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Beyond the Surface: Understanding the “Blurred Lines” of Sexual
Dynamics and Consent in Trinity College's Hookup Scene

Zoe Kon

Trinity College

An Interdisciplinary Thesis in Public Health

Advised by Rebecca Beebe

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Introduction

College students live, communicate, and have sex in very different ways than they did fifteen years ago. The exploration of romantic and sexual relationships within college environments is a critical area of social concern, especially in the context of consent and sexual assault. College campuses across the nation are recognized as critical sites for investigating issues of sexual safety and the complexities surrounding consensual interactions. Recent statistics suggest a troubling prevalence of sexual assault cases in these educational settings, with 26.4% of females and 6.8% of males experiencing rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation¹, highlighting a gap between awareness campaigns and actual student experiences. It is known that many sexual assaults on college campuses go largely unreported, but not concretely why.

Against this backdrop, there exists a pressing need to understand how college students themselves perceive and navigate romantic and sexual encounters. This includes examining the language of consent, the social cues involved in intimate interactions, and the overarching cultural norms that may influence these dynamics. The experiences of students at Trinity College provide a valuable lens through which we can better understand these phenomena, as they reflect broader patterns of behavior that are relevant within and beyond the Trinity community.

My experiences and ethnographic research at Trinity College provide a unique lens through which to view the interactions of student life, hookup culture, and coercive practices. These experiences, coupled with the insights gained from engaging with peers for four years and conducting student interviews, highlight a significant gap in awareness and understanding of

¹ Cantor, David, et al. Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct. Association of American Universities, 17 Jan. 2020, p. 125, [https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU-Files/Key-Issues/Campus-Safety/Revised%20Aggregate%20report%20%20and%20appendices%201-7_\(01-16-2020_FINAL\).pdf](https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU-Files/Key-Issues/Campus-Safety/Revised%20Aggregate%20report%20%20and%20appendices%201-7_(01-16-2020_FINAL).pdf).

sexual dynamics and consent on campus. This unique insider perspective as a researcher affords me a significant advantage: students communicate with me more honestly and comfortably, viewing me as a peer. This thesis aims to delve into these intricate social interactions by directly engaging with students' voices, whose personal narratives and experiences are often lost in broader quantitative studies. Focusing on detailed qualitative insights, this research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of consent, coercion, and the often blurred lines of personal boundaries within the college setting.

It contributes to the broader academic discourse on sexual consent and assault within college settings, providing a detailed examination of these issues in an ethnographic context. This allows for a nuanced understanding of how different environments influence sexual behavior and consent. By highlighting how consent is communicated and perceived within hookup culture, this research supports cultural change towards more respectful and explicit sexual interactions. Ultimately, empowering students by validating their experiences and perspectives, facilitating a more engaged and supportive college community that upholds safety and respect in all interpersonal relationships.

A significant portion of sexual assault incidents fall into a grey area, where individuals feel that consent was not fully established. They may feel violated or uncomfortable during the encounter, yet unsure about how to halt the progression, or they may only recognize their discomfort retrospectively, struggling to articulate whether what occurred was indeed a sexual assault. This ambiguity can be especially pronounced when there was no overt violence or when the other party had previously been a partner in consensual sexual experiences. This grey area of consent and sexual coercion remains largely unreported and poorly understood, which poses a

substantial challenge in both research and educational efforts aimed at understanding the dynamics of sexual assault on college campuses.

The primary objective of this study is to engage with both male and female college students, from freshmen to seniors, to gain a deep understanding of the campus culture, particularly focusing on their personal lives, communication styles, sexual behaviors, and relationship dynamics. This research aims to document and analyze the social and cultural norms that influence student interactions, especially in romantic and sexual contexts. Through comprehensive interviews, the study seeks to collect rich, contextual narratives that reveal how students navigate their intimate and social lives within the college environment and create mythos.

This investigation will delve into how students communicate their desires, boundaries, and consent and how their peers receive and interpret these communications. It will explore the specifics of how students initiate, what they think consent to be, and engage in sexual activities and relationships, seeking to uncover the underlying factors that lead to both consensual and non-consensual encounters. By gathering detailed stories from students about their experiences and emphasizing the context, this thesis aims to construct a layered understanding of how complex social interactions and cultural expectations shape miscommunications and ambiguous consent. The ultimate goal is to identify potential areas for intervention that could enhance clarity and safety in sexual and romantic interactions on campus.

At Trinity College, the hookup culture is characterized by ambiguous boundaries between consensual interactions and sexual assault, a reality that students are aware of yet continue to participate in. Despite knowing that sexual assaults occur within this context and that the lines of consent are often unclear, students still willingly engage in hookup culture. This engagement is

driven by the social relevance and the perception that one's reputation is a pivotal asset in college life. Thus, pursuing social standing often leads students to navigate these blurred lines despite the risks involved. This thesis explores the nuanced dynamics within student encounters that contribute to misunderstandings and ambiguous consent in a collegiate setting.

The significance of studying how hookup culture at Trinity College blurs the lines between sexual assault and consensual sexual interactions is substantial, primarily because it enhances student safety and well-being. By delving into the specific elements of hookup culture that contribute to confusion and misunderstandings about consent, this research can lead to the development of targeted interventions designed to clarify these ambiguities. Such clarity has the potential to reduce incidents of sexual assault significantly. Through analyzing the findings of my interviews—students' voices and lived experiences—I aim to enlighten and inform better campus policies and educational programs, enabling the creation of more effective consent education and sexual assault prevention strategies that resonate with the actual experiences of students rather than relying on reactive approaches that may not fully address the unique dynamics of the campus environment.

In exploring the intersection of hookup culture and consent at Trinity College, it becomes evident that the technical definitions of terms do not always align with student interpretations and experiences. This discrepancy highlights a crucial aspect of cultural mythos—while a word or concept might have a precise dictionary definition, its real-world application and understanding can differ significantly. For instance, 'consent' might be clearly defined in legal or policy terms, yet how it is perceived, communicated, and understood among students can vary, creating a complex expression of meanings. The language people use to discuss consent can often be blurry, adding to the ambiguity that permeates students' interactions. This phenomenon

raises the question: What becomes the true meaning of such terms? Is it bound by its technical definition or reshaped by collective interpretation and cultural practice? This exploration does not aim to arbitrate these definitions but rather to present a neutral reflection of how students navigate and articulate these concepts within their social and sexual engagements, often using blurred language that reflects the complexity of their experiences. Such insights are crucial for understanding not just the mythos of consent on campus but also for developing interventions and policies that resonate with students' lived realities.

Sexual assault remains a critical concern on college campuses, characterized by complex interactions influenced by the unique social and environmental contexts that exist in these spaces. This environment is conducive to behaviors that may lead to assault due to factors such as peer pressure, substance use, and ambiguous understandings of consent². The literature points out that these assaults often occur in contexts where institutional policies are insufficiently enforced or where sex education and sexual assault prevention education are lacking, leading to significant underreporting.³

Hookup culture significantly impacts student interactions, promoting sexual encounters that are often devoid of emotional commitment and lack real communication. This cultural norm complicates the dynamics of consent, with studies suggesting that the informal nature of hookups can lead to misunderstandings and consent violations.⁴ The normalization of such encounters

² Pugh, Brandie, and Becker, Patricia. "Exploring Definitions and Prevalence of Verbal Sexual Coercion and Its Relationship to Consent to Unwanted Sex: Implications for Affirmative Consent Standards on College Campuses." *Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 8, Aug. 2018, p. 69. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs8080069>.

³ Lindo, Jason M., et al. "College Party Culture and Sexual Assault." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, vol. 10, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 236–65. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160031>.

⁴ Broach, Jennifer L., and Patricia A. Petretic. "Beyond Traditional Definitions of Assault: Expanding Our Focus to Include Sexually Coercive Experiences." *Journal of Family Violence*, vol. 21, no. 8, Dec. 2006, pp. 477–86. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-006-9045-z>.

exacerbates the challenges of fostering a campus environment where clear and affirmative consent is understood and respected.⁵

Power dynamics within influential campus groups such as Greek Life and athletic teams critically shape the social landscape, creating structures of informal social control in student life. These organizations often perpetuate harmful norms that can encourage sexual misconduct among their members⁶ while also not providing adequate education and remediating measures. Furthermore, the authority and prestige associated with these groups can shield perpetrators from accountability, complicating efforts to address and reform problematic behaviors.⁷ The responses to such incidents within these groups are frequently blurry, lacking clarity and consistency, which further obscures the process of holding individuals accountable and addressing the underlying issues.

Coercive sexual assault is especially prevalent on college campuses, involving subtle pressures rather than overt force. This type of assault often goes unrecognized because it doesn't align with the stereotypical narratives of violent sexual assault, making it difficult for victims to recognize and report their experiences.⁸ The literature underscores the need for educational programs that specifically address the nuances of coercion and teach students to recognize and resist such pressures.⁹

⁵ Pham, Janelle M. "Campus Sex in Context: Organizational Cultures and Women's Engagement in Sexual Relationships on Two American College Campuses." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 34, no. 1, Mar. 2019, pp. 138–57. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12489>.

⁶ Allison, Rachel, and Margaret Ralston. "Opportune Romance: How College Campuses Shape Students' Hookups, Dates, and Relationships." *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 3, July 2018, pp. 495–518. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2018.1479200>.

⁷ Lindo, Jason M., et al. "College Party Culture and Sexual Assault." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, vol. 10, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 236–65. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160031>.

⁸ Carline, Anna, et al. "Too Drunk to Consent? Exploring the Contestations and Disruptions in Male-Focused Sexual Violence Prevention Interventions." *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, June 2018, pp. 299–322. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663917713346>.

⁹ Herbenick, Debby, et al. "Prevalence and Characteristics of Choking/Strangulation during Sex: Findings from a Probability Survey of Undergraduate Students." *Journal of American College Health*, vol. 71, no. 4, May 2023, pp. 1059–73. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1920599>.

The digital age has transformed how students communicate and form relationships, with social media platforms playing a pivotal role. While facilitating connectivity, these platforms also introduce challenges in maintaining clear boundaries and understanding non-verbal cues of consent.¹⁰ Moreover, gaps in sex education contribute to misconceptions about consent, often leaving students unprepared to navigate complex sexual encounters responsibly.¹¹

The widespread availability of pornography has altered expectations around sex, often portraying unrealistic and sometimes violent scenarios that can distort perceptions of “normal” sexual behavior.¹² This exposure influences how students perceive and engage in sexual activities, potentially normalizing aggressive behaviors and undermining the concept of mutual consent.¹³ The concepts of “normal” sex that emerge from such influences are often blurred, contributing to further confusion among students about what constitutes acceptable and consensual sexual interactions. This blurring of sexual concepts complicates efforts to foster a clear understanding of healthy sexual relationships.

The small size and intense social environment of Trinity College amplify both the positive and negative aspects of campus sexual dynamics. The close-knit community can lead to enhanced scrutiny and gossip, which impacts how sexual assault cases are perceived and handled. This setting provides a unique case study exploring how such environments influence student behavior and campus policy.

¹⁰ Giarla, Veronica. *GENERATIONAL SOCIAL MEDIA: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES THE ONLINE AND IN-PERSON RELATIONSHIPS OF GEN X, GEN Y AND GEN Z*. 2019. Salem State University, Undergraduate Honors Thesis, <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.13013/699>.

¹¹ Richman, Billy. *Sexual Assault in Greek Life: A Literature Review*. 2023. SUNY Brockport, Masters Project Literature Review, <https://soar.suny.edu/handle/20.500.12648/14080>.

¹² Allison, Rachel. “Asking out and Sliding in: Gendered Relationship Pathways in College Hookup Culture.” *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 3, Sept. 2019, pp. 361–83. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-09430-2>.

¹³ Wade, Lisa. *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*. First edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.

These publications, although extremely important and informative, are not ethnographic and lack an insider's perspective and understanding of how students engage with one another and find the nuanced components and patterns that lead to incidents of miscommunication, coercion, and sexual assault. Integrating personal insights and detailed analysis from various studies aims to foster a deeper understanding of these issues and contribute to more effective interventions and policies.

