

*Collective Exclusion: How White Heterosexual Dating App Norms Reproduce Status Quo Hookup Culture**

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This article analyzes how heterosexual college students use dating apps with their peer groups, and how their collective behaviors privilege heteronormativity and whiteness on a college campus in the United States. By focusing on the collective practices of heterosexual dating app users, this article draws out how taken-for-granted assumptions about hookup culture and dating apps manifest in group behaviors that are shown to limit the available sexual scripts for heterosexual women and men while simultaneously excluding people of color. Using interview data from 27 heterosexual college students, this article argues that offline and online interactions are sites where dating app users and their friends reconcile interpersonal and intrapsychic sexual scripts within their cultural milieu. The findings of this study suggest that their collective rationalizations appeal to heteronormative gendered expectations and whiteness in ways that reproduce social inequalities.

Introduction

Using internet dating technologies is common practice among heterosexual people. Models estimate that 39 percent of new heterosexual couples met online or on a dating app (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Haussen 2019). Much internet dating research has examined why people adopted a new technology for love, often concluding that users balanced risk with desire (Albury and Byron 2016; Buggs 2017; Ranzini and Lutz 2017; Ward 2017). As internet dating normalized, largely due to the development of dating apps, scholars began analyzing online discursive practices, arguing that minority dating app users are disadvantaged in the dating app market (Albury et al. 2017; Buggs 2017; Buggs 2019; Hess and Flores 2018). The shift toward examining dating app users' interactions with one another highlighted power differentials at the interactional level. However, by focusing on what occurs online among users and their matches, scholars have missed how peers play a role in shaping and creating dating app norms. This article draws on sexual scripting theory and theories of gender performativity to examine a sample of heterosexual students in the United States who use dating apps with their peers. Analysis suggests that the collective practices of these students result in exclusionary norms that privilege heteronormativity and whiteness.

Sociologists have studied how heterosexual groups reproduce gender inequality at the interactional level (Bird 1996; Grazian 2007; Quinn 2002). This article extends this scholarship by showing how heterosexual college students reproduce gendered expectations, as well as center whiteness, when using dating apps collectively. By collectively, this article means instances where friends use dating apps together in-person or via asynchronous communication. In this study, students used dating apps together in dorm rooms, apartments, and digitally for continued communication. Both in-person and digital communication served as interactive sites where students' interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts were shaped by cultural schemas on a college campus where hookup culture and whiteness contextualized their experiences. In-person and digitally, students held each other accountable to gendered norms of heterosexual courtship and subtly excluded people of color. Moreover, their logics normalized sexual harassment and sexual violence (Hlvaka 2014; Hollander 2001; Pascoe and Hollander 2016).

Hookup culture has been a mainstay of gender and sexuality research in the United States for more than a decade (Wade 2017). Hookup culture, in the U.S. context, is a set of sexual mores and norms that bring college students together under a rubric of casual sexual activity, college parties, and drinking (Bogle 2008). Some parallels between hookup culture's norms and dating apps exist. For instance, both can facilitate consensual sexual activity and lead to relationships (Hirsch and Khan 2020; Wade 2017). However, given a persistent double-standard, women disproportionately face sexual objectification, harassment, sexual assault, and rape (Armstrong et al. 2014; Armstrong et al. 2006; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Hess and Flores 2018; Khan et al. 2018). Further, hookup culture tends to favor heterosexual white college students and thus excludes other groups of people (Hirsch and Khan 2020; Wade 2017). This article asks how these not-so-subtle power differentials translate into dating app norms by examining the interactional dynamics of peers who use dating apps together. First, how and why do heterosexual college students use dating apps? Second, how and why do heterosexual college students use dating app with their peers? Finally, how do heterosexual college students use dating apps in ways that reinforce or challenge heteronormativity and whiteness? In order to answer these questions, this article uses qualitative data collected from a sample of heterosexual college students from a United States university who discussed their dating app history. This article shows that dating app users interactionally co-create dating app norms that exclude minorities and reproduce the inequalities endemic to hookup culture and dating apps.

Literature Review

Much online dating scholarship has focused on individual users or the apps themselves (Albury et al. 2017; Albury and Byron 2016; Albury et al. 2019; Buggs 2017; Hess and Flores 2018). However, sociologists have demonstrated that peers play a part in the sexual scripts that shape sexual meanings (Armstrong et al. 2014; Bogle 2008; Grazian 2007; Pascoe 2008; Quinn 2002; Simon and Gagnon 1986). Among heterosexual groups, peers often perform gender identities in ways that reproduce heteronormative gender roles (Bird 1996; Connell 2005; Grazian 2007; Quinn 2002). Examining the gendered dimensions of sexual scripts is limiting though, as hookup culture scholarship has demonstrated that race also influences sexual experiences (Buggs 2017; Spell 2016). By combining a sexual scripting framework with insights on how groups perform identities, this article extends dating app scholarship to include group behavioral norms.

Sexual Scripts and the Sociology of Sexualities

Sexual scripting theory uses metaphorical scripts to explain how individual sexual desires are co-constructed with situational and cultural schemas. Simon and Gagnon (1986) outlined three sexual scripts: cultural scenarios, interpersonal, and intrapsychic. Cultural scenarios are dominant scripts that govern social relations between people, such as heterosexuality. Interpersonal scripts allow people to navigate sexual interactions, such as norms regarding who initiates sexual activity. Finally, intrapsychic scripts are an individual's desires which may or may not align with cultural scenarios and interpersonal sexual interactions. The sexual scripting framework has been applied widely, including to college students and hookup culture (Bogle 2008). While this framework is useful for outlining sexual norms, it can be extended. First, rather than using abstract scripts in ways that sometimes read as essentialized roles, it is possible to examine how identities are performed. Performative theories highlight how people's agency is bounded within power structures. Second, by attending to power's complexity, performative theories capture how social identities constitute each other at the interactional level.

