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Hooking up as a core requirement: Casual sex in college isn't optional anymore, "it's an imperative"

Salon talks to the author of "American Hookup" about drinking, casual sex, sexual assault and campus culture

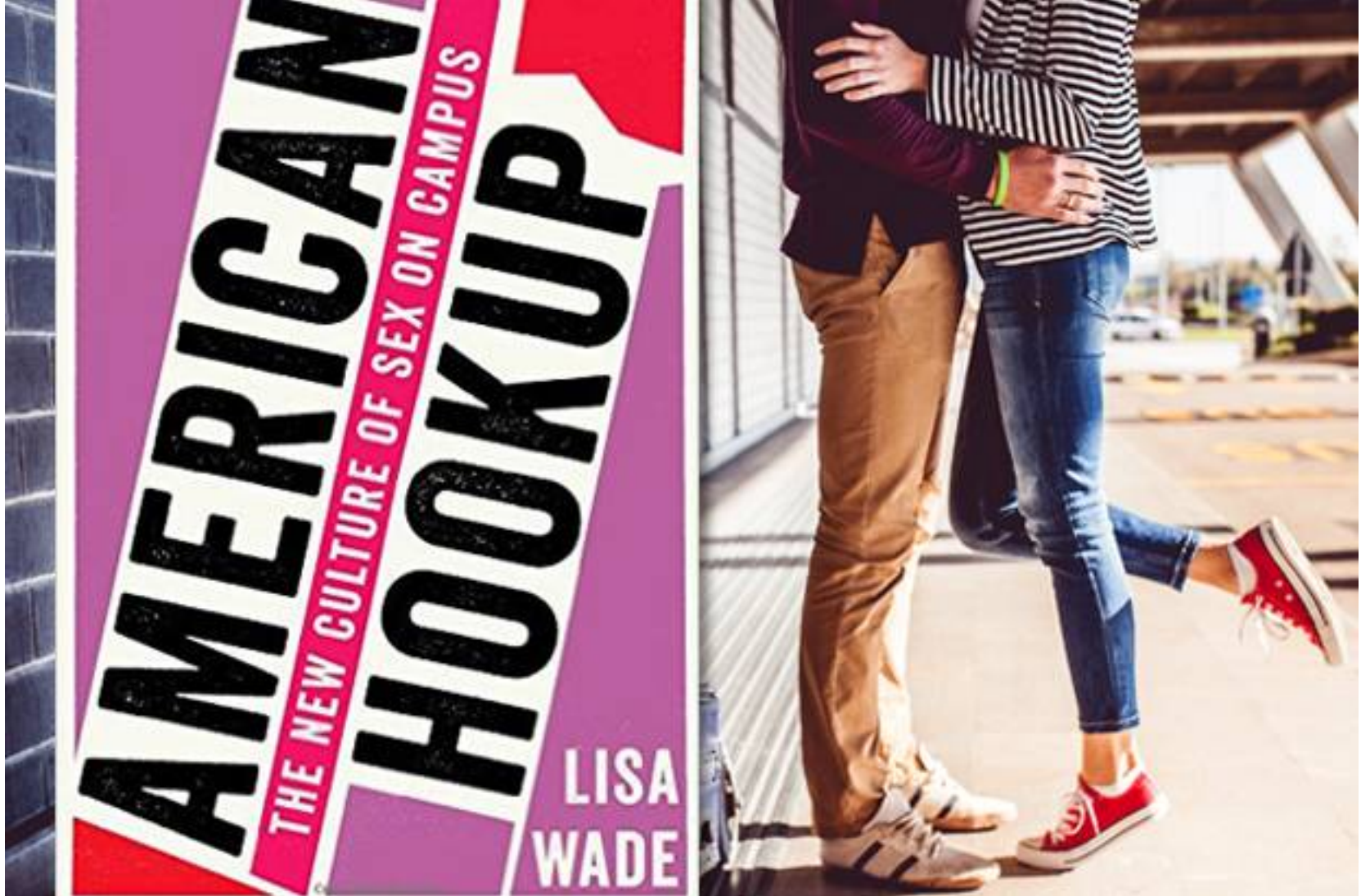
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In the first chapter of her new book, [“American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus,”](#) Lisa Wade describes the event around which, she argues, much of contemporary college life orbits: the hookup.

It is “a drunken sexual encounter with ambiguous content that is supposed to mean nothing, and happen just once,” she writes. “It’s a scrappy little sex act, a wayward Cupid. Armed with dark of night and blur of intoxication, its aim is a fun, harmless romp, a supposedly free expression of one’s sexuality, but within oddly strict parameters. It’s spontaneous, but scripted; order out of disorder; an unruly routine. It is, in short, a feat of social engineering.”

Elsewhere in the book, the Occidental College sociology professor notes that college students today aren’t necessarily having more sex than previous generations. But they are talking about it, thinking about it, posting on social media about it, scheduling their lives around it, and being affected by it more intensely than ever before. That hookup culture she writes, “is an occupying fog, coercive and omnipresent” on campuses across the U.S. She quotes one student from Tulane University who says simply, “Hookup culture — it’s college.”

And Wade would know. She has drawn on an enormous pool of information for the book, including written testimony from more than a hundred of her own students, scholarly articles, visits to dozens of schools, reporting from mainstream media outlets, data on thousands of students from the Online College Social Life Survey, and “hundreds of firsthand accounts of

sex on campus written for student newspapers and other media outlets.”