Methods

Study Design

As an undergraduate student researcher embedded in the college community for four years, the research approach embodies ethnographic principles. My extended presence within the college environment facilitates a deep understanding of the culture, norms, and social dynamics prevalent among undergraduate students. This insider perspective allows me to engage in participant observation, drawing on firsthand experiences and interactions to gather rich, contextually embedded data.

Through ongoing immersion in the college culture, I have adopted an ethnographic lens to explore aspects of undergraduate life. My position as a student has allowed me to establish rapport with fellow students by leveraging my insider status, enabling candid discussions and insights into their experiences. Thus, while my role may differ from that of a professional ethnographer, my study represents a form of ethnographic research grounded in the university community's lived experiences and cultural context.

Qualitative research can capture detailed accounts of individuals' experiences within the college culture, facilitating a nuanced understanding of social dynamics and cultural norms among undergraduate students. Through methods like interviews and participant observation,

qualitative research allows for exploring complex issues within their specific contexts. The qualitative method enables participants to authentically share their perspectives and narratives, contributing to constructing knowledge about their experiences and fostering a deeper understanding of Trinity's campus culture.

This study sought to explore the nuanced dynamics of hookup culture at Trinity College, focusing particularly on how students perceive and enact consent within this context. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with thirty students, encompassing a diverse mix of genders, ages, and years of study to ensure a broad perspective on the subject matter. During these interviews, I took notes but did not audio or video record. I then analyzed my notes using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to students' experiences and perceptions.

Participants

In this study, I gathered qualitative data through private, forty-five-minute interviews. The sample comprised thirty adults aged between eighteen and twenty-six, predominantly consisting of female participants (70%), and all were Trinity College students. Before commencing the interviews, the researcher underwent training on responding to disclosures of sexual assault and sexual violence, ensuring a supportive environment for participants. Trinity College's Institutional Review Board approved my study and procedures. I advertised my study through fliers around campus and personally solicited. Participants were offered a \$10 gift card as compensation. The inclusion criteria were:

1. A Trinity College student
2. 18 years of age or older

3. Have engaged sexually at Trinity with a fellow Trinity student, and willing to talk about it with me.

If the prospective participants did not meet one of these criteria, they were kindly notified that they were not an eligible participant and could not move forward with an interview.

Procedure

Potential participants were screened over text to ensure they met my inclusion criteria and to provide their informed consent before scheduling an interview. Interviews were in a private one-on-one setting. Interviews were conducted in a private, one-on-one neutral setting, with accommodations made for participants known to the researcher by offering the option of conducting interviews in familiar environments, either their own or the researcher's room. Participants were provided with a comprehensive explanation of the study objectives and the nature of the questions, after which oral consent was obtained. Participants were assured of their right to refrain from answering any question that caused discomfort and were informed of the option to stop the interview at any time. Although interviews were guided by a structured set of approximately 25 questions, flexibility was exercised to foster organic conversation about the participants' experiences at Trinity College. The study design was intentionally crafted to cultivate an environment conducive to participant comfort and autonomous interpretation of inquiries. The study was geared to make participants feel comfortable and interpret questions independently. Participants were encouraged to disclose information at their discretion, and in instances where elaboration was warranted, the researcher asked the participants if they felt comfortable expanding upon their answers. Detailed digital notes were taken during interviews while abstaining from audio or video recording to preserve participant confidentiality. Participant

anonymity was maintained by refraining from documenting names and modifying identifiable information. Thirty students were interviewed for the study, each receiving a digital \$10 Amazon gift card as compensation for their participation.

Data Analysis

The participant group comprised ten males and twenty females, representing a diverse cross-section of Trinity College regarding sexual orientation, socio-economic backgrounds, racial identities, and social experiences. The participants varied across academic standings; while most were seniors, all class levels from freshmen to seniors were included in the study, ensuring a comprehensive representation of the student body.

After completing the data collection phase, I compiled and refined my interview notes, focusing solely on participant responses by removing the questions. I then imported this refined data into AtlasTI, a software designed specifically for researchers to assist in identifying, organizing, and analyzing qualitative data. Using AtlasTI enabled me to detect recurring patterns and extract supporting quotes from the data. In addition to utilizing AtlasTI, I conducted further analysis independently to pinpoint particularly impactful quotes and derive quantitative insights from my qualitative interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Before commencing the interview process, I underwent training to equip myself with the skills necessary to respond to any disclosures of sexual assault and violence appropriately. This preparatory step was crucial for ensuring I was adequately prepared to handle sensitive information that participants might share. While I found the training to be a good reassurance, it

did not significantly alter my understanding or approach to responding to the discourse, as it largely reinforced what I already knew. After completing this training, I received approval from Trinity College's Institutional Review Board to begin conducting the interviews.

The ethical components considered were the sensitive topic of sexual assault. This study aims to find the patterns in campus culture that lead to sexual assault. Part of that conversation involves intimate questions that indirectly and directly relate to sexual assault and uncomfortable or traumatic experiences. I positioned my sensitive questions further into the interviews so the questions worked up in intensity. I also give a content warning when I ask my question that directly asks about sexual assault to warn participants and allow them to skip the question. I prepared for those conversations by getting trained in how to respond to disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Although I'm not a mandated reporter, if a participant discloses an assault during an interview, I offer a document of compiled resources available on and off campus.

While participants were offered a \$10 Amazon gift card as compensation for their participation, this amount does not serve as a sufficiently strong financial incentive to encourage individuals to share sensitive experiences, particularly those related to sexual assault.

Limitations

This study's notable limitation is the time investment required for conducting interviews. Given the researcher's status as a full-time student, logistical constraints hindered conducting a larger volume of interviews within the designated time frame for data collection, so there is a small sample size. While participants contributed valuable insights, the study participants may

only partially represent part of the student body of Trinity College. Consequently, the findings may reflect certain perspectives and experiences while potentially overlooking others.

Results

The findings reveal several key themes central to understanding the interplay between consent and hookup culture. I broke up key themes and components I found in my interviews into ten sections: Sexual assault Prevention Training at Trinity, What Trinity is Doing, Campus Culture, Parties, Hookup Culture, Social Pressures Around Hookup Culture, Social Media, Sex Students Are Having on Campus, The Blurred Lines of Consent, and Sexual Assault on Campus. In each section, these themes are broken down and analyzed to determine how they contribute to the mythos of student life and build up to how students understand consent and expectations for sex. To enhance the clarity and impact of the findings, this section incorporates direct quotations from the interviews conducted. These excerpts are presented at length when necessary to convey the participants' experiences and perspectives candidly. Retaining the full context of these statements is crucial, as it allows for a richer, more authentic representation of the students' voices. This approach counters the tendency to reduce individual stories to mere statistics, which can obscure the depth and nuance of the students' lived experiences. This study aims to provide the Trinity community with a profound understanding of student life and culture by presenting these detailed narratives. This, in turn, helps illuminate the underlying behaviors and conditions that contribute to broader issues within the campus environment.

Hookup culture at Trinity College is shaped by a complex interplay of factors that include communication norms, social media engagement, sexual education, and the prevalent practices of partying and drinking. Additionally, this culture is deeply influenced by the specific

subcontexts of the communities within which hookup culture occurs. For Trinity, these dynamics are further defined by the institution's unique characteristics—the type of students it attracts, the social scene dominated by Greek Life, pervasive informal social controls, a pronounced culture of alcohol consumption, and the high value placed on reputation among peers.

There is a complex interplay of social pressures, communication styles, and cultural norms that influence students' sexual behaviors and consent practices. From my data I have uncovered often overlooked or misunderstood aspects of student experiences and interactions that contribute to issues of sexual miscommunication and consent ambiguity.

When I inquired with participants about their definitions of hookup culture at Trinity, their responses were strikingly consistent. Most described it as pervasive, noting that hooking up is more common than dating, predominantly fueled by alcohol and social outings. The typical scenario involves attending parties with the explicit intention of meeting someone to potentially go home with. However, while this initial response captures a broad view, the depth of the interviews revealed much more about the intricate components that underpin this culture. These discussions provided valuable insights into the nuanced factors that drive and define the hookup dynamics at Trinity. Each of these elements contributes to a distinctively nuanced hookup culture that is both reflective of and unique to the Trinity College experience, which I further discuss throughout the paper. Participants indicated that while engaging in hookups is not essential, there is a prevalent expectation to participate in this behavior if one chooses to engage in the party scene, reinforcing the notion that hooking up is somewhat expected among those active in social gatherings.

1. Sexual Assault Prevention Training at Trinity

This section delves into the sexual assault prevention training programs provided to students at Trinity College, examining the methodologies, content, and efficacy of these educational efforts. At Trinity College, there are four different times a student would encounter mandatory sexual assault prevention training: freshman orientation, onboarding as a student employee, annual training for all student-athletes, and training when a student joins Greek Life. From my interviews with students, I will detail what these trainings provided to students on campus are like and their opinions.

There is an extensive freshman orientation for incoming freshmen at Trinity College. It evolves every year; however, it always includes some form of sexual assault prevention training and educational courses. Over the past four years, every student has at least had to complete an online course to come to campus. It is a required online module, and participants stated they often click through it or do not pay attention while the module runs. It involves limited interaction and attention to pass the module. Although it is required, many students do not complete this online course, which results in students being required to attend in-person training, which is also not highly enforced, as I had a participant disclosure that she did not do the online training and was supposed to go to the in-person training, however, did not show up and did not face any penalty.

In my interviews, students talked about the in-person sexual assault prevention training they had received at freshman orientation over the past two years. These students described a play put on for them during orientation by an external organization Trinity hired. The play had adults acting out scenes of sexual interaction and depicting what consent looks like. All participants who witnessed the play described it as “weird and funny” and that “it felt like a

joke.” The resounding opinion was that students did not take this educational play seriously. One sophomore female participant said that they wouldn’t even say the word “rape” in the play, and “watching all these boys destined for frats cheering was really uncomfortable and scary.”

(Female, sophomore) Additionally, I spoke with students who had been orientation leaders and said they were not pleased with the play. They felt they were yelled at when they voiced their disapproval and concerns about the play to the administration.

All student employees at Trinity are required to take a brief online training on sexual harassment and assault prevention. As a student worker, I remember taking the training and paying little attention to pass. Student employees at Trinity are also newly Responsible Employees, meaning they are all mandated reporters while on the clock¹⁴. This means that while you are working your job and you witness or hear about someone experiencing sexual assault or harassment or perpetrating it, you are mandated to report what you heard to Trinity’s Title IX office. I only learned this from the class I took, a public policy and law class offered at Trinity called *Title IX: Changing Campus Culture*. This information is not emphasized to student workers when they start their jobs.

Athletic Teams at Trinity received their own annual training. An online training course mandated by the National Collegiate Athletics Association is held over the summer. It is done within individual teams, in person, at the start of the year. It lets them know their Title IX rights with sexual misconduct and any kind of gender discrimination within NCAA sports.

In Greek Life at Trinity, there is training for all of Greek Life for new members when they join. When I asked participants who are members of Greek Life if they received any kind of sexual assault prevention training when they joined Greek Life, all male participants in

¹⁴ *Your Rights, Your Options A Guide for Victims, Survivors, and Accused Persons*. Trinity College, Dec. 2021, <https://www.trincoll.edu/campus-safety/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2021/08/YRYO2021.pdf>.

fraternities said they “do not think so” or “maybe” or “If we did, I don’t remember it.” All female participants within sororities remembered it being a training session with all new members of Greek Life, put on by the Title IX office when they joined, informing them of resources on campus for them if they encountered sexual assault. They also, without a trigger warning, read case studies of sexual encounters and had them decipher if that was consensual or not, which a participant told me was triggering for her. There is only one training required of the school for Greek Life, which occurs when new members join. Some Greek organizations have additional training from their national organization, which Trinity College does not require.

Participants spoke about an all-Greek Life meeting in the Fall of 2023. In this meeting, many issues were brought up, such as sexual assault on campus. According to student accounts and perception, in this meeting, a Trinity Dean made a comment alluding to women being at fault for their assaults by not reporting them to the school; hence, they are a large part of the problem.

