenology, which according to Creswell is “analyzing data for significant statements, meaning units, textural and structural description, description of the ‘essence’” (Creswell, 2007). I found this type of writing to be the most appealing

because it would allow me to utilize direct quotes to best describe the situations the fraternity men and sorority women were describing throughout the interview process.

## **Results**

The results of this study assist in the understanding of communication in the hookup culture for fraternity men and sorority women. The findings are specifically related to learning enough superficial information to feel comfortable hooking up but not creating emotional intimacy as seen with Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Based on the data collected from this study, consent was the dominant theme in the Greek life hookup culture with various subthemes. Two major subthemes were found within the data. The first subtheme explores the difference between fraternity men's and sorority women's reported use of alcohol while participating in the act of hooking up. Alcohol use has been explored in several studies about the hookup culture (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006, Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015); however, the data in this study explores the communication used to justify the participants' alcohol use and to seek their knowledge of the campus consent policy. The second subtheme found within the data is the prevalence of nonverbal communication in the hookup culture compared to the extremely limited use of verbal consent. This finding is useful in the exploration of what forms of communication create emotional intimacy versus sexual intimacy. Overall, the concept and understanding of consent, based on the data collected in this study, begs to be examined closely to understand more fully where communication and educational disconnects are occurring in the process of learning about consent and how it should be incorporated into the hookup culture to protect its participants.

## **Hookups and Alcohol Use**

A portion of this study focused on the consumption of alcohol within the hookup culture for both fraternity men and sorority women. Questions focused on the frequency of alcohol use while hooking up as well as their partner's level of sobriety and the effects this level has on the sexual acts they were willing to participate in. Themes that arose from these questions consisted of alcohol being used a majority of the time, but men and women had a different way of reporting their alcohol use: women were more straightforward and factual while men justified their responses immediately. Another significant theme emerged when participants discussed their partner's "level of drunk," meaning that participants felt that they could determine that a person was sober enough to consent, often while they themselves were intoxicated to a certain degree. Other questions regarded specific policies regarding consent while intoxicated, where another theme emerged. Participants often were unaware of the policy, and several participants went so far as to call the policy stupid or unnecessary. Although the underlying theme was the use of alcohol, each question revealed different elements of the hookup culture.

### **Sorority women are simply factual and consistent.**

When asked about how frequent alcohol is involved within the hookup culture, a vast majority of the sorority women said that alcohol was used almost exclusively or more than they thought was appropriate for the activity. Participants usually gave their answer with details utilizing specific scenarios or giving reasoning to why alcohol was involved. Alcohol seems to be an "understood" component of the party scene, which also is a large component of the hookup culture. Alcohol, on multiple occasions throughout



the interview process, was referred to as “liquid courage,” meaning alcohol was consumed to let them be more bold, participating in activities they would normally never consider doing while sober. The following are quotations from multiple sorority women when asked about the frequency alcohol was used while participating in the hook up culture. These responses indicate that the sorority women frequently use alcohol while hooking up.

Frequently. . . Like every time. . . Just, liquid courage, it makes you feel more comfortable. Um it makes you feel braver [chuckle].  
(Chloe line 357-360)

Participant Chloe indicates that alcohol is always used when she participates in the act of hooking up. She always mentions two key components found throughout the data that show why people often consume alcohol before hooking up: finding courage and being comfortable. The term “liquid courage” was mentioned frequently throughout the study, showing that people know the substance is going to be used during the process.

Umm most of the time I would say 90% of the time. Most of my hookups believe it or not... believe it... have been alcohol involved. I meet most of my hookups at the bars so its kind of a given that some sort of alcohol is involved.  
(Jessica line 444-446)

Participant Jessica states that location plays a factor in her hookups; throughout the data, participants frequently indicated that parties, bars, and social setting where alcohol was present was where people can expect hookups to initiate. These locations correlate directly with the level of alcohol use indicated.

Most of the time alcohol is involved. I very rarely hear of that happening where some type of alcohol or drug is not involved.  
(Macy line 371-372)

Participant Macy makes a point to note that she hardly ever hooks up without partaking in some type of substance; this illustrates the idea that “not being sober” is a key component of the hookup culture in general.

The sorority women also gave various reasoning for why alcohol was used during the hook up process. These reasons varied from the thought process behind drinking (i.e. bravery, boldness, etc.), the social setting hookups take place within, or the idea that it is just a component of the process. These responses indicate that alcohol is used primarily to alter participants’ behavior in way to make them behave in a manner they normally would not when sober. Alcohol is used in a sense to change participants’ behavior in a way that makes them act in a way to make them more “likeable” to potential hookup partners. Terms like “loosen up” and “liquid courage” were often brought up when the sorority women referred to their drinking and hookup behavior.

Mm, yes I guess, because when people are drunk they act differently, and they’re willing to do more stuff. Like it’s not like if I were in the library reading and someone would approach me and be like “hey do you wanna go to my place” and I’d be like no (laughs) I mean when I’m drunk I might be like “Well, it might be fun”, so yeah.  
(Betsy line 332-335)

Participant Betsy implies that the way she makes decisions is altered when she is under the influence of alcohol. She makes decisions in this state that she would not do if she were sober in the same situation. Her level of “brave” increases, causing her to participate in risky behavior that she otherwise would abstain from.

