

Social Motivations for College Hookups

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Abstract:

Hookups are a normative experience for college students with 72% of college students reporting hooking up by their Senior year. Although there is over a decade of research on hookups, what motivates college students to participate in hookups is not clear, with prior research focused mostly on psychological rather than social motivations, and differences by gender, but not exploring whether students differ in hookup motivations by other factors. This study explored whether students hooked up and hookup motivations among a random sample of 180 heterosexual college students at a Southeast university, and differences by demographic characteristics, marital age expectations, and parent and peers' marital status. Results showed the majority of participants hookup up to feel sexual pleasure, with a significant minority motivated by relationship formation and the 'college experience.' Significant predictors of hookup motivations include gender, mother's education, religiosity, parent's coupled status, and friends' marital status, while race and age differences were not significant. Results of a latent class analyses showed five distinct classes of social hookup motivations: older and younger abstainers, relationship seekers, pleasure pathway, and college scripts. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: hookups | motivations | latent class analysis | college students

Article:

Introduction

The past 50 years have seen various changes in traditional American sexual and romantic partnering with 'hookups' increasingly becoming an expected part of the 'college experience' (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). Hookups are casual sexual encounters that can range from kissing to sexual intercourse (Bogle 2008; Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). The number of college students who have been found to hookup varies across time and population, from 40% of all women in older research (Glenn and Marquardt 2001) to 60% of all undergraduate students (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016) to 72% of all Seniors (England et al. 2008). Recent research finds students are

now as likely to ‘hookup’ as they are to go on a traditional date, and report more hookup experiences than dates (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). Hookups are then a normative experience for most college students (England et al. 2008; Garcia et al. 2012; Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Reiber and Garcia 2010) despite them sometimes resulting in negative emotional and psychological outcomes, lack of satisfaction and enjoyment among college women, and even sexual assault (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008; Flack et al. 2007; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Owen et al. 2010).

Among casual sexual encounters, college hookups occupy a unique position because of social expectations of ‘the college experience,’ which can include expectations of hooking up as part of a broader partying ‘social script’ associated with college (Wade 2017, Kuperberg and Padgett 2017). Social scripts are a set of expectations that individuals have about how a given encounter or situation will unfold, and can be shaped by demographic characteristics and social contexts, including the behavior and experiences of peers and family (Kuperberg and Padgett 2017). Expectations to party and hookup while in college may directly motivate students to hookup so they can get the ‘full college experience,’ and may encourage substance use, which can also motivate hookups. These expectations can also increase other types of risk-taking behavior, making studying their role in motivating behavior of special importance: recent news articles reported that expectations of getting “the college experience” before being sent home motivated student parties during the Covid-19 pandemic that may have increased outbreaks (Luciew 2020).

While past research has examined features of hookups predicted by specific social scripts associated with partying and hooking up while in college (Kuperberg and Padgett 2017; Kuperberg and Walker 2018), the degree to which sexual experimentation may motivate hookups (Weitbrecht and Whitton 2020), and social expectations of hookups among students (Wade 2017), the extent to which getting “the college experience” directly motivates hookup behavior has not been examined. Past research has instead examined motivations for casual sex, and individualistic psychological motivations for hookups, but research examining the physical, relationship, social contextual and substance related factors that may motivate the broader category of hookups” is very limited (Uecker et al. 2015; Weitbrecht and Whitton 2020). This research has also tended to examine hookup or casual sex motivations as distinct, and only limited research has examined whether certain motivations may “cluster” together. Finally, while past research has found a positive association between hooking up and having an older ideal age at marriage, and distinct patterns in hookups and desire for more hookup opportunities by race, age and sexual orientation (Allison and Risman 2017; Kuperberg and Padgett 2016), research has not examined whether specific hookup motivations differ by race, age, religiosity, ideal age at marriage, or other social contextual measures of marriage such as the marital status of parents or peers or the education (and therefore educational experiences) of parents, with past demographic comparisons of motivations only examining gender or partner type differences (Weitbrecht and Whitton 2020). We add to this literature by using an originally collected pilot dataset to examine social motivations for hookups, and differences by race, age, gender, religiosity, mother’s college education, ideal age at marriage, and marital status of parents and peers. We also examine the degree to which these factors are related to hookup rates, and whether hookups motivations “cluster” together among certain demographics.

Literature Review

Hookup Motivation Research

A large body of psychological literature has explored human motivations for having sex and casual sex specifically, but there is limited research on hookup motivations, especially outside of psychological motivations. Qualitative research argues that hookups are increasingly an expected part of the college experience (Wade 2017), suggesting that these expectations may be an important motivation for some to participate in the practice. Regan and Dreyer (1999) found over 32 motivations for casual sex that they grouped into five general motive categories: personal intraindividual motivations, social-environmental motivations, physical-environmental motivations, interpersonal motivations, and other motivations. In a quantitative study asking about general motivations to hookup 89% of students were motivated by physical pleasure, 54% cited “emotional reasons”, 8% were motivated by other people doing it, 4% indicated their friends pressure them to hookup, 33% reported the hookup was due to alcohol and other drugs, while 51% wanted to form a relationship (Garcia and Reiber 2008). A third study investigated how six motivations (relationship desire, lack of dating scene, sexual gratification, wanting to fit in, fun/excitement, and not enough time to pursue a relationship) grouped together to create four distinct classes of hookup motivations including Utilitarians (motivated by hookup enjoyment but use hookups as a catalyst into relationships due to a weak dating scene), Uninhibiteds (motivated by fun and sexual gratification), Uninspireds (are not strongly motivated by anything), and Unreflectives (are neutral on all hookup motivations) (Uecker et al. 2015). Weitbrecht and Whitton (2020) examined motivations for college hookups, finding the most common were physical pleasure, followed by feeling attractive, substance use, romantic relationship formation, lack of long term commitments, sexual experimentation, and gaining sexual experience. Less common motivations included loneliness, increasing social status, peer pressure, or because other people were doing it. Finally, a recent study found that college students who engaged in casual sex for autonomous motives (e.g. for fun, to explore their sexuality, to have an important experience) had more casual sex partners, and that non-autonomous motives were associated with negative psychological well-being (e.g. depression and self-esteem) (Townsend et al. 2020)