What Trinity is Doing

In interviews, many students voiced negative experiences or perceptions about Trinity's Title IX office, with the common sentiment that “Trinity protects perpetrators because they are scared they will try and come after the school. Title XI favors perpetrators, and our Title XI coordinator is bad, which makes it clear she works for Trinity and not us.” (Female, senior). When I met with Shannon Lynch to discuss Title IX’s role in sexual assault reporting and the options students have in proceeding with the reporting process, as well as some of students' concerns. The Title IX office follows legal precedence, as it is an office meant to deal with and remedy reported incidents of sexual assault on campus, which means there are limitations on

what the coordinator can do. A Title IX coordinator has to remain a neutral party and can not be a student advocate or act proactively on campus. Trinity's Title IX office works in collaboration with The Woman and Gender Resource Action Center (WGRAC), the Counseling and Wellness Center, and the Dean of Community Life and Standards to help students get support they may not be able to receive through Title IX.

Shannon clarified that her ability to address anonymous reports is limited, as she lacks the victim's identity, which does not allow her to follow up and discuss further details or potential courses of action. In cases where multiple anonymous complaints are received about an individual, Shannon may convene a discussion with the accused perpetrator regarding the reported grievances, but her actions are constrained beyond this point. Victims who opt to proceed with their report are presented with two options: informal resolution or formal resolution. Informal resolution methods vary and may include mediation or the implementation of a mutual no-contact order tailored to the specifics of each case. On the other hand, formal resolution entails an investigation by an impartial investigator followed by a hearing before a panel of three members responsible for determining whether a policy violation occurred. Throughout this process, both parties typically engage in legal representation, and communication between Shannon and the involved parties occurs through their respective lawyers. Ultimately, the panel adjudicates the guilt or innocence of the accused perpetrator. Shannon noted that during her tenure, all students found guilty in these proceedings have faced expulsion, and despite appeals, these decisions have remained upheld.

A fraternity member recounted his experience grappling with a sexual assault issue reported to him, highlighting inherent challenges within the system. "There is a lot of backwardness in the rules," he remarked.

“Girls have approached me numerous times with incidents involving brothers in our fraternity. The first time, a group of girls came to me with an issue, and when I spoke with the deans and Title IX (you can't bring specific names to Title IX, or they will open a case), one of the deans said we should drop the new member from our organization. We decided to cut ties with him, and when we dropped him, we told them there might be a Title IX case, and if everything clears, we might take you back. The guy's family got a lawyer who intimidated the girl and tried to sue the frat. The deans said 'they can't speak on the matter anymore.' Similar situations have played out several times and are hard to deal with. We can't legally take action against the perpetrator if the victim doesn't file a case with Title IX. I think it's how so many men on campus get away with sexual assault.”
(Male, senior)

Shannon agreed, noting that perpetrators often count on victims' reluctance to report assaults due to fear of retaliation. Affiliation with a social organization offers perpetrators a shield of protection, as victims fear social isolation for challenging individuals with social power. Greek organizations face further constraints, as they are prohibited from expelling members solely due to Title IX cases because it is seen as Title IX retaliation. The complexity deepens with the multitude of rules and governing bodies involved. Shannon said that she recommends that these social organizations refer to campus safety when dealing with these incidents. However, I raised the issue that it is doubtful that fraternities would willingly engage campus security at their events, fearing potential repercussions such as party shutdowns or disciplinary measures. Ultimately, victims must decide whether to report and pursue formal disciplinary action. It's worth noting that not all victims seek discipline or justice; some simply desire validation and a platform to be heard. However, this falls outside the purview of the Title IX office, which is why Trinity has WGRAC.

I had a conversation with Laura Lockwood, the Director of WGRAC. Laura serves as a Confidential Employee¹⁵ and advocate for students, providing them with support and assistance

¹⁵ Confidential Employees are required to report basic information about the incident/s to the Title IX Coordinator and the director of Campus Safety, they do not reveal the names or identifying information of all parties involved unless there is imminent harm to the campus or the person/s disclosing.

in navigating their options. She helps students understand their experiences and determine the best course of action through Title IX or alternative avenues. Laura mentioned that many students she interacts with have experienced coercive sexual assault or situations where consent boundaries were blurred or unclear. These encounters can be confusing and distressing for students, as they may not fit the typical image of assault they are used to hearing about. To help them, Laura often provides resources like "Your Rights, Your Options: A Guide for Victims, Survivors, and Accused Persons"¹⁶ and guides them through it.

Laura highlighted proactive intervention and educational initiatives on campus, such as Students Expecting Consent (SEC) and the Green Dot¹⁷ training program. Trinity has invested significantly in Green Dot training over the past six years, which has proven to be an effective preventive measure by promoting bystander intervention. Laura emphasized the importance of students with social influence in getting Green Dot trained in the social scene, as she believes it would greatly enhance the safety culture. Additionally, SEC conducts workshops in first-year dormitories, led by students, to foster open conversations about sex and sexual assault, creating a supportive environment for education and discussion on these important issues.

Campus Culture

Trinity College is a small College with an undergraduate enrollment of just above two thousand students.¹⁸ Most students live on campus. Students who live off-campus are primarily

¹⁶ *Your Rights, Your Options A Guide for Victims, Survivors, and Accused Persons*. Trinity College, Dec. 2021, <https://www.trincoll.edu/campus-safety/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2021/08/YRYO2021.pdf>.

¹⁷ The Green Dot training program is a violence prevention strategy designed to promote bystander intervention in situations involving power-based personal violence, such as sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking. It aims to empower individuals to recognize potentially harmful situations and intervene safely to prevent violence from occurring. The program has two levels of training, the first being 72 minutes long and the second level, an intensive three hour session.

¹⁸ "About Trinity." *Trinity College*, <https://www.trincoll.edu/abouttrinity/>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

in Greek Life and athletic teams and live in the houses associated with their social organizations. These houses, although off campus, are all on streets bordering campus. Students tend to know most of their peers on a small campus with a lively social scene. Because so many people know each other, word travels fast. Everyone knows each other's business, such as who someone is sleeping with, dating, or talking to.

Unspecific to the school, Trinity has Greek Life, a strong party and hookup culture, and a significant presence of sexual assault. Informal social control is the unofficial mechanisms and norms that regulate behavior and maintain order through informal means, such as peer pressure, social expectations, and informal sanctions like gossip or disapproval. It operates through interactions among individuals and groups rather than formal laws or institutions. This form of control often shapes individuals' behavior to conform to societal norms and expectations, reinforcing accepted behaviors and discouraging deviance.

“Generally, students resolve conflict within the mechanisms of informal social control. Students find this method effective and efficient, being that the informal social control has norms governing for more extreme circumstances warranting external intervention. For example, more public physical altercations get reported to the college authorities. Those smaller, more private altercations, between friends, teammates, or GLO organizations go unreported.” (Aldeanueva, 11).

Freshmen who are not on athletic teams or don't have a strong group of friends to connect them to the larger community are part of students with low social capital. Students who lack a strong presence on campus—are not in clubs, Greek Life, or athletic teams, or do not have a strong affiliation with one—also fall into the category of students with low social capital.

Within informal social control at Trinity, there is a code of silence. The code of silence is a tacit agreement within social organizations to refrain from disclosing certain information or actions, particularly those that could disrupt social dynamics or challenge power structures. It

serves as a mechanism of informal social control to keep these exclusive groups in social power. Power structures within these exclusive groups and a specific hierarchy leave outcasts within them.¹⁹ A participant in a fraternity spoke on an incident “where a brother in the frat committed a sexual assault and had a non-contact order between him and the victim, and all the older guys in the frat hid it from me and other brothers in my year. It made me angry, and we should've kicked him out.” (Male, senior) This example illustrates the severe consequences for those who might consider breaking the code of silence; individuals who challenge this tacit agreement can be punished or socially ostracized by their group, underscoring the significant risks in confronting these entrenched norms.

Informal social control mechanisms permeate the social fabric of Trinity's campus, particularly within exclusive cohorts. Greek Organizations, in particular, are ingrained with an aura of prestige delineated by an implicit hierarchy. Certain sororities and fraternities enjoy elevated status and cachet, wielding more significant influence and fostering allegiance among their members. Deviating from allegiance to one's organization entails substantial risk to one's social capital and influence.

These organizations are reputed to enforce rigorous initiation rituals known as “hazing,” serving as rites of passage to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to the group. Similarly, within the realm of athletics, a comparable hierarchy of prestige prevails. Certain sports teams are esteemed as more desirable, affording their members enhanced social standing. Moreover, a symbiotic relationship exists between certain sports teams and Greek Organizations, wherein members of a given athletic team often enjoy preferential treatment or a streamlined pathway to membership within a corresponding Greek entity. This arrangement facilitates dual membership

¹⁹ Aldeanueva, Cristina. *Disequilibrium and Private Governance During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. 2022. Trinity College, Undergraduate Thesis.

in a prestigious athletic team and a Greek Organization, consolidating one's social prominence and influence within the campus milieu.

In addition to these formal social structures, students have also created unofficial, exclusive social groups that host parties in dorms, providing an alternative to the predominantly heteronormative, white-dominated party scene. These self-organized spaces cater to those who seek a different, more inclusive environment to have fun, away from the mainstream social gatherings.

Parties

Participants described Trinity as a party school, meaning there is a strong emphasis on a vibrant going-out scene. When I asked participants to describe these mainstream parties, the consensus was that they occur in fraternity houses. They are packed with many people, with little room to move freely. Most people are drunk, the music is loud, the overhead lights are off, with some colored or dim lights on, and as the night gets later, you will most likely see a dance-floor-makeout. Participants often talked about the sections of a party. They said there is a main room with dancing. In this room, elevated surfaces are around the edges, typically reserved for women in sororities. The second section of a party is in a quieter area where people have conversations, often in the kitchen or hallways. The third section is upstairs.

Being a man in a fraternity or popular athletic team gives you an upper hand for nightlife at Trinity since most parties take place at fraternities. Nightlife occurs Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights on campus. There is a series of events that ensue before the party starts. For female students, it starts with getting ready together. Participants described the ritual of getting ready with their roommates and friends, gathering around mirrors as they style their hair and

apply makeup, all while listening to music and enjoying their first drink of the evening. They would then assist each other in selecting outfits. One participant shared, “My friends and I, along with other girls at parties, opt for pretty skimpy tops. You want to show cleavage and skin—these aren't tops you'd wear to class. But it can also drop to below freezing, so we drink and call it an 'alcohol blanket' to keep us warm.” (Female, senior)

Next in the night comes a smaller party called a pregame or a mixer. Most friend groups will have a pregame before going out, where most of the night's alcohol is consumed. It is a small gathering with friends in a dorm or house where everyone hangs out with music, plays some drinking games, and drinks as much as they can before the party, as fraternities only serve beer. A male participant said, “There is always a pregame or a mixer with a sorority; usually, the lights are on.” (Male, sophomore) Another male participant commented that pre-games are usually more chill, involve more conversation, and are often single-sex gatherings. Pre Games usually start at around 9:30 PM, and it's where groups make their plans for the night, where they want to go, who they want to see, and maybe who they want to go home with.

A mixer is an alternative to a pregame for many Greek organizations and athletic teams. A mixer is held at a fraternity, sorority, or athletic house. It is where a male social organization and a female social organization have a smaller party before the main party. Members of these organizations are expected to attend and create this exclusive atmosphere of familiarity between the two organizations. A female participant said, “It felt like mixers were to meet guys.” Mixers give people in these organizations a preference in hooking up and dating, as it gives them a space to mingle and talk with less “competition” before the actual party starts. They are not overtly for this reason, but a participant said, “After joining my sorority, I participated in hookup culture

more. Probably because I was going to more mixers and frat parties, but my other friends were doing it, so it felt normal.” (Female, senior)

The frats will “open,” as they refer to it, meaning they will open their house into a bigger party around 10:30 or 11 PM. They station one to three brothers or pledges at the fraternity's door. These boys get to decide who gets let into their party. Some frats are more exclusive with whom they let in than others. Parties are the primary mechanism through which people meet potential hookups, serving as a pivotal facilitator for the hookup culture that is so prevalent at Trinity. This setting encourages social interaction and significantly shapes the dynamics of how and with whom students engage romantically and sexually with.

