

Hookup initiation and emotional outcomes differ across LGB young men and women

Sexualities

2019, Vol. 22(5–6) 932–950

© The Author(s) 2018

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1363460718774528

journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Ryan J Watson**

University of Connecticut, USA

Yousef M Shahin

University of British Columbia, Canada

Miriam R Arbeit

University of Virginia, USA

Abstract

Research on hookups has grown to keep pace with new opportunities for initiations to engage in casual sex. However, most of the scholarship has been heteronormative, which is problematic because sexual minority (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer) individuals report unique experiences in relation to their sexual experiences and health. Through minority stress, positive youth development, and grounded theory of resiliency frameworks, we studied the initiation patterns and outcomes related to hooking up among sexual minorities. Interviews were conducted with 17 participants aged 18 to 25 ($M_{\text{age}} = 22$) in British Columbia, Canada. We found that gay males most often used social media applications to initiate hookups; bisexual young women and lesbians were most likely to use social gatherings. Despite most scholarship focusing on risks associated with hooking up, we found that outcomes of LGB young adults were more positive than negative. By way of the minority stress and resiliency frameworks, we position hookups as potential coping mechanisms in response to sexual minority stress experiences. Stakeholders should be aware of the challenges associated with hooking up for sexual minorities.

Keywords

Gay/lesbian relationships, hooking up, mental health, online dating, qualitative methods

Corresponding author:

Ryan Watson, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Connecticut, 348 Mansfield Road, U-1058, Storrs, CT 06269, USA.

Email: ryanwatson@uconn.edu

In a time of increased opportunity to meet dates and sex partners online, hookups are now part of many formative sexual developmental experiences (Bogle, 2008; Garcia and Reiber, 2008; Garcia et al., 2012; Glenn and Marquardt, 2001; Kalish and Kimmel, 2011; Snapp et al., 2015). Hookups are oftentimes operationalized as uncommitted sexual encounters with either strangers or friends; these sexual encounters can encompass a wide variety of activities ranging from kissing and cuddling to penetrative intercourse (see Snapp et al., 2015). Though scholarship has expanded regarding hookup experiences, outcomes, and motivations, an overwhelming majority of scholarship is heteronormative – that is, scholars have paid little attention to sexual minority groups such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals (see Armstrong et al., 2009; Bogle, 2008; Watson et al., 2017). There are many reasons to believe the hookup experiences of LGB individuals may differ from heteronormative sexual scripts. Primarily, LGB people are not typically afforded the opportunity to find hookup partners in the context of their daily lives, and may thus turn to clandestine methods, such as meeting in anonymous locations or using social media applications for sex, which raise concern for behavioral risk and exposure to sexually transmitted infections (Elford et al., 2001; Miller, 2015). Furthermore, minority stress (Meyer, 2003) has implications for how scholars might conceptualize the role that hookups play in the lives of LGB young people.

There is little foundational knowledge of the motivations and outcomes of LGB hookups (Boislard et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2017). What are the common contexts for initiating hookups for LGB individuals? Is the method of hookup initiation associated with how a person feels afterwards? Documented differences among sub-groups of LGB people imply that the answers to these questions may differ for different sexual minority groups (see Watson et al., 2016). To expand this underdeveloped field of research, we sought to explore LGB hookup initiation and social-emotional outcomes through semi-structured interviews of young adults who self-reported LGB sexual identities.

Theoretical framework: Positive youth development in the context of minority stress

Minority stress frameworks focus on the processes by which LGB individuals respond to the additional and unique stressors related to their sexual orientation—such as stigma and discrimination—that place them at increased risk for poorer health than heterosexual individuals. By way of this framework, Meyer (2003) has conceptualized that some experiences and buffering factors (e.g. support from relationships, or perhaps hookups) may decrease the risk posed by sexuality-specific stressors. Although the majority of research focused on (heterosexual) hookups highlights negative sexual experiences and sexual health disparities, the minority stress framework is unique in that it suggests some factors can attenuate the negative outcomes precipitating from discrimination (Meyer, 2003). Given that some sexual identities—such as bisexuality—are stigmatized more than others (Brewster and Moradi, 2010), and many young people report hooking up in

search of romance and partnership (Watson et al., 2017), might the role that hooking up plays in one's development differ based on sexual orientation?

Scholars have begun to call for a greater focus on resiliency and a further understanding potential buffers against the negative effects of minority stressors among LGB young people (Saewyc, 2011). Relatedly, results from a recent grounded theory study that interviewed sexual minority youth suggested that young people may enact several resiliency processes to work through emotional pain—one of which was seeking and cultivating relationships (Asakura, 2017). Specifically, Asakura (2017) found that sexual minority youth who were resilient sought relationships that provided them with physical and/or emotional resources. We utilize the tenets put forth by positive youth development frameworks (Larson, 2000) to suggest that LGB individuals may engage in hookups as a coping mechanism for the stigma associated with their sexual orientation. On one hand, perhaps hooking up is not always risky and negative for LGB young adults, but instead may serve as experiences that enhance their inner strengths (i.e. self-esteem) and interact with assets in their environments to promote their healthy development even in the face of stressors. On the other hand, some scholars find there may be long-term costs in the pursuit of self-esteem (Crocker and Park, 2004), such as compromised romantic/hookup relationships—thus, some individuals may have different affective experiences related to hooking up (see Crocker and Park's 2004 article on the costly pursuit of self-esteem). These frameworks are important to consider because experiences of positive and negative emotions related to hookups may have implications for how youth of various sexual minority subgroups (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer) cope with minority stress.

