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Sexual Hookups via Dating Apps: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of Black Men Who Have Sex with Men in Florida

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SEXUAL HOOKUPS VIA DATING APPS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN FLORIDA

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Background: Sexual hookups via social media dating apps have been understudied among Black men who have sex with men (BMSM). **Purpose:** The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the role of dating apps on hookup culture and to describe the sexual experiences among BMSM in Florida. Specifically, this research delves into various sexual hookup themes. **Methods:** Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with BMSM participants aged 18 to 25 in Florida who self-identified as frequent dating app users. A grounded theory approach was applied to thematically analyze the hookup encounters and the factors that drive these perceptions and experiences among BMSM. QSR NVIVO 12 was used to code, categorize, and collect emergent themes. **Results:** Three major themes emerged depicting the complexities of hookup culture using social media dating applications among BMSM. 1. Positive hookup experiences were linked to feelings of “no strings attached” to some participants, while others associated this positive experience to the use of alcohol and drugs; 2. Negative hookup experiences revolved around miscommunication on sexual roles, catfishing, and disclosure of HIV status; 3. Psychological aspects of hookups were centered on feelings of regret, disbelief, and disgust after a sexual hookup encounter. **Discussion:** Understanding BMSM hookup culture could aid in the development of prioritized evidence-based interventions for behavioral change to improve safer sexual health encounters among this vulnerable population

Introduction | Hookup culture is increasingly becoming engrained in popular culture and signals a shift from traditional sexual practices. The literature classifies hookup culture ranging from behaviors such as, kissing, petting, oral sex, and intercourse that occurs outside of a relationship.¹ A very high prevalence of hookups ranging from 65% to 85% was consistently found among both male and female college-aged students.^{3,4} Moreover, there remains notable gaps in the literature depicting the prevalence of hookup encounters among blacks who identify as gay.

The explosion of social media applications in the late 2000s transformed men who have sex with men (MSM) hookup encounters, from a chance meeting in bars and sex shops to orchestrated meetups while sitting on the couch made possible by technology.⁴ In a large three-city study, 205 (MSM) were reported to have spent, on average, 34 hours per week on social media sites. Little over half had arranged sexual hookups online in the previous 3 months.⁵ Such trends in concert with other factors have led to adverse sexual

health outcomes among gay men. In the context of sexual health, this new social trend is a public health concern. Early analysis has indicated individuals who used social media applications for hooking up had greater odds of testing positive for STIs/HIV than those who met traditionally, including MSM.⁶

Extant research has revealed predominant end-users of online apps are between the ages of 12-29 years old.⁷ Confidentiality accompanied by using direct messaging has fueled hookup culture prevalence among this age group. Many of these social media apps are being used to facilitate hookups especially among disenfranchised populations who are usually afraid of discrimination and rejection by their peers. However, there remains notable gaps in research. Formative research has not explored the differences in the association between the use of social media applications and adverse health outcomes as it relates to black gay men.⁵ Moreover, research has revealed, African-Americans are detailed to spend more time on social media applications compared to the general adult population.⁸ Additionally, the Lesbian, Gay,

Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community utilizes social media applications more than heterosexual cohorts.⁸

It is well documented in the literature that Black men who have sex with men (BMSM) are disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS and remain at substantial risk for other adverse health outcomes.⁹ Gay, Bisexual, and other MSM accounted for roughly 2 percent of the population in the US, however, they accounted for 63 percent of newly diagnosed HIV cases.⁹ The HIV/AIDS epidemic seems to go unaddressed in this population, by public health efforts as compared to their counterparts. If trends persist, 50 percent of BMSM will be diagnosed with HIV over their lifetime.¹⁰ Geographical disparities reveal that those who reside in the southern region of the United States have an increased lifetime HIV diagnosis risk.¹⁰ Increases in other STIs among BMSM include gonorrhea, chlamydia, primary and secondary syphilis, which remain a reoccurring public health threat.⁹ Several factors related to individuals' sexual behaviors, networks, sexual partners, and stigma are drivers of high STI incidence rates among BMSM.¹¹

Yet, there is a paucity of research that has examined the hookup experiences of BMSM using social media dating applications. This population is often mistrustful of divulging personal sexual health history to research investigators. Given the considerable research that sheds light on hookup culture among heterosexual cohorts, there is a substantial gap in qualitative research designs that concentrates on the experiences of BMSM hookup culture. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the sexual hookup experiences of BMSM via social media dating applications.