Alcohol definitely calms the nerves. Me personally I’m a very shy person but when I have alcohol in me I am more social and I feel like men sometimes need that boost... I mean a lot of people do. A lot of people are shy.  
(Jessica line 448-450)

Participant Jessica states that bravery is a big component of why alcohol is frequently consumed when hooking up. Like participant Betsy, she indicates that alcohol makes her behave in a way that she normally would not, which is a favorable outcome for all parties involved, based on her opinion.

Because alcohol just makes me frisky and makes him frisky. And in places drinking alcohol, I'm a very heavy drinker, and so like, people who drink get horny. And most of it goes with alcohol – hand in hand. They're like friends: alcohol and sex.  
(Peaches line 396-398)

Participant Peach explicitly states that alcohol alters the behavior of the consumer, causing participants to act on urges they otherwise would abstain from. This shows that deciding to engage in risky behavior is much easier to decide when under the influence of alcohol. These responses raise the question why women are so open to answer why alcohol is involved and the reasoning behind its use during the hookup process.

**Fraternity men answer similarly to sorority women but add justifications.**

The fraternity men had similar yet different responses than the sorority women for a few reasons. Most of the fraternity men did acknowledge that alcohol was present during the hookup process because it was just a component of the social atmosphere, but in their minds they knew the level of drunk their partner was, making the situation okay. They would often state that alcohol was involved, but they would immediately distance themselves from what would be considered inappropriate activity. Other men flat out responded that they never mix alcohol and hooking up, giving specific reasons why this action was “not okay.” The fraternity men, unlike the women, seem to be trying to justify

their actions in order to separate themselves from inappropriate actions, while the women just state the facts of the situation because they are not seen as being the aggressor.

As mentioned previously, the reasoning for this justification corresponds with society's view of men being the aggressor in within the hookup culture. When hookup situations result in unfavorable outcomes (i.e. rape, sexual assault), women are seen as victims from a legal standpoint, regardless of the level of intoxication of both parties, male and female. These reasons make the men much more prone to immediately justify their responses or answer in a way that could not come back to hurt them or their fraternity, regardless of the validity of the response.

The following are responses from the fraternity men when asked how frequently alcohol is utilized or the how their partner's level of sobriety effects participating in the hookup culture followed by an immediate justification or reasoning of the behavior described.

Um, when I'm drunk and their drunk it's fair game. If I'm drunk and they are not drunk but they are initiating it, they are kind of taking advantage of me.. [both laughs] but that's still cool too. And if I'm not drunk and they are drunk, I'm usually kind of cautious because I don't know what's up. And that has actually happened before.. and I was like I don't know about this, you might just need to wait until like you come down because you kinda turnt. Because I've heard to many situations where people get flapped on some crazy stuff when they really didn't have no intentions on something crazy happening but...

(Tommy line 260-266)

Participant Tommy indicates that as long as both participants are both drinking, then it makes it okay for sexual actions to occur. He notes that the situation is 'fair game.' Also, he expresses that he is extremely cautious when his partner has been drinking, meaning that he has expressed a justification for hooking up while drunk. He notes that his intentions are not meant to cause harm.

Hmm... I guess like when you're at the scene of a social event, then like people have had a few drinks in them, and the girls have a few drinks in them, and I have a few drinks in me but it's never.. I've never had a scare or something like that where a girl was like too drunk, and made the mistake of it. At least I knew the people before. Like I met her earlier on, like early in the day or a week earlier and like she just remembers me and I remember her.. its like that. But I've never had that personal scare in my life.

(Ray line 399-403)

Participant Ray expresses that he is accustomed to seeing alcohol involved at social events where sexual hookups are often initiated, but he has never had a "scare," which implies that he has never felt like he has raped or sexually assaulted a woman. Also, he indicates that knowing the woman before having sex makes a difference in what is acceptable to happen when she is intoxicated.

Usually alcohol is involved at any party or bar where you would see someone hooking up. And usually if you invite someone out, it's to a party where there's going to be alcohol. I would say it's usually involved. Not that it's specifically to get her drunk so I can do this, but just that it's there to be there. Not really for a purpose.

(Herbert 288-291)

Participant Herbert explicitly states that alcohol happens at social events, which is where hookups initiate. He is also sure to state that the alcohol there is not meant to get women drunk so that they will have sexual intercourse. With this statement he contradicts himself because he says alcohol is always at social settings, but it is not usually involved with hooking up. This contradiction separates him from the inappropriate action, while he justifies that alcohol is not used to get people to have sex.