LGB hookups

LGB young people have traditionally struggled to identify dating and hookup partners in the same ways as heterosexual youth have; this is in part related to fewer opportunities to meet partners, concurrent with stigma toward these non-heterosexual identities and relationships (Mustanski et al., 2011). An early study by Seage and colleagues (1998) found that gay men oftentimes met in secluded alleyways or bathrooms to initiate sexual encounters. Despite recent attitude shifts that reflect more positive views toward LGB people, experiences of harassment at both school and work still occur (Corrigan and Matthews, 2003; Ragins and Cornwell, 2001). With advancements in technology, LGB young people often meet online (Mustanski et al., 2011); gay males are much more likely than heterosexual males to meet sexual partners through online dating sites, and queer men report spending more than two hours a week searching for sexual partners online (Barrios and Lundquist, 2012; Bauermeister et al., 2011). However, not much is known about the social-emotional motivations or outcomes related to initiating hook ups on LGB sex/dating applications.

Preliminary evidence regarding LGB individuals' use of online tools to initiate hookups indicated some concerning outcomes for gay men (Engler et al., 2007;

Hawkins and Watson, 2017). Related to our framework of positive youth development, we seek to challenge the current literature that identifies hookup-related outcomes as sexual risk behaviors (e.g. feelings of guilt, lack of sexual pleasure) or negative health outcomes (e.g. sexually transmitted infections; Everett et al., 2014). Emerging research has documented positive experiences related to hooking up (Abara et al., 2014), and some scholars call for more attention to the ‘upside of hooking up’ (see Snapp et al., 2015). A focus on the positive aspects of hooking up may help highlight the positive possibilities (e.g. sexual pleasure) that often overlap with concerns about sexual risk (Tolman and McClelland, 2011). This framework can thus inform foundational research on LGB hookup experiences without making assumptions about the meanings, motivations, or outcomes of hookups for different LGB individuals.

Disproportional focus on gay males and looking beyond gay men

Most LGB scholarship that examines hooking up lacks an exploration of lesbian and bisexual sub-groups (Garofalo et al., 2014; Johns et al., 2012; Kubicek et al., 2010). Some of the only evidence that has focused on bisexual individuals found differences across gender: on one hand, bisexual men tended to report younger ages at first sex, higher numbers of sexual partners, and were more likely to have concurrent sex partners compared to heterosexual and gay men (Everett et al., 2014). On the other hand, bisexual women reported higher rates of unintended pregnancy, were more likely to have a history of coerced sex, and had higher rates of lifetime and recent sexual partners, than heterosexual women (Goodenow et al., 2008; Saewyc et al., 2008).

These differences between bisexual individuals and members of other LGB sub-groups provide the impetus to further explore potential LGB differences in hookup experiences. In order to gain a more holistic perspective on the hookup culture, hookup behaviors among different LGB sub-groups require specific exploration. Some research on heterosexual hookups have found differences for males and females. For example, Armstrong and colleagues (2009) found that women orgasm much less than men in hookups; however, this gap in orgasm frequency was markedly reduced in relationships. Additionally, factors such as types of sexual contact (e.g. more oral sex) and aspects of hookups (e.g. longer duration) were linked to women orgasming more frequently, and helped to explain that women orgasmed more frequently with other women partners as compared to men partners (Frederick et al., 2017). Interestingly, a study on lesbian hookups revealed that queer women were able to experiment their same-sex desires by kissing in the presence and erotic satisfaction of heterosexual men (Rupp et al., 2014). Other studies have demonstrated that bisexuals are more likely to have financial resources and be more depressed than their lesbian and gay counterparts (Bostwick et al., 2014; Persson and Pfaus, 2015), which suggests a benefit to examining differences in how individuals initiate and engage in sexual behavior. Given the clear gender differences among heterosexual hookup experiences, and differences of health

outcomes across sexual orientation sub-groups (Watson et al., 2016), we investigated differences among gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual men and women with regard to hookup initiation, as well as how social-emotional outcomes were related to various initiation methods.

Current study

Through positive youth development and minority stress frameworks, we focused on the hookup experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults to understand whether the initiations and related outcomes (e.g. positive or negative feelings) differed across sexual identities. Given previous research that has found major differences in health and well-being, such as depression, self-esteem, and social support across sexual orientations (see Watson et al., 2016), we hypothesized that different initiation methods and related feelings toward hooking up would be found for lesbian, gay, and bisexual men and women. For example, recent evidence has found that gay men and bisexual individuals were more likely to report forced sex than lesbian women (Everett et al., 2014), and numerous studies have found that gay men who used online tools to meet partners reported higher levels of sexual risk behaviors (e.g. inconsistent condom use, and unprotected anal intercourse with a partner of unknown HIV status) than gay men who met sexual partners in bars (Benotsch et al., 2002; Bull et al., 2001; Garofalo et al., 2007). Based on this evidence, we hypothesized that there might be different social-emotional outcomes associated with LGB sub-group hookup initiation. We report our findings separately by sexual minority subgroup (i.e. lesbian, gay, and bisexual men and women)—not to compare these groups directly, given our sample size, but instead to elucidate the important differences that emerge across LGB individuals, in a larger context of sexual minority sexual health pertaining to hookups.

