

## **Aspects of ‘Hookup Culture:’ How Motivations, Locus of Control, and Knowledge Intertwine**

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### **Abstract**

Though there is no universally accepted definition of hooking up, most definitions articulate that hooking up involves casual sexual contact between non-dating partners without expectation of forming a committed relationship<sup>1-6</sup>. After establishing the prevalence of hooking up in college populations and the negative outcomes associated with hooking up, researchers have begun to shift their focus to determine the motivations that drive college students to hook up. In the current study, 53 college students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.39$  years old,  $SD = 1.47$ ; 75% female) indicated their sexual orientations, whether they had engaged in sexual activity and whether they had engaged in a hookup. If participants indicated they had engaged in a hookup, participants were then directed to also report on their motivations for hooking up and their perceptions of their peers’ motivations for engaging in hookups<sup>7</sup>. Participants also reported on their locus of control in sexual situations<sup>8</sup> and completed the knowledge subscale of the Knowledge and Psychosocial Measures<sup>9</sup>. Consistent with previous research, in the current study, 73% of participants reported having engaged in a hook up. Overall, participants tended to assess their peers’ social-sexual, social-relational, enhancement, coping and conformity motivations higher than their own. Unexpectedly, locus of control and sexual knowledge were not found to be related to the motivations for hooking up, with one exception. As participants reported being more sexually knowledgeable, participants tended to indicate they were less likely to be motivated to hookup through social sexual motives. Given the prevalence of hooking up in college populations, a better understanding of the factors that motivate hooking up is a natural next step in better understanding this phenomenon.

**Keywords: Hookup Culture, Motivation, Locus of Control, Sexual Health, Communication**

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Hooking Up**

Common themes across the many definitions of hooking up indicate that hooking up involves casual sexual contact (e.g., kissing, oral sex, and/or sexual intercourse) between non-dating partners without the expectation of forming a committed relationship<sup>1-6</sup>. Hookups are typically one-time sexual encounters with anyone from a random stranger to a close friend. Research has found hookups are usually initiated at parties or while under the influence of alcohol, and hookups typically occur on the weekends and late at night<sup>2,10,5</sup>. Approximately 65-85% of college students have reported engaging in hookup at least once while in college<sup>11</sup>. Whereas, some college students report enjoying their hookups, the majority report the hookup as unpleasant or coercive, and experience emotional distress regarding their hookups<sup>1,12,6,13</sup>. Thus, a better understanding of the factors that motivate and increase the likelihood of hooking up is needed, and the aim of the current study was to begin to address this issue.

## 1.2 Motivations for Hooking Up

When sexual motivations were first researched by Masters and Johnson in 1966, they conceptualized sexual interactions on a purely innate biological drive basis. This understanding was consistent with the popular drive reduction theory at the time. In the context of sexual situations, drive reduction theory states that the goal of sex was to release a desire for orgasm or as Masters and Johnson referred to as an “inborn orgasmic release”<sup>14</sup>. More recently, researchers have broadened the scope of potential sexual motivations to include more personal and relationship related motives, such as reproduction, pleasing one’s partner, establishing intimacy in a relationship, releasing sexual tension, gaining experience, prevention of conflict within a relationship, a sense of conquest, and impressing one’s peers<sup>15</sup>.

From a historical perspective, however, the expression of sexual behavior changes along with each new generation and their rapidly changing subcultures, and therefore it is crucial for research to focus on the needs and desires that each new behavior provides for young adults<sup>16,4</sup>. Thus, a clearer understanding of the motivations that drive college students to engage in hookups, more specifically, needs to be developed.

Initially, it was found that students used hookups to initiate relationships, with up to 51% of college students reporting that they engaged in hooking up to potentially begin a relationship with the partner they hooked up with<sup>4,17,18</sup>. More comprehensive study, however, has indicated that there might be five types of motivations for hooking up in college students<sup>7</sup>. In this study, two samples of college students reported that they sometimes engaged in hookups to engage in sex without the commitment of a more traditional romantic relationship (i.e., social-sexual motivation) and because hooking up can be fun and pleasurable (i.e., enhancement motivation). Alternatively, another motivation to hookup revolved on the desire to establish a friendship or relationship (i.e., social-relationship motivation). Other motivations identified in this study included feeling pressured because friends were engaging in hookups (i.e., conformity motivation) and to deal with a negative internal state (i.e., coping motivation).