### **Fraternity men's reasons to avoid rape.**

An interesting point to make behind the reasoning justification was needed with these responses is why men think alcohol and sexual relationships are not two

components that need to be mixed. One reason found frequently is that these actions could potentially come back to hurt the fraternity. This statement alone signifies why the men are closed-lipped about giving more accurate responses. The possibility of rape occurring is a bad situation for the fraternity, but not for the women unable to give valid consent, which could potentially cause her to be sexually assaulted or raped because of this inability. This signifies that fraternity men are very aware of the legal consequences of having sex while under the influence of alcohol, they have mentally noted that they need to play it off like they would never participate in that behavior, but they actually are a part of those situations. This shows the mentality of being able to cover up one's actions while not fixing the actual problem. Additionally, men would often respond in a way to indicate that they are not a rapist even with alcohol present. They would mention that there is a level of sobriety where they know the cutoff is for their hookup partner, even if they had been drinking themselves. The following quotes display several reasons fraternity men implied were important when avoiding sexually assaulting or raping sorority women when participating in the hookup culture when alcohol was involved.

Um... Uh, I'm also very strict about that. Uh, the one thing is, uh, if the girl is too drunk, absolutely not... because that is also a threat to our fraternity. Uh.. but um... I would say.... About half the time.  
(Harvey line 197-199)

Participant Harvey makes two very interesting points, the first being that he is hyperaware of a of a woman's sobriety because it could come back to hurt the fraternity if a member is accused of rape or sexual assault. This statement alone indicates that men are definitely made aware of the inappropriate behavior, but they may be being taught it is inappropriate for the wrong reasons (i.e. fraternity losing its charter) instead of the

appropriate reason (i.e. physical and emotional harm to women). Also, he states that he is careful not to have sex with women who are “too” drunk, which implies that he thinks he is capable of gauging this level.

Oh, big deal. I don't em, I have too much to live for. No, em I don't do that. If there's any doubt in my mind, hell no. Some people do, flirt with that line, but eh I can't. it's too risky for me. I'm not a big risk taker. [Laughter] Definitely not when it comes to that. It's not worth it. Now, has it happened before when there's been alcohol involved with me directly? Yeah. But that was in high school. I don't, college, you know how many, how much bad, a reputation can be ruined. Your..get charges, mm. nmn. Not for me.  
(Freddie line 344-349)

Participant Freddie expresses that he knows the legal consequences involved with rape and sexual assault, meaning he definitely understands that the actions are inappropriate. He also states that the loss of his reputation is something that prevents him from participating in this ‘risky behavior.’ He also admits to participating in this behavior, but he distances himself from the action by saying he was younger when it had occurred.

Oh yeah. Um. I think one of the big things that was hammered into me my freshman year was once a girl has a drop of alcohol, she kind of loses uh, ability to consent. I'm not sure if that's true or not but that's what we're told to kind of scare us into... it's like hey don't do it or at least know what you're dealing with.  
(Charles line 183-186)

Participant Charles notes that he was taught endlessly that alcohol cancelled out one's ability to give consent. He also states that he does not know if that was just used as a scare tactic. This demonstrates again that fraternity men are being taught about the inappropriate behavior, but it is not necessarily for the right reasons.

### **Levels of Drunk: Sobriety and Sex**

As mentioned previously, both parties seem to believe that they have the ability to determine, some even while intoxicated themselves, the level of sobriety where there

must be a cutoff to having a hookup. Most participants state that “black out” drunk is not okay to have a sexual encounter with. The problem with this scenario is that alcohol eliminates one’s ability to consent with just one drink. There is no level at which someone can determine if sexual actions are still appropriate. Both male and female participants, explicitly stated in astounding numbers that they knew when they were too drunk to make decisions, they knew when others were too drunk to make decisions, and that they could formulate thoughts and conclusions for both of these matters while they were intoxicated. The notion that these students believe they can gauge how drunk someone is and decide if their consent is valid proves that they have little to no knowledge of the effect someone’s sobriety has on their ability to give valid consent when participating in sexual activities.

The following quotations give specific instances from both fraternity men and sorority women in regard to their ideas behind the ‘level of drunk’ that is appropriate for themselves as well as their partner to still have a sexual hookup encounter.

Well, I never go home with someone if I’m, like, blackout or don’t think I should be going, so I always – I’ve never gone home without like complete knowing, like, this is what I want to do. And so usually, I make sure that they’re like on my same like level of either soberness or drunkness because I wouldn’t want them to be more drunk than me. Because that just feels uncomfortable on my part, and I wouldn’t want them to be more sober than me because then I wouldn’t want to be acting sloppy. And so usually I try to make sure that they’re like on like somewhat of the same page as me.  
(Sorority woman) (Peaches line 401-407)

Participant Peaches indicates that she can gauge if her partner is on the same level as she is. She also mentions that she never wants to be in a situation where her partner is less drunk than she is because she would not feel comfortable. The term “black out drunk” is



seen in her response, which is something she states is when she would most definitely not agree to have sex with someone, but based on the definition of the term, she would not remember if she partook in sexual actions at all. Also, unlike men, her statement focuses on her level of drunk in regard to safety rather than the man's level, supporting the idea that men are seen as the aggressor in this scenario.