Method

Participants

This study included 17 lesbian, gay, and bisexual men and women who reported hooking up at least once in the past year and were residents of the Greater-Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada. Participants ranged from 18 to 25 years of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 22$, $SD = 1.70$). All participants were cisgender: six participants were gay men, four were lesbian women, three were bisexual women, and four were bisexual men. Random sampling of this population is oftentimes limited by the fact that the LGB population can be hard to identify (Boehmer, 2002), thus, we used snowball techniques and screened for participants of various ages, economic backgrounds, and sexual orientations. The researchers did not know 16 of the 17 participants that were interviewed; one participant had met a researcher at a social gathering two weeks before the interview was conducted. We recruited interview participants through several techniques, including study advertisements (8

participants), word of mouth (4 participants), and via previous participants of the study with whom no hookup relationships existed (4 participants). Because most hookup studies have sampled primarily college populations (Heldman and Wade, 2010; Watson et al., 2017), we intentionally targeted participants not enrolled in college (76% of participants) to ensure diversity in our sample. Participants were not offered any compensation for completing the interview.

Materials and procedure

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol in consultation with experts in hookup and sexual health experiences. The protocol and study procedures were approved by the University of British Columbia Ethics Board. Four researchers conducted interviews; in preparation to maintain consistent interview techniques, the four researchers recorded practice interviews with each other and with a research coordinator well versed in qualitative methods. When referring to participants throughout this article, we use pseudonyms created at random along with actual age and gender to describe the experiences of individual participants; for example, Aaron (22, bisexual, male).

We assessed interview questions that were related to the holistic hookup experience (e.g. How would you describe it to your friends? What language would you use?) and to initiations (e.g. Where did you find your hookup partner?; What was your state of mind when you were searching for a hookup?) and outcomes (e.g. How do you feel after a hookup?; What do you get out of a hookup?). During recruitment, participants were informed that researchers were interested in discussing the hookup experiences among LGB young adults. Researchers did not provide a definition of hooking up, and participants were asked early in their interviews how they described hooking up. Broadly, participants reported hookups similarly—as sexual acts that included kissing and/or penetrative sex.

The interviews lasted an average of 68 minutes. The majority of the interviews occurred in a university office, but a few took place in public, such as at a park. Each interview was recorded, with consent from each participant, transcribed verbatim, and then uploaded to NVIVO 11, which was used to explore and connect our interviews using thematic analysis (see Attride-Stirling, 2001 for more information on thematic analysis). Our thematic analysis involved coding parts of the interview related to the research questions, followed by secondary explorations of these codes when making comparisons between interviews to find overall patterns, themes, and re-occurring descriptions (see Miles and Huberman, 1994). Re-occurring descriptions were only classified as themes if they appeared in at least four (more than 20%) interviews (see Attride-Stirling, 2001).

We evaluated the reliability, validity, and transferability of our analysis through assessment of inter-coder reliability using proportional agreement techniques (Ryan and Bernhard, 2003). We relied on interview data where segments of text

were sometimes assigned to multiple codes (i.e. unitization). First we assessed the confirmability of our coding by crosschecking our data (see Wildemuth, 2009) and revisiting our findings several times to narrow the parameters of our thematic coding. Next, a second researcher coded the unitized (uncoded) copy of two transcripts (14% of the total number of transcripts). We then calculated the proportional agreement value for each code in transcripts through negotiated agreement (Oleson et al., 1994). Using NVIVO 11, we counted the number of agreements and disagreements for each code and divided the number of agreements between both coders by the total number of times the code was present in a random sample of transcripts. We compared discrepant codes and iterated on our coding reliability analysis until we achieved an acceptable level of reliability by adjusting the vagueness of the indicators of the descriptions of codes. Inter-coder reliability was high for both hookup initiation (92% agreement) and for hookup outcomes (89% agreement).

Results

Overview

The social and emotional outcomes described by LGB young adults in this study were more positive than negative—regardless of initiation method. Some of these positive outcomes included physical pleasure, emotional connectedness, opportunity for sexual development, and affirmation of sexual identity. Conversely, negative outcomes, which were less common, included feelings of guilt, lack of physical pleasure, and dissatisfaction related to hookups with inexperienced individuals.

Thematic analyses indicated that gay males in our study used social media applications (SMAs) to find hookup partners more than any of the other LGB sub-groups; in fact, all gay participants ($n=6$) indicated using SMAs at least once in the past year. The use of this initiation method was often accompanied by positive outcomes. Six of the seven bisexual men and women described a preference for initiating hookups in real life through dance groups and bars; only two of the bisexual men and women preferred SMAs. Three of the four lesbians in our sample reported hookup initiations with previous friends, at house parties and bars. Hooking up with friends was associated with positive outcomes (e.g. emotional connectedness). The results pertaining to initiation techniques and related outcomes will be presented by sub-group based on gender and sexual orientation.

Gay men: Exploration and excitement on SMAs

Initiations. SMAs were frequently described as the primary platform of hookup initiation by all six gay males. Aaron (24, gay, male) described that he used his

preferred social media application primarily for sex, as opposed to dating:

... when I'm on Grindr, I'm looking through anybody's profile, no matter what they look like, no matter how they talk, I'm very rarely thinking of them as a relationship potential. If I'm on there, I'm there to hook up.

The goal of seeking a hookup, rather than a romantic relationship, shaped how Aaron judged the appearance and profile content of each person he viewed. The use of SMAs was reported by all six of the gay males in our sample, though at varying degrees (e.g. three participants only used SMAs, two others used SMAs only a handful of times). Eric (22, gay, male) *preferred* to meet potential hookup partners at clubs, but he still utilized Grindr as a “gay radar to see who is around,” even when out in public with other gay men (e.g. at a gay bar). In this way, he combined SMA use with meeting people in person.