I received different accounts on three different fraternities at Trinity College. One participant said that a frat she frequents “tells their new members to let in all the women, and a boy has to be approved over the phone with a brother.” (Female, senior) Men not in these Greek organizations or on affiliated sports teams find it hard to get in. A participant in a fraternity said when talking about who they let into their parties, “People show up at the door. If it’s empty, we let most people in. If you are a girl, you have a better chance of getting in than a guy. If a dude shows up with a bunch of girls, we let them in. We don't discriminate against any ‘type’ of girl; we let them all in.” (Male, senior) However, another female participant said

“Parties can be exclusive and tend to exclude international students and people of color. Once, I was at a party at a frat, and this girl from my class said it was her first time in the frat because they never let her in. She said they don’t let many POC in, and they only let her in because there was an administrator at the door making them let in people they don’t usually let in.” (Female, senior)

Mainstream Greek Life at Trinity is not racially diverse, whether that be intentional or unintentional. This lack of diversity is also evident in their parties, where six participants commented that the gatherings visibly consist of primarily white students, with one participant

saying, “Race is a factor at these parties. Trinity is very racially segregated, and POC don't feel comfortable at frats. Women of color especially feel scared of frats because of their reputations of sexual assault.” (Female, senior) Reflecting the overall composition of the student body, more than half of Trinity College’s enrolment is white students²⁰; these social gatherings not only mirror but amplify this demographic characteristic, with an even higher percentage of white attendees. Additionally, Trinity is known for having the fifth highest percentage of students who are considered "one percenters" in the country²¹, further influencing the social dynamics and perceptions within these Greek Life events.

According to my interviews, 100% of participants mentioned that drinking is extremely prevalent at Trinity, and a large part of going out involves being severely inebriated. Fraternities are only allowed to serve beer at their parties and a participant in a frat said that because of this, “people show up to the parties drunk upon arrival, sometimes they walk in with a BORG.²² We don't always over-serve as many people as we thought. Freshmen show up considerably drunk, and additionally, girls tend not to like beer, which is the only alcohol we serve. We have very few transports²³.” (Male, senior) There is an extreme culture of drinking at Trinity, which is very prevalent at many colleges, and is seen as part of the “college experience.” That entails usually making a strong mixed drink at the pregame or having a canned beverage or two, then taking several shots of hard alcohol in a short time and leaving with a mixed or canned drink to take with you to a party.

²⁰ Trinity College - All Traditional Undergraduates: Selected Demographic Characteristics. 24 Sep. 2021, <https://www.trincoll.edu/asic/wp-content/uploads/sites/125/2020/11/Demographics.pdf>.

²¹ Aisch, Gregor, et al. “Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours.” *The New York Times*, 18 Jan. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html>.

²² BORG stands for Black Out Rage Gallon. A BORG is a plastic gallon of water, where one pours out about a third of the water and adds copious amounts of vodka and water flavoring.

²³ Transports refer to a term commonly used to describe when a student gets so drunk they need medical attention and have to get transported to the hospital.

At frat parties, there are several advantages to being friends with a brother or in the “in-crowd.” You can access upstairs if you have an “in” with a brother. Upstairs, there is access to bathrooms that are less disgusting than the main bathrooms available, more intimate spaces to talk, and access to hard alcohol and drugs such as cocaine. Women will often flirt with members of fraternities they do not have an interest in just to get this special access.

There is an overwhelming expectation among participants that, as an underclassman, the goal for the end of the night is to go home with someone. As a female participant said, “I do understand that the goal of the party is to meet kind of someone to go home with.” Partying and hooking up almost go hand in hand. With a party scene, hookup culture is somewhat inevitable. “Drinking and dancing make people sexual” (Female, freshman), a statement that underscores the intrinsic link between these social activities and sexual encounters. A male participant in a fraternity stated that “being in a frat makes it easier for me to hook up with girls.” (Male, senior) Essentially, hooking up serves as one of the primary functions of these parties. Additionally, for underclassmen, a special social cachet is associated with hooking up with an upperclassman male who is part of a prestigious social organization, further embedding this behavior within the cultural norms of campus life.

Hookup Culture

When I asked participants to define a hookup for me, I got two main answers. 46% of participants thought that a hookup was sex. When participants, for instance, hear that their friend hooked up with a guy last night, they assume that means they had sex. The other 54% of participants responded that hookup consists of anything beyond kissing, “A hookup is not

necessarily sex, but you end up at the same place at the end of the night, and it's more than a kiss.” (Female, Senior)

The understanding of hookup culture that I gathered from my interview as well as my time at Trinity, Hookup culture at Trinity College is defined as the prevalent practice of engaging in casual sexual encounters without expectations of emotional attachment or romantic commitment. This culture primarily manifests through three categories: one-night stands, sneaky links, and situationships, each representing different levels of intimacy and commitment but underpinned by a common ethos of minimal emotional investment and a focus on physical intimacy. Predominantly facilitated by social gatherings like parties, hookup culture dictates the college’s social dynamics, influencing how students interact and form relationships. While it offers freedom and spontaneity, it also complicates personal connections, reflecting the complex interplay of sexual freedom and emotional reticence within the student community.

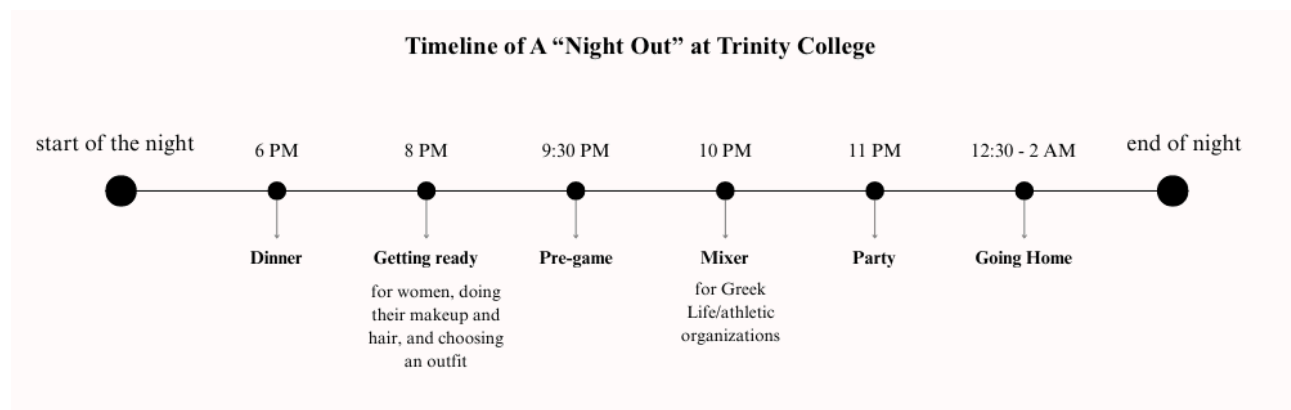
For most students, college is their first time living away from their parents and experiencing a newfound freedom. At any college in America, there is bound to be some sort of hookup culture²⁴, but because Trinity is such a small school with such a large hookup culture, it feels more prevalent than in other places at times. Everyone is young and experimenting with who they are while trying to get to know each other and self-discovery, so when you “gather a bunch of young people wanting to have sex, for some, it’s their first time away from home, along with a social a large social pressure to hookup, it is bound to happen.” From interviews and my personal observation, freshmen and sophomores participate more openly and heavily in hookup culture than upperclassmen throughout college. As an underclassman, I find college and parties

²⁴ Wade, Lisa. “THE RISE OF HOOKUP SEXUAL CULTURE ON AMERICAN COLLEGE CAMPUSES.” *Scholars Strategy Network*, 25 Aug. 2017, <https://scholars.org/brief/rise-hookup-sexual-culture-american-college-campuses#:~:text=Today%2C%20almost%20all%20of%20America's,are%20not%20especially%20sexually%20active>.

very exciting and new. You want to meet new people, establish yourself in the community, and see where you fit in. Because hookup culture is part of the social culture, it becomes a way to meet each other.

“Hookup culture is a great way to meet people and establish a connection. It's also really fun having this new experience. Even a bad one could be a good story. It's like a game; you have to read the person you are hooking up with to best guess their next move. To know when to care or not to care, how to keep them engaged, and still be nonchalant. It's a popularized thing, a big norm that makes everyone want to do it. Also, people have sexual needs and are bored.” (Female, freshman)

When I asked where participants usually met their hookups, an overwhelming 80% of participants' answers were “at parties.” Some participants said they knew the hookup they met at the party beforehand, and others did not. Typically, a student will walk into the crowded frat party drunk and dance with friends and other students. At this party, the student will likely find someone they are interested in, stay near that person, and make eye contact throughout the night. They will likely talk and dance together, maybe even kiss, establishing their interest in one another. Eventually, the party will go on, and people will start to leave, and from there, the two will decide to go home together or to part ways. Parting ways does not necessarily mean the pair will cease the pursuit of hooking up. Sometimes, contact information is exchanged, or one will find them on social media later and follow them, establishing that connection and interest.



13.33% of participants also stated that they used dating apps to meet other students on campus, such as Hinge, Tinder, and Grinder, to meet hookups, and a few others mentioned classes, mutual friends, and Instagram. These participants self-proclaimed themselves to refrain more than other students from the mainstream party culture at Trinity. Some said they knew them or knew of the people they met through apps beforehand, but the consensus of the dating apps was that participants found it easier to see if someone was into them in that way. Students who used dating apps said they would chat on the app for a while and then hang out or go on a date before hooking up.

At Trinity, there is a casualness that comes with hookup culture. You are expected not to care very much, even if you do. Because hookup culture here is much more dominant than dating culture, students tend to feel that dating is very serious and stay away from it. There is such a strong sense of casualness that conversations around boundaries and intentions do not occur often. A female senior said, "I'm more comfortable setting boundaries when not at Trinity. Here, those conversations are more scary, like people will think I'm too intense. At Trinity, it's expected that there is no conversation about intentions and boundaries." (Female, senior) The sentiment is that, in this environment, the worst thing you can be perceived as is clingy or "not chill." You have to be okay with the fact that people are essentially using you for sex without wanting to care about you or show respect. The consequences for acting too clingy, not chill, or too intense include being talked about negatively, which can deter other potential suitors from taking an interest in you or wanting to hook up with you.

As a female freshman participant mentioned above, navigating a hookup can be like a game. For many students, this can cause a lot of anxiety that having this conversation will break off the hookup, so it is safer not to have it and retain that anxiety, as they find it better to be

hooking up with someone, even if it is not on your terms than no one at all. Many women fear that requesting clear communication will make them seem too clingy or needy. There is a careful balance that people think they have to maintain of caring just enough to keep it going while also being nonchalant, and this balance as an underclassman usually.

“It feels like the guys are in control. Girls tend to stress out more than boys. I talk with my girlfriends about guys, and they are stressed about what they are supposed to be doing and how he is supposed to respond. If they receive something else, they are stressed. Girls play this game of what a guy wants, but I don’t do that. One of my friends was self-conscious of being too clingy and not wanting to ‘mess up.’ There is such a lack of communication in hookups because people fear if they communicate, it makes it more serious than just sex. It often leaves girls in a state of confusion and anxiety” (Female, freshman).

Within the hookup culture at Trinity, there are different hookup categories. There is a one-night stand, a sneaky link, and a situationship. Participants defined one-night stands as hooking up with someone once, then proceeding with little interaction. They are also regarded as unpreferable, as 96.66% of participants preferred a consistent sexual partner, with only one male freshman responding he prefers a one-night-stand. I asked all participants to define a sneaky link. The consensus is that a sneaky link refers to a discreet arrangement for sexual encounters, typically involving minimal communication outside of the hookup itself and often kept secret from others. Late-night weekend texts characterize it or call for hooking up, with an understanding that the relationship is primarily based on sex and sometimes is not publicly acknowledged. “A sneaky link is the person you are calling at the end of the night, after a party, when you want to have sex. There is more of an understanding that they are like a last resort person.” (Female, senior)

Some participants had some negative feelings towards the term sneaky link: “Sneaky link is a cowardly term that diminishes what they are doing with a person. I think it's disrespectful,

and I would be pissed if someone called me their sneaky link. Why would you want to hide the person you are having sex with.” (Female, freshman) Other sentiments were similar in that it was confusing why someone is embarrassed to be associated with that person if they are having sex.