The shift toward performative theories of gender and sexuality in sociology has been fruitful. Performative theories frame gender as something that is "done"; thus, shifting the focus away from roles one would play in a script to the active social construction of gender identity (West and Zimmerman 1987). West and Zimmerman's concept "doing gender" suggests that gender is not individually derived but rather, a performance within social structures that holds people accountable to masculine and feminine expectations. Gender thus requires actors and audiences, as well as a culture that ascribes gendered

meaning to behaviors. Additionally, people are interactionally accountable for their perceived sex and sexual orientation (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Thus, within a heteronormative society, people are interactionally held accountable to normative expectations of heterosexual masculine and feminine behaviors.

Masculinity scholars have shown that while multiple masculinities exist, there is a hegemonic form to which many men aspire, and all men answer (Bird 1996; Connell 2005). Central to hegemonic masculinity are heterosexuality and whiteness (Connell 2005). Thus, the performative work “doing” hegemonic masculinity is also “doing” heteronormativity (Schilt and Westbrook 2009) and whiteness (Connell 2005; Pascoe 2008). Within homosocial groups, men are expected to express their attraction to women (Bird 1996; Grazian 2007). Sometimes this expression of attraction to women is performed in ways that privilege emotional detachment, competitiveness, and normalize sexual objectification (Quinn 2002). These can occur simultaneously, as Grazian (2007) demonstrated how men can be competitive in their pursuit of women, furthering both sexual objectification and emotional detachment. The tension between attraction to women and a desire to be masculine with friends is at the crux of what Jane Ward (2020) calls the “tragedy of heterosexuality.”

Ward’s (2020) “tragedy of heterosexuality” conceptualizes the relational structure of straight culture as one which ultimately separates men and women except for their supposed attraction to one another. Heterosexual men are cast as semi-broken suitors who *may* be able to outgrow their binge drinking days and settle into domestic bliss, while heterosexual women spend their time together upholding heteronormative feminine ideals. One way this manifests is women policing each other’s hookups (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006). Women police feminine norms by employing the “slut” label to enforce sexual expectations (Armstrong et al. 2014). Additionally, femininity is constituted by contextual racialization (Buggs 2017). For example, within hookup culture in the United States, white and Asian women are stereotyped as feminine, or even hyperfeminine, whereas Black women and other women of color are stereotyped as less feminine and therefore, less attractive (Spell 2016). When held accountable to white standards of femininity, women of color sometimes experience fetishization, which further objectifies them within hookups (Spell 2016).

The term “slut” resonates deeply in heteronormative society because it aligns women with sexual agency. Heteronormativity posits that despite mutual attraction, men are the active agents of sexuality (Hirsch et al. 2019). As active sexual agents, men often direct how sexual interactions unfold. Since masculinity often includes elements of strength and competitiveness, this sometimes manifests as sexual aggression. Sexual aggression can range from sexual jokes and innuendo, to sexual harassment, assault, and rape. These traits are often

normalized by the women who experience them, underscoring the normativity of hegemonic masculinity (Hlvaka 2014; Hollander 2001). This is not to say that all heterosexual men perpetrate sexual violence, as this oversimplifies masculinity. Contemporary masculinity scholarship demonstrates that men navigate between multiple masculinities that combine elements from hegemonic masculinity with other masculine presentations (Pascoe and Bridges 2016). However, men's social position relative to women makes them more likely to sexually assault (Hirsch and Khan 2020). Further, Pascoe and Hollander (2016) show that masculinity can be performed in ways that discursively disavow sexual violence while still being emotionally detached, competitive, and objectifying women. Heterosexual men's changing attitudes toward sexual violence are likely tied to increasing awareness of college women's disproportionate risk of sexual violence (Hirsch and Khan 2020).

Courtship in College

Heterosexual college students and their peers are often centered in studies on dating and courtship trends. Bogle's (2008) landmark study analyzed a generational reorganization of sexuality on college campuses which combined alcohol, parties, shifting sexual mores, and men and women's expectation of freedom in college. Scholarship on hookup culture has continued, showing that despite the sexual freedom college promises, women are disadvantaged in multiple ways (Armstrong et al. 2014; Armstrong et al. 2006; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Khan et al. 2018). One issue is that women in college report less sexually satisfying hookups than men (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Moreover, women are disproportionately the victims of sexual assault and rape (Armstrong et al. 2006; Hirsch and Khan 2020). Thus, double standards and sexual violence limit the equitability of hookup culture.

The power relations on college campuses between heterosexual women and men are all but codified. Fraternities control much of the alcohol and parties in a context where both are scarce commodities (Hirsch and Khan 2020; Wade 2017). Control over party spaces, where hookup culture is dominant, provides men further power to control sexual interactions. Outside of parties, hookup culture exists in college students ongoing interactions with friends. Speaking to their peers *about* sexual activity in a "ritual retelling" after a hookup is part of the interpersonal scripts within hookup culture (Auster, Faulkner, and Klingenstein 2018). Further, while many students discuss their hypothetical and actual hookups with peers, gender shapes the likelihood of disclosure with women being more likely to discuss sexual activity with peers than men (Auster et al. 2018). Thus, hookup culture depends on college students' discussions *about* hookups just as much as sex itself. However, since

much hookup culture scholarship predates dating apps, it is worth questioning how the lack of established dating app norms relates to hookup culture (Haywood 2018).

The Sociology of Dating Apps

Finding a sex partner online is different than finding one at a party. Mainly, online dating tools allow users to set criteria and filter matches before meeting in-person (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Instead of being limited to who is at a party, dating apps expand a college student's network of potential matches while filtering people out based on predetermined criteria. This efficiency allows users to sort through matches more quickly than meeting in-person. Additionally, by being asynchronous, dating apps can be used anywhere at any time. However, these technological opportunities come with constraints, too. A common issue is that some profiles are falsified to appear more attractive (Duguay 2017; Toma, Hancock, and Ellison 2008; Ward 2017).