Outcomes. In our sample, the six gay men reported no negative emotional or physical experiences when using SMAs to find hookup partners. Positive outcomes described included physical pleasure, sexual exploration, and bolstering of self-esteem. A majority of gay men ($n=5$) reported that through hookups, they became more comfortable with their own body, which increased their self-esteem and reduced self-consciousness related to body image. Participants credited these positive outcomes to the ability to screen for particular sex partners through SMAs. For example, two participants indicated that they “knew what they were getting themselves into” after having lengthy conversations with potential sex partners before meeting. Descriptions of positive outcomes appeared throughout the interviews, as exemplified by Eric (24, gay, male):

An older gay guy kind of takes you under his wing and shows you the ropes and introduces you to their circle of friends and tells you all the cool places to go out and that was a really awesome, positive experience for me.

and Aaron (24, gay, male):

But also there's a lot of we're acknowledging and exploring specifically the positive things. So, you know, whatever they may be, maybe it's actually better for your self-esteem, maybe you know, it helps you with your mental health, or all these positive things about it.

These descriptions indicated positive emotional experiences of excitement, potentially extending to after the experience is over.

The risk of meeting an individual who misrepresented their appearance or personality via SMAs was acknowledged by five of the six gay male participants. The only potentially deleterious outcome was when Manny (21, gay, male) met another young man from an SMA, but the potential hookup partner

did not look like previously sent photos—Manny was not overly bothered by this and decided to continue the date anyway. Overall, the reflections of our six gay male participants on their experiences using SMAs were positive.

Bisexual men and women: Changing strategies based on gender

The majority of bisexual participants used social gatherings or other organic environments to initiate a hookup; however, SMAs were also used. The use of SMAs varied depending on the participant's gender. When searching for other-gender hookups, bisexual participants had a consistent preference for using dance and social groups. They identified dance groups as small organizations (e.g. dance class through a local university) where they could practice current skills or learn more advanced dance routines. When bisexual men sought to hook up with other men, they were more likely to turn to SMAs than when they sought to hook up with women. Specific to bisexual women, all three participants reported seeking same-gender hookups through SMAs thanks to the ease of switching gender preferences through these applications.

Bisexual female initiations. All three bisexual women interviewed reported the use of an organic environment (e.g. dance group) to initiate hookups—this did not differ by the gender of the partner they sought out. Amanda (23, bisexual, female) described dance groups as a place where one could find “someone you’ve known for years, that you can trust, and you already have that emotional connection, too”. Dance groups were also reported to ease tension because the two people already have dance in common. Gloria (20, bisexual, female) expanded on her own experience:

If you throw 300 dancers into a ballroom for 3 days at a time on a weekend somewhere. Emotions run high and a lot of stuff happens.

In her comment about “a lot of stuff,” Gloria was alluding to the whole dance community as a space where people commonly connect with each other emotionally and engage in sexual activity.

Despite also using organic environments, two of the three bisexual women described using SMAs as their *primary platform* for hookup initiation. They reported that they used SMAs because of the relative ease of switching between looking for male and female partners—most SMAs have a feature to quickly change gender preference. Using these applications was often accompanied by intoxication; both Amanda (23, bisexual, female) and Jennifer (24, bisexual, female) described alcohol as “a great social lubricant and facilitator of hookups.” In this way, the use of alcohol along with SMAs parallels the ways in which the emotional dynamics of dance groups offered social lubrication in and of themselves. On the other hand, those who used SMAs knew that sex was expected by virtue of being on the SMA.

Bisexual female outcomes. The three bisexual women in our study evaluated the outcomes of their hookups based on their subjective rating of physical pleasure received during the hookup; if the experience was not satisfying, then outcomes such as guilt and self-blame were reported after engaging in the hookup. Amanda (23, bisexual, female) noted that when she had a bad experience, she “. . . would feel guilty. It would depend on how comfortable [she was] with the person.” One bisexual female participant described feeling badly or not feeling badly, rather than describing positive emotional outcomes: Gina (23, bisexual, female) said “[I] never feel like ‘oh I shouldn’t have done that,’ unless it’s with someone that I shouldn’t have done that with” adding that she normally does not feel upset with herself or that she did something wrong. Gina’s reflection suggests that when she did feel badly after a hookup, she felt confident in her negative assessment of that person and that decision.

Carla (20, bisexual, female) spoke of her reticence to use SMAs for hooking up with heterosexual cisgender men:

. . . I think if my partner and I broke up I would go back into the app scene for like women or trans people but not straight cis men. I just have no—the threat of violence or like rape or like disease is just so high in my mind through hookup apps for straight guys, that it just doesn’t feel like a possibility. But with women I just have a more inherent trust I think about hooking up.

Carla’s comment about the threats associated with meeting men on SMAs show the other side of Amanda’s comment about building trust within dance group communities. When bisexual women in our study sought male partners, they did so within the context of historical and contemporary patterns of men’s violence against women, which shapes the social and emotional nuances of their available options. Not only did most participants ($n = 3$) indicate that it was safer to use SMAs exclusively to seek female partners, but all bisexual women interviewed also discussed trust and emotional connectedness in relation to hooking up with women, but not men. Despite this, hookups with both genders were evaluated positively by bisexual women.