The last category of a situationship was the term participants deviated most on. Ultimately, participants agreed that a situationship is a relationship dynamic that falls somewhere between consistent hookup and casual dating. In a situationship, individuals may engage in consistent interaction, including activities beyond just hooking up, without a traditional relationship's clear label or commitment. It often involves romantic activities, consistent hookups, and shared experiences but often lacks clear communication, labels, or commitment. Situationships can be characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and a lack of clarity about the nature of the relationship, leading to potential misunderstandings and emotional complexities.

Participants remarked that “Trinity is a situationship-heavy school.” (Female, freshman) As defined by collective responses to what a situationship is, it entails a lack of clear communication of the relationship, a common theme in conversation regarding hooking up and relationships in general at Trinity. Communication creates fear, especially within women, that making their boundaries and wants clear with their partner will result in coming off as clingy and ending the relationship.

A common theme among Trinity relationships is that most come from a hookup or a situationship. There is less of a casual dating culture and more of a situationship trial run. Some people engage in hookup culture, even if they are not a fan of hookup culture, hoping to get into a relationship or establish an emotional connection. “I have participated in hookup culture, and I don't see myself as a relationship person, and I enjoy sex. However, for other people, I think they do it because it's like all you can get with a connection with people.” (Female, sophomore)

During interviews, I posed a question: "What do you prefer: a one-night stand or one-time hookup, or do you prefer a consistent sexual partner?" 96.66% of participants, all but one male freshman, responded they prefer a consistent sexual partner to a one-night stand. This indicates a strong desire for connection within the student body, yet there appears to be an unwillingness to communicate effectively. Notably, female participants emphasized the importance of knowing their partner to some extent, even if just through a conversation before engaging in sexual activity. One participant recalled a conversation with a friend during her junior year, in which her friend voiced a desire for genuine connection and a more substantive relationship. However, amidst the prevailing hookup culture, she felt these aspirations were challenging to fulfill. Despite her reservations, she believed that the only pathway to a substantive relationship was hooking up and hoping it would evolve into something more meaningful, as many relationships start at Trinity.

Regardless of reservations about hookup culture, many individuals participate in it, perhaps hoping to foster a relationship or establish an emotional bond. As one participant, a sophomore female, put it, "I have participated in hookup culture, and I don't see myself as a relationship person, and I enjoy sex. However, for other people, I think they do it because it's like all you can get with a connection with people." (Female, sophomore)

Social Pressures Around Hookup Culture

Hooking up at Trinity College is a social normality, creating a lot of pressure to participate. 56.66% of participants said they have felt pressured to participate in hookup culture at Trinity, 65% of all female participants and 40% of all male participants. Several participants who said they did not feel pressured to participate in hookup culture mentioned that others had

influenced them to participate or that they tried it because so many other people were doing it but did not feel necessarily pressured. Some terms specific to hookup culture uphold and encourage this normality of hookup culture amongst peers, such as body count²⁵ and roster.²⁶ A participant said, “Hookup culture is so encouraged by people asking ‘who is on your roster,’ there is such a culture around sleeping with so many people. People make you feel abnormal for not wanting to participate, especially within male groups.” (Female, senior). People are so cavalier about hookup culture that sex and sexual partners often become impersonal. While both men and women can have a body count and a roster, men are often expected—and even praised—to have a high body count, whereas women are expected to maintain a relatively low body count. A participant even said that some women even lie about their body count to avoid being labeled as a “slut,” reflecting the societal expectation for women to be desired by many yet remain highly selective. The term “body count,” which originally refers to the number of people someone has killed, suggests a troubling dehumanization in the context of sexual conquests, further complicating the dynamics of hookup culture at Trinity.

For women who responded that they felt some sort of pressure to participate in hookup culture at Trinity, the dynamics reveal a complex layer of social engagement and bonding. “There is also a lot of social pressure with hookup culture. I remember lying to other girls freshman year that I was talking to and hooking up with people because I felt so much pressure to engage in hookup culture.” (Female, senior) This pressure often stems from the way romantic and sexual relationships become central topics of conversation among female students, providing a common ground for forming and strengthening friendships. A female senior participant vividly

²⁵ Body count typically refers to the number of sexual partners a person has had. It's often used casually to discuss or gauge someone's level of sexual activity or experience. However, discussions about body count can sometimes carry judgment or stigma.

²⁶ Roster is a list of potential or actual sexual partners that someone may have. It's akin to keeping track of individuals with whom one may engage in casual or non-committal sexual encounters.

recalled her freshman year, where Sunday brunches at the dining hall were dedicated to sharing tales from the night before—discussing who hooked up with whom, the details of these encounters, and personal feelings about the experiences. She noted that while this continues into her senior year, the nature of these discussions has shifted: “It's not a pressure thing though; it's just a fun way to catch up with your friends. I think when we were lowerclassmen, it felt like there was more pressure, but now not really.” (Female, senior)

The pressure is particularly palpable within Greek Life, as another participant described, “When I joined Greek Life, there was pressure to go to mixers, date parties, and formals, and my older sorority sisters would try to connect with me by asking about boys. So, to fit in, it felt like you had to go home with someone so they could ask you about it.” (Female, senior) She also mentioned that these social gatherings are often followed by a poll sent in the group chat, inquiring whether members hooked up with their dates. This ritual not only reinforces the normativity of hooking up but also serves as a gateway to social acceptance and integration within the group. Thus, while the activities might seem like straightforward social interactions, they carry an undercurrent of expectation to conform to the prevailing hookup culture, intensifying the pressure, especially on newer or younger members who are eager to fit in and be accepted by their peers. This social dynamic, while different in its manifestations between genders, underscores a broader cultural pressure that permeates many aspects of college life.

Some male participants stated that they feel a specific pressure on them as men to participate in hookup culture, “I feel pressured to participate in hookup culture at Trinity because, as a guy, it is such a social norm to do so. So many guys talk about it. When they see a girl is into you at a party, they immediately assume you had sex with them, or you are going to. It's really annoying.” (Male, senior) Male participants did not talk to me about any kind of

debriefing but described male-to-male social pressure. To prove your masculinity, you have to not only participate in hookup culture but also sleep with many women, which is referred to as body count. From my interviews, 56.66% of participants said they feel or have felt pressured to participate in hookup culture to fit in, more so during freshman and sophomore years. 40% of male participants shared that they felt the most pressure from other men to prove their masculinity by hooking up with many women. It then gets deeper within a social organization through functions like mixers, date parties, and formals. If you cannot “pull through” with sleeping with your date, then you have failed from the perspective of your peers. This is emphasized especially for men, even if your intention wasn't to sleep with your date in the first place.

Trinity's intimate size fosters a tight-knit social scene where familiarity reigns supreme, particularly within the party circuit. Amid this social fabric, a select few individuals obtain campus-wide recognition, earning the title of Campus Celebrity²⁷ among certain people. Consequently, specific figures become objects of desire, their allure magnified by either their striking looks or elevated social status. In a revealing anecdote, a participant recounted an exchange with her male peers, where the topic of who was the most attractive man on campus surfaced. When probed for their top pick, they responded with the name of a fraternity brother who had previously assaulted her, which they did not know. Perplexed, she sought clarification, only to be met with the unsettling rationale: "Because he hooked up with *****." Here, the unsettling truth emerges that social cachet hinges not only on personal charisma but on the implicit validation bestowed by peers deemed desirable in their own right, part of the reason why people opt into hookup culture.

²⁷ Campus Celebrity refers to someone who is widely known or popular within the student community. They're someone who has gained a level of recognition within the campus environment, often extending beyond their immediate social circle.

The female participant who recounted this also revealed her own experiences, noting that her choice of sexual partners often aligned with the consensus of attractiveness among her peers. Reflecting on her encounters, "I guess it felt validating that these really hot guys wanted to have sex with me out of everyone. It made me feel attractive and desirable. However, that wasn't the sole motivation behind my actions." (Female, senior) While not unique to Trinity, this sentiment reverberates across college campuses and beyond. Yet, within Trinity's close-knit community, such dynamics are amplified, casting a sharper spotlight on the intricacies of social validation and personal perception.

Social Media

Social media is an extremely large component that needs to be considered when looking at college hookup culture. Participants called upon three major social media platforms: Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok. College students use Instagram widely as the first point of connection. One participant said, "Instagram is like your first impression of a person. Not only do you see what they look like, you see who they are friends with, where they are from, and what they want you to know about them." (Female, senior) On Instagram, you can be a public or private profile²⁸, and when you view an account, you can see all your mutuals.²⁹ For many colleges, there will be a class Instagram or Facebook group where all the students in your class year join to get to know each other and connect on social media,

"When I committed to Trin, the Facebook group was overwhelming. I'd scroll through, identifying cool girls and cute guys. I posted about myself and found my roommate through the group. I recall finding this cute guy and connecting on Instagram and Snapchat through his Facebook posts. We Snapchatted pictures with text for about two

²⁸ Public meaning, anyone can view your profile (what you post, who you follow and who follows you). A private profile, you have your request to follow the account to see their profile.

²⁹ Mutuals meaning accounts who mutually follow them and you.

months, trying to build something before school started. It felt like grasping at straws.”
(Female, senior)

Social media, particularly Instagram, allows young people to scope each other out.

“Sometimes when you follow someone, it's like making the first move, letting them know you're into them. But sometimes it's tricky for girls. Girls don't want to follow first because you don't want to look desperate.” (Female, senior) Social media has become a way for the younger generation to flirt and build relationships. It has become a significant communication component, much of it being indirect. For instance, liking an Instagram story instead of liking a general Instagram post is an indirect way of letting someone know you may be interested in them. It is also a private interaction that only the story-liker and story poster can see. Recently, there has been an online discourse of young women discussing how they dislike when their partners like other female posts,³⁰ especially pictures in bathing suits. Another participant said, “I have posted on my Instagram or private Snapchat story a picture of myself purely in the hopes that a guy I'm interested in will see it, and my friends do the same.” (Female, senior) There are many nuanced meanings behind little actions like liking an Instagram story, which is common knowledge among a younger audience yet seems mindless to an older audience.

In college hookup culture, a significant signal that someone is into you is when you add you on Snapchat. This can be asked in person after you have already met, it can be someone DMing you on Instagram asking for your “snap,” or even through “quick add.”³¹ However, in college hookup culture, Snapchat is a crucial component. On Snapchat, you can send pictures and texts that disappear after the person opens it. You can also “half swipe” on a text to see what it said, but it does not notify the sender that you have seen it, and you can type to the user and not

³⁰ Golding, Emma. “My Boyfriend Likes Other Girls’ Pictures On Instagram & I’m NOT OK With It.” *Bolde*, 26 May 2023, <https://www.bolde.com/boyfriend-likes-other-girls-pictures-instagram-not-ok/>.

³¹ Quick Add is a feature on Snapchat that suggests potential friends to add based on mutual connections and phone contacts. It's designed to help users discover and connect with people they may know or have shared interests with.

send anything without the user getting a notification that you are typing. You can track a user's activity on the app through their "snap score"³² and even track their location on "snap maps" if they allow you to. Many participants discuss many nuanced notions of communication within Snapchat. For instance, a snap-text vs. a Snapchat picture is different in that snap pictures are used to keep consistent communication throughout the week—it's more of an unspoken rule that you don't hookup on weeknights, as people are sober, entailing sober conversation—and a snap text is a more immediate communication. There were also mentions of how long it takes to reply to someone's Snapchat. If they waited a certain amount of time to respond to you, you might mirror the same so as not to seem desperate or beautiful. If someone responds frequently and quickly, it could mean they are more interested in you. Four participants noted that Snapchatting someone was typically more casual and often reserved for hookups. However, when feelings started to develop beyond mere hookups, they found that communication often shifted to text messaging, "If I'm talking to a girl and I want it to be a bit more serious, I switch to texting from Instagram DMs or Snapchat." (Male, freshman)

In the realm of college hookup culture, late-night snap-texting serves as a prime example of communication stripped down to its bare essentials. The language employed is brief and to the point, with phrases like "wyd?"³³ or "you up" has become shorthand for the singular purpose of arranging a late-night hookup. These messages forgo the niceties of traditional conversation, opting for efficiency in conveying the desire to meet up for physical intimacy. As a participant stated, "A Hookup is mostly communication over Snapchat. They will use abbreviated words and minimal texting, such as 'You up?' Or 'u going out tonight?' People want to seem cool or come across as if they don't care, even if they do." (Female, senior) The brevity of the

³² Snap score, a numerical representation of a user's activity and engagement on the platform, calculated based on various factors like sending and receiving snaps, posting stories, and interacting with friends.