While one’s own motivations for engaging in hookups might be important, the peer subculture and the influence that college students’ peers carry in their decisions to hook up is another potentially important aspect to understanding hookups as an evolving sexual script for young adults. For example, hookups have been found to typically occur in the company of other peers<sup>19</sup>. Research has also demonstrated that students are more apt to assume that their peers are more accepting of casual sex relationships, such as hooking up, which might impact college students’ decisions whether to participate in hookups<sup>20,13</sup>. Additionally, young adults typically experience brain changes related to sexual and reproductive behavior, and they are more accepting of the social sexual norms that their peers share<sup>4</sup>. Thus, it is likely that the importance of college students’ own motivations for hooking up would be related to college students’ perceptions of their peers’ motivations for hooking up.

Although college students’ motivations and attitudes are expected to be related to their perceptions of their peers’ motivations and attitudes, differences in college students’ motivations and attitudes and their perceptions of their peers’ motivations and attitudes are also likely. For example, most college students have reported that they are not motivated by the fact that others are hooking up, as only 8% of college students surveyed responded that they were motivated to engage in hookups because others were doing it, and 4% reported that they felt immediate peer pressure to engage in hook-ups<sup>4</sup>.

## 1.3 Locus of Control and Motivations for Hooking Up

How locus of control relates to sexual activities has received limited research focus, but locus of control might be related to the motivations that drive college students to engage in hookups. Locus of control involves the extent to which one believes that he or she is in control of the outcome of situations<sup>21</sup>. Whereas an internal locus of control involves the belief that one can control the outcome of situations, an external locus of control is when one believes that the environment or context is responsible for the outcome of the situation

It seems that self-initiated sexual activities, presumably an indication of an internal locus of control, are associated with more positive outcomes. Alternatively, sexual activities such as drunk sex, which are presumably less strongly self-initiated have been found to be associated with more negative outcomes such as emotional discomfort or guilt<sup>22</sup>. Additionally, lower self-efficacy, a concept similar to external locus of control, has been associated with more frequent sexual risk taking behaviors<sup>23</sup>.

More directly related to locus of control, the belief that the outcomes of one’s sexual interactions are under their control was shown to be associated with engaging in more sexual activities, lower anxiety associated to sex, and higher levels of satisfaction<sup>8</sup>. Feeling sexually powerful, in control, and free to explore one’s sexual freedom appears to be very important to young adults<sup>24</sup>. Together, these findings appear to stress the importance that internal locus of control

may play in sexual interactions and the outcomes of these interactions. Yet few studies have examined how locus of control more generally, and sexual locus of control more specifically, relate to the motivations that drive young adults to hookup.

## 1.4 Sexual Health Knowledge and Motivations for Hooking Up

Knowledge of sexual health and about the practice of safe sex are key aspects of young adults' sexual lives. This knowledge, or lack of knowledge, can be linked to the recent increases in the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections among college students. The nature of hook-up's carry higher risks of sexually transmitted infections than more traditional dating culture due to its random nature and the tendency to use alcohol while hooking up<sup>25</sup>. This increase is most likely to be due to an increase in oral and anal sex, which are activities in which many young adults do not use protection<sup>27,13</sup>, and it might be that knowledge of sexual health is related to the motivations that drive young adults to hook up. College students who have engaged in hookups, for example, have been shown to underestimate their own susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections, relative to their peers' susceptibility<sup>23</sup>.