Researchers have examined how users vet the authenticity of people they meet online (Duguay 2017). One tactic is the use of additional technological means such as web searches (Gibbs, Ellison, and Lai 2011) and social media (Handyside and Ringrose 2017). These technological tools assist in triangulating a person's "true" identity. While finding someone's social media presence verifies what they look like, vetting intentions is more difficult. Vetting intentions is important because what people seek varies. Some users seek long-term relationships, others want casual sex, friendship, or self-validation (David and Cambre 2016; Newett, Churchill, and Robards 2018; Ranzini and Lutz 2017). These desires tend to fall along gendered dimensions and reflect social expectations, but mainly, users seek compatible desires (e.g., both want a long-term relationship). In addition to vetting compatibility, users also try to avoid being "catfished." Catfishing is when someone misrepresents their appearance, intentions, or both. While the fear of catfishing is likely greater than occurrence, it is a common fear (Toma et al. 2008). Online vetting is particularly important for women who encounter sexual objectification online (Hess and Flores 2018). Women of color face additional objectification from men who racially fetishize them (Buggs 2017) Thus, Black women sometimes do the additional work of screening for political congruency with white men (Buggs 2017). The measures that users take to verify authenticity highlight how protection tends to be individualized (Shaw 2014).

Research on the technological affordances of dating apps has shown that design and culture combine in ways that limit the opportunities for people to express themselves freely in online spaces. Tinder, for example, utilizes the "swipe" feature which enables fast sorting, but limits users based on location and sexual orientation. Swiping also makes Tinder feel ephemeral, which in

turn structures how users interact with the app (Ward 2017). Together, this has garnered Tinder a reputation for being a misogynistic space (Hess and Flores 2018) that is further fueled by the protection anonymity provides users. However, it is ultimately how people choose to use technologies within social structures that needs addressing (Shaw 2014). Focusing too much on technological affordances leaves behind the considerable scholarship showing that digital practices emerge from existing social structures.

This article contributes to our sociological understanding of dating apps by theorizing the microlevel interactions of college students who use dating apps collectively. Rather than individualizing practices, or reducing them to the technical design of apps, this study shows how peers shape usage.

Methods

This study uses data from semi-structured interviews with 27 heterosexual students who were recruited for interviews at a public university in the Midwestern United States (hereafter “University”) from 2016-2018. Students were recruited by email and in-person from several introductory and mid-division sociology courses.

Sampling and Demographics

All 27 students lived on campus or in the nearby neighborhoods of University’s college town. University’s enrollment is approximately 22,500 nested in a town of about 30,000. This college town is in a relatively liberal part of the state because of its proximity to several major cities. The sample reflects some diversity but is not representative. Further, the non-random sample is skewed due to self-selection into the study. The demographics are: 18 women and 9 men ranging from 18 to 21 years old; 17 Caucasian/white students; 4 African American/Black students; 2 Native American students; 2 mixed-race students; 1 Hispanic/Latina student; and 1 racially self-identified as “other.”

Informed Consent, Confidentiality, and Interview Procedure

All interviews followed the protocol approved by University’s IRB. First, students signed written informed consent forms. Then, interviewees provided their demographic information on a questionnaire. This questionnaire asked students their age, race, major, class standing, and to indicate which dating apps they used and how frequently they used them. The questionnaire also allowed students to select their pseudonym. Two of the four students who created pseudonyms included surnames. For uniformity in the findings, these surnames are reported in Tables 1 and 2 but not in the analysis. All other pseudonyms were

chosen at random and some identifying information has been altered to protect participants' confidentiality.

After receiving the questionnaire, the interviewer reviewed it before beginning to audio record the interview. Interviews began with a discussion of the student's athletics, academic clubs, sorority/fraternity membership, and social activities. Seven women were in sororities and one man was in a fraternity. Nine women and eight men attended parties and drank alcohol with some regularity.

After establishing rapport and getting a sense of their social life, interviews shifted attention to the dating app(s) students used and how they used them. Only two students did not use Tinder. Christine used the app versions of Christian Mingle and OkCupid, and Esmerelda used the app version of OkCupid. Phil used Tinder and the app version of OkCupid. In addition to Tinder, OkCupid, and Christian Mingle, most reported using one or multiple social media apps in conjunction with dating apps as a means to communicate with their matches (Gibbs et al. 2011).

Next, interviews followed a semi-linear account of the participants' dating app interactions. This began with when and how students decided to download a dating app, and then moved through how they used dating apps with their friends. Students were asked about how they constructed profiles, who they matched with, how they talked to their matches (and what they talked about), who they talked with about their experiences (and what they talked about), and how they went about meeting their matches in-person. For example, students would be asked, "what made you decide to download a dating app?" When students talked about the role of their friend(s), probing questions determined the student's relationship with the person. Probing led to questions such as, "When someone messages you on Tinder, who do you tell?" and "What do you tell them?" Perhaps due to University's same-gender dorm policy, these students discussed dating apps with their same-gender roommate(s), dormmate(s), and friend(s).

Coding

The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half, were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into NVivo where they were first coded for emergent themes and then recoded with a focused coding scheme. The initial open coding allowed for the emergence of more than 50 themes, which were eventually collapsed into focused thematic codes (Lofland and Lofland 1995). The initial themes included some findings that were not relevant to how students used dating apps and were excluded from analysis. Relevant themes were merged and arranged according to, (1) dating app collective practices, and (2) the logics and rationalizations students gave for their

Table 1
Women (N = 18)