³³ Wyd? stands for What are you doing?

communication underscores the transactional nature of these interactions, where the primary goal is clear and direct: to come together to have casual sex. This minimalist approach to communication reflects the prevailing attitudes within hookup culture, where efficiency and immediacy often take precedence over deeper connection or emotional investment. Using such clipped and casual language often leads to blurred communication, where intentions and desires are not fully expressed or understood, further complicating the dynamics of these fleeting encounters.

Sex Students Are Having on Campus

As we venture into the physical exploration of college students' sexual experiences, it's crucial to delve into the diverse and dynamic nature of the encounters that define contemporary college hookup culture. Navigating through the spectrum of sexual encounters within college hookup culture, it becomes evident that power dynamics play a significant role in shaping these interactions. I found in my interviews that 46.66% of participants said the male in the sexual interaction initiated the hookups, 20% of females initiated, 30% said it was mutual, and one participant said she could not recall due to severe intoxication during most of her hookups.³⁴ Additionally, 56.66% of participants engaging in heterosexual hookups said that most of the time, they went to the male individual's room. Several female participants said they usually go to their room because they feel safer in their own space. However, this choice can also lead to situations where the male does not want to leave, even if the woman desires him to, putting her in a hard-to-navigate and uncomfortable situation. Another participant mentioned this as a reason she primarily goes to her male sexual partners' rooms instead, so she can leave when she wants.

³⁴ By initiated, they referred to making the interaction overly sexual by suggesting to leave together or make it physical by kissing or touching the other person.

Several participants also noted that they had sex with a guy because they thought it would make them leave their room, further highlighting the complexities and coercive pressures faced in these encounters.

However, hooking up in one's own room can confer several power advantages. Firstly, being in a familiar environment gives a sense of control and comfort, allowing them to feel more confident and assertive in the interaction. Having privacy and control over the space enables the person to set the tone and pace of the encounter, potentially enhancing feelings of dominance or authority. Moreover, when it comes to contraception, such as the use of condoms, having access to them in one's own room provides a greater degree of control and responsibility, or lack thereof. 43% of participants said they or their partners used condoms in the majority of their sexual encounters. Being in a familiar space allows for easy access to protection, eliminating potential barriers or uncertainties that may arise when hooking up in unfamiliar environments. Condoms serve as a crucial public health precaution for sexual health, providing protection not only against unplanned pregnancy but also against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)³⁵, particularly relevant in college environments where hookup culture is prevalent. This control over contraception further reinforces the sense of agency and power in navigating the sexual encounter. When women predominantly visit their male partners' rooms, their control over contraception use diminishes due to limited access and a lack of familiarity with the environment, which can undermine their confidence in managing the situation. This creates a notable power imbalance. Overall, hooking up in one's own room can afford a comprehensive sense of power and agency, extending beyond just the physical environment to encompass elements of sexual health and responsibility.

³⁵ "Condoms." *Cleveland Clinic*, 15 Sept. 2022, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/9404-condoms>.

Sex has changed a lot over the past few decades. What was “normal” in the 1990s and even early 2000s differs from what is “normal” now. Many participants attributed this primarily to the influence of the accessibility and mass consumption of online pornography among young people. Rough sex, such as choking, spanking, slapping the face, spitting, and pinning/holding down wrists, has become more mainstream and incorporated into casual sex, as what used to be thought of as more violent sex has made its way into mainstream porn, “With porn, there is a lot of violence, and when guys see it, they think it’s a normal thing to do which it normalizes it.” (Female, senior). 70% of participants disclosed that they have engaged in rough sex, such as choking, with only 28.5% of them saying it was something discussed beforehand. Six of the participants said they experienced being slapped on the face during sex, with two saying it was not discussed beforehand but enjoyed it, another two saying it was not discussed beforehand but did not enjoy it and was not something they consented to, and one male talked about a partner asking him to engage in her rape fetish, which he declined. Choking in casual sex is usually a hand around the neck with a bit of pressure, not affixation to the point where the person being choked can not breathe. It has become so normalized in sex among young people that most men do not even ask. A participant who discussed regularly engaging in rough sex, including choking, without discussion of it beforehand said, “It’s crazy for a man to choke someone without asking them. That isn’t something that I would ever do. Men start watching porn so young, so it influences the way they have sex.” (Female, sophomore) Participants who said they had experienced slapping discussed that usually, that was not in casual sexual encounters and something that was talked about with their consistent sexual partner beforehand.

Another factor in the sex students have on campus is whether they are intoxicated or not. 76% of participants stated that they are intoxicated to the point of being drunk in the majority of

their hookups; some even said they were so intoxicated they blacked out³⁶, remembering the sexual encounter minimally or not at all. One participant, when speaking about her unhealthy drinking habits, said, “I do not remember so much from my sophomore year, including the sex I had. I'm not saying I didn't consent, as I did choose to be there, but it's complicated.” (Female, senior) When alcohol is involved in a hookup, several issues and implications can arise, especially when one person is significantly more intoxicated than the other or when both parties are very drunk.

When I asked a male participant about these blurred boundaries of consent, he discussed how if one person is substantially more intoxicated than the other, it raises concerns about consent and the ability to make informed decisions. The sober or less intoxicated individual may have an unfair advantage or may not be able to gauge the other person's level of consent accurately. This power imbalance can lead to situations where boundaries are crossed or where consent is not fully informed or freely given, potentially resulting in non-consensual sexual encounters or sexual assault. He told a story where he was able to recognize that his partner was not sober enough to consent,

“It was Halloweekend³⁷, and we were dancing at a party until I asked her to go home with me. On the walk home, I started to sober up, but she was way drunker than me. When we got to her room, she stripped naked. We had a coherent conversation on the walk back, but she was slurring her words by the time we got back to her house and couldn't give verbal consent, so I left. The day after, she apologized to me because she was embarrassed and didn't remember any of it.” (Male, senior)

When both parties are heavily intoxicated, participants report an increased risk of miscommunication, misunderstandings, and blurred boundaries. Alcohol can impair judgment,

³⁶ Blacking out, refers to a state of extreme intoxication where a person experiences memory loss for events that occurred during the period of intoxication. It's important to note that blackout drunk does not necessarily mean unconsciousness; rather, it refers to a level of alcohol-induced impairment severe enough to cause memory loss.

³⁷ Halloweekend refers to the weekend closest to Halloween. It's a popular time for parties, and one of the biggest party weekends at Trinity.

inhibitions, and cognitive functioning, making it difficult for individuals to accurately assess their desires and the intentions of their partner. According to participant observations, this often leads to situations where individuals engage in sexual activities that they may not have explicitly consented to or that they later regret. Many shared that being drunk during a hookup also impacts sexual health and safety, noting that impaired judgment often leads to the neglect of safer sex practices, such as condom use, thereby increasing the risk of unplanned pregnancy and STDs. Additionally, they noted that someone intoxicated might struggle to actively pay attention to the situation, accurately gauge the other person's interest in participating, and comprehend the overall dynamics of the interaction.

Participants explained that since drinking is a crucial aspect of socializing and going out, which in turn is often linked to engaging in hookups, much of the sexual activity on college campuses occurs under the influence of alcohol. They observed a notable decrease in communication effectiveness and coherence during sexual encounters. Individuals who are very intoxicated may be more vulnerable to coercion, manipulation, or exploitation. This vulnerability extends not only to predatory individuals seeking to take advantage of their impaired state but also to those who may not have malicious intentions but genuinely fail to grasp the severity of their actions. This becomes especially difficult to navigate if the heavily intoxicated person is insistent upon or even initiates sexual interaction, blurring the lines of consent and exacerbating the potential for harm.

Several participants emphasized that this dynamic contributes significantly to the prevalence of blurred boundaries of consent and sexual assaults on college campuses. They pointed out that this type of sexual assault is often less overt than other forms that are more forceful and obvious, the kind of incidents commonly portrayed in media. Overall, the presence

of alcohol in a hookup can exacerbate power differentials, impair communication and decision-making, and compromise both physical and emotional safety. Participants stressed the importance of being aware of these risks and prioritized clear communication, mutual respect, and consent in all sexual encounters, regardless of alcohol consumption.

The Blurred Lines of Consent

In the harsh light of reality, the pervasive and alarming prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses casts a shadow over the collegiate experience. In the complex system of collegiate governance, where institutions maintain their own systems and protocols for addressing issues, the challenge of effectively being heard, represented, attaining justice, and feeling safe and advocated for looms large. Not everyone is always on the same page about what constitutes sexual assault; sometimes, even the perpetrator or the person being assaulted may not fully grasp the many degrees and interpretations of these experiences, particularly if they lack sufficient education on the matter. This creates a significant challenge in how to effectively address sexual assault on campuses when not everyone comprehends the gravity of consent and must navigate the complexities of addressing it.

In sexual education through education, students are usually taught that consent can only be given verbally. However, when discussing how participants discuss consent in their sexual encounters, 23.33% disclosed that they or their partner use verbal consent, and 76.66% said that they assume consent from reading their partner's body language or that it's implied. Several participants said they use verbal consent only the first few times with a partner until they feel they can accurately read their body language for consent. Students who said they use verbal consent said that it could sound like, "Is this ok?" and they will often keep checking in with their

partner while preceding. A participant recalled the hookups she would have with a situationship, and “he would always ask me if I was ok and if I wanted to have sex. It was unusual for a guy to ask for consent so consistently when it was established that we often had sex. Other guys I had hooked up with usually just assumed that if I was in their room or they were in mine, that we were going to have sex and it.” (Female, senior)

Just because we tell young people to use verbal consent repeatedly does not mean they will use it. “Like in porn, there is no verbal consent, and I think a lot of people, especially men, learn to have sex through watching porn. They watch it and think that is how sex should go, and that is what women like, and mirror it.” (Female, senior) Participants noted that it can also be awkward to ask for consent in the first place, as it is perceived as unsexy and “awkward” to take away consent mid-sex. Many participants discussed reading consent by gauging body language and physical cues. However, not everyone has the emotional intelligence and social awareness to read these cues at college age, especially when alcohol is added into the mix. A participant said that she has never experienced verbal consent. She said, “Social cues and being respectful to me are given when engaging in sexual activities. I don’t think you should have to say no for it to be no; your partner should know by reading the situation” (Female, senior). When it is evident that college students are not widely using verbal consent and are not likely to do so, there needs to be a more open conversation around sex and consent between peers.

Another important aspect to consider is that consent can be withdrawn anytime. However, there is often a lack of education among young people about how to effectively communicate their desire to stop or discontinue a sexual encounter if it is unrecognized by their partner. Several lowerclassmen female participants spoke about engaging in sex and realizing that they did not want to continue but didn’t want to ask to stop because they thought it would be

awkward, “I was hooking up with a guy older than me on an athletic team, who I knew before, but not well, and I felt uncomfortable in the encounter, but not enough that I stopped it. I would rather go through with it then tell him I wanted to stop and make things awkward” (Female, freshman). Equipping students, especially young women, on how to assert themselves sexually is important and something that is generally left out of these conversations. From this lack of communication and navigation of consent, in the broader context of sexual assault on campuses, it becomes evident that many instances are not characterized by overt violence but rather by coercion, manipulation, and situations that leave victims feeling uncomfortable and confused about whether they experienced assault. Despite the negative facets of hookup culture, it's important to acknowledge that some students participate in it because they genuinely enjoy the freedom and immediate gratification that casual sex can provide. This engagement occurs even though they are aware of the risks associated with sexual assault and the blurred lines of consent within hookup culture.

Sexual Assault on Campus

Sexual assault can take many forms and manifestations. The majority of assault that goes on at Trinity is coercive sexual assault, where a victim is coerced or manipulated into engaging sexually with someone. It is often non-overtly sexual assault, with victims not always realizing they are experiencing an assault and assailants not always realizing that what they are doing is wrong and an assault. Sexual assault is often discussed as violent and overt. The sexual assault that is portrayed in the media is usually overt and forceful; however, sexual assault does not always manifest that way.