Bisexual male initiations. All four bisexual men interviewed discussed how the initiation of their hookups was experienced through gender norms. Raman (25, bisexual, male) said:

Men are expected to be more dominant. Take the lead. In a gay bar, it would be more mutual. With women, you are just meant to be the more dominant person.

Bisexual men thus have opportunities to pursue and be pursued by other men, but experience pressure to more consistently be the pursuer when they partner with women. Related to this, three of the bisexual men preferred meeting their male hookup partners in person (mostly at bars), but all had some experience

of using Tinder, mostly to meet women. These three bisexual men went on to highlight a disparity between their preferred method of meeting other men (i.e. via organic environments) compared to how they actually met these partners (i.e. via SMAs). Participants connected gender norms and expectations to their overall hookup experience such that when norms were followed, hookup experiences tended to be positive, but hookups were more exciting when gender norms were broken, such as if a woman approached a bisexual male to initiate the hookup.

Bisexual male outcomes. In instances where the four bisexual men in our sample met their female partners in person, patterns of intimacy mirrored those of bisexual females who met their male partners in person. For example, Jon (21, bisexual, male) discussed outcomes related to hooking up via an in-person initiation with a female:

I think it varies so much between experiences. I can think of an experience where this girl and I hooked up and it was an hour long and afterwards we were lying next to each other panting and in my mind I was like that was like incredible, I'm exhausted. But I'm very beyond satisfied right now and I'm confident she's feeling the same way so I was like almost like proud of myself and I wanted to give myself like an internal high five. And yeah it felt good. It felt very comforting, it was a confidence booster. It was like all around positive and good.

In his recollection of this hookup, Jon described feeling good about himself internally, which was connected to his own positive physical outcomes and to his confidence that the pleasure was mutual. However, in cases where Jon met his partners through dating apps, he reported some experiences that were not as positive:

...but I've definitely had hook ups where I've been like that wasn't that great and like it was kinda cold and frigid and I don't feel that great about it afterwards.

In this case, Jon's negative feelings about the encounter were connected to interpersonal discomfort throughout the experience.

When all four bisexual men hooked up with other men, patterns were similar to those discussed by the six gay men: bisexual men nearly always met their same-gender hookups on SMAs, such as Grindr. This pattern was connected to how they talked about the emotional context for hooking up. With regard to hooking up with other men, participants emphasized a sole focus on seeking sexual pleasure; when discussing hookups with women, three of the four bisexual men assumed women's need for emotional connection. In none of the cases did bisexual men discuss their own need for emotional connection with regard to their hookup decisions.

When other young bisexual men described their most memorable and successful hookups with men and women, they stressed the importance of meeting their

hookup partners in person. For example, Raman (25, bisexual, male) spoke about where he found his best hookup partners:

Definitely at the bar. Because in the app you can be chatting with a person and then put it away and not talk to the person for hours. But at the bar, you are constantly talking and building that energy.

This sensitivity to the dynamics of flirting in the pursuit of hookup partners was also present in the comments of lesbian women.

Lesbian women: Sexual encounters and emotional connection

Initiations. The four lesbian women in our sample described using social gatherings as their primary method for hookup initiation. These gatherings were reported as bars in downtown Vancouver and house parties hosted by friends. Whitney (23, lesbian, female) noted that it was “easier to find hookup partners as lesbians, because nobody judges or discriminates against [lesbians] as much as they do other queer people”; this sentiment was echoed by Nicki (24, lesbian, female). House parties were described as providing a great atmosphere for engaging in hookups because of the relative ease in getting introduced to a larger number of people as well as the norm of alcohol use—a social lubricant that lowers inhibitions thus making conversation and hookup initiation more direct. All of the lesbian women interviewed also mentioned using SMAs (e.g. PlentyofFish), but did not hookup or follow through with any potential partners found on SMAs. Their reluctance to follow through with potential hookups on SMAs was mainly caused by, as described by Alexandra (22, lesbian, female), “having potential hookup partners change their minds or taking too long to respond to messages.” These delays in decisions and communication were seen as “turnoffs” that negatively impacted the natural progression of a hookup process.

Outcomes. The four lesbian women in this study mostly reported physical fulfillment and emotional connectedness related to hookups; positive outcomes were often discussed in terms of emotions. Three of the four lesbian participants reported mostly positive hookups, and one lesbian participant experienced trauma resulting from a hookup. All participants indicated that emotional outcomes related to hookups were most important. Alexandra (22, lesbian, female) said:

I think I am quite an emotional person as well, so probably if there was any instance of a possibility of an emotional connection, I would make it. That’s why I don’t hear often of lesbians having lots of hookups. Women have really intense connections to people.

As Alexandra reflected on her experience of bringing her emotional self to her hookup encounters, she drew a connection between lesbian sexual relationships

and women's relationships more broadly. Multiple individual and contextual factors such as women's emotional socialization, cultural acceptance of intimacy between women, and social pressures on female sexuality to focus on emotional over physical pleasure may all play a role in how lesbian women experience hooking up.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the initiation patterns and outcomes related to hookup experiences of LGB young adults. Holistically, we found that LGB young adults' hookups were related to more positive than negative outcomes. This is related to hookups as potential strategies or mechanisms through which young people experience minority stressors, and, more specifically, LGB stress (Meyer, 2003). In line with Asakura's (2017) grounded theory study that found close relationships were related to resiliency for sexual minority youth, we found that positive sexual experiences were common, and perhaps a way to cope with minority stressors. We expect that the positivity surrounding the hookups among our sample may be attributed—at least in part—to progressive and non-traditional sexual socialization around hooking up in queer communities. Though our data cannot prove this, we suggest future research specifically situate these experiences in a larger framework that considers the role of hookups in mitigating minority stressors.