Name	Age	Race	Major	Class Year	Sorority	College Party Attendee
Amanda	18	White	Biology Pre-Med	1st Year	Yes	Yes
Gloria	18	Hispanic	Criminal Justice	1st Year	No	No
Joanna	18	White	Undecided	1st Year	Yes	Yes
Leah	18	Black	Criminal Justice	1st Year	No	No
Sarah	18	Black	Biology Pre-Med	1st Year	Yes	Yes
Brittany	19	White	Criminology	3rd Year	No	No
Haley	19	White	Zoology	1st Year	No	No
Jennifer	19	White	Human Development & Family Studies	2nd Year	Yes	Yes
Lizzie	19	White	Sociology	2nd Year	Yes	Yes
Caroline	20	White	Business Management	3rd Year	No	No
Christine	20	Other	Criminal Justice	1st Year	No	No
Esmerelda	20	Multi- racial	Sociology / Human Development & Family Studies	3rd Year	No	No
Indigo (Mars)	20	Black	Sociology	3rd Year	No	Yes
Sydney	20	White	Human Development & Family Studies	3rd Year	Yes	Yes
Victoria	20	White	Environmental Conservation Biology	3rd Year	No	Yes
Wendy	20	White	Psychology	3rd Year	Yes	No
Zelda	20	White	Zoology	3rd Year	No	No
Karen	21	White	Psychology / Sociology	4th Year	No	Yes

collective dating app practices. For example, a first-order code could be a man saying that he and his dormmate were talking about their matches together, and the second-order code would be the reason for discussion (e.g., showing his dormmate a picture of the woman he matched with and discussing her attractiveness).

Findings and Analysis

Below, data are presented on the collective practices of heterosexual college students who use dating apps. The data are ordered to reflect the linear trajectory of how students normally use dating apps. First, they download a dating app, then they make their profile and find matches, and finally, they move off the app to meet matches in-person. The data show that collective practices occur throughout this trajectory, and analysis reveals how these collective practices center heteronormative gender expectations and whiteness. Each student's gender and race are included for context.

Downloading A Dating App

Students described a range of reasons for downloading dating apps. Oftentimes students paired their decision to download a dating app with an emotional state such as boredom, curiosity, or desire. While intrapsychic desires for sex and companionship were expressed by students, it was their peers who ultimately influenced students to download a dating app. These interpersonal scripts rationalized downloading dating apps in ways that reflected heteronormative gender expectations. While some students were open to a range of possibilities at the individual level, men heard from other men about Tinder's usefulness for hooking up and casual sex, whereas women emphasized using the app as a way to bond and seek long-term relationships.

Using dating apps is a way to pass the time while working toward a goal. Haley (white, woman) was sleeping over at her cousin's house when the two women, "were just bored... it was like two o'clock in the morning." Haley said they both made Tinder profiles, "and we just talked to people, swiped, and laughed and had fun with it." Jennifer (white, woman) downloaded Tinder with her three roommates and said it was, "kinda funny, seeing people like, from the frats, or this guy we all know is like, on Tinder." Haley and Jennifer are among the 17 of 18 women in this sample who regularly used dating apps with friends. Justin (white, man) uses Tinder with friends, too. He said, "Alright, so when I first started using it, everyone said to get it... And, that's what I did my freshman year. I originally downloaded it just to find people, new people to hookup with." Justin generalized by saying "everyone"; thus, he underscored Tinder's taken-for-granted ubiquity at University. Further, Justin emphasized Tinder's usefulness for "finding new people to hookup with," reflecting

Table 2
Men (N = 9)

Name	Age	Race	Major	Class Year	Fraternity	College Party Attendee
David	19	White	Biology Pre-Med	1st Year	No	No
Marc	19	White	Biochemistry	1st Year	No	Yes
Matthew	19	White	Social Studies	2nd Year	No	Yes
Michael	19	Black	Sports Administration	2nd Year	No	Yes
Ralph	19	Native American	Aeronautics	1st Year	No	Yes
Steele (Stanwick)	19	Native American	Biology Pre-Med	1st Year	No	Yes
Terrance	19	Multi- racial	Philosophy	2nd Year	No	Yes
Justin	20	White	Botany	3rd Year	Yes	Yes
Phil	21	White	American Sign Language / English	3rd Year	No	Yes

research showing that dating apps expand personal networks (Newett et al. 2018). David's (white, man) friend put Tinder on his phone, "He said, 'You have to get it.'" Justin and David are among the eight of nine men in this study who used dating apps primarily for hookups. Comparatively, 16 of 18 women in the sample primarily sought long-term relationships. However, these stated preferences may reflect adherence to heteronormative social desirability where men perform masculinity by tapping into a discourse of sexual prowess, and women perform femininity by tapping into a discourse of sexual restraint (Hirsch et al. 2019). That is to say, the dominant cultural schema that men are active sexual agents and women are passive influences how these students express their intrapsychic desires (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Despite these stated preferences, however, sexual multiplicity occurred with some regularity. For example, Wendy's current relationship began as a casual hookup facilitated by Tinder.

Despite personal desires, women and men rationalized downloading a dating app via collective decision. Esmerelda (multi-racial, woman) said, "My

freshman year, when I got here, there's a group of us [women] and we're all just kind of awkward and we were like, 'Hey, we're all lonely, why don't we sign up for a dating app?'" In her dorm, Esmerelda and her friends did what so many heterosexual college students do, they downloaded a dating app together. Often these decisions adhered to heteronormative standards of behavior in terms of attitudes toward sex and relationships, but sometimes these decisions were a way to have fun together. Nevertheless, once students downloaded a dating app, they now had to use it.

Using A Dating App

These students spent a lot of time on Tinder, similar to other dating app users (Newett et al. 2018). Before students started matching, they crafted profiles that would attract partners. Students relied on both the design of dating apps and peers to make their profiles. Making profiles and matching with people provided students with an opportunity to have fun with their peers. These group interactions adhered to heteronormative gendered expectations of "fun." Whereas men made sexual jokes and demonstrated their sexual prowess by bragging about how attractive their matches were, women emphasized making attractive profiles and establishing norms that would safeguard themselves against potential violence.