## 1.5 Current Study

In the current study, it was expected that participants' own motivations for hooking up would be positively correlated to participants' perceptions of their peers' motivations for hooking up. Though perceptions of the motivations for participants and their peers to hookup were expected to be related, it was also anticipated that there would be differences between participants' perceptions of their motivations for hooking up and their peers' motivations for hooking up. More specifically, it was hypothesized that participants would report that social-sexual, social-relational, and enhancement motivations would more frequently motivate their decisions to hookup than these motivations would motivate their peers' to engage in hookups. Alternatively, it was anticipated that participants would rate that they were less frequently motivated by conformity to engage in hookups than their peers. Differences in the role of coping motivations for hooking up were also explored, and it was predicted that external sexual locus of control and less sexual health knowledge would be associated with more frequent social-sexual, social-relational, enhancement, coping, and conformity motivations to hookup in participants. To address these hypotheses and research questions, self-report data were collected through an anonymous online survey.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 53 undergraduate students attending a university in the southeastern United States. Their ages ranged from 18-23 years with the mean age of 19.39 years old ( $SD = 1.47$ ). The participants were overwhelmingly female (70%), with 26% reporting as male, and 4% declining to indicate their genders. The sample was predominantly freshman, 54%, with 21% reporting as seniors, 13% as sophomores, and 12% as juniors. Most of the sample was single (i.e., 63%), and 37% were seriously dating. The majority (i.e., 83%) of participants were heterosexual, with 11% reporting they were bisexual, and 4% reporting as pansexual. The remainder of participants declined to indicate their sexual orientation. Participants were also asked if they had taken a course on human sexuality in the course of their college history, and 30% of the participants responded that they had taken a course on human sexuality.

### 2.2 Measures

#### 2.2.1 *hookup motivations – self*

To determine participants' motivations for engaging in hooking up relationships, participants completed the Hooking up Motive Questionnaire<sup>7</sup>. The survey is composed of 19 items in which participants were asked to rate their motives for hooking up on a 5-point scale ranging from "almost never/never" to "almost always/always." The HMQ consisted of five subscale: enhancement, coping, conformity, social-sexual, and social-relationship. The social-sexual motivation subscale contained 3 items which measured how much participants were motivated to hook up by the sexual value of the experience (e.g., "Hooking up provides me with sexual benefits without a committed

relationship.”). The social-relational motivation subscale included four items that measured how much participants were motivated to engage in hookups as a way to initiate relationships with others (e.g., “I hookup because hooking up is a way to find a relationship.”). Alternatively, the enhancement motivation subscale was composed of four items that measured how strongly participants were motivated to engage in hookups by the potential pleasure, excitement, and fun of the interactions. The coping motivation subscale included four items that measured how strongly participants were motivated to engage in hookups as a way to deal with negative internal emotional feelings (e.g., “I hookup because it makes me feel good when I am not feeling good about myself.”). The conformity motivation subscale included three items and measured how strongly participants were motivated to engage in hookups due to a sense of pressure to conform to societal norms, norms about the college experience, and depictions in the media (e.g., “I hook up because I feel pressure from my friends to hook up.”). Composite scores were calculated separately for each of the subscales of the survey. Each subscale score was computed by summing each participant’s responses for the items that composed that particular subscale. Higher scores indicated a greater degree of motivation derived from the subscale.

### *2.2.2 hookup motivations – peers.*

A second version of HMQ, the HMQ-P<sup>7</sup> was also used to assess the participants’ impressions of their peers’ motivations for engaging in hooking up relationships. This version of the HMQ-P was modified by omitting the first-person terminology in the stem of each item and replacing it with “my peers.” For example, the item “I hook up because it allows me to avoid being tied down to one person” was modified to read “My peers hook up because it allows them to avoid being tied down to one person.” Similar to the original version of the HMQ, the survey was composed of 19 items, and participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale. The HMQ-P also consisted of the same five subscales as the HMQ. The scores for each of the five subscales was computed separately by summing each participant’s responses to the items used to compose each of the subscales.

### *2.2.3 sexual locus of control*

The Dyadic Sexual Relations scale<sup>21</sup> was used to assess the participants’ perceived locus of control in sexual contexts. The survey is composed of 11 items in which each participant was asked to rate his or her sense of internal or external locus of control in sexual contexts on a 7-point, Likert-scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Higher scores indicated a greater degree of internal locus of control. A composite scale score was computed separately for each participant by summing each participant’s responses to all of the items composing the scale.

### *2.2.4 sexual health knowledge*

Thirty-one items from the knowledge subscale of the Knowledge and Psychosocial Measures<sup>9</sup> were used to assess the participants’ knowledge of sexually transmitted infections and the human immunodeficiency virus. Participants responded to the knowledge items on a three point scale, “True,” “False,” or “I don’t know” format and were scored as either correct (worth 1 point) or incorrect/not known (worth 0-point). A composite score was computed separately for each participant by summing the participant’s responses to each of the items in the scale.