Ooo ... yeah. I mean, I would never want to do anything with a girl that was too drunk because I wouldn't want it to be anything that she wakes up the next day and is like, "oh my gosh, I did not mean to do that." She would need to be aware and conscious before she went into it. If she was a little tipsy, I don't think that makes that big of a difference. But there's a pretty big line that you have to put up with tipsy and drunk. You know you don't, I think that, I don't think you should, you know I've heard too many horror stories of guys that have done stuff with girls who have been trashed and then they wake up the next day and turn around and say that the guy raped her or something like that. So I think there's, you know, a huge line between that.

(Fraternity Man) (Reginald line 292-300)

Participant Reginald, as seen throughout the data, believes he is able to accurately determine if a person is too drunk to participate in a hookup, even if he is also under the influence himself. He also makes an interesting comment that she must be sober when the hookup begins, implying that consent would still be valid if his partner became drunk after the initiation had already taken place.

Right, yeah. As long as she's not unconscious and you're conscious. I guess there has to be if she's not, if she's obviously too drunk to make a good decision, that's a tough line. If she's puking on the toilet and obviously passed out on the floor, then no. If I wasn't drunk, I don't think I would try to hook up with someone who is obviously drunk. I don't know why ... I guess ... I don't know. I guess just because I know when I'm sober that she's not making the best decision or a decision that she'll actually be happy with and I am sober enough to make a decision that I am confident in. So it's okay when we're drunk because we're both making a stupid decision, I guess. [laugh]

(Fraternity Man) (Terry line 369-376)

Participant Terry expresses that the line of being too drunk to consent and being sober enough to consent is a fine line, but he, like most participants, thinks he is able to make that distinction. He also make the comment that if they are both very drunk then no one is really at fault if inappropriate behavior does occur due to being intoxicated.

### **Knowing the campus consent policy**

Participants were asked about their knowledge of consent in regard to legal matters. The response varied between yes and no, but the responses were shocking when the participants were informed of the campus consent policy and the state consent policy. Some participants, both men and women, seemed worried that this was the case. They did not realize that any amount of alcohol could turn in a rape situation. Others, both men and women, were completely outraged that the two, legally, could not be mixed. Some participants could tell the interviewer exactly what the policies were, but it was very evident that they knew the policies did not mean anything to the people participating in the hookup culture.

The following quotations illustrate responses from both male and female participants regarding the questions about campus policies.

That is literally the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Like, I mean obviously I'm in criminal justice and I'm going to school to be a lawyer for like sexually assaulted women and children, and like I've had my own experiences. But that's just not fair for either party. Like, I get it, like, blackout is not ok like to have sex with, but like having a beer? Like, I drink a beer, and like go do everything. Like, I literally had a beer at 10 AM the other morning just cause I had no other drinks. [Laughs] What the fuck?  
(Sorority Woman) (Peaches 448-453)

Participant Peaches goes as far to call the policy dumb, even as a female involved in a criminal justice field of study. She claims that the law is unfair, even though it is designed to protect people from making inappropriate decisions while intoxicated.

Participant: I mean, again, I think a lot of times it's understood. A lot of times you definitely can tell when someone else is wanting it and they, I don't think words are necessarily always necessary.

Interviewer: Are you aware of the consent policy on this campus?

Participant: There is a consent policy? [laughs]

Interviewer: There is. So, basically the consent policy states that if either party has had any alcohol at all then it's not consensual sex.

Participant: Well I also think that rule is bullshit! [laughs]  
(Sorority Woman) (Kennedy 289-296)

Participant Kennedy, like Peaches, thinks the rule is stupid, but we learn this after she admits that she was unaware of the campus even having a consent policy, which indicates that there was insufficient training in place for that sorority.

Participant: I did not know that! Even if she initiates it?

Interviewer: Even if she initiates it and looks you dead in the eye and she's like, what she said to you, she could later go back and file for rape and she could win.

Participant: Holy shit. I did not know that. Wow.

Interviewer: Mind bomb.

Participant: Right? My head just exploded. [laugh] Now I feel bad. Shit. I could possibly be accused of rape! How would I combat that?  
(Fraternity Man) (Maverick 388-394)

Participant Maverick goes as far to express genuine fear when he realizes that he did not know what the true meaning of consent was, which he expresses has put him in harmful situations that could be considered rape.

These direct statements are not exactly what campus officials want to hear, and in reality, they are quite terrifying. The consent policies were created to protect these individuals, but the majority of our participants obviously do not take these rules very seriously. This indicates that there is an obvious disconnect between the education of what consent is defined as and what it takes to get consent and what it takes to actually get consent in real-world situations.

### **Verbal and Nonverbal Consent**

Participants were asked multiple questions regarding how consent is obtained or how it is not obtained. When asked how they know if a partner is giving consent, nearly all participants indicated that some form of nonverbal communication was utilized to express that either they wanted to have sexual relations or their partner was interested in having sexual relations. Additionally, a significant portion of the participants said they did not always get verbal consent, but instead relied on nonverbal cues of consent. Participants indicated that verbal consent was unnecessary or was too awkward to talk about out loud. It was very evident from the responses given that a majority of the participants used nonverbal cues to determine whether or not their hookup partner consented to sexual acts with them.