Among our participants, we found that young gay men reported the most preference for using online tools (specifically, social media applications such as Tinder) to initiate hookups. Bisexual and lesbian participants described a preference for initiating hookups specifically through social gatherings, such as dance groups and bars, and reported positive outcomes related to hooking up, such as enhanced physical pleasure. While gay men talked about physical pleasure and self-confidence as primary positive outcomes of hooking up, lesbian women emphasized seeking and benefiting from emotional connectedness. The comments of bisexual participants reinforced the importance of considering gender socialization and gender norms in order to better understand LGB hookup initiation and outcomes.

Hooking up was mostly positive in our sample of LGB young adults

Hookups were more positive than negative for LGB young adults in our sample. These findings counter a plethora of research studies that suggest hooking up is related to compromised health, and many scholars have focused on reducing risks related to hooking up behaviors (Kalish and Kimmel, 2011; Paul et al., 2000). Positive outcomes reported by gay men included: physically satisfying hookups, confirmation of sexual orientation, and feeling emotional connectedness during the hookup. These positive outcomes are what we would expect for many of these young adults, given we conceptualized hookup experiences as potential coping mechanisms to mitigate the effects of social and minority stress (Meyer, 2003).

As noted previously in the literature, few studies have examined positive outcomes of hookups, especially in gay men (see Snapp et al., 2015 for exceptions). Perhaps these positive outcomes are related to the way young gay men are sexually socialized (Tolman and McClland, 2011) in regards to hookups—heterosexual men are praised and even respected when mentioning a hookup to their peers (Tolman and McClland, 2011). Perhaps this has translated to the gay community and plays a role in the positive outcomes described by gay men. Specifically, gay men discussed positive outcomes in relation to self-esteem and self-confidence. It may be that gay men have limited opportunities to validate their sexual worthiness and physical attractiveness, and that hooking up therefore has the potential to positively contribute to their developing sense of self. Bisexual men and women were the most likely to describe mixed hookup outcomes out of this sample.

Contexts of initiation differ for LGB young adults

Bisexual women reported utilizing in-person environments as hookup initiation methods most often. Bisexual women were able to circumvent the restrictions of gender-specific searching on social media apps by situating themselves in physical environments (e.g. dance groups) where both men and women were present and, importantly, somewhat known and trusted. Lesbian women also focused on social gatherings as a main context for hookup initiation, citing the ease of communicating with someone in person rather than online, and the importance of building an emotional connection prior to hooking up.

Expanding scholarship: Focus on lesbian and bisexual women

LGB hookup scholarship has nearly exclusively focused on gay men (see Grov et al., 2014; Johns et al., 2012). Gudelunas (2012) found that gay men used online sources as ways to expand their social networks, both sexual and non-sexual (e.g. friendships). In addition, Pingel and colleagues (2013) found that young gay men perceived online sources as a positive place that creates opportunities to find same-gender sex partners. Thus, it is not surprising that we found gay men utilizing online sources (e.g. Grindr) as their primary method for hookup initiation. As society becomes more accepting of minority groups (Corrigan and Matthews, 2003) and with the development of easy-to-use online resources, more research is needed to assess the perceived risks and benefits of online hookup initiation for sexual minority women.

Gender and meaning-making

This study analyzed a sample of sexual minority young adults to assess patterns in hookup initiation related to initiation and social-emotional outcomes. Analysis of participant reflections across men and women indicated the continued significance of gendered norms and expectations that shape sexual experiences based on the

person's own gender and the gender of their sexual partner. Bisexual men hooking up with women talked more about emotional connectedness as something their female partners may need and want, whereas bisexual and lesbian women discussed their own desires for and experience of emotional connectedness within their sexual connections with other women. Bisexual and gay men hooking up with other men emphasized seeking and enjoying physical pleasure and boosts in personal self-image and self-esteem. When bisexual women spoke of hooking up with men, their primary concerns were personal safety and building trust. More research is needed to understand the various pathways through which these gender dynamics shape sexual experiences for sexual minority men and women. Interviewing techniques designed to address these gender norms through direct and indirect methods can be used to differentiate between gendered patterns in individuals' lived experiences and patterns in how people make meaning of and report on their experiences during the interview process.

Limitations and conclusions

There were some limitations with our sampling and methodology. First, participants responded to advertisements, had visited community centers or were a part of LGBT-specific Facebook groups. These participants made conscious efforts to seek and/or share information relevant to the LGBT community by their participation in these organizations. Young adults that visit community centers and are active in the LGBT community might have different hookup experiences than young adults not involved with the LGBT community. However, a few of our participants were recruited by means other than advertisements and comparisons of the responses from these participants did not elicit major differences. Second, most potential participants that contacted the research team identified as gay males or bisexual females, but lesbians and bisexual males were difficult to recruit in Vancouver. It is unclear if this was because of a disclosure issue or whether these two subpopulations represent a smaller demographic within hookup culture. Future studies could expand on these results with recruitment of more lesbians and bisexual males to examine whether differences in hookup initiation and outcomes arise. Future research should also examine whether negative initial experiences with a particular hookup method has any influence on consequent choices for hookup initiation. Given that the use of alcohol was seen as an effective tool—or social lubricant—for hookup initiation, and many LGB individuals reported doubting whether they would have had the courage to initiate without intoxication, future research can continue documenting and exploring the role of alcohol in hookups for all people. To gain a holistic perspective on LGB hookup culture, future studies should examine more of the basic aspects of hookups (i.e. motivations) and the psychological process that connects hooking up with alcohol use. Last and perhaps most important, future research should utilize larger and robust sample sizes to be able to generalize findings to a wider population of sexual minority young people.