Her book is, on one hand, hyper-specific. In one chapter she tracks the steps of an average hookup from the pregame drinking to dance-floor grinding to after-the-fact efforts to “establish meaninglessness” and “create emotional distance.” But it also places hookup culture in the wider context of American sexual, educational and social history, and examines the phenomenon through lenses of race, class and gender. In one chapter, she reports, “Women in college, like American women more generally, have fewer orgasms than their male counterparts.” In another, she says, “In some ways hookup culture *is* a white thing.” By book’s end, you not only feel as if you have peered inside the minds (and bedrooms) of countless collegians, but also learned something essential about contemporary American sexual mores.

Salon caught up with Wade recently via phone to help explain what’s going on inside that “occupying fog.” The interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

For folks who haven’t read the book, what is the two-minute definition of “hookup culture”?

There has always been casual sex on campuses. That has been true since the minute there were campuses. But a hookup culture is one in which everyone is expected to be participating in some sort of casual sexual engagement. So it’s not just an option, it’s an imperative.

And like all cultures, hookup culture manifests at the level of ideas — how people are thinking about what they should be doing — and then the rules for interaction, how people interact with one another. And it also becomes institutionalized. So there are ways in which the rhythms and architecture of the colleges themselves facilitate hookup culture.

One of the concepts you discuss is a phrase you borrow from Ohio University sociology professor [Thomas Vander Ven](#), “drunkworld,” that almost seems to be a necessary ingredient for hookup culture. What is “drunkworld,” and how does that relate to the hookup culture you just described?

It is an interesting question how it came to be that we decided as a society that college is supposed to be fun. But now that we have decided that, there is a particular kind of fun that students come to expect that they should be having on college campuses, and that is what Vander Ven means by “drunkworld.” I think at some point, he calls it a “temporary insanity.” There’s this effort to sort of collectively bring into existence this space where many of the rules of social interaction are lifted and there’s a whole new set of expectations where it’s normal to be slurring one’s words and barely able to walk. And the goal is to create a kind of collective effervescence that is just a bit perilous. Partying to the point right up to the rim of danger is this idea [of] what a really good raucous college party is supposed to be like. Thinking about

["drunkworld"] as an alternative reality — that's what Vander Ven is really trying to get at with that term.

Another a big part of that culture you describe in the book are these conversations where people — generally of the same sex — are recapping what happened the night before. What is really going on there? What do you think those conversations are really about?

Sexuality is exciting, especially when it's new, and the people that we might be having contact with are new. So there's just this buzz and excitement around sexuality on campus. And even if people aren't hooking up, or didn't hook up the night before, there's a lot of just high-energy discussion around who did, and who you might have wanted to hook up with, or who you almost hooked up with, or who your friends hooked up with or tried to to avoid hooking up with. So there's a heck of a lot of conversation about it that is going on sort of as a recap in the days after the Thursday-Friday-Saturday party period, and then as anticipation over the course of that next week. And so even though hooking up itself is not happening all the time, the conversation is omnipresent, and it's omnipresent, too, online. There's this constant sexual energy being traded very publicly in social media spaces.

I get asked a lot about hookup apps, and if students are using hookup apps to hook up, and my answer to that is, "They're using *every*, every platform to hook up." They may be using Tinder, but just as much they're using Instagram and Facebook and Snapchat. They are all highly sexualized spaces on college campuses. So if you are paying attention as a student, you can't help but feel enveloped by this conversation about who may or may not be hooking up with who.

You include kind of a poignant chapter in which you discuss the people opting out, and you very evocatively describe the experience of being sober in a dorm room and hearing the clack of heels and the screams outside. What is this like — and maybe it's the clearest way to see hookup culture — for the students who, in your words, "opt out?"

A lot of them feel incredibly isolated and like they're missing out on a really fundamental life experience. It's almost a cliché to tell young people that "college is going to be the best years of your lives." And that's a lot of pressure. A lot of students come to college really thinking that that's true and that if they don't take advantage of the particular . . . fun that college has to offer, that they're missing out on something that they're going to maybe regret forever. But if they really don't enjoy it, then they often don't participate.

So instead they often feel just lonely and isolated from their peers. You know, in "drunkworld" — and Vander Ven makes this point really wonderfully — part of what happens at those crazy parties is that friendships are cemented. Something about being drunk together, but also

escaping peril together, is really bonding. You know, you can be friends with someone, but once you've held her hair back while she pukes, you're *really* friends now. So there are a lot of friendships that get cemented in these crazy times. And the students who are opting out of that stuff often feel like they have a hard time making friends at all. And not only that, but by opting out, they feel sometimes judged by their peers who don't understand why they wouldn't want to participate, but they also think that their peers feel judged by them. So they have a hard time bonding with them for that reason. In another book called "**Paying for the Party**," they are described as "isolates," these students who decide to opt out of these sexy parties. And my students used the word "isolated" independently several times to describe how they felt.

In a way your book isn't merely about hookup culture; it uses campus hookup culture as a lens for looking at society in general. What do you think your research tells you about our culture today?

Oh, I think everything applies. I really feel like what we're looking at on college campuses is just American culture in microcosm. I mean, these young people are not getting their ideas about sexuality out of thin air, and they're not inventing them whole cloth when they get to college. And they certainly don't apply simply to college. And so I think that what we see on college campuses is almost a concentrated, crystallized, clear demonstration of many of the values that are driving all of our sexualities, that are harming all of our sexualities. And so I do think that anyone of any age, whether they went to college or not, is going to be able to recognize many of those dynamics in their own lives.

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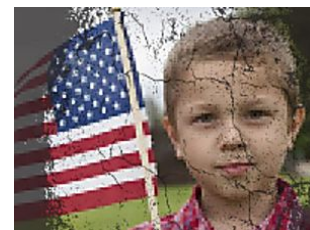
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