Coercive sexual assault is often with someone the victim already knows. For some, it is a person they might have had consensual sex with before. A participant recalled her experience with a coercive assault during her sophomore year,

“I was involved with a guy from a fraternity, a year older than me, who initially seemed genuinely interested in me. We had hooked up a few times before but never fully had sex. Despite my lack of real attraction towards him, I gave him a chance because he seemed genuinely interested in me. He invited me to his date party and asked me out to dinner and his fraternity formal weeks in advance. After our date and formal, I felt obligated to hook up with him, so after going out to his frat, we returned to my room, which we had done before. We hooked up for over an hour, and I wanted to be done, so I asked him to stop, but he was upset. We went to bed, and in the middle of the night, he kept touching me and then trying to have sex with me. I told him multiple times that I was too tired to have sex, and then sternly said NO when I could tell he wasn’t listening to me. He persisted until I made it very clear I wanted him to stop by asking him to leave. He refused to leave, so I made him sleep on a couch in my room, and he told me I was a bitch and said, ‘You’re really going to make me sleep on this couch?’ I was very scared since he was much larger than me, and I honestly didn’t know what he would do. In the morning, he came into my bed like nothing had happened the night before and started to kiss and touch me. I questioned if I had overreacted, but I knew the situation made me uncomfortable, and I was scared to say no again. I thought that if I had sex with him, he would leave, so I did. He started being sweet to me, but I persistently told him to leave until he did. I ended up ghosting³⁸ him and not talking to my friends about my experience, as I didn’t quite understand what happened and didn’t know if I could consider it assault. He called me repeatedly for weeks, which I ignored. He also would sit close to me in the dining hall, staking out until I left. I remember checking Snapmaps to see where he was on campus so I wouldn’t run into him. His friends told me I hurt his feelings, and he liked me. I don’t know if he even knew what he did to me. It took me months to fully realize he assaulted me, but I did not want to report it. The last week of my junior year, as he was graduating, I found out he had assaulted other female students before me.” (Female, senior)

I had 36.66% of all participants –50% of female participants and one male participant– tell similar stories of coercive sexual assault, though not all of them described it as an assault.

Due to the broad spectrum of sexual assault and violence, many victims of coercion may not

³⁸ Ghosting, refers to the act of abruptly ending communication or cutting off contact with someone, typically in a personal relationship, without explanation or warning. This can involve ignoring messages, calls, or other forms of communication.

perceive their experience as reaching the threshold of assault, particularly if there was no overt violence and if there was a prior consensual relationship involved. Coercion often brings feelings of guilt and self-blame, causing victims to question the nature of the encounter and potentially view it as consensual, even if it was not. A victim may believe that their feelings of violation are invalid, especially if they had a previous consensual encounter with the perpetrator or even earlier on the same night. This perception may make them hesitate to report or discuss the incident with peers, fearing their experience will not be believed or taken seriously.

Another significant issue is that perpetrators of coercive sexual assault may not always recognize that their actions are wrong and constitute assault. This lack of understanding stems from a broader deficiency in education surrounding coercive sexual assault, contributing to its pervasive nature in college environments. This phenomenon exemplifies the "blurred lines" of consent, where the absence of verbal communication can lead to misunderstandings, miscommunications, and misinterpretations. Blurriness at every level—from understanding consent, interpreting signals, to communicating intentions—compounds the complexity of these situations. Effectively communicating with someone who is already misreading the situation physically can be challenging and intimidating, underscoring the importance of incorporating conversations and education on coercive sexual assault into training programs. Such initiatives are crucial to equip individuals with the necessary tools to communicate effectively and navigate complex sexual encounters, helping to clarify the ambiguities that can lead to non-consensual interactions.

I also spoke to four women who discussed encounters, some several, with overtly violent sexual assault. They all asked their assailant to stop and physically tried to stop them to no avail. This is often the kind of sexual assault that is portrayed in the media and talked about in sexual

assault prevention education. There are no “blurred lines” of consent in question, which often gives the situation more priority and more likelihood of being believed. However, reporting processes can be long and arduous as well as triggering and traumatic for a victim to rehash their assault and be questioned in an investigation, leading to many victims not wanting to go through with the process at all. Despite the clarity of these cases regarding consent, there remains a blurred idea of what the appropriate response could or should be from both the community and institutional perspectives. Victims often face uncertain outcomes, variable support, and inconsistent responses from the authorities and their own social circles, adding another layer of complexity to their decision to report the assault.

I also interviewed three women who shared their experiences of overtly violent sexual assault, where they explicitly asked their assailants to stop and physically attempted to resist yet were unable to prevent the assault. This type of assault aligns more closely with the portrayals in media and discussions in sexual assault prevention education, as there are no ambiguities in consent to be debated, often resulting in greater credibility and support for the survivor. However, the reporting process can be lengthy, daunting, and emotionally taxing for victims, requiring them to revisit the trauma of their assault and endure potentially triggering questioning during investigations. Consequently, many victims may opt not to pursue the reporting process altogether.

Through conversations with participants and friends throughout my time at Trinity, as well as a discussion with Shannon Lynch, Trinity's Title IX coordinator, it became evident that there is a pervasive fear of retaliation and judgment associated with reporting sexual assault. There is a concern that regardless of the reporting route victims take, there will be social repercussions if the perpetrator discovers the report and who made it. Given that these assaults

often occur within the context of hookups, with many students meeting their assailants at parties hosted by fraternities or athletic houses, designed to provide members with an advantage in finding a hookup, perpetrators frequently belong to these social organizations or are part of the social elite in-crowd. Consequently, individuals who choose to report their assault fear that doing so will lead to their alienation from the social spaces and circles that are central to campus life.

All instances of sexual assault, sexual violence, and sexual harassment must be treated with the utmost seriousness while fostering open dialogue to reduce the stigma around sexual misconduct. It is crucial to create an environment where students feel empowered to discuss their experiences openly, ask questions without fear of judgment, and receive the support they need.

Conclusion

This thesis has delved into the complex interplay of hookup culture at Trinity College, a culture that often obscures the lines between consensual interactions and sexual assault. This exploration has uncovered the nuanced dynamics that foster misunderstandings and ambiguous consent and illuminated the growing prevalence of situationships—informal, non-committed relationships that dominate the social landscape of the campus.

Throughout this study, key insights have emerged from interviews with thirty students, each bringing their own experiences and perspectives into the broader discussion of campus culture. These narratives have highlighted a significant deficiency in meaningful communication, a shortfall that often results in the blurring of consent and a troubling normalization of sexual misconduct. As this thesis concludes, I have found an emphasized need for enhanced support systems for survivors, improved educational initiatives around consent, and a cultural shift towards more open and honest discussions about sex and relationships. By addressing these

critical issues, Trinity College can begin dismantling its hookup culture's problematic aspects, paving the way for a safer and more respectful campus environment.

For participants, the definition of a situationship varied, yet this variability encapsulates the very nature of the situationship. A situationship typically involves romantic feelings and extends beyond mere sexual encounters, yet lacks formal commitment (Langlais). This ambiguity often stems from a fundamental lack of communication between partners, placing them in a limbo where they enjoy both emotional connection and sexual intimacy without the obligations of a committed relationship. Even when one partner desires more commitment, the fear that open communication might solidify or dissolve the relationship leads many to avoid frank discussions. As revealed in my interviews, partners often shy away from addressing each other's feelings and desires directly, finding the prospect of such conversations daunting. This avoidance sustains the ambiguity that defines situationships, allowing them to persist as the normality at Trinity.

A pervasive fear of emotional intimacy and commitment significantly influences the dynamics within situationships and the broader hookup culture. Often seen as temporary and lacking secure commitments, these relationships discourage individuals from expressing vulnerability, typically reserved for more serious relationships. However, it's important to recognize that emotional intimacy does not need to be confined solely to defined relationships; it can also enrich situationships, potentially leading them to evolve into more committed relationships. Yet, the very nature of a situationship, marked by its insecurity and the ease with which connections can be lost, contributes to a reluctance to foster deeper emotional ties. For instance a participant said that a “Situationship, it's guaranteed sex. I can talk to other girls ‘playing the field and then go home with my situationship. There is a cost-benefit analysis that

goes on of who to go home with.” (Male, senior) Additionally, there seems to be a widespread deficiency in effective communication skills among students. Many appear inexperienced in articulating their emotions, treating such disclosures as uncharted territory fraught with the risk of emotional pain. This apprehension has fostered a culture where avoiding deep emotional connections and maintaining superficial interactions are the norm, perpetuating a cycle of minimal communication and mutual care. This environment hinders the development of more meaningful relationships and reinforces the transient nature of situationships.

Participation in hookup culture at Trinity College is a significant way students gain social capital. Since hooking up at parties is a prevalent aspect of the social scene, being seen as available becomes crucial. Attracting the attention of and hooking up with a popular or attractive student who has power within the social scene enhances one's social standing and influences how others perceive one's attractiveness and social worth. Consequently, entering into a committed relationship can seem like a loss of this valuable social currency.

Trinity is known for its vibrant party scene, intertwined with a pronounced hookup culture. This environment creates pressure to conform, often compelling students to participate even if they do not genuinely enjoy it, as they are led to believe that there are few other entertaining alternatives. The desire to be desired is powerful, and hookup culture superficially satisfies this need by providing validation of one's attractiveness through sexual encounters. However, when these encounters evolve into situationships and desires for commitment diverge, the illusion that one is preferred over others can quickly dissolve, revealing such connections' transient and superficial nature.

Participants talked about it being weird and a “jump-scare” to go to a party and often be there alongside a campus-known rapist. It is normalized that these assailants face no

consequences through Trinity, and a lot of the time, little to no consequences socially by the student community. At Trinity College, perpetrators of sexual assault can only be disciplined through legal proceedings, necessitating a formal investigation by Title IX. This process is initiated only if a victim chooses to proceed formally. However, many victims opt out of this formal process due to discouragement, fear, or being informed that their case does not meet the necessary criteria, leaving perpetrators unchallenged. Without any formal alternative for seeking justice and given a social structure that often favors the accused, there is a lack of collective social accountability. This allows offenders to continue attending social events and remain part of the community as if nothing happened. Such situations not only affirm their behavior but also entitle them and others to believe they can evade repercussions for sexual assault, knowing that most victims refrain from undergoing the formal reporting process.

This pervasive lack of communication extends beyond situationships and emotions to include the communication of boundaries and consent in sexual encounters. Within hookup culture, consent is often implicitly assumed—simply agreeing to go home with someone from a party or agreeing over Snapchat to “hang out” is frequently taken as an unspoken agreement to engage in sex. This assumption contributes to a significant communication gap in casual sexual encounters, where discussing boundaries is uncommon. Due to this communication gap, individuals are often ill-equipped to express discomfort or withdraw consent in sexual settings. Many feel embarrassed or fear being labeled as “crazy” or “clingy” for merely suggesting an open dialogue about sexual preferences and boundaries. This normalization of minimal communication about consent not only fosters misunderstandings but also leaves those who inadvertently cross boundaries unaware of their transgressions, potentially perpetuating harmful behavior.

In my interviews, several female students recounted instances where they wanted to stop during sex but continued because they felt it would be awkward to say something, or they had sex with someone simply to get them to leave. Others felt obligated to engage in sex and chose to get it over with. These situations reflect a problematic understanding of consent that falls short of being positive and overtly consensual. A significant concern is the apparent lack of social awareness and emotional intelligence among male students participating in hookup culture. This deficiency hinders their ability to interpret their partners' non-verbal cues accurately. Although verbal consent is widely taught and recognized as the most clear-cut form of consent, 76% of all participants and 80% of male participants in this study reported that they primarily rely on body language and implied signals to gauge consent. It has become clear that most students at Trinity College do not routinely practice verbal consent. This discrepancy highlights that what is theoretically accepted or taught does not always translate into practical understanding or application. The primary issue here is that while male students who engaged in hookup culture may believe they are discerning consent from non-verbal cues, they are not always interpreting these signals correctly, leading to misunderstandings and potentially non-consensual encounters they can't even recognize.