In addition to these previously examined factors, social-environmental factors unique to hookups such as social dating scripts and hookup scripts on college campuses may also play a role in college hookup motivations, if hooking up is an expected part of getting the “full college experience,” or if college students, hearing about hookup culture, hook up to “fit in” with what they believe to be the behavior of their peers (Wade 2017). Sexual script theory suggests that people navigate a set of sexual ‘scripts’, a type of social script consisting of a set of expectations and norms about how sexual encounters, in this case hookups, will unfold (Simon and Gagnon 1987; Wiederman 2015). The social script of college as a time for sexual experimentation is related to the college hookup script, as is the social script of substance experimentation in college; nearly half of college hookups involve binge drinking during or right before the encounter, and over 1 in 10 included marijuana consumption, which has also been found to be linked to an increased likelihood of unprotected sex and hookups with lesser known partners (Kuperberg and Padgett 2017). Substance use may therefore be related to motivations to hookup at a higher rate than other casual sex encounters, because it is an established part of the college hookup script; substance based motivations for hookups may also be especially common among those motivated by the college expectation ‘script.’

Marriage Timing Intentions, Marital Status of Parents and Peers, and Hookup Motivations

Apart from social scripts associated with college, other social factors may also shape motivations for college student hookups. Marriage timing intentions which are shaped by group based social expectations, and the more individualistic marital social contexts that students inhabit given differences in the marital status of parents and peers, may lead to differences in hookup motivations. While many students list forming a relationship as a motivation for hooking up (Garcia and Reiber 2008), hooking up has also been conceptualized as a “placeholder” for serious relationships and marriage while college students pursue education, career and personal development opportunities in a social context in which marriages more commonly occur at older ages, especially among the more educated (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Kefalas et al. 2011). However, not all college students embrace the hookup scripts, and ideal age of first marriage may be less strongly related to hookups for students who are socially excluded from hookup culture (Allison and Risman 2017).

An individual’s marital horizons, or their outlook or approach to marriage based on their current situation (Carroll et al. 2007), may influence their motivations to participate in hookup culture. Marital horizons theory is rooted in a life course framework, and notes that desired future transitions shape the sexual behaviors and beliefs of individuals; hookups are part of a developmental trajectory on the pathway to adulthood, versus an experience that is only relevant during college years (Carroll et al. 2007; Lyons et al. 2014; Sessler 2010). The importance that someone places on marriage, ideal age of marriage, and perceived qualities for marriage readiness are the three central components of marital horizons theory, which all shape these behaviors (Carroll et al. 2007). The marital status of parents and close peers may also shape the beliefs and scripts of college students by setting expectations for marital behavior which inform their sexual behaviors, and the current study adds to the literature by examining whether these factors are related to hooking up and hookup motivations.

Distinct racial/ethnicity, class and age differences in marital timing expectations and peer and parent marriage rates can also shape group-based differences in hookup motivations and participation (Allison and Risman 2017, Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Mullen 2010). A key component of marital horizons theory is that social expectations related to ideal age and timing of marriage, or “marriage mentalities” vary by race, gender and class (Carroll et al. 2007; Halpern-Meekin 2012; Willoughby and Hall 2015). Working class students typically already take on adult roles and are more likely to be in committed relationships and marry earlier than their more privileged counterparts when they do marry, but ultimately are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce in the long run, potentially leading to lower marriage rates among parents and peers (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; England and Bearak 2012; Kefalas et al. 2011; Uecker and Stokes 2008). Students of color are less likely than White students to see marriage delay as normative (Allison and Risman 2017). Yet compared to white students, Black students may have fewer peers and be less likely to have parents that are married, given race-based differences in marriage rates and high rates of racial homophily (McClintock 2010; Raley et al. 2015). Older students may have a higher likelihood of having married peers. Given gender inequalities in college hookup culture, ideal age of first marriage may not be a predictor of hookups for college women (Allison and Risman 2017).

Sociodemographic Differences in Hookup Motivations

Hookup participation and motivations may also be shaped by social location; that is, membership in social groups, which can in turn shape social scripts, social expectations and social contexts

(Dugger 1988). Participation in hookups differs by gender, race, religiosity, class and age (Allison and Risman 2017; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Kuperberg and Padgett 2016); these differences may to some extent be shaped by group-based differences in hookup motivations. It is also important to note which groups of students are more likely to have certain motivations, since motivations are linked to differences in outcomes (Vrangalova 2015). Motivations likely also vary by sexual orientation; prior research has found differing levels of hooking up, desire for hookup opportunities, and risk taking in hookups by sexual orientations and when partners were same-sex (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016, 2017). However, the small size of our sample in which almost all respondents were heterosexual did not allow us to examine these differences in depth; analyses were limited to heterosexual students.