These results are important for stakeholders: public health officials (nurses, counselors) should be aware of the unique challenges associated with hooking up for sexual minorities. These findings have implications for risk prevention programs, whether they are used to promote sexual health or for general safety. These programs can now be tailored to focus on areas that are relevant to specific sub-groups of vulnerable youth that take part in hookups—effectively increasing their impact on the choices made during these encounters. For example, the social media applications used by gay males could show nearby health clinics; these clinics offer check-ups for sexually transmitted infections, and give out free condoms. These findings address the large gaps in literature and promote a more inclusive and representative research base on the hookup scene.

This research systematically investigated the hookup culture of LGB young adults; we examined the basic aspects of hookup initiation and outcomes. Our results indicate LGB young adults utilize a variety of hookup initiation methods; however, regardless of initiation method, positive outcomes were often reported. Different outcomes were not associated with hookup initiation method. Continued investigation of gender norms, and increased understanding of the nuanced ways in which dominant gender norms impact LGB men and women, will be essential to understanding and supporting the sexuality development and sexual health of sexual minority youth and young adults.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge support from University of British Columbia Work Learn program, the Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre, Skyler Wang, and Dr. Elizabeth Saewyc.

References

- Abara W, Annang L, Spencer SM, et al. (2014) Understanding internet sex-seeking behaviour and sexual risk among young men who have sex with men: evidences from a cross-sectional study. *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 90(8): 596–601.
- Armstrong EA, England P and Fogarty ACK (2009) Orgasm in college hook ups and relationships. In: Risman B(ed.) *Families as They Really Are*. New York: Norton, pp. 362–377.
- Asakura K (2017) Paving pathways through the pain: A grounded theory of resilience among lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 27(3): 521–536.
- Attride-Stirling J (2001) Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research* 1(3): 385–405.
- Barrios RJ and Lundquist JH (2012) Boys just want to have fun? Masculinity, sexual behaviors, and romantic intentions of gay and straight males in college. *Journal of LGBT Youth* 9(4): 271–296.
- Bauermeister JA, Leslie-Santana M, Johns MM, et al. (2011) Mr. Right and Mr. Right Now: Romantic and casual partner-seeking online among young men who have sex with men. *AIDS and Behavior* 15(2): 261–272.

- Benotsch EG, Kalichman S and Cage M (2002) Men who have met sex partners via the internet: Prevalence, predictors, and implications for HIV prevention. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 31(2): 177–183.
- Boehmer U (2002) Twenty years of public health research: Inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations. *American Journal of Public Health* 92(7): 1125–1130.
- Bogle KA (2008) *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*. New York: New York University Press.
- Boislard MA, van de Bongardt D and Blais M (2016) Sexuality (and lack thereof) in adolescence and early adulthood: A review of the literature. *Behavioral Sciences* 6(1): 1–24.
- Bostwick WB, Boyd CJ, Hughes TL, et al. (2014) Discrimination and mental health among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults in the United States. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 84(1): 35–45.
- Brewster ME and Moradi B (2010) Perceived experiences of anti-bisexual prejudice: Instrument development and evaluation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 57(4): 451–468.
- Bull SS, McFarlane M and Rietmeijer C (2001) HIV and sexually transmitted infection risk behaviors among men seeking sex with men on-line. *American Journal of Public Health* 91(6): 988–999.
- Corrigan P and Matthews A (2003) Stigma and disclosure: Implications for coming out of the closet. *Journal of Mental Health* 12(3): 235–248.
- Crocker J and Park LE (2004) The costly pursuit of self-esteem. *Psychological Bulletin* 130: 392–414.
- Elford J, Bolding G and Sherr L (2001) Seeking sex on the internet and sexual risk behaviour among gay men using London gyms. *AIDS* 15(11): 1409–1415.
- Engler K, Frigault LR, Léobon A, et al. (2007) The sexual superhighway revisited: A qualitative analysis of gay men's perceived repercussions of connecting in cyberspace. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 18(2): 3–37.
- Everett BG, Schnarrs PW, Rosario M, et al. (2014) Sexual orientation disparities in sexually transmitted infection risk behaviors and risk determinants among sexually active adolescent males: Results from a school-based sample. *American Journal of Public Health* 104(6): 1107–1112.
- Frederick DA, St John HK, Garcia JR, et al. (2017) Differences in orgasm frequency among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual men and women in a US national sample. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. Published online first, 17 February 2017: 1–16. DOI: 10.1007/s10508-017-0939-z.
- Garcia JR and Reiber C (2008) Hook-up behavior: A biopsychosocial perspective. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology* 2(4): 192–208. DOI: 10.1037/h0099345.
- Garcia JR, Reiber C, Massey SG, et al. (2012) Sexual hookup culture: A review. *Review of General Psychology* 16(2): 161.
- Garofalo R, Herrick A, Mustanski B, et al. (2007) Tip of the iceberg: Young men who have sex with men, the Internet, and HIV risk. *American Journal of Public Health* 97(6): 1113–1117.
- Garofalo R, Kuhns LM, Hidalgo M, et al. (2014) Impact of religiosity on the sexual risk behaviors of young men who have sex with men. *Journal of Sex Research* 52(5): 590–598.
- Glenn N and Marquardt E (2001) Hooking up, hanging out, and hoping for Mr. Right: College women on dating and men today. Institute for American Values Report to the Independent Women's Forum, *Institute for American Values*, pp. 36–41.