Coercive sexual assault at Trinity College, often characterized by blurred consent boundaries, leaves many victims uncertain about what has happened to them, not recognizing their experiences as overt sexual assault. As a result, these incidents frequently go unreported to Title IX, creating a significant gap in understanding their prevalence due to a lack of formal data. When such cases are reported, they are sometimes dismissed by Title IX officials as not meeting the severity threshold or lacking sufficient evidence to pursue. However, the absence of a legal classification does not diminish the need to address these issues. This recurring pattern of not

having a course of action in dealing with these kinds of incidents not only invalidates the experiences of victims but also perpetuates a cycle of behavior that leaves students feeling unsafe and unsupported. An alternative approach is needed at Trinity to address these issues more effectively and empathetically.

Moreover, perpetrators often belong to well-established social groups on campus, affording them considerable support, loyalty, and power in social settings. At Trinity, female students, including those in established social organizations like sororities, are often at a disadvantage in cases of sexual assault. Since sororities do not typically host parties and social events in their own spaces, they lack the spatial dominance that fraternities wield during these gatherings. Consequently, if the assailant is affiliated with a fraternity or similar social house, they hold more power in the social hierarchy, leaving female victims vulnerable to social retaliation. Victims fear that reporting will cause them to lose their sexual desirability and social standing or even be ostracized. The absence of safeguards against social retaliation represents a significant flaw in the Title IX process and is a crucial reason why many students choose not to report their assaults. Consequently, many incidents remain unnoticed and unaddressed, further undermining the sense of safety and community on campus.

Trinity College's community must enhance its support for victims. Students will feel more comfortable engaging with the formal Title IX investigation process if they are assured of support, belief in their accounts, and protection against social retaliation. However, challenges arise within social organizations with their own bylaws, making it difficult to “drop” members solely based on a Title IX case, as this could be perceived as Title IX retaliation. Nonetheless, these organizations need to critically evaluate their morals and the power dynamics they perpetuate, prioritizing the safety of all students over the protection of alleged perpetrators. I am

not advocating for the abolition of Greek Life or social organizations at Trinity College. Instead, they must reexamine their bylaws and the standards of conduct required to maintain membership and enforce them internally. Allowing members to behave as they please without consequences is unreasonable simply because they have completed a pledging process. Standards for continued membership should enforce responsible and respectful behavior consistently. Dismantling established power structures that benefit perpetrators is crucial. A cultural shift towards safety and support can be achieved with a committed buy-in from the entire student body, particularly those with significant influence and substantial social capital.

A commendable initiative by Trinity College is the formation of the student group Students Expecting Consent (SEC). This organization has effectively organized workshops within freshman dorms involving residential advisors, PRIDE leaders, and interested freshmen. These workshops facilitate open and informative discussions about sex and consent, providing a valuable platform for students. Expanding these workshops beyond freshman dorms could significantly benefit the wider student body, offering spaces where students can ask questions and learn from their peers in a less formal environment. Peer-led learning often encourages students to engage more openly, allowing them to address sensitive issues without fearing judgment from older adults. I recommend integrating SEC workshops into freshman seminars, with three sessions throughout the semester. This approach acknowledges the complexity and significance of issues surrounding consent, providing students with repeated opportunities to engage deeply with the topic, ask questions, and fully comprehend the gravity of these matters. Establishing a framework for continuous learning and dialogue will help create safer, more informed campus environments. Beyond the freshman year, it should be mandatory for students

to attend at least one workshop annually. This requirement should be rigorously monitored and enforced by Trinity administration to ensure ongoing education and awareness.

Additionally, Trinity's adoption of the Green Dot program is a vital resource for campus safety. It would be beneficial to mandate basic Green Dot training for all leaders within Greek Life—including Presidents, Vice Presidents, Standards Chairs, all members of executive boards, and all members of the Inter-Greek Council and Panhellenic Council. Furthermore, all sports team captains should be mandated to undergo Green Dot training. It's crucial for student leaders also to consider the more intensive three-hour training, acknowledging the significant responsibility that comes with their roles. Leaders should be proactive in ensuring the safety of everyone involved with their organizations. When influential students visibly participate in such programs, it sets a trend, making it 'cool' to assume social responsibility and making the creation of safer spaces a more attainable goal.

The issue of inadequate sexual education extends far beyond Trinity. There is a pressing need for comprehensive sexual education to be implemented earlier in high schools across America and from inside the home. Such education should equip students not only for college but also for various life settings. It's crucial to foster discussions about realistic consent, including casual ways to ask for it and the importance of being attuned to a partner's demeanor throughout sexual encounters. Students should be taught social awareness and how to accurately interpret social and bodily cues.

There should be a greater emphasis on the responsibility of men to ensure women feel comfortable in sexual situations, as interviews revealed that women often hesitate to voice their discomfort. Education should empower women to advocate for their boundaries and articulate

refusals confidently, without fear. This dual approach would help cultivate a culture of respect and mutual understanding in all social interactions.

The changes proposed in this thesis are essential for fostering a safer and more supportive environment at Trinity College. By enhancing support for victims, reevaluating the roles and responsibilities within social organizations, and broadening educational initiatives, we can begin to dismantle the deeply ingrained issues that currently undermine the integrity of our campus culture. This transformation requires a collective effort and an unwavering commitment from all corners of the community. Therefore, I call upon students, faculty, administrators, and parents to actively participate in these crucial conversations and support the implementation of these measures. Together, we can cultivate a campus atmosphere that values and insists on respect, safety, and genuine understanding among all its members.

Appendix A

Glossary

BORG: Slang acronym that stands for Black Out Rage Gallon. A BORG is a plastic gallon of water, where one pours out about a third of the water and adds copious amounts of vodka and water flavoring.

Blacking out: A state of extreme intoxication where a person experiences memory loss for events that occurred during the period of intoxication. It's important to note that blackout drunk does not necessarily mean unconsciousness; rather, it refers to a level of alcohol-induced impairment severe enough to cause memory loss.

Body count: Refers to the number of sexual partners a person has had. It's often used casually to discuss or gauge someone's level of sexual activity or experience. However, discussions about body count can sometimes carry judgment or stigma.

Campus Celebrity: Slang typically refers to someone widely known or popular within the student community. This individual might be known for various reasons, such as their attractiveness, involvement in campus activities, outgoing personality, achievements, or even social media presence. Essentially, they're someone who has gained a level of recognition within the campus environment, often extending beyond their immediate social circle.

Confidential Employees: Employees at Trinity College who are required to report basic information about incident/s to the Title IX Coordinator and the director of Campus Safety. They do not reveal the names or identifying information of all parties involved unless there is imminent harm to the campus or the person/s disclosing it.

Ghosting: A slang term that refers to abruptly ending communication or cutting off contact with someone, typically in a personal relationship, without explanation or warning. This can involve ignoring messages, calls, or other forms of communication.

Green Dot: A program that trains students on violence prevention strategies designed to promote bystander intervention in situations involving power-based personal violence, such as sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking. It aims to empower individuals to recognize potentially harmful situations and intervene safely to prevent violence from occurring. The program has two levels of training, the first being 72 minutes long and the second level, an intensive three-hour session.

Halloweekend: The weekend closest to Halloween. It's a popular time for parties and one of the biggest party weekends at Trinity.

Initiated: In the context of a hookup, making the interaction overly sexual by suggesting to leave together or making it physical by kissing or touching the other person.

Mutuals: In the context of Instagram, this means accounts that mutually follow them and you.

Pledge: A pledge is most often a sophomore student who receives a bid from the fraternity and undergoes a semester filled with rituals, commonly referred to as "hazing," as part of their pledging process. These activities are designed to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment to the fraternity before they are officially inducted as brothers.

Public: In the context of social media, specifically Instagram, anyone can view your profile (what you post, who you follow, and who follows you). A private profile, you have your request to follow the account to see their profile.

Quick Add: A feature on Snapchat that suggests adding users based on mutual connections and phone contacts. It's designed to help users discover and connect with people they may know or have shared interests with.

Roster: List of potential or actual sexual partners that someone may have. It's akin to keeping track of individuals with whom one may engage in casual or non-committal sexual encounters.

Snap score: A feature on Snapchat that gives a numerical representation of a user's activity and engagement on the platform, calculated based on various factors like sending and receiving snaps, posting stories, and interacting with friends.

Transports: Refer to slang commonly used at Trinity to describe when a student gets so drunk they need medical attention and have to get transported to the hospital.

Wyd?: Acronym for What are you doing?

Appendix B

Oral Consent Form for Interviews

The purpose of this research study is to understand romantic and sexual relationships at Trinity and how they relate to sexual assault on campus. You will be asked to have a conversation about your life and romantic and sexual experiences at Trinity College, where you can decline to answer any question you do not feel comfortable answering, as well as ending the interview at any time. This will require about 45 minutes of your time.

While this study may not directly benefit you, it hopes to benefit the future Trinity student body and community by understanding these interactions and how to prevent and respond to sexual assault on this campus most effectively. The potential risks are emotional discomfort from personal questions I ask.

To compensate you for participating in this study, you will receive a \$10 gift card.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you can stop or withdraw at any time without penalty.

I would like your permission to take notes during your interview. I will NOT use your name or any identifying details when typing up the transcript or sharing our final results. May I start taking notes?

If you decide after the interview is completed that you no longer wish to have your response used, you can contact me at zoe.kon@trincoll.edu or my cell: (323) 459-****.

Interview Guide of Questions

Participant #__ (Gender, Year)

Tell me about Trinity relationships, dating, and sex on campus.

How would you define a hookup? How would you describe hookup culture?

Do you participate in hookup culture at Trinity College, or have you in the past?
If so, why or why not?

Tell me about parties at Trinity.

Who goes to them? What are they like? What happens at these parties?

Have you had sexual relations with someone, hoping that later it would turn into a romantic relationship with them?

How do students navigate the transition from casual encounters to more serious partnerships, and are there challenges or issues that arise?

Can you define a sneaky link for me?

Is it preferable to have a consistent sexual partner or a one-night stand/one-time hookup?

In the majority of your sexual encounters at Trinity, how have they started?

Where? When? Did you know them before? What kind of communication, and on what platform?

How do you feel your sexual partners care about you?

What do they do that makes you feel this way?

How often are you intoxicated during your sexual interactions/hooksups?

During your hookups, who initiated them?

Whose room do you go to?

What is the sex like in these hookups?

Do you use protection such as condoms?

Do you engage in rough sex such as: choking, hitting/slapping, spitting, or anything you would not qualify as “vanilla sex”?

Do you find casual sex to be fulfilling?

Emotionally? Sexually?

Does your sexual partner make an effort to please and accommodate you?

How do you feel after?

Do you feel pressured to participate in hookup culture at Trinity because it is a social norm?

Are you in Greek Life or an athletic team? *any identifying information will be altered to maintain confidentiality*

What was your Title IX or sexual assault prevention training like at Trinity?

How has your experience in these organizations shaped how you participate in hookup culture or dating?

How have you and your sexual partners typically communicated about consent in these encounters?

Do you think there is a clear understanding of what constitutes consensual sex, or are there gray areas that often lead to misunderstandings or potential incidents of sexual assault?

Trigger Warning, as some of these questions ask about sexual assault and harassment.

Have you ever had sex with someone because you wanted them to leave or felt like you had to?

Have you felt misled after a sexual encounter? If yes, how so?

Have you been sexually assaulted, experienced sexual coercion, or had a sexual experience that made you feel severely uncomfortable or unsafe at Trinity College?

What year of school?

Did you know them before? What was your relationship? Had you hooked up with them consensually before?

Was this person in Greek Life or on an athletic team?

Was it violent?

Did you report it to Trinity? If not, why not? If Yes, what actions did the school take?

Have you talked to your friends about this?

Have you talked to a professional about this?

Have you confronted/spoken to your assailant about this?

Do you think Trinity College does a good job of making its students feel safe from sexual assault on campus?

Have you heard stories from your friends at Trinity of them experiencing sexual assault on campus?

Do you think Trinity College has adequate education/prevention systems for sexual assault on campus?

How do you believe media, including social media, porn, movies, TV shows, and anything pop culture on the internet, influence college students' expectations and behaviors towards sex and hookup culture?

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