Gender differences in hookup motivations are often explained by social learning theories, which suggest that the differences in motivations are shaped by the reinforcements and punishments associated with these behaviors (Mischel 2015). Women typically experience more negative consequences for engaging in hookups while men receive more positive reinforcement (Allison and Risman 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Reiber and Garcia 2010). Past research has found women are more likely to endorse motives for sex and hookups such as love, commitment, initiating or solidifying an enduring relationship, and being compliant to their partner, compared to men (Bogle 2008; Hatfield et al. 2010; Weitbrecht and Whitton 2020). Women who wish they had more opportunities to form long term relationships are also more likely to have hooked up in the past; although it is unclear if this desire to form relationships preceded or were a result of that hookup experience (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). In a mixed methods study, first year college women reported five groups of motivations including social rewards, mood and physical enhancement, conformity to social pressure, coping with negative emotions and external situations, personal qualities, and internal states (e.g., hormones) (Kenney et al. 2013). Women are also more likely to report hooking up to feel attractive or desirable (Weitbrecht and Whitton 2020).

Men are more likely to endorse pleasure, self-affirmation, peer conformity and goal attainment as motives for sex and hookups (Hatfield et al. 2010, Weitbrecht and Whitton 2020). Men may also choose to hookup or engage in casual sex to fit in with other students, conform to the hookup scripts on their campus, sexually experiment, and increase their social status (Garcia and Reiber 2008; Regan and Dreyer 1999; Weitbrecht and Whitton 2020). Gender differences have been found in reporting certain motivations such as sexual desire (47% men vs. 29% women), relationship desire (9% men vs. 44% women), increase in social status (27% men vs. 5% women), having fun (58% men vs. 44% women), and to fit in because their friends were doing it (23% men vs. 4% women) (Lyons et al. 2014; Regan and Dreyer 1999). However, research on more broad casual sex encounters suggests that gender differences in motivations are small and not statistically significant (Hatfield et al. 2010; Lyons et al. 2014; Regan and Dreyer 1999). Women are equally likely as men to use marijuana during or right before hookups and gender differences in alcohol and other drug use are significant (with women using substances less than men) but very small in magnitude (Kuperberg and Padgett 2017).

Race also shapes hookup participation, and students of color may have distinct motivations for hooking up. Although prior research has found that Black college women and Asian college men are more likely to desire hookup opportunities, they are less likely to participate in them compared to their white counterparts (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). Students of color may be 'pushed out' of hookup culture because they exist in the social margins of hookup culture on predominately White college campuses. Black men reportedly felt they would

be judged negatively for participating in hooking up as a result of their visibly rare presence on campus (Kimmel 2008). Students of color are often limited in the number of sexual partners on college campuses due to their and other's desire for racial homophily (Allison and Risman 2017; McClintock 2010). The reasons that students of color may choose to hookup may be different from their white counterparts, but we know very little about students of color motivations for hookups since the hookup literature is largely based on predominately white college samples. White college students are more likely to use hookups to secure romantic relationships while also hooking up for fun and excitement, which Uecker, Pearce, and Andercheck (2015) interpret to mean that for white students hookups have become a regular part of the college script. Some limited research found Black and Hispanic students were more likely than White students to hookup because they wanted to have sex (Uecker et al. 2015). Students of color are less likely to binge drink or use marijuana during hookup encounters compared to white students (Kuperberg and Padgett 2017); therefore substance use may be less likely to motivate their hookups compared to those of white students. Hooking up can result in negative consequences for students of color such as sexual shame, guilt, and stereotypes (Garcia et al. 2012; Hall and Tanner 2016; McClintock 2010), thus the reasons why they may choose to hookup despite these consequences should be explored.

Religiosity is a factor that shapes an individuals' sexual scripts and adherence to hookup scripts on college campuses, as well as their ideal age at marriage and the marital status of their peers. To date there has been little research that has examined religiosity and motivations for hooking up. People who are religious may be motivated by their desire for a relationship more than those who are not religious, in part because religiosity is associated with a younger desired age at marriage (Fuller et al. 2015). Findings on the relationship between religiosity and hookup behaviors have been mixed. Penhollow et al. (2007) found religious feelings and regular attendance were associated with fewer hookups and lower likelihoods of participating in sexual intercourse during a hookup. Kuperberg and Padgett (2016) found hookups were most common among those who occasionally attended religious services and least common among those who regularly attended religious services; those who never attended services were in between. They speculate that occasional religious attendance increases social networks allowing students to meet more potential hookup partners, but strong religious beliefs associated with regular attendance discourage hookups. However other researchers have not found a significant relationship between hooking up and feelings of religiosity or spirituality (Berntson, Hoffman, and Luff 2014; Fielder and Carey 2010; Owen et al. 2010).

Differences in motivations for hooking up can also vary based on class and age. Being able to participate in hookup culture and perceiving college as an "experience" is often viewed as a privileged activity that working class students do not have (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Kuperberg and Allison 2018). Class background is often measured by whether or not a mother has a college degree, which may also directly influence expectations for college directly if students hear stories of college experimentation from their parents. Having a mother with a bachelor's degree has also been found to be related to increased binge drinking and marijuana use during hookup encounters (Kuperberg and Padgett 2017). Traditionally aged first-year college students often enjoy the excitement that comes with new opportunities for sexual exploration as they explore their newfound freedom from parents (Bogle 2008). The thrill seeking and experimentation motivations may begin to decrease as college students age (Uecker et al. 2015). Also, many first-year college students conform to social norms and may hookup to fit in or because their friends are doing it in order to receive peer approval (Uecker et al. 2015).

As students age they have more pressure to find a romantic partner so they may desire to hookup in order to settle down and form a relationship with someone (Owen et al. 2010). However, older college students may not desire a relationship because they will be transitioning out of college soon (Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Lyons et al. 2014).