Methods | This study employed a grounded theory methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss.¹² A grounded theory approach allows for a deep and rich exploration of the connection between social media applications, hookup culture, and sexual health experiences. The grounded theory process allows for researchers to move in and out of the data collection and data analysis process.¹³ After obtaining IRB approval from the institution affiliated with the authors, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Each scheduled interview lasted between 30-45 minutes. Participants were audio-taped with their permission and each interview was carefully transcribed verbatim. Personal identifiers were removed, and interviewees were assigned a "reference code". Participants were required to sign a consent form before their participation in the study.

Participant Recruitment. A purposive snowballing sampling that involves asking interviewees to

nominate other potential candidates for interviewing was employed to recruit participants.¹⁴ The target population for this study included (BMSM), or black men who identify as gay. The inclusion criteria of this study required each participant to have had prior hookup experience using any of the social media applications (Jack'd, Grindr, or Tinder). All participants had either current or prior use of the aforementioned applications. The age ranges of the study population were 18-25, but not exceeding 25 years of age, based on the inclusion criteria. A total of 17 BMSM between the ages of 18-25 were interviewed with a median age of 24, upon reaching theoretical saturation. Studies using a qualitative methodology have not established a set sample size to accomplish data saturation. Notably, a study conducted by Guest et al. (2006)¹⁵ infers those 12 interviews meet the threshold to achieve experimental saturation for sexual behavior research.

Data Analysis. QSR NVIVO™ 12 qualitative software was used to aid in data management and analysis. Two investigators assigned codes to the data extracted from the transcribed interviews. The codes were compared for differences to ensure the maintenance of inter-rater reliability and validity during the coding process.¹⁶ After all codes were extracted from the data, categorization of the codes allowed the investigators to capture relevant themes from the data. Theoretical propositions were compared to emergent concepts, theories, or hypotheses of existing literature.¹⁷

An in-depth semi-structured interview guide was developed to further explore respondents' perspectives on an idea, program, or situation. After extensive consultation of individuals in the HIV/AIDS field, two research questions were developed: 1. What are the sexual hookup experiences of BMSM via social media dating applications? 2. How are the various themes of BMSM sexual hookup experiences categorized? Exploring the study participants' thoughts and behaviors allowed for a complete picture of the impact of these online applications on sexual health experiences among BMSM.

Results | A deep analysis of the research unveiled three major themes from the coding, categorizing, and theming iterative process.

1. Positive Hookup experiences
2. Negative Hookup experiences
3. Psychological aspects of hook-ups

Defining hookup experiences: Participants were asked, what does the word "hook-up" mean to you? Most of the interviewees responded with traditional sexual acts ranging from casual dates, "chillin" with a friend, kissing, oral sex, and penetrative sex. New

practices of defining hookups arose, including using alcohol and drugs to facilitate hookup encounters. Two study participants defined hookups as:

You meet someone, you guys might smoke together, might drink and then you do what you like to do and go your separate ways. -Participant Age 24

Having like casual sex, pretty much no strings attached, nothing after that. I mean there is the two parties decide they want to do something again... Anal sex, oral sex- Participant Age 25

Theme 1 Positive Hookup Experiences

Participants experienced an array of hookup experiences; however, most categorized their encounters as either a positive hookup experience or bad hookup experience. When asked what constituted a positive hookup experience most responses centered around sex, the actual encounter, also the use of alcohol, and drugs. (Figure 1, Word cloud Positive Hookup experiences). One participant referenced:

I've had good experiences where I was hosted very well, I was shown through a guy's house, they would offer me water, drinks, anything like if I smoke, but I don't smoke and they offered me drinks, they will say oh, do you want to watch a movie, do you want like -- what do you want to do. -Participant Age 24

One participant noted the feeling of having “no strings attached” or not having to be connected to the person after the hookup experiences as an overall positive experience stating:

The good thing about some hook-ups are that you have something with someone with no strings attached and they're not trying to run me down and be all over me. -Participant Age 24

A subtheme of survival sex emerged from this research. Two interviewees reported hooking up as a means of “survival sex.” Survival sex is the exchange of sex in return for material support and sometimes money.¹⁸ The concept of survival sex in the gay community is prevalent and disproportionately impacts BMSM. When probed further on this phenomenon, one participant stated:

Basically, what survival sex is for the people who are in really low situations like they're either homeless or they've been kicked out of the house and basically, they might be a little low on rent or something and they use sex as a means to like a transfer of goods or they're like courting sex with some thought of gain- Participant Age 23

Theme 2 Negative hookup experiences

A few of the participants classified their experiences as negative or bad. Participants mentioned a variety of traditional negative experiences ranging from small male anatomy sizes, terrible sex, and disclosure of HIV status. With respect to terrible sex and not having a connection with a potential hook-up partner a participant stated:

There have been a few bad hook-ups I'm not going to lie, where it's just you're not really connecting with the person or you're just really not that into it for some reason or it's just maybe the sex is bad and that's the reason. So those hook-ups have been a not a favorite obviously. – Participant Age 25

I just had the urge to ask this guy are you HIV positive. And this was in between us like kissing and groping on each other stuff like that and I don't know, something just did not click and I was like – I don't know, I just asked him again and he was like oh, you know, if you want me to be honest with you and if you do not judge me so yes. - Participant Age 24

The respondents also mentioned the term “Catfished” explaining it as the intended hookup party’s use of a fake identity profile to secure that encounter. Participants also mentioned their overall hookup experience as bad if the sex during their encounter was not pleasurable. (Figure 2, Word cloud Negative Hookup experiences)

The bad has looked like I guess typically a lot of people probably say it is like oh, where you pull up and they do not look the same as they did in the picture. So, like catfishing.” “The bad has been where it wasn't just the sex was actually bad. – Participant Age 24

Theme 3 Psychological Aspects of Hooking Up

Interviewees were asked, “How did you feel after hooking up using any social media applications? The participants had a range of experiences from feelings of regret, which were associated with “bad feelings”, “feeling disgusted” and disbelief of a hook-up occurring. Most respondents reported that they wished they had known their hook-up encounter longer before deciding to engage in intercourse. With respect to feelings of regret, some participants had an immense feeling of disbelief after a hook-up encounter. Terms to describe the interactions were disbelief, regret, guilt, and reconsideration. At least 11 of the 17 participants experienced feelings of regret after a hook-up.

To illustrate feelings of disbelief:

Sometimes I'm like oh, my God, did I just do this, did I just hook-up with this person, I don't really know this person from a can of paint. – Participant Age 25

To illustrate feelings of regret:

Immediately following that I felt regret a little bit, I guess I would say to myself because for the longest I thought of myself having sex after marriage or at least having sex when I am in a relationship. – Participant Age 20

To illustrate feelings of disgust:

I feel disgusted. It depends on my connection with the person. For me that is what it's all about. - Participant Age 23

One participant described feeling psychologically overwhelmed and saddened to point of crying.

I cried. Because I don't like sleeping with people that I don't know, or I much prefer a connection. I don't like to be like everybody else or I just don't like to participate in anything risky that I know that is wrong. I just wouldn't have done it. - Participant Age 24

Discussion | The purpose of this study was to explore the role of social media applications and the experiences of BMSM who are end-users of the technology. Three major themes were extracted from the research including the positive hookup experiences, negative hookup experiences, and psychological aspects of hooking up. One unexpected theme of survival sex emerged depicting the complex experiences of hookups overall. The emergent themes from this research study are discussed further.