Students made their dating app profiles by leveraging technological integration and asking friends for advice. Tinder has users select pictures for their profile and prompts users to write a "biography." Steele (Native American, man) used Facebook's synchronization with Tinder, "I can just go through my Facebook pictures and see which ones I like." Indeed, technological integration assisted men in getting to the matching part of dating app use quickly, as they were less interested in making their profiles and more focused on meeting women. Jennifer (white, woman) asked her friends which Facebook pictures to use, "because, you know, you wanna make sure the pictures look good." Making attractive profiles was a central concern for all students to some degree, but women's interpersonal scripts allow space for group input on how to make an attractive profile. Amanda (white, woman) said:

Oh yeah, we definitely work on it. I have, all my pictures are me from the summer, because I just think I'm more attractive when I'm tan. But I also used to be, I used to do boot camp a lot, so I used to be really fit, so I guess, a majority of my pictures are me from when I was fifteen pounds heavier in muscle, and not what I look like now. I guess in a way, it's not fake, you can see what I look like, but I'm definitely more fit, and I'm like, I'm not gonna change those.

Amanda's rationalization underscores how gender and race condition what heterosexual college students consider white feminine beauty. She draws

attention to her “tan” skin and bodily proportions when she was attending fitness classes, and with her friends, decided to use these pictures instead of more recent ones. This interpersonal selectivity reflects adherence to heteronormative white culture that aspires to be tan and fit. By noting that these photos may be misleading, Amanda rationalizes her deceptive profile by aspiring to a shared cultural schema of what is attractive white femininity (Toma et al. 2008). Her friends legitimize this decision interpersonally, as their collective work strategically makes what they consider to be Amanda’s most desirable digital self.

Amanda’s decision occurs within two contexts that exist in tension with one another, hookup culture and online dating. As Spell (2016) and Wade (2017) have demonstrated, racial fetishization and discrimination locate white men and women, Black men, and Asian women at the top of heterosexual hookup culture in the United States. However, research on internet dating has demonstrated widespread fear of online misrepresentation (Toma et al. 2008). One interpretation of Amanda’s decision is that white heterosexual students rationalize a degree of selection in crafting their online presentations of self, a privilege students of color are unlikely to have (Buggs 2017; Spell 2016).

After making attractive profiles, students sorted through potential matches. Four of the men in this study discussed this process as humorous. The fun these men had consisted of comparing their matches and sending sexually explicit messages to women. They reveled in the perceived bravery of their friends violating the culturally dominant scripts of appropriate dating behavior. Instead of engaging their matches by establishing commonalities, Matthew said:

We were having like a joke fest last Saturday. We were just going through, and my friend was like, just trying to be funny on Tinder. Not hurting anybody, he’d narrate it like a Billy Mays commercial and they’d be like, “That’s hilarious” and I’m like, “This actually works?”

Matthew qualifies his “joke fest” as “not hurting anybody,” which suggests the messages he and his friends were sending could be interpreted as harmful. It is difficult to know what Matthew’s friend said, since he declined to reveal the joke. Given his surprise that “this actually works,” the “joke” likely does not conform to the taken-for-granted cultural schema that dictates dating begins with formal social niceties. Ralph (Native American, man) was open about the “stupid” messages he sent women. Ralph said:

Like I just put stupid stuff, like, “Taxation is theft.” Just to see what they react to, or I’ll do like, stupid joke. Like, “If you had a donkey and it dies, and I was a taxidermist, would you let me stuff that ass?”

Ralph's libertarian provocateur statement and taxidermy pun were discursively conveyed as "stupid stuff." This discursive tactic echoes Matthew who framed his friend's joke as, "not hurting anybody."

Instead of expressing sincere attraction or affection for some of the women they matched with, these men upheld the "tragedy of heterosexuality" (Ward 2020). These interactions perpetuate the social structural paradox of heterosexual men preferring each other's company, despite their performative attraction to women. The anonymity that dating apps provide facilitates this behavior by digitally shielding men from the repercussions that may occur if they made sexual jokes about women in public settings (Hess and Flores 2018). However, with their peers, these men framed their online interactions as humorous and discursively situated their lack of emotional attachment as normative masculine behavior, all the while maintaining a "nice guy" persona when talking about their dating app experiences after the fact (Pascoe and Hollander 2016; Quinn 2002). This articulation of masculinity upholds gendered inequalities within heteronormativity under a discourse of humor that normalizes sexual jokes and emotional detachment as men who are, in the end, just having fun. In addition to having "fun" at women's expense, men would also brag about their matches. Justin (white, man) says, "I definitely showed pictures, everyone brags, "Oh, look at this girl I matched with." Justin discursively aligns bragging with "everyone." For men like Justin, attractive matches signify their own attractiveness. Thus, for men, their attractiveness is measured by the women they match with rather than by adherence to a script that dictates how they should look.

Sincerely trying to hookup with attractive women meant that some online conversations had to be serious. Rather than collectively discussing these conversations, men tended to guard their genuine conversations with women. Marc (white, man) said:

Marc: Like, I remember there'd be times where like, us three were in the dorm and were just kinda like, swiping through just like, hanging out or whatever and we'll be like, "Oh man, this chick's really hot, and stuff." But I don't know, we don't really say like, "Oh, I kind a think this girl, I might have feelings for this girl." You know? Cause it's kinda like, not very masculine to like, talk about. You know what I mean? It's kinda like, you tell your friends, your guy friends, "This chick, she's pretty hot and seems like a pretty popular chick." You know like, "I think I'm gonna go for her." But that kinda like, it ends there. Everything else is kinda like, personal."

Interviewer: Ok, so you don't ask your guy friends for advice? Like if a girl says, like asks you a question or something, you wouldn't say to your guy friends, "Hey man, like, this girl just said this. What do you think I should do?"

Marc: I mean, I'm trying to think because it was mostly last semester. Not really.

Pointedly, Marc said, “It’s kinda like, not very masculine” to talk about sentimental or romantic feelings with his “guy friends.” Instead, Marc emphasized his match’s attractiveness by saying, “she’s pretty hot.” This shared masculine understanding shows how men’s interactions with women online affect their offline sexual scripts. In meeting attractive matches online, Marc is faced with contradictory expectations. At the interpersonal level, Marc is expected to show other men his matches, but at the individual level, Marc sincerely hopes to make something of his match. Thus, these heterosexual men’s scripts limit a discourse that would allow for open discussions of emotional attachments or vulnerability.