Purpose and Research Questions

The limited research on motivations for hooking up and casual sex has typically focused on psychological motivations, and there is little research on how these motivations cluster together, or how motivations may vary by marital horizons, marital contexts, and demographic characteristics (Garcia and Reiber 2008; Li and Kenrick 2006; Lyons et al. 2014; Regan and Dreyer 1999). It is unlikely that college students are motivated by one factor alone. Students are constantly navigating multiple schema that encourage or discourage sexual behaviors. Uecker et al. (2015) suggests that there may be complex sets or groups of motivations that are not being explained by the previous analytical approaches used in prior studies. By using more complex analyses we will be able to illuminate the ways in which different motivations work together to create groups. Thus, in this paper, we will explore both selection into individual types of motivations, and groups of hookup motivations using a latent class analysis. By using a latent class analysis, we build upon the work of Uecker et al. (2015) which was the first to explore classes of hookup motivations; however, instead of focusing on psychological motivations we shift our focus on social motivations that are formed by social scripts. Our study was guided by the following questions: (1) Are there demographic differences in hookup motivations by gender, race, mother's education, religiosity, and age? (2) Are there differences in hookup motivations by ideal age at marriage, and parent/peer relationship status? (3a) Are there distinct classes of hookup motivations among our sample of college students and what are they? (3b) Do these classes cluster among certain types of individuals?

Method

Procedures

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the host institution. The data from this study are from a survey of undergraduate students collected in Fall 2012. Participants for the survey were recruited from a public university in the Southeast United States, which is considered a Minority Serving Institution (MSI) because over 25% of its student body are from a specific minority group; approximately 27% of the student body are Black/African American and 7% are Latinx, with additional students in other racial-ethnic groups, in line with rates among respondents (see Table 1). Participants were asked to participate in 10–15-min online surveys. A survey was sent to a random sample of 1000 undergraduate students enrolled at the University, with emails obtained from the university's Office of Institutional Research. To increase participation, three raffles were conducted with gift cards that could be used wherever a credit card could be used, with the first distributing a \$300 gift card, the second 2 weeks later distributing three \$100 gift cards and the third one and a half weeks later distributed six \$50 gift cards; reminder emails were sent the day before each raffle to increase response rates.

Table 1. Demographics and hookup motivations (N=180)

Characteristics	Engaged in a hookup %, mean (N=115)	Had not hooked up %, mean (N=65)	X ² p value	Total % (N=180)
Gender				
Female	90 (77.2)	58 (89.9)	.06	82.2
Male	25 (22.8)	7 (10.1)		17.8
Race				
White	65 (55.6)	34 (52.9)	.61	55.0
Black	32 (28.6)	17 (26.5)		27.2
Other	18 (15.9)	14 (20.6)		17.8
Age				
18	20 (16.5)	13 (20.3)	.66	18.3
19-20	50 (45.7)	20 (29.0)	.09	38.9
21-24	45 (37.8)	32 (50.7)	.18	42.8
Mom has college degree	44 (37.8)	22 (50.7)	.55	36.7
Religious	77 (37.8)	39 (36.2)	.34	64.4
Ideal age of marriage >25	49 (45.7)	23 (34.8)	.32	40.0
Coupled parents	69 (44.1)	49 (56.5)	.04	65.6
Close friends are married	51 (59.7)	38 (75.4)	.07	49.4
Hookup motivations				
Pleasure	74 (64.3)			
Sex skills	14 (12.2)			
Relationship desire	38 (33.0)			
College experience	17 (14.8)			
Fit in	4 (3.5)			

Boost self-confidence	13 (11.3)			
Drugs or alcohol	16 (13.9)			
Not sure	18 (15.6)			

Participants

A total of 280 college students participated in the study for a response rate of 28%, although 26 participants did not provide information on whether or not they had hooked up and were excluded from the sample. This response rate is typical for online surveys; response rates under 40% are typical in web surveys that utilize incentives, and many have closer to a 20% response rate, with women often more likely to respond (Laguilles et al. 2011). This rate is lower than the more well-known Online College Social Life Survey (OCSLS), because our method did not similarly assign the survey as an extra credit assignment to those enrolled in sociology, gender, sexuality or family related coursework (Kuperberg and Allison 2018). Instead, our sampling method allowed for a much wider range of participants enrolled at a single regional southern university, a population not well represented in the OCSLS, which has few responses outside elite ‘Research 1’ universities, or in the south (Kuperberg and Allison 2018).

The ages of the participants in our sample ranged from 18 to 50. For the purposes of this study, we limited our analysis to students who were between the ages of 18-24 years old (N = 200) and those who identified as male or female (N = 196) and heterosexual (N = 183). Only a few participants (n = 11) were not heterosexual; since this group is too small to analyze separately and patterns of hookup participation and behavior for heterosexual students differ from those who have other sexual identities (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016), we exclude these 11 students from analyses. We also dropped one person who reported not wanting to marry in the future and two people who did not report their race, resulting in a final sample of N = 180. There were more females (N = 148; 82.2%) than males (N = 32, 17.8%) in the sample; this gender imbalance is a result of both the gender composition of the university, which was 65.4% female during the semester in which data were collected, and the higher response rate of women, which is common in surveys (Laguilles et al. 2011). Some students were married by the time of the survey (N = 7) but we retain them in the sample because the question about motivation asked about most recent hookups, which can include pre-marriage hookups for these students.