The results of this study unveil the intricate connection between positive and negative hookup encounters, and the psychological impacts individuals may experience. While often described as positive hookup encounters, participants in the study often had negative experiences that would occur after a hookup encounter. The wide range of sexual behaviors accompanied by substance abuse can lead to significant risk of STIs/HIV, and overall adverse health outcomes. While drug use and other substance use may facilitate the ease of a hookup encounter using social media apps, this can ultimately lead to condomless sexual encounters, sexual violence, failure to discuss relevant sexual health history, and sexual exploitation.

The unexpected subtheme of survival emerged as both a positive and negative hookup experience, both filling a needed transaction and an unannounced, one-sided expectation. Extant research defines survival sex as the exchange of sex in turn for material resources and support, which usually involves money.¹⁸ Participants noted survival sex as a necessity to aid in clothing, food, shelter, and a means of making additional income. This finding is poignant as the occurrence of survival sex is prevalent and disproportionately impacts racial and ethnic minorities. This phenomenon is exacerbated among individuals who are part of the LGBTQ community. Consequently, BMSM bear the brunt of social stigma, isolation, and an increased risk of homelessness, which in turn can increase the risk of survival sex. Survival sex with known and unknown sexual partners can increase the risk of STIs/HIV.

Additionally, findings depict that while hookup encounters could be categorized into positive and negative hookup experiences, psychological outcomes typically ensue. As noted by study participants, feelings of regret, disgust, and disbelief were the wide range of emotions felt after a hookup encounter. These findings are important because BMSM should be made aware of the psychological toll future encounters could have. As noted, increasing one's awareness of the negative and positive aspects of engaging in hookup encounters allows individuals to make an informed decision to endeavor into hookups.

Limitations. This study involved a rigorous in-depth analysis of rich qualitative experiences of Floridian BMSM. By its nature, qualitative analysis focuses on extracting in-depth insights from fewer participants. Therefore, the generalizability of findings beyond the study is limited due to the use of a convenience sample, a small sample size, and the qualitative nature of the research. The snowballing sampling method may have driven the small sample size, especially when individuals hooked up with persons outside the specified age range. Other limitations of the study were the exclusion of other LGBTQ+ persons or other Black minority demographics to capture their hook-up experiences using social media applications.

Implications for Public Health Practice. Understanding the role and stigma of hookup culture plays a vital role in reducing the prevalence of STIs/HIV infections among BMSM in the U.S. Findings from this qualitative research may be of value to local, state, and national STI and HIV departments. Health educators and frontline staff that conduct outreach to this disenfranchised population need to understand the intricate relationship of using social media dating applications and sexual health experiences of BMSM. The need for appropriate and

relevant health communication messaging, which seeks to eliminate stigmatization of individuals could be a pathway for tailored evidence-based interventions for BMSM.

Future Research. Exploring the broad and overarching concept of hook-up culture among BMSM, provided some of the much-needed information to reach this population. Moreover, there were ideas that emerged from the study which, merits further research. Survival sex was a subcategory that emerged under two themes in the study. Future research should focus on this concept and the health outcomes related to this reoccurring phenomenon. Additional research should also include the hook-up culture of other disenfranchised minorities, such as the Black Latinx population. Currently, Latinx men who

have sex with men were at the highest risk for HIV acquisition in 2017.²⁰ Finally it would be advantageous to expand the age range of participants to beyond 25 as risky sexual behaviors do not cease at that age.

Conclusions | This study provides insight into the hookup experiences of a population that is typically underrepresented in research. Few studies have been conducted that examined the intricate relationship of social media applications and hook-up experiences among BMSM and its associated health outcomes. Understanding hook-up culture among BMSM could aid in developing interventions that recognize the myriad of issues Black gay men face while using these applications. Since BMSM account for a significant portion of all new HIV infections in the U.S, this research is timely and advisable.

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