### **Nonverbal versus verbal consent.**

Participants were asked how they knew when someone was consenting to a hookup and do they ever get verbal consent. The participants, both fraternity men and sorority women, overwhelmingly responded that consent was given with only nonverbal indicators rather than granting someone verbal permission to engage in the hookup

encounter. Participants explicitly stated that nonverbal communication was enough to show that they were ready to have sex. Some participants, both fraternity men and sorority women, shockingly mentioned that if the other party was not resisting that meant that consent had been given to pursue the sexual hookup encounter.

The following quotes are sorority women's responses in regard to how they know someone is giving consent to have sex.

It's more nonverbal, I don't, I don't know. I don't like uh, like let's have sex. That's weird, so weird you know like verbally saying I feel like just go into it. Um, cause I know guys have those, those spots like they will touch your knee, and see if that like see if you push it away, touch her thigh see if you push it away. Uh, you know next up third base see if you push it away and then like I feel like if you don't push it away then that's a good nonverbal sign. Yeah, we can continue this.  
(Beth line 369-374)

Participant Beth states that it would be odd for her to verbally indicate she wanted to have sex. She also mentioned what she would consider to be good nonverbal indicators, which included different types of touching and not resisting her partner's advances.

Hmm. For females, I guess not saying 'no' is definitely one way they are consenting, but you can also give consent with your actions too. If she's pushing a man away, or physically doing something to stop him, that's also a way to say no. I guess your actions and your words give consent for the most part.  
(Macy line 392-395)

Similar to Beth, participant Macy states that as long as someone is not pushing his or her partner away, that means he or she is consenting to having sex. She also mentions that the person has to say no rather than he or she has to say yes to the action. She indicates that consent is given by both actions and words, but she never gives the importance of someone explicitly giving verbal consent.

The sorority women' responses indicate several of the factors previously mentioned, including that consent is based on nonverbal communication, not resisting is considered a valid form of consent for women, and 'not saying no' immediately means yes for both parties involved in the situation.

The following responses are how the men reacted to how they know when consent is being given.

No, I've never had a girl just come up and say it. But, uh, a lot of times that you'll be dancing or whatever, sometimes you'll be dancing, the way that they'll be dancing with you or grinding with you, suggestive or whatever, cause it'll go from where you're like, dancing with a friend to like ... you know dancing with more than a friend. You know what I'm saying? And, uh, that's when you can kinda tell that they're down for a hookup and if you're talking with them, if they want to get you away from their friends, like if they're with their friends or if you're with your friends, if she came up, depends on where you are, if they're wanting to get you alone or wanting to not be here, then they're probably wanting you to go talk alone or something. And if they're wanting to go talk alone privately then they probably want to go make out or something. If they're, you know, and probably wanting to hookup, you know what I'm saying? If they're trying to get you away or singling you out, you know.  
(Ken line 439-449)

Participant Ken states that physical contact, such as dancing, lets him know that a woman wants to have sex with him. He also mentions that if a woman is trying to get him in a more private environment, then that automatically means she has consented to have a sexual encounter with him.

Oh you can tell a lot about body language, flipping the hair, if they play with their hair and they pull the hair and they flip it and they do shit like that, that's pretty, that's an early sign I guess. Any kind of, whenever they touch your arm, above the elbow, anywhere around here, that's usually a pretty good sign, and as the night goes on, and they get more comfortable with you, your just kind of realize that once they kiss you, that's pretty much I mean, 80% of the way there. If you get an invitation to go anywhere else with them afterwards, then it's pretty much a done deal. Cause if they intend on like, hanging out with you somewhere else after that bar, then that's the next step.

(Donald line 629-637)

Like participant Ken, Donald believes that if a woman tries to leave a social setting with him, then that means she has consented to hooking up. Also, he touches on the element of what he considers a girl flirting with him, such as hair flipping and physical touch to certain body parts. This idea of consent relies heavily on their accurate perception and analysis of a woman's nonverbal signals. One factor the men touched on more than the women was the notion of leaving a party or social environment with the other person immediately means consent has been given. It is seen as an immediate, open invitation to have sex. Flirting and other forms of nonverbal touching or closeness is immediately seen as consent to have sex from many of the fraternity men's perspectives.

Some participants viewed verbal consent as their partner talking dirty to them or asking them to leave with them. This is a form of verbal communication, but the participants did not give examples of dirty talk that included requests for specific sex acts, which could be viewed as consent. Rather, the dirty talk they mentioned tended to be superficial and referred to their looks.

I guess if they make a lot of physical contact, eye contact, if they get real close if they talk to you. Yeah those are really this biggest signs, and if they like whisper and talking about hooking up with you, they are probably down to hook up.

That's really about it, that's how I can tell. She will say, "You are so hot right now" or "you make me hot" or something like that.

(Fraternity man) (Mark line 301-308)

Participant Mark gives the perfect example of consent being mistaken for dirty talk, which he gives specific examples of in his response. He also mentions that physical contact is a very important indicator of a woman giving her consent, even something as simple as eye contact, which does not have to be a sexual component.