Measures

Hookup Motivations

Each participant was asked “Thinking about your last hookup experience, what motivated you to hookup with that person? (check all that apply)” Survey respondents could select multiple responses. There were ten response options: sexual pleasure, to improve my sex skills, hoped to form a romantic relationship with that person, it’s part of the “college experience”, my friends are hooking up and I wanted to fit in, to build my self-confidence, I didn’t intend to but I was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, not sure, other, and I have never hooked up with someone before. We do not present logistic regression or other analyses of the options of to fit in and other because they were not chosen by many participants.

Sociodemographic Variables

We examine differences in motivations by race, gender, age, religiosity and mother's education. Participants were asked to check what race/ethnicity they consider themselves, with responses mutually exclusive. They could choose between White or Middle Eastern, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, Alaskan Native Hawaiian, Asian or Pacific Islander, Other race, or two or more races or biracial. Since 32 respondents in the sample chose a race other than White or Black (see Table 1), the race choices were recoded as a series of three dummy variables: Black (1=yes, 0=no), Other (1=yes, 0=no), and White (1=yes, 0=no; referent group). Participants were asked about their gender and chose from seven answer choices: female, male, FTM transgender, MTF transgender, intersex, queer, questioning/unsure, with five respondents who gave responses other than male or female excluded from analysis. Females were coded as 0 and males were coded as 1. Age was used as a continuous variable in regressions and a series of three dummy variables in our Latent Class Analyses. The three dummy variables were 18, 19–20, and 21–24, with the first group capturing freshmen who entered college at the traditional age, and the last group capturing those for whom purchasing alcohol is legal in the United States. Since age and class standing are collinear, and other measures such as alcohol legality and desired age at marriage are more closely tied to age than class standing, we do not also control for class standing. Participants were asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement “I consider myself a religious person.” The answer choices were dichotomized with strongly agree and agree being 1 and disagree and strongly disagree being 0. Participants were also asked about the highest degree that their mother received. A dummy variable was created and coded as mom has a college degree (1) or does not have a college degree (0). This was the only measure of social class collected in the survey, in line with prior surveys of college sexual life, such as the OCSLS.

Marriage Intentions

Participants were asked if they wanted to get married and the response options were yes, no and unsure. The majority of students (N = 170; 94.4%) reported that they wanted to get married in the future, with the remainder reporting they were unsure; one reporting they did not want to marry was previously removed from analysis. Participants who responded they did want to marry or were unsure were asked “at what age would you ideally like to get married, assuming you met the right person by that age?” Response options were 18–21 years of age, 22–25, 26–29, 30–34, and over 35. A dichotomized variable was created for those who stated that their ideal age of marriage was > 25 years old coded as 1 and those who did not as 0. This differentiates between people who want to get married before or soon after college ends, and those with more distant marital horizons. Only 7 respondents reported wanting to marry after 30, precluding a more refined analysis.

Parents Relationship Status

Participants were asked “what is the current relationship status of your biological or adoptive parents?” The answer choices were married, married and separated, divorced, never married/currently living together, never married/currently separated and widowed. Parents who

were married, widowed, or currently living together were collapsed into a dummy variable of coupled parents (1) versus not (0).

Peer's Marriage Status

Participants were asked “how many of your close friends are married?” Response options were none, 1–3, 4–6, 7–10, and more than 10. Response options were collapsed into some any friends are married (1) and no close friends are married (0).

Analysis

After calculating descriptive statistics, we conducted a series of logistic regressions with demographic, ideal marital age, and parent/peer relationship variables predicting selection into having hooked up, and among those who hooked up, whether they reported being motivated by each hookup motivation. Next we ran a Latent Class Analysis (LCA) in Stata (Lanza et al. 2015) which included having hooked up, hookup motivations and demographic and social context characteristics to determine if certain characteristics, intentions and motivations comprised distinct groups or “classes” of students. LCA was chosen because it is able to illuminate distinct classes and provide more theoretically meaningful results for social science research than a cluster analysis (Hagenaars and Halman 1989). LCA produces categorical classes and results are presented as the predicted probability that a participant was a member of that specific class. Values close to 1 or close to 0 indicate a strong relationship between a given variable and the latent class. The distribution of the probabilities across classes must also be examined to determine which variables are significant (Collins and Lanza 2010).

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the total sample and sample of those who reported hooking up. Over a third of participants reported that they had never hooked up before (N = 65; 36.1%) while 63.9% (N = 115) reported having hooked up. Most participants in our sample who hooked up reported sexual pleasure as their main hookup motivation (N = 74, 64.3%). The second most commonly reported motivation for hooking up was forming romantic relationships (N = 38, 33.0%), followed by those who were not sure why they hooked up (N = 18; 15.8%), hooking up for the “college experience” (N = 17, 14.8%), alcohol or drug use (N = 16, 13.9%), self-confidence (N = 13, 11.3%) and improving sex skills (N = 14, 12.2%). Only 3.5% (N = 4) reported hooking up to “fit in;” we exclude this category from further analysis due to the small number of affirmative responses. The overall sample was majority female (81.6%), White (N = 99; 55.0%), followed by Black (N = 49; 27.2%), and other race (N = 32; 17.8%), with an average age of 20.25 years old (SD = .12). Those who hooked up were significantly less likely to have coupled parents compared to those who had not; there were no other significant differences in demographic characteristics between those that had engaged in a hookup and those that had not in a simple Chi-square analysis.