- Goodenow C, Szalacha LA, Robin LE, et al. (2008) Dimensions of sexual orientation and HIV-related risk among adolescent females: Evidence from a statewide survey. *American Journal of Public Health* 98(6): 1051–1058.
- Grov C, Breslow AS, Newcomb ME, et al. (2014) Gay and bisexual men's use of the internet: Research from the 1990s through 2013. *Journal of Sex Research* 51(4): 390–409.
- Gudelunas D (2012) There's an app for that: The uses and gratifications of online social networks for gay men. *Sexuality and Culture* 16(4): 347–365.
- Hawkins B and Watson RJ (2017) LGBT cyberspaces: A need for a holistic investigation. *Children's Geographies* 15(1): 122–128.
- Heldman C and Wade L (2010) Hook-up culture: Setting a new research agenda. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 7(4): 323–333.
- Johns MM, Pingel E, Eisenberg A, et al. (2012) Butch tops and femme bottoms? Sexual positioning, sexual decision making, and gender roles among young gay men. *American Journal of Men's Health* 6(6): 505–518.
- Kalish R and Kimmel M (2011) Hooking up: Hot hetero sex or the new numb normative? *Australian Feminist Studies* 26(67): 137–151.
- Kubicek K, Beyer WJ, Weiss G, et al. (2010) In the dark: Young men's stories of sexual initiation in the absence of relevant sexual health information. *Health Education and Behavior* 37(2): 243–263.
- Larson RW (2000) Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist* 55(1): 170–183.
- Meyer IH (2003) Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin* 129(5): 674–697.
- Miles MB and Huberman AM (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Miller B (2015) 'They're the modern-day gay bar': Exploring the uses and gratifications of social networks for men who have sex with men. *Computers in Human Behavior* 51(Part A, October): 476–482.
- Mustanski B, Lyons T and Garcia SC (2011) Internet use and sexual health of young men who have sex with men: A mixed-methods study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40(2): 289–300.
- Oleson V, Dries N, Hatton D, et al. (1994) Analyzing together: recollections of a team approach. *Analyzing Qualitative Data* 1(3): 111–128.
- Paul EL, McManus B and Hayes A (2000) 'Hookups': Characteristics and correlates of college students' spontaneous and anonymous sexual experiences. *Journal of Sex Research* 37(1): 76–88.
- Persson TJ and Pfau JG (2015) Bisexuality and mental health: Future research directions. *Journal of Bisexuality* 15(1): 82–98.
- Pingel ES, Bauermeister JA, Johns MM, et al. (2013) 'A safe way to explore': Reframing risk on the internet amidst young gay men's search for identity. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 28(4): 453–478.
- Ragins BR and Cornwell JM (2001) Pink triangles: Antecedents and consequences of perceived workplace discrimination against gay and lesbian employees. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 86(6): 1244–1261.
- Rupp LJ, Taylor V, Regev-Messalem S, et al. (2014) Queer women in the hookup scene: Beyond the closet? *Gender and Society* 28(2): 212–235.

- Ryan GW and Bernard HR (2003) Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods* 15(1): 85–109.
- Saewyc EM (2011) Research on adolescent sexual orientation: Development, health disparities, stigma, and resilience. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 21(1): 256–272.
- Saewyc EM, Poon CS, Homma Y, et al. (2008) Stigma management? The links between enacted stigma and teen pregnancy trends among gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in British Columbia. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 17(3): 123–139.
- Seage GR, Mayer KH, Wold C, et al. (1998) The social context of drinking, drug use, and unsafe sex in the Boston young men study. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes and Human Retrovirology: Official Publication of the International Retrovirology Association* 17(4): 368.
- Snapp S, Ryu E and Kerr J (2015) The upside to hooking up: College students' positive hookup experiences. *International Journal of Sexual Health* 27(1): 43–56.
- Tolman DL and McClelland SI (2011) Normative sexuality development in adolescence: A decade in review 2000–2009. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 21(1): 242–255.
- Watson RJ, Grossman AH and Russell ST (2016) Sources of social support and mental health among LGB youth. *Youth and Society*. Published online first, 20 July 2016: 1–19. DOI: 10.1177/0044118X16660110.
- Watson RJ, Snapp S and Wang S (2017) What we know and where to go from here: A review of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth hookup literature. *Sex Roles* 77(11–12): 801–811.
- Wildemuth BM (2009) *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Woods WJ, Tracy D and Binson D (2003) Number and distribution of gay bathhouses in the United States and Canada. *Journal of Homosexuality* 44(3): 55–70.

Ryan J Watson is an Assistant Professor at the University of Connecticut. He explores health and well-being among sexual and gender minority populations, with a particular focus on sexual health, romantic relationships, and families.

Yousef M Shahin is currently pursuing his BSc. in Psychology with a minor in Cellular and Physiological sciences. His research interests include mental and sexual health among sexual minority populations.

Miriam R Arbeit is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Virginia Curry School of Education. She studies adolescent sexuality development with a focus on sex education, sexual violence prevention, and school-based supports for queer and trans youth.