## **2.3 Procedure**

Participants completed the on-line survey anonymously via Qualtrics. At the beginning of the HMQ (self) survey each participant was asked if they had ever engaged in a hook-up with someone. If the participant responded, ‘Yes,’ the participant was directed to complete the HMQ (self) survey. If the participant indicated that he or she had never engaged in a hookup, the HMQ survey was skipped, as the participant could not report on motivations for a behavior in which he or she did not engage. Similarly, at the beginning of the HMQ-P survey, participants were asked if their peers had ever engaged in a hook-up with someone. If the participant responded, ‘Yes,’ the participant was directed to complete the HMQ-P survey. If the participant responded, ‘No,’ then the participant was not required to complete the HMQ-P survey. The survey typically took participants approximately 15 minutes to complete.

### 3. Results

Most participants reported being sexually active (85%), 73% of the participants reported that they had engaged in a hookup. Additionally, two participants responses were omitted from analysis due to incomplete data.

To determine if participants' motivations for hooking up were similar to their perceptions of their peers' motivations for hooking up, a series of correlations between the peer and self HMQ subscales was conducted. Results of these analyses supported the first hypothesis, as participants' motivations for hooking up tended to be statistically, significantly correlated with their impressions of their corresponding motivations in the peers (see Table 1). For example, the importance of social-sexual motivations for participants was significantly correlated with participants' impressions of the importance of social-sexual motivations in their peers ( $r = .53, p < .01$ ), and the importance of social-relational motivations for participants was significantly correlated with participants' impressions of the importance of social-relational motivations in their peers ( $r = .42, p < .05$ ).

Table 1. Correlations between motivations for hooking up and perceptions of peers' motivations for hooking up

|                          | Social Sexual<br>(Peer) | Social-Relational<br>(Peer) | Enhancement<br>(Peer) | Coping<br>(Peer) | Conformity<br>(Peer) |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Social-Sexual (Self)     | .53**                   | .49**                       | .55**                 | .27              | -.07                 |
| Social-Relational (Self) | .25                     | .42*                        | .26                   | .26              | .28                  |
| Enhancement (Self)       | .45                     | .52**                       | .65***                | .25              | -.07                 |
| Coping (Self)            | .21                     | .25                         | .37*                  | .52**            | -.02                 |
| Conformity (Self)        | .02                     | .11                         | .13                   | .23              | .33 <sup>+</sup>     |

Note. <sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

It was hypothesized that participants would indicate social-sexual, social-relational, and enhancement motivations to more frequently motivate themselves to hookup than these motivations would drive their peers to hookup. To test this hypothesis, three paired samples t-test were conducted. One of these t-tests was used to compare frequency that social-sexual motives led the participants to hook up with the participants' perception of how frequently social-sexual motives lead their peers to hookup. Another of these t-tests was used to compare the frequency that social-relational motives drove participants to hook up with the participants' perception of how frequently social-relational motives drove peers to hookup. The last of these t-tests was used to compare frequency that enhancement motives led the participants to hook up with the participants' perception of how frequently enhancement motives lead their peers to hookup.

Unexpectedly, results of these t-tests indicated that participants tended to report motivations for hooking-up less frequently in themselves than they perceived in their peers. For example, participants indicated their hookups were less frequently motivated by social-sexual motives ( $M = 2.46, SD = 1.06$ ) than their peers ( $M = 3.30, SD = 1.04, t = -4.879, p < .001$ ), and participants also reported that their hookups were less frequently motivated by social-relational motives ( $M = 2.21, SD = 1.18$ ) than their peers ( $M = 2.66, SD = 1.13, t = -2.132, p = .04$ ). The frequency with which enhancement motives influenced hooking up for participants and their peers was marginally, statistically significant ( $t = -1.915, p = .064$ ), with participants ( $M = 3.60, SD = 1.19$ ) reporting slightly less frequent enhancement motives for hooking-up than their peers ( $M = 3.90, SD = 1.02$ ).