Research Question 1: Hookup Motivations and Demographics

We next estimated binomial logistic regressions to investigate the association between hooking up, individual hookup motives among those who report having hooked up, and demographic characteristics, marital horizons, and parent/peer relationship variables (see Table 2). Past participation in hookups was more common among male students, with males being less likely to report they had never hooked up (OR = .38, 95% CI [.15–.98], $p = .04$). Among those who had hooked up, male students were significantly more likely than female students to report hooking up for pleasure (OR = 3.56, 95% CI [1.04–12.15], $p = .04$), to improve sex skills (OR = 4.90, 95% CI [1.30–18.44]; $p = .019$), to boost their self-confidence (OR = 4.62, 95% CI [1.04–20.42], $p = .04$), or because it's part of the college experience (OR = 8.38, 95% CI [2.28–30.7], $p = .001$). There were no significant gender differences in reporting being motivated by drug or alcohol use, desiring to form a relationship with their partner, or being unsure about motivations. Participants who were more religious (OR = 2.59, 95% CI [1.09–6.18], $p = .03$) or whose mother had a college degree (OR = 4.33, 95% CI [1.09–17.17], $p = .037$) were also significantly more likely to report that they hooked up because it was a part of the college experience. Motivations did not significantly differ by race or age.

Research Question 2: Hookup Motives and Marital Variables

There were no significant associations between ideal age of marriage, or having married friends and hookup motivation or experience in regressions; however, hookup participation and motivations differed by the relationship status of parents. Participants who had parents who were coupled were more likely than those who didn't to report hooking up because they hoped to form a relationship (OR = 3.86, 95% CI [1.45–10.29], $p = .007$) or that they had never hooked up (OR = 2.14, 95% CI [1.04–4.38], $p = .04$).

Research Question 3: Latent Classes

For the latent class analysis, we calculated goodness of fit statistics for models with 3, 4, 5 and 6 classes, which revealed that the model with the best fit for each analyses was a four class model based on lower Akaike's information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC). The goodness of fit statistics for the three class LCA model were AIC = 3610.78, BIC = 3805.55, the four class model had an AIC = 3587.44 and BIC = 3852.45, the five class model had an AIC = 3526.38, BIC = 3808.36 and the six class model had an AIC = 3515.73 and BIC = 3911.66.

Based on these fit statistics we chose the five class model and labeled the classes: older abstainers, young abstainers, relationship seekers, pleasure pathway, and college script.

Abstainer Classes

There were two classes of abstainers and three classes of participants that engaged in a hookup. The first class we call the older abstainers group and comprised almost 18% of students. 100% of participants in this class had never hooked up and were over the age of 21. This class was mostly White (.62). They were the class most likely to have married friends (.72) and had a high probability of having parents that were coupled (.72). Only 6% of this class was male. They were fairly religious (.66) although not unusually so. Despite being older, people in this class had younger ideal ages of marriage with only .34 reporting the desire to marry over the age of 25.

Table 2. Adjusted odds ratios from binomial logistic regressions predicting hookup participation and hookup motivations among hookup participants

	Has never hooked up	Pleasure	Improve sex skills	Alcohol or drugs	Self-confidence	College experience	Not sure	Relationship desire
Other	1.40	1.30	1.45	.52	2.45	.53	1.36	1.14
Black	1.37	2.09	.32	.85	.83	1.03	.36	1.77
Male	.38*	3.56*	4.90*	.16	4.62*	8.38**	1.36	.52
Religious	.95	.73	1.23	.69	.95	2.59*	1.49	.75
Age	1.08	.85	1.09	1.00	1.37	1.04	.89	1.27
Coupled parents	2.14*	.77	.76	1.08	1.39	.79	1.54	3.86**
Mom has college degree	.81	1.27	1.52	1.90	.83	4.33*	1.71	1.76
Ideal age of marriage >25	.89	1.00	1.47	.77	1.45	1.39	2.15	.46
Has married friends	1.58	1.45	1.45	2.74	.89	2.63	.85	1.13
N	180	113	113	113	113	113	113	113

White was the reference group for race

OR odds ratio

*p < .05, **p < .01

The second class is the young abstainers who comprised another 18% of students. Like the first class, 100% of participants had never hooked up. Unlike the first class, the young abstainers were more racially diverse, with more Black students (.30) and the largest group of students of other races (.27). They were more likely to be 18 years old than any other group (.39), suggesting some of these students may hookup in the future, moving to a different class. They were also between the ages of 19-20 (.61), but no one in this class was 21 or older. They had the highest rates of coupled parents of any class (.79) and had a relatively low level of mothers with a college degree (.27). Both the older abstainers and young abstainers were most likely to have coupled parents compared to the hookup classes.

Hookup Classes

The third class is the relationship seekers class, making up about 20% of respondents. This class was motivated by relationships more than any other class (.46) and least likely to be motivated

by pleasure compared to other classes that hooked up (.48). They also were not motivated at all by getting the college experience, and had the lowest likelihood of being motivated by drug or alcohol use (.11) They were most likely to be White (.71) and, like the first class of abstainers, 100% were over the age of 21. They were likely to have friends that were married (.65) although not as many as the older abstainers (.72). They were least likely to have a mother with a college degree (.27).

The fourth class is the pleasure pathway class. The largest class, comprising 32% of students, was motivated by relationships less than the relationship desire group (.30) but more than the college script class. They hooked up because of pleasure (.62) and were most likely to report that they were unsure why they hooked up (.19). This group was also motivated by relationship desire (.30) but not highly motivated by the college experience (.02) or gaining sexual skills (.00). This class had the most Black students (.38) and the second lowest group of males (.11). They were religious (.68) and were more likely to be ages 19–20 (.71) compared to other groups, with none over the age of 21. This group was least likely to report coupled parents (.56) and married friends (.28) but had a relatively low ideal age at marriage, with only .37 wanting to marry at 25 or older.