[laugh] I feel like, personally, if you, you know, you're having a good time and you're a little bit tipsy and she's a little bit tipsy and if you know that she has made a comment about liking you and you go and talk to her and ya'll make a connection and she's easy to talk to you and y'all have a lot to talk about and you're like "do you want to come over after we leave here?" and she's like, "yeah" You know, you just know because girls know that stuff. And if they feel like you're ... girls can tell when you're trying to make a move, I feel like. They're not stupid. And if they're not into it, they'll be like, "Oh, well, I gotta work in the morning," or something like that. So you just know. Maybe not everybody, but for me, I feel like I can tell. I think it's cheesy to say, "hey, do you want to have sex with me tonight after we leave here?" "Yeah! Let's go!" I don't think, nobody does that, I feel like. [laugh]  
(Fraternity man) (Reginald line 313-322)

Participant Reginald indicates the awkward feeling that occurs when the idea of hooking up is expressed verbally rather than nonverbally. He also makes the assumption that women will always perceive a male hitting on them correctly, meaning that his experience has lead him to believe that men initiate the conversation while it is the woman's responsibility to read the underlying messages.

### **Men initiate and gain consent.**

One other category arose within the subject of men initiating hookups and being responsible for gaining permission to have a sexual encounter. Women, when asked about how they knew someone was consenting to a hookup, would often say how they would be consenting to a hookup rather than them asking their male partner if they wanted to have a sexual encounter. Men are often seen as the aggressors in the relationship; women are often being pursued while the men take part in the act of pursuing. Women openly state their alcohol usage because there are little to no perceived legal repercussions of their actions. Within the women's responses, it can be found that they acknowledge this concept by referring to men as the initiator or aggressor in an



alcohol induced hookup scenario. The following quotations illustrate the women passing off the responsibility of consent to fall upon the men only.

When asked about consent, participant Brooke stated that she had never initiated a conversation about consent directly. She stated that it was up to the men to bring up the conversation, meaning that the men are taking the lead role during the hookup situation.

That's not happened, honestly. [laughs.] Not me asking him. Um, I've always been way more drunk than they guy, but for him, he would ask, sometimes they ask, "are you, is this what you want?" And of course, yes. Now, if I'm not, then... I've never said no, so I don't really... I couldn't answer that as a "no" person. It's only me as a yes, so. Whenever they get my consent, that's when it really gets heated. But, he'll, he'll tone it down a little bit to ask and then it'll heat back up once I say it's okay.  
(Brooke line 581-586)

Participant Dallie Mae had a very similar response when asked if she had ever asked the men for verbal consent before hooking up with them. She stated explicitly that men were the ones to start that process, and the process did not necessarily require or involve any verbal communication at all.

More so the guys are always the ones that initiate it that's how I always know its consent and ummm.. just I guess like I said earlier touching, hugging, kissing, maybe reaching in the drawer for a condom and holding it out like... you know. I think that's how I know its consensual.  
(Dallie Mae line 711-713)

Participant Macy's response to how she felt about the level of sobriety when participating in a hookup displays the idea that men are the aggressors in drunken hookups while women often result in being a victim in some fashion, whether it be regret, sexual assault, or rape depending on the scenario.

I think it can completely control the willingness of each participant. I feel like, as a male, being inebriated would cause them to go farther, faster than they normally would and typically hurt a female. And I think for a female, being inebriated she's

much less likely to say no or put out her standpoint where she is when she is drunk, just because she's not...there, or she might be afraid to do so.  
(Macy line 380-384)

### **Lack of verbal communication and intimacy lead to awkward situations.**

When asked why participants did not verbally give consent, once again both men and women responded with a very similar answer: asking someone to have sex out loud is just awkward. Participants indicate that they usually do not or never had verbally asked for consent. Fraternity men sometimes stated that they did get verbal consent, but they later indicated that nonverbal consent was much more prevalent. As mentioned previously, a majority of the women gave responses that indicated that the men were responsible for gaining consent, or they also mentioned that nonverbal consent (i.e. taking clothes off, kissing passionately, simply not resisting, or not explicitly vocalizing the word no to the sexual advances) were a good enough notion that consent had been given for both parties. The following quotations show how the participants explicitly state that verbal consent is just too awkward to obtain.

Umm, I guess you could say no because, I mean there's times when you just get caught up in the moment but that's not...there's obviously going to be a consent, like I said if she's making more of the moves. I mean if she's doing everything then, obviously you know that she's okay with it...you don't really need to talk about it...I guess that makes it a little more awkward at times if you're like...wanna have sex? [chuckling]  
(Fraternity man) (Teddy line 186-190)

Participant Teddy states explicitly that the awkward conversation of verbal consent is not necessary when nonverbal signs show that both parties want to have sex. He mentioned that he knows consent is happening when the female partner is 'making more moves' than he is, which is not awkward in comparison to verbally asking.

Umm, I don't know. Verbally I guess; just them saying "Hey, im really ready for this. Im really ready to take it to another level". Saying something like "oh yeah, I want to penetrate you" is just fucking weird! No one wants to hear that, even when you are a little intoxicated you know? It's weird as hell, but I feel like "lets take this a little further" things like that are a pretty good way pf getting that consent. Or you could be just straight-up.  
(Sorority woman) (Beth line 483-487)

Participant Beth, like Teddy, thinks that verbally consenting is something people find to be strange and unnecessary when hooking up, even when alcohol is involved in the situation. She mentions that it would be more acceptable to give a vague statement that implies that consent is given, but it is not actually stated that they want to have sex.