Using paired samples t-tests, whether participants reported less frequently being motivated to hookup because of the need to conform than their peers was examined, and the differences in the frequency of coping motivations for participants and their peers were also explored. Consistent with expectations, participants reported conformity motives for hooking-up ( $M = 1.21, SD = .30$ ) less frequently than they thought their peers experienced conformity motives ( $M = 2.24, SD = 1.08, t = -6.006, p < .001$ ). Participants ( $M = 2.19, SD = 1.33$ ) also indicated that coping motives less frequently motivated their hookups than they thought that coping motives motivated their peers ( $M = 3.13, SD = 1.17, t = -3.507, p = .001$ ).

The final hypothesis was that an external locus of control and less knowledge of sexual health would be associated with more frequent social-sexual, social-relational, enhancement, coping, and conformity motivations to hookup in participants. To test this hypothesis, a series of correlation analyses were conducted. Inconsistent with expectations, sexual health knowledge and locus of control were generally unrelated to the various motivations for hooking up that were measured in the current study (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between sexual health knowledge, sexual locus of control, and motivations for hooking up.

|                         | Social Sexual<br>(Peer) | Social-Relational<br>(Peer) | Enhancement<br>(Peer) | Coping<br>(Peer) | Conformity<br>(Peer) |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Sexual Health Knowledge | -.34*                   | .06                         | -.21                  | -.22             | .00                  |
| Locus of Control        | .07                     | -.03                        | .06                   | -.10             | -.13                 |

Note. \*  $p < .05$ .

#### 4. Discussion

College students tended to perceive their own motivations for engaging in hookups as similar to the motivations of peers for hooking up, as indicated by the statistically significant correlations between the one's own motivations and the corresponding motivations perceived in peers. However, college students also noted differences in their own hookup motivations and the motivations of their peers. Based on the types of motivations measured in the current study, generally college students perceived that their peers were more frequently motivated to hookup than they, themselves were motivated. More specifically, participants reported that their peers were more frequently motivated to hookup by social-relational, social-sexual, conformity, and coping motivations. The conformity and coping motivations both are described as negative attributions. Contrary to social-relational, social-sexual and enhancement motivations stem from obtaining positive outcomes (i.e. relationships, pleasure, experience) gained from hooking up, while coping and conformity motivations stem from avoiding negative outcomes like from social exclusion or negative emotions<sup>16</sup>. Thus, seeing one's peers as being motivated by these reasons could be explained by the fundamental attribution error. The fundamental attribution error states that people are more likely to ascribe negative motivations to others than themselves<sup>28</sup>. The social-sexual and social-relational motivations however, were not thought to be negative attributions to motivation because in both cases participants gain a positive outcome from the hookup. Within the understanding of the fundamental attribution error gaining status, experience, or pleasure would be thought to be associated with one's self. Negative perceptions of hooking up associated with emotional turmoil and coping with lack of self-esteem would be thought to be attributed to other's motivations<sup>7,4</sup>. Perhaps hooking up is attributed as a negative behavior, regardless of the motivation. Alternatively, it could be that young adults inaccurately think that their peers are more supportive of and engage in hooking up more than they, themselves.

Unexpectedly, sexual knowledge and locus of control were unrelated to the frequencies of the various motives for hooking up. It might be that hooking up is more of an impulsive behavior that is not well thought out ahead of time, and thus, one does not often take the time to consider one's sexual health knowledge before hooking up. The finding that locus of control was unrelated to hookup motivations could be due to the measure of locus of control that was used in the current study. The locus of control measure focused on sexual situations more generally, and not primarily hooking up situations.

Limitations to the current study included a small sample size. With a sample of only 53 students, it is difficult to generalize the findings to all college students and other populations. Future studies should include a larger, more diverse sample. The peer version of the Hook Up Motivation Questionnaire and sexual health knowledge subscale used in the current study were also adapted from existing measures, and further research needs to be conducted to establish the reliability and validity of these measures.

Future directions for hooking up research should include gathering both quantitative and qualitative data on how young adults talk and communicate about sex and hooking up. How young adults communicate with one another about shared experiences is essential to both understanding hooking up and educating people who participate in the hookup culture. Future studies should also further explore the accuracy of young adults' perceptions of their peers' motivations and behaviors.

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