The fifth class is the college script class and was the smallest group at just under 12% of students, around 23% of those who had hooked up. In this group, 100% of participants reported sexual pleasure as their hookup motivation. People in this group were also more likely than any other class to report hooking up because it is a part of the college experience (.75), to improve their sex skills (.47), self-confidence (.31) and about 1 in 5 (.19) were also motivated by drug and alcohol use. This group was also more likely to be male (.67) and especially likely to have college educated mothers (.64) and a desire to get married at an older age (.54) when compared to other groups (Table 3).

Table 3. Latent classes of hookup motivations and social characteristics

	Classes				
	Older abstainers	Young abstainers	Relationship seekers	Pleasure pathway	College scripts
Pleasure	0.00	0.00	0.48	0.62	1.00
Sex skills	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.57
Not sure	0.00	0.00	0.14	0.19	0.10
Alcohol/ drugs	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.14	0.19
Never hookup	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Self-confidence	0.00	0.00	0.08	0.06	0.31

College experience	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.75
Relationship desire	0.00	0.00	0.46	0.30	0.20
Other race	0.16	0.27	0.18	0.15	0.11
White	0.62	0.42	0.71	0.47	0.58
Black	0.22	0.30	0.11	0.38	0.30
Male	0.06	0.15	0.13	0.11	0.67
Religious	0.66	0.55	0.63	0.68	0.70
Age 18	0.00	0.39	0.00	0.29	0.15
Age 19-20	0.00	0.61	0.00	0.71	0.43
Age 21-24	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.41
Parents coupled	0.72	0.79	0.65	0.56	0.65
Mom has college degree	0.41	0.27	0.26	0.37	0.64
Ideal age of marriage >25	0.34	0.46	0.45	0.37	0.54
Married friends	0.72	0.45	0.65	0.28	0.54
Percent in class	17.8	18.3	20.1	32.0	11.8

The bolded proportions represent the characteristics that make each class unique and that differ the most when compared to other classes

Discussion

This study adds to the literature by focusing on social characteristics that predict hookup motivations as well as latent classes of motivations. Results demonstrate that prior studies focused on individualistic psychological motivations have missed important social contextual factors motivating hookups, and that these motivations in turn vary by social characteristics including social location, individualistic marital social context, and marital horizons.

In contrast with qualitative depictions of college hookups and hookup culture (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017), motivations related to college expectations were not the most common motivations, with these including sexual pleasure and romantic relationship formation. Yet, about one in six students reported motivated by hookups being part of the college experience, or due to alcohol or drug consumption, and almost 12% of students, almost one-fourth of students who hooked up, were part of the ‘college scripts’ class of hookup motivations. These motivations are related to social scripts associated with college hookups; the college social script emphasizes sexual experimentation, as well as experimentation with intoxication and substance abuse (Kuperberg and Padgett 2017). Hookups are then, at least for some, directly motivated by the unique social expectations and sexual scripts associated with college, making college hookups unique among sexual encounters, and pointing to the importance of taking into account social contexts and scripts when examining motivations for behavior more broadly.

While hooking up “to fit in” was so rare ($N = 4$) that we were unable to analyze responses further, suggesting that a simplistic notion of ‘peer pressure’ does not motivate hookups, social scripts more broadly shaped student’s hookup experiences and motivations by shaping expectations of what constitutes the ‘college experience,’ and by encouraging intoxication in settings that may lead to hookups. Our LCA revealed that seemingly individualistic motivations such as ‘boosting self-confidence’ and ‘building sex skills’ also clustered with motivations related to getting the ‘college experience’ and sexual pleasure. To students in these clusters, which we found were disproportionately men, engaging in what they believe to be the normative college experience of casual sexual encounters is seen as a pathway to improve their self-image and perhaps gain skills they will use when they are forming future sexual or more longer lasting romantic relationships, the latter of which our LCA found is more commonly a motivation among older students, those who desire an early at age marriage, and those whose mothers did not attend college themselves.

We found distinct gender differences in hookup motivations. In line with our expectations and prior research, women were less likely than men to report hooking up to improve sex skills or self-confidence, or because it’s a part of the ‘college experience’. The LCA similarly revealed men were more likely to be motivated by college scripts, including getting the “college experience”, which can include gaining sexual skills and self-confidence via sexual experimentation. Women were more likely to be in the classes that abstain, and in classes motivated by relationships (the relationship seekers and pleasure pathway class) although they were not more likely to report being motivated by relationships in regressions. Developing sexual skills, self-confidence, and the college experience was uncommon in the classes dominated by women. Logistic regressions revealed that sexual pleasure, the most common motivation, was equally cited as motivations for their last hookup by both men and women. This finding shows the importance of investigating the positive aspects of female sexuality including pleasure and desire, which are often considered a “missing discourse” (Fine 1988; Fine and McClelland 2006). Hookup literature has shown that there are negative emotional and psychological consequences for college women that hookup; however, college women are also having positive experiences and are able to pursue and are motivated by sexual pleasure in these experiences.