Women found dating apps to be “fun” and framed their experiences as bonding with friends. Compared to the men in this study, who guarded their conversations for fear of being seen as unmasculine, women regularly informed one another about their conversations. Women often updated each other through technological means. Caroline (white, woman) said, “We would screenshot the messages that they would send us and send them to each other.” Other times women discussed using the apps in-person. Karen (white, woman) said, “We throw HGTV on and we would just go through and be like, “Oh look at this guy” it’s like, “Oh I saw him the other day.”” Karen described this as a “bonding experience.” Two of the women in this sample went so far as to collectively decide which men they should match with. Amanda (white, woman) said, “Oh God, it just, it shouldn’t [matter] as much as it does, but if my friends don’t find someone that I’ve matched with attractive, like, I’ll unmatch them.” Tinder’s design requires both parties to indicate interest before they can interact on the app. Thus, Amanda must have had some level of individual interest in the men she matched with (Albury and Byron 2016; Albury et al. 2019). However, she admits that interpersonal interactions can overrule her individual desires. The importance of interpersonal scripts for these women underscores how collective processes shape dating app use.

Potential sexual activity could be limited by friends, but it also gave women the opportunity to draw boundaries. Brittany (white, woman) said:

We will both be exchanging information about, “What should I say? He just said this.” But my roommates are definitely different, we each represent, I think, different modes of thinking in terms of dating or hooking up. So, I try to take that with a grain of salt when they tell me things that I don’t do.

Brittany, who does not party, drink, or hookup, discursively positions her roommates across a spectrum of views on casual sex and hooking up. Brittany toes a line that allows her to share in the collective fun she and her roommates have while asserting her sexual identity on her own terms. Brittany’s agency

within a group context is a stark contrast from Gloria's (Hispanic/Latina) experience. Gloria was the only woman who used Tinder privately. On a majority white college campus, with Hispanic/Latino/a students being one of the least represented racial groups, it is unsurprising that Gloria's dormmate is white. When students like Justin describe Tinder as something "everybody" is using, Gloria is not included in his imagination as someone who is part of the local dating app culture. Nor does Gloria for that matter, who described Tinder as something she does out of boredom. While Gloria "wants a boyfriend," she does not see Tinder delivering on this desire. While white students were having fun with their friends, Gloria used Tinder as "something to do" alone.

Gloria is one of five women of color in this sample and her isolation from white peers is the manifestation of exclusion from white heterosexual spaces. This is not to say that women of color did not use apps collectively, or even with white students in some cases. However, women of color used dating apps differently from the white women in this study. The women of color in this study all discussed a lack of matches compared to their white peers, and none of them engaged in casual sex or hookups. This reflects research showing that students of color are less likely to hookup (Spell 2016; Wade 2017) and that women of color face racial discrimination on dating apps (Buggs 2017; Buggs 2019). Further, the discursive tactics white women used to rationalize how they used dating apps revealed a degree of flexibility that women of color did not have. While all but one white woman in this sample purported to seek long-term relationships, most did engage in one or more hookups with someone they met on dating apps. Women of color did not hookup with people they met on dating apps, and in Gloria's case, were sometimes excluded from bonding with other women over their shared experiences. However, a thread that stratifies heterosexual students along gendered dimensions is their scripted engagement with sexual humor. Men of color performed masculinity similarly to white men by making sexual jokes such as Ralph's earlier taxidermy pun and thus scripted their behavior according to interpersonal desires to have fun with other men rather than seek genuine emotional connections with women. Conversely, a point of agreement among heterosexual women was that online sexual harassment was common and unwelcome.

Unanimously, the women in this study did not find unsolicited explicit sexual jokes funny and said these messages were the worst part of dating apps. Karen (white, woman) said:

Tinder was a little bit hard to use at first... getting past all the people that just wanted to hookup and getting into the people who were looking for an actual relationship, which there were few and far between.

Women used the term “fuckboy” to reference men who sought hookups and sent sexually explicit messages. When asked why she might unmatched someone, Lizzie (white, woman) said, “Too pushy. Like, I don’t know. They’d ask for [nude] pictures or something. And I’m just like, “Eh, no.” They just seem like, I don’t know. They just seem like a fuckboy.” In response to fuckboys, women would collectively react to the message and support one another. Indigo (Black, woman) said:

It’s the bouncing up and down, and the flapping of the hands, and the giggling, and acting like a bunch of girls. That’s usually how it goes. And if they’re rude, it’s cussing out and the name calling, and dragging the person’s character through the dirt.

The same collectivity that brought women together for fun also provided space to collectively react to requests for nude pictures and sexually explicit messages. The salience of these messages should not be understated. Karen (white, woman) said, “I really, was not prepared for how many people were like, sexually aggressive and crude.” Rather than be dismayed, one woman responded by asserting his disapproval of the behavior. Zelda (white, woman) said, “Yeah, I went off on that guy, like, sorry but it’s just rude.” Confronting her rude match allowed Zelda to exert some agency in the face of sexist advances online.

Despite these tensions, 25 of 27 students did eventually meet one or more of their matches in-person. Of the 25 students who did meet people, only three met more than five of their matches in-person. This is in comparison to students reporting “dozens,” “hundreds,” or “too many” matches. Thus, the vast amount of time these students spent using dating apps was not meeting matches for dates or hookups, but either in communicating with matches online or talking about their online experiences with their friends. This difference in time underscores the fact that dating apps are not just digital environments, but collective rituals with gendered and raced dimensions. Further, this difference elaborates on research showing that people use dating apps for multiple purposes (Newett et al. 2018). One of those reasons, while perhaps not always explicit at the outset, is the development of social ties with peers. These interactions highlight how heterosexual college students tie whiteness, heteronormativity, hookup culture, and dating apps together. Nevertheless, students do eventually move off dating apps as they begin to meet their matches in-person (Newett et al. 2018).

Moving off Dating Apps

Meeting a stranger off the internet violates everything these students were socialized to do. Accordingly, students worked hard to establish trust.