This information poses the very serious question of why men and women do not want to verbally ask for consent when participating in the act of hooking up. The answer could very well be that the hookup culture itself frowns upon the notion of having an intimate relationship with partners, and intimacy can be created through having verbal communication. The hookup culture is often associated with "simple" relationships that are in actuality not even a relationship. These hookups are often onetime events that lead to little or no contact after the sexual encounter. The lack of verbal consent supports the idea that both fraternity men and sorority women are trying to avoid intimacy at all cost. The awkward feeling the participants mention is a direct connection with how the hookup culture is supposed to function without the messiness of emotional intimacy, which is meant for people who have an intimate relationship.

### **Discussion**

Because the hookup culture is prevalent throughout universities (Danube, Vescio, & Davis, 2014; Fielder, Walsh, Carey, & Carey, 2014; Katz & Schneider, 2013), the

current study explored this culture with a direct focus on the concept of consent, particularly on the idea of nonverbal versus verbal communication and the effects of alcohol consumption on the perception of consent. The present study also makes connections between Altman's & Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory (SPT) with the idea that participants within this culture hope to learn enough superficial information to become comfortable but not learn enough to develop any level of actual intimacy. Some of the results throughout the study are supported by previous research, aside from the connection to SPT, which, to our knowledge, has not been explored in previous studies conducted.

Society has framed the way men and women are supposed to behave both as sexual beings as well as roles within intimate relationships, with men being in the lead and women behaving as the subordinate (Morgan, Johnson, & Sigler, 2006; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; Sprecher, Treger, & Sakaluk, 2013). Our results indicated that men were often seen as the aggressor in the relationship, while women were often the ones being pursued to take part in a sexual hookup encounter. Men pursuing women is often seen as a normal way of behaving (Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991; Hickman & Muelenhard, 1999; Higgins et al., 2010; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). The current study, found that women often gave straightforward answers about the hookup process, while men would give their answer but provide an immediate justification for the action (i.e. report alcohol was involved but not with the purpose to get women drunk to have sex) in order to distance themselves from any inappropriate behavior (i.e. sexual assault, rape). The

connection can be made that women are seen as victims in sexual situations involving alcohol because they are being pursued while men are being the aggressor in the scenario.

According to the results of this study, a majority of the participants reported that alcohol was used most of the time when hooking up, which is supported by various research studies conducted previously (sex (Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991; Copenhave & Grauerholz, 1991; Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006, Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; LaBrie et al., 2014; Manthos, Owen, & Fincham, 2014; Ward et al., 2012). Our results also indicated that participants stated repeatedly that alcohol changed their behavior, making them feel more social, brave, and risky. Consuming alcohol, or 'liquid courage,' made participants much more likely to engage in casual sex. Recent studies have indicated that alcohol leads to one participating in risky behavior (i.e. having sex with someone they have never met before that night) that they would not consider if sober (Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; LaBrie et al., 2014).

While members of Greek organizations report that alcohol is a large part of the hookup culture, they have a very limited understanding of how alcohol affects one's ability to give their consent to participate in a sexual encounter. Various research projects have suggested that better training programs should be implemented within colleges in order for students to understand the effects alcohol has on one's cognitive ability to understand what is happening, despite how they are behaving in the heat of the moment (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; LaBrie et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2012). The current study provides yet another example of why these training programs are necessary. Participants had very limited knowledge of what consent policies

consisted of; some participants went as far as to call the policies stupid and pointless because of the restrictions they have on alcohol consumption. Fraternity men especially reacted strongly, some even expressing fear because they were unaware that they could potentially be accused of rape if they had sexual relations with someone who was even slightly intoxicated. These responses show that there is, in fact, a disconnect between the consent policy, education on the policy, and the enforcement of the policy.

An interesting result found consistently throughout this study was that participants, both male and female, felt that they were able to gauge a person's sobriety in a way to determine if the other person was able to give their consent, despite the fact that they had been drinking themselves before the hookup began to take place. Past studies have reported that fraternity men have indicated that as long as a woman appears to behave somewhat normal (i.e. not throwing up or blacked out), then she was able to give consent (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006). Throughout the study, participants would often indicate that the line between being tipsy and being unable to consent was a very fine line, but they were still able to determine if consent could be obtained or not despite the lingering gray area on the matter.

Communicating consent has been a hot topic throughout college universities, mainly because consent is such a hard term to define and to understand, (Hickman & Muelenhard, 1999). Previous research has reported that both men and women rely heavily on nonverbal communication rather than explicating giving their verbal consent (Beres, 2010; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Higgins et al., 2010). Hickman & Muehlenhard (1999) reported that both men and women consent by not resisting more

than any other method of expressing consent, while Beres (2010) expresses that the behavior of nonverbal communication is now a normative practice. Our study falls in directly with this past research. Participants reported, nearly unanimously, that nonverbal communication (i.e. taking off clothes, making out heavily) was how they expressed consent. If the message was sent verbally, it was often implicitly stated (i.e. Come back to my place; Do you have a condom?), rather than explicitly stating that they wanted to have sex with them.

