PSYCHOLOGY OF CASUAL SEX

COURSE INFORMATION
Meeting times: Tuesday, 1:00 – 3:30 pm
Location: Meyer 465

INSTRUCTOR: ZHANA VRANGALOVA, PHD

COURSE MATERIALS
Book:

Additional required & optional materials (primarily academic journal articles): Will be posted on NYU Classes a week prior to class.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

Approximately 60% of U.S. adults (and up to 80% of college students) report having engaged in at least one nonromantic sexual encounter (often known as casual sex or hooking up), yet this behavior remains socially stigmatized, clouded in stereotypes and misconceptions, and fraught with physical, emotional, and social risks. This course explored the psychology of this behavior, including the evolutionary, environmental, and situational origins of people’s desires to engage in it, gender differences, mental health outcomes of casual sex, and various factors that can moderate the link between casual sex engagement and positive versus negative mental and physical health outcomes (such as pleasure, consent, unwanted attachment, social stigma, sexual health). We will examine these issues from a biopsychosocial perspective, focusing on empirical research drawn from evolutionary, social, developmental, and health psychology, and, to a lesser extent, also neuroscience, communications science, and sociology.

Class sessions will be largely discussion-based. Students will be asked to complete weekly thought pieces in which they will have the opportunity to further reflect upon the relevant research and critically examine the evidence. By the end of the semester, they should develop a greater understanding of what drives people’s engagement in short-term mating, the potential outcomes this behavior can have, and the factors these outcomes depend on. At the same time, students will gain a better insight into their own sexual desires and behaviors, allowing them to make sexual decisions that are best suited for their specific needs.

TOPICS COVERED
Week 1 (Jan 23): Intro
Week 2 (Jan 30): Casual sex definitions, prevalence, and the “sexual hookup culture”
Week 3 (Feb 6): Sociosexual orientation: Measurement, distribution, change
Week 4 (Feb 13): Gender differences—Evolutionary (incl Sexual Strategies Theory) and social influences
Week 5 (Feb 20): Individual differences—Biological factors and Life History Theory
Week 6 (Feb 27): Individual differences—Social & Situational factors
Week 7 (Mar 6): Sexual pleasure in hookups
Week 8 (Mar 20): Consent issues
Week 9 (Mar 27): Attachment issues
Week 10 (Apr 3): Sexual health issues
Week 11 (Apr 10): Mental health correlates of hookups
Week 12 (Apr 17): Role of technology in modern sex and love
Week 13 (Apr 24): Friendships & relationships during and post-hookups
Week 14 (May 1): Wrap-up

COURSE EVALUATION

Your grade will consist of three components:

1.) Final Research Paper (50%)

Each student will complete a 10 page, APA-formatted paper on some aspect of casual sex. The topic can be related to material explicitly covered in class, but it does not necessarily have to be. You will have the freedom to choose a topic in the area of casual sex that is of inherent interest to you; however, you must receive instructor approval for your topic before you begin work on the paper. You will have the option of writing your paper as a research proposal for a study that you would potentially like to carry out, or as a critical review paper that mirrors what might be submitted to an academic journal. This paper is due on the last day of class.

2.) Reflection and Analysis Papers (40%)

Each student will complete a series of 10 reflection and analysis papers that are 1-2 pages in length. Each paper will be based upon the assigned readings for that week. The goal of these papers is to help you organize your thoughts on the readings and critically evaluate them prior to in-class discussions. Papers are due at the beginning of class each day. More detailed instructions for these papers will be posted on the course website.

Late papers will only be accepted in cases of legitimate personal or medical emergency. Students are required to notify the Instructor within 24 hours of the due date plus provide acceptable documentation of the emergency. If you are participating in an official, university-sanctioned event on a paper due date, your paper must be submitted early to receive maximum credit.

3.) Participation and Discussion Leading (10%)

This is seminar-type course, and therefore class attendance and participation is obligatory. Students who do not attend and/or do not actively participate on a regular basis will necessarily receive a lower participation score.

Grade Scale

A  = 93-100%  
A- = 90-92.99%  
B+ = 87-89.99%  
B  = 83-86.99%  
B- = 80-82.99%  
C+ = 77-79.99%  
C  = 73-76.99%  
C- = 70-72.99%  
D+ = 67-69.99%  
D  = 63-66.99%  
D- = 60-62.99%  
F  = less than 6
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| 1/23  | **Course Introduction**  
No readings  |
| 1/30  | **Casual sex definitions, prevalence, and the “sexual hookup culture”**  
- *American Hookup*, Chapters 1-5.  
| 2/6   | **Sociosexual orientation: Measurement, distribution, changes**  
| 2/13  | **Gender differences—Evolutionary and social influences**  
| 2/20  | **Individual differences—Biological factors and Life History Theory**  
| 2/27  | **Individual differences—Social, developmental & situational factors**  
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| 3/6  | Pleasure in hookups | - American Hookup, Ch. 6-8  
| 3/13 | NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK) | |
| 3/20 | Consent and coercion in hookups | - American Hookup, Ch. 9  
- Westerlund et al. (2010). Does unrestricted sociosexual behavior have a shared genetic basis with sexual coercion? *Psychology, Crime, & Law, 16*, 5-23.  
4/24 **Friendships & relationships during and post-hookups**
- American Hookup, Ch. 10
- Rhoades, G. K., & Stanley, S. M. (2014). *Before “I Do:” What Do Premarital Experiences Have to Do with Marital Quality Among Today’s Young Adults?* The National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

5/1 **Course wrap-up**
- American Hookup, Conclusion

**FINAL PAPER DUE**

*Note:* Readings should be completed before class on the day they are listed.