Establishing trust primarily hinged on the ability to mitigate fear. Whereas men feared women misrepresenting their bodies, women feared being sexually harmed, kidnaped, and raped. While these fears warrant attention in their own right, it is also the case that heterosexual college students articulate these fears in ways that normalize the tragedy of heterosexuality (Ward 2020).

When men did not send explicit jokes, dating app conversations were about interests, compatibility, and verifying authenticity. Gloria (Hispanic/Latina) said, “I kinda just try to get to know them first, I mean like, around here they’re in college, it’s like, ‘Well, what are you studying?’” Discussions revealed a match’s compatibility. A match might reveal whether or not they eventually wanted to get married, whether they had or wanted children, how much they drank and partied, and more. Even though the men in this sample primarily sought hookups, and women primarily sought long-term relationships, these conversations also allowed for users to sort by perceived race (Buggs 2017). For example, Indigo (Black, woman) was looking to date Black men. Preference for white matches by white students was never explicitly stated but preferential sorting often excluded people of color. Most white students limited an app’s search radius to exclude nearby cities, neighborhoods, and other universities. In students’ words, they only swipe right on “University students” (Jennifer, white woman) or “people within one mile” (Haley, white woman). These spatial parameters excluded students of color who commuted from suburbs of nearby cities, and even students from other universities with larger minority populations. Additionally, some students sought matches in majors that are disproportionately white, such as architecture or STEM fields. However, Sarah (Black, woman), a biology major with a pre-med focus, had difficulty finding matches at University. Accordingly, she expanded Tinder’s range to include nearby cities. This is how she met a Black man at a nearby University with whom she had a long-distance relationship. Unfortunately, “We hit it off, we just got along really well, but he just now actually moved to a different state and started a new job.” Thus, the color-blind logic of white students at the individual level, coupled with a majority white campus, limited the ability of students of color to find matches. Whereas white students found matches at University, students of color had difficulty doing so and sometimes resorted to expanding their network beyond their locale.

In addition to preferential sorting, students worried about inauthentic matches. Accordingly, students used social media accounts to continue their conversations and verify their match’s physical appearance (Gibbs et al. 2011). In addition to using social media to verify their match’s appearance, some students used additional measures to safeguard themselves and their friends.

Six of nine men in this study told stories of meeting women who did not look like their profile pictures, and two suggested that all women lie about their

appearances. For example, based on her profile pictures, Phil (white, man) said his match had a “white girl basic look.” In other words, a white suburban or rural aesthetic that was similar to his own, having lived and attended a high school close to University. Instead, when they met, he learned that she smoked cigarettes (a habit she had not disclosed), wore clothes with a “pop punk aesthetic,” and “was a little chubby.” Phil negatively evaluated her health habits, the way she dressed, and her body, which together meant Phil was not attracted to his match. Phil frames his match as deceptive, which may be true to a certain extent given that she did not disclose that she smoked. However, Phil’s experience must be situated in its context. Like Amanda who, as discussed earlier, selected pictures that highlighted her fitness, Phil’s match attracted him by making her profile in a way that responded to the cultural expectation that she be healthy and thin. Once they met, Phil evaluated her according to his intrapsychic desires which rigidly aligned with normative expectations of feminine beauty. Those same expectations that shape the decisions people use to make their profiles and match with one another, create the very conditions of dismay when they are not met in-person. Further, by leaving those conditions unacknowledged, Phil (and others) move on in hopes of finding someone that embodies the ideal.

Personal experiences with misrepresentation, as well as a general fear of it, pervaded men’s comments about meeting women. Steele (Native American, man) said women were “always lying about their weight.” The almost singular focus on women’s appearance, particularly their weight, was so pervasive that no man suggested they might be harmed by women or that their bodies would be judged. Men evaluated women based on feminine norms of beauty that privileged thinness, which dovetails with racialized standards of beauty that associate white bodies with being athletic and thin, while fetishizing women of color and fat bodies as “exotic” (Spell 2016). Paradoxically, men assume that thinness is so obviously desirable that women routinely lie and misrepresent their bodies online, and yet, when face to face with women who have misrepresented their bodies, do not pause to consider the unachievable standard they have set. Thus, fatphobia structures the interactions of dating app users in ways that work to reproduce white and heteronormative expectations of feminine beauty.

Women’s fears about moving off dating apps encompassed a wide range of concerns. Certainly, women worried that men misrepresented their appearances. Haley (white, woman) said, “You never know because they could put like, they could find, take pictures or they could say, you can say anything you want on the Internet and be different in-person.” Accordingly, these women often vetted their matches carefully. Sarah (Black, woman) said,

We [her and her roommate] matched with the same guy on Tinder. He was like, crazy attractive. She had a mutual friend with him, so she looked up his name through her mutual friend and she saw, his name was like Ian or something. And Ian's picture didn't match up!

In vetting matches, peers and social media could be used in conjunction in order to verify someone's authenticity (Gibbs et al., 2011). Women did this because of their fear of what men might do to them. Wendy, (white, woman) was one of 15 women in this sample who specifically feared *both* rape and kidnapping. These fears should not be read as hyperbolic, as women on college campuses are more likely to be victims of sexual assault (Hirsch and Khan 2020; Khan et al. 2018). Indeed, two women in this sample were survivors of dating violence from men they met online. In light of this reality, ten women discussed using extra technological measures to feel safe. Multiple women shared their location with their friends when meeting someone, and Christine (other, woman) had a friend watch her and a date from a distance anonymously. Collectively, when moving off the app, women were both more reliant on their friends, and more worried about protecting themselves than men. These safeguards were not framed as bonding, but as necessary precautions in a culture where women bear the responsibility of protecting themselves from men. Unfortunately, the circumstances women find themselves in warrant this caution. However, the normalcy of these collective behaviors among heterosexual women suggests that routinized prevention of sexual violence is constitutive of heterosexuality. Heterosexual women who use dating apps balance their desire to have fun with friends and maybe find a partner, with potential violence (Ward 2020).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article examined how college students used dating apps with their friends. The findings suggest that heterosexual women and men use dating apps collectively in gendered ways that center whiteness. While previous scholarship has focused on the interactions that occur between matches, this article shows how those interactions are part of the broader interactional order in which dating apps are used. Heterosexual college students incorporate their friends into their dating app experiences. In turn, peers *and* matches shape how dating app users reconcile their intrapsychic desires with interpersonal sexual scripts and existing cultural scenarios. In regard to college students in the U.S., the dominant context is heteronormative hookup culture (Bogle 2008; Hirsch and Khan 2020; Simon and Gagnon 1986; Wade 2017). Hookup culture is composed, in part, of friends who give meaning to hookups and help students navigate sexual experiences (Auster et al. 2018). Similarly, dating app experiences are shaped