While certain researchers believe that both men and women are becoming literate enough of nonverbal communication to use this type of communication to effectively express consent (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999), there has been a large number of researchers to explore the difference between how men and women decode nonverbal communication, often with women being much more accurate than men (Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2008; Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Morgan, Johnson, & Sigler, 2006; Schmid et al., 2011; Wood, 2011). This idea is widely accepted, but researchers have a difficult time agreeing with why women are better decoders than men. One prevalent idea is that women are socialized to be friendlier (i.e. smiling, direct eye contact) than men. Research has indicated that this friendliness is associated with the idea of consent when it should not be by men (Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2008). Our study falls in line with the past research: male participants equated concepts like being physically close, flirting, dancing, smiling, and eye contact with sexual interest and consent. Dirty talk and agreeing to leave a public social setting to go to a more private one was also seen as being a method of consent. Several participants

indicated that not resisting or physically pushing someone off meant consent had been given. The problem with these methods being acceptable is the discrepancy between how men and women decode these messages. In our study, women would often make statements like, “Well, no means no,” and “I just push him off or ignore him.” To the women, these messages could mean that consent is not being given, but the men could see this as an open invitation to having sex.

One key purpose of our study was to explore why there is a limited amount of verbal communication utilized, even when campus policies indicate that verbal consent must occur for consent to be real. While past research has reported that verbal communication tends to be absent in casual hookup scenarios, there has been very limited research conducted on why this takes place. Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter (2006) reported that men avoid verbal consent due to the fear of rejection. For the purpose of the current study, our aim is to connect the lack of verbal communication with Altman’ & Taylor’s Social Penetration Theory (1973) (SPT) due to the apparent lack of intimacy involved in casual hookup relationships.

The results from the current study repeatedly showed that both men and women avoid verbal consent because it was “awkward” or “uncomfortable” actually to say that they wanted to have sex. They would have much rather just continued with the actions happening without resistance to show what they wanted to occur, often because these nonverbals were just understood to mean they wanted to have sex. Based on previous studies, it is known that within the hookup culture, intimacy and emotional attachment are not components of the process. Contact is often limited to the basic function of the



hookup itself just to ensure that emotional attachment does not occur (Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2011).

SPT ultimately explains that an individual willingly discloses information to another person in order to create intimacy, both with depth (different levels of relationships) and with breadth (depth in several different categories). Based on past research and the current study, Altman's and Taylor's SPT (1973) can be utilized to better understand the lack of intimacy, which ultimately leads to a lack of verbal communication. Hookup relationships generally have one purpose: sexual encounters. The only communication taking place is on a superficial level (establishing sexual interest, selecting a partner based on physical appearance, determining a person is worthy of a hookup encounter, etc.). One could explain the awkwardness participants reported experiencing comes from the lack of intimacy between the two hookup partners, which stays undeveloped due to both parties avoiding disclosing personal information.

SPT can be utilized to explore other components of the hookup culture, one of which is sexual roles found within this culture. Previous research has established that men are socialized to be masculine and reject femininity (Danube, Vescio, & Davis, 2014). Men are often glorified for participating in casual sex, while women are thought poorly of for taking part in the same actions (Jonason & Marks 2009). Mark & Alper (1980) concluded that women are much more likely to have intimate relationships than men. Altman & Taylor relied on the work of Thibaut & Kelley (1952), who developed Social Exchange Theory. What Altman & Taylor concluded is that people perform a cost-benefit analysis before disclosing information with another individual in order to create

intimacy. When applied to the hookup culture, SPT provides an interesting explanation for why men and women behave within this culture. Since men are almost expected to participate in casual sex and to reject feminine behavior, which would encompass intimate relationships, this explains why men avoid verbal communication, which would lead to intimate situations. Women are much more likely to have intimate relationships (Mark & Alper, 1980), but according to Altman & Taylor (1973), intimacy only occurs when it is reciprocated equally between the two parties, meaning both men and women have to disclose personal information willingly to establish intimate relations. Previous research has indicated that casual hookup relationships that occur more than once are often terminated for one of two reasons: the other partner is developing emotional attachment or they want to pursue some type of romantic relationship in which the other partner is not interested (Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009). Furthermore, the lack of verbal communication can be explained by Altman's & Taylor's Social Penetration Theory (1973) due to the lack of reciprocated disclosure of personal information between the two individuals that would lead to an intimate relationship.

### **Conclusion**

While this study is supported by past research in various areas, the current research provides information that explains several components of the hookup culture, such as the absence of verbal communication and the lack of intimate relationships. The current study also found that most of the participants were uninformed or misinformed of campus policies regarding consent and the use of alcohol, which should raise questions in regard to training programs implemented on campus for this type of awareness. Future

research should explore the type of education programs students are exposed to on campus in order to better understand where disconnect is occurring in the process. Further research should also take place in order to better understand what college students view as an intimate relationship.

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