by students with their friends. How students use dating apps collectively, reflects heteronormative ideals of gender identity and white attractiveness.

The findings suggest that students “do gender” when using dating apps (West and Zimmerman 1987). Students “do gender” by making profiles and interacting with matches publicly in ways that appeal to heteronormative gendered expectations. Specifically, men use dating apps in ways that emphasize stereotypically masculine behaviors such as emotional detachment and sexual objectification, whereas women focus on making attractive profiles and safeguarding themselves against potential dating violence. Analysis further reveals that these gendered performances are structured by white standards of attractiveness, which at this predominantly white university, means that students of color tend to be excluded. Students of color are excluded in two ways. First, they are isolated from having fun with other dating app users. Second, they have fewer romantic possibilities. This exclusion, coupled with the heteronormative expectations, reproduces social inequalities among dating app users.

Sexual scripting theory provides a framework for deeply analyzing how college students reconcile their intrapsychic desires within social structures. At the individual level, college students want to have fun with their friends and find a romantic or sexual partner. These individual desires sometimes conflict with interpersonal gendered expectations, especially for men. The expectation for men to find attractive matches while performing masculinity in a way that showcases emotional detachment, is antithetical to forming genuine connections with women. Within their peer group, men privilege fun over finding a partner. This fun comes at the expense of women. This behavior is rationalized in two ways. First, men frame their sexually explicit messages as jokes, and therefore, harmless. This framing allows these men to maintain a sense of self that is distinct from other men they cast as harmful and dangerous (Pascoe and Bridges 2016; Pascoe and Hollander 2016). Secondly, women normalize their experiences of sexual harassment as part of the dating app experience (Hlvaka 2014; Hollander 2001). By normalizing explicit sexual jokes on dating apps as fun, or endemic to dating apps, the sexual double standard persists.

The willingness to conclude that explicit sexual humor is an outcome of dating apps by their design dovetails with fears of internet technologies in general. Phone and app affordances shape how dating apps are experienced, and those experiences exist within cultural fears regarding technology and sex. Like early internet dating fears of catfishing, students worry that people lie about their identity on dating apps (Toma et al. 2008). Identity misrepresentation exists along a spectrum, where people can lie about themselves entirely or exaggerate certain characteristics by selectively choosing what appears online. Selectivity is a process negotiated by friends, especially women, who help each other craft attractive profiles. This process is fun for women, who frame dating

apps as a bonding experience. While women shape each other's profile construction, they are also performing femininity in ways they think men will find attractive. When successful, matches move off the app to meet. However, the group dynamics that push women to make attractive profiles, and men to compete for attractive women, can lead to unmet expectations when the two meet in-person.

Whereas men tend to evaluate women based on their bodies, women fear what men will do to them. Specifically, these women feared being raped. Accordingly, they normalized collaborative safeguarding practices. Women used each other's social media profiles to verify the authenticity of their matches (Duguay 2017; Gibbs et al. 2011) and relied on each other via digital communication. These fears, in addition to widespread online sexual harassment, suggest that the most pleasurable experience for women was using dating apps *with other women*. Similarly, men seemed to find joking with their friends more fun than actually meeting women offline. When men shifted to genuine interactions with women, they shied away from their peers for fear of being seen as un-masculine. Fear thus structures, and limits, the potential sexual scripts for heterosexual women and men.

Due to how women and men collectively perform gender within peer groups, it seems that heterosexual dating app norms reproduce rather than challenge existing social structures. In short, heterosexual fun upholds the "tragedy of heterosexuality" (Ward 2020). Men perform masculinity that is emotionally detached from women and bolster each other's masculine identity at women's expense. Given the sexual harassment they experience, heterosexual women seek each other's company. Further, findings show that women of color had difficulty finding matches and relating to their white peers. Thus, heteronormative dating app norms also centered whiteness.

Given how fraught heterosexual students were in their descriptions of dating app experiences, it is worth considering why they bother using them, and how dating app practices could be done differently. One suggestion from the findings is that users need to be distinguished from the technological aspects of dating apps. By conflating misrepresentation and online sexual harassment with the design of apps, users who misrepresent or harass are absolved of their behavior, which in turn normalizes gender hierarchy and misogyny (Hlvaka 2014; Hollander 2001; Pascoe and Hollander 2016). Another suggestion is that users need to work together *across* social categories in order to address their shared fears. While gender and race structure their experiences, all dating app users in this study worried about the uncertainty dating apps brought into their lives. Working with friends *and* their matches could produce more egalitarian sexual scripts that allow for a wider variety of desires and pleasures.

Future research can build on the limitations of this study. Notably, the sample is limited. With men being underrepresented, as well as minority populations, it is difficult to make strong claims regarding how these differences affect dating app collective practices. By sampling diverse populations, future research could show how people rely on their peers across and within social categories. Finally, although dating apps share many features, it is worth considering how other dating apps shape users' collective experiences. Research that systematically incorporates a systematic analysis of both the technological differences and collective practices across social categories could yield considerable insight into the collective sociotechnical processes examined here.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to report for this study.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted with IRB approval from Kent State University and was conducted according to the ethical standards set by the Declaration of Helsinki.

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