We did not find strong race differences in the logistic regression results related to individual hookup motivations or participation; while this may be an artifact of sample size, we did have a significant number of students of color in our sample. Results suggest students have similar motivations for hookups when they do hookup regardless of race; racial differences in

hookup rates found by prior research may instead be shaped by difficulties finding partners rather than differences in underlying motivations (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). Some racial differences did emerge in the LCA; White respondents were more likely to be relationship seekers, a class which was older and included respondents most likely to have married friends, which may reflect racial differences in marriage rates and racial homophily in friendships (McClintock 2010; Raley et al. 2015). However Black and White respondents were both common in the “college scripts” class, indicating fewer racial differences in whether students are motivated by these social scripts. That class also commonly included those who had a mother with a college degree, as found by prior qualitative research (Allison and Risman 2014). Having parents with a college education may shape expectations of college sexual behavior, both because of parental stories of their own college sexual and romantic experiences, and because those with a parent with a college education are more likely to have college educated peers and older siblings, shaping expectations of social scripts. Mother’s education also serves as an indicator of class background, shaping expectations of marital horizons and college experimentation. Those with fewer peers who are college educated may have fewer expectations of sexual experimentation in college, and may be more focused on improving their economic position while in college; those whose parents did not have a college degree were found more commonly in the relationship seeker class.

Religiosity was surprisingly related to a higher probability of hooking up in order to gain the ‘college experience’ while not being tied to overall probability of having hooked up. Prior research shows that respondents, especially men, who attend some religious services may hookup more than those who do not attend services, perhaps as a result of increased access to social networks (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). Students who grew up religious may have grown up in a more restrictive sexual environment and perhaps see college as a time to break free of these norms before perhaps marrying at a younger age. These students may also have stronger expectations of college hookups as a result of religious teachings on the sexual immorality of college students; future qualitative research should explore hookups and religious norms more closely.

This study also incorporates measures related to ideal age at marriage and the relationship status of parents and peers, in line with marital horizons theory and a social contextual approach to understanding sexual motivations. In our regression models ideal age at marriage was not a strong predictor of differences among the abstainers and those in the relationship seeker or pleasure pathway groups, but was oldest among those motivated by college scripts. Some differences did emerge in motivations based on individualistic marital context, that is, the couplehood and marital status of parents and peers. Participants who had parents that were coupled were more likely to report hooking up because they desired a relationship, or to not hookup at all, possibly hooking up to achieve the relationships that they have seen with their parents. Participants with married friends were more likely to be in the relationship seeker and older abstainer classes, not surprising since both classes consisted of older students. Older students in the relationship seeker group had a lower rate of having married friends or partnered parents, and an average older ideal age at marriage compared to the similarly aged older abstainer group. Among younger students not motivated by the college experience, those in the pleasure pathways class had a relatively low ideal age at marriage, but were least likely to have married friends or coupled parents among all groups.

Individualistic marital social contexts and marital horizons then to some degree differentiated whether students ended up in the abstainer groups, or in the groups of students

hooking up, but unmotivated by the college experience in particular. Those motivated by college scripts on the other hand showed more typical rates of having married friends or coupled parents, but had higher ideal ages at marriage and were more likely to have a college educated mother. For these students, distant marital horizons and perhaps expectations shaped by their parents' experience and class position distinguish them more than the couplehood and marital status of parents and peers.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study has major contributions, it does have some limitations. First the data is cross-sectional, so we are not sure how respondent's hookup motivations and marital intentions may change over time. Secondly, because our data were collected at one university it can only be generalized to that population. Each university has its own unique sexual scripts and hookup culture, and scripts also vary by school type (Pham 2019). These scripts may shape students' motivations for hooking up as well as their marriage intentions. Questions only asked about last hookup motivation rather than motivations of hookup in general; while this may be an advantage in making the question more concrete for students, results may differ from a study looking at motivations for hooking up more generally. Specifically we expect that our estimates of the degree to which hookups are motivated by the 'college experience' or by gaining sexual skills may underestimate the overall degree to which hookups are ever motivated by these concerns, with some students perhaps satisfying their desire for that experience or skill development in earlier hookups not captured by our question. Third, our survey instrument only included nine motivations, and numerous motivations examined in the literature were not included. However, the motivations in our study address some of the key motivations that have been mentioned repeatedly in the literature, and only one student selected "other" as a motivation. We also add to the literature by including motivations reflecting the college sexual experimentation script captured in notions of the expected 'college experience.' Future research should incorporate sociological motivations with additional psychological and structural motivations such as stress release, feelings of control, coping mechanisms for breakups, time commitment, and lack of a college dating scene (Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Meston and Buss 2007; Uecker et al. 2015). Our study was limited in sample size due to limited funding to conduct this survey and was only collected at a single university; larger surveys should be collected, examining this issue at a wider range of colleges. This limited sample size did not allow us to analyze students who were not heterosexual, or had gender identities outside of male or female, and future research should examine the hookup motivations of those with additional sexual and gender identities. Finally, this data was collected in 2012 which must be taken into account when applying the study findings. As sexual relationships and social scripts in college have changed and may continue to change in light of social changes such as the rise of dating and hookup apps (Kuperberg and Allison 2018), and due to Covid-19, hookup motivations may change as well.

Conclusion

Elaborating research on hookup motivations is important because hookups are now as common as dating on campus, with the majority of students hooking up at least once before graduation (Kuperberg and Padgett 2016). Understanding the degree to which social contexts and social scripts can motivate behavior also has important implications when examining behavior within

contexts with strong social expectations more generally, such as behavior within colleges, fraternities and sororities, the military, and numerous other social institutions.

The reasons why students hookup are complex and concurrent but students are most commonly driven by pleasure, with two-thirds of our sample of those that hooked up choosing this motivation. Romantic relationship formation, substance use and the college experience also appear as common motivators, the latter two both associated with college scripts. While the ‘college experience’ is a unique motivator of the college hookup that distinguishes it from other casual sexual encounters, and has important public health implications, findings suggest that college hookups are more commonly motivated by other concerns. Research on college students has typically focused on reducing sexual risk behaviors and examined negative outcomes related to hookups; our findings suggest it is important to incorporate pleasure into future research. Research has also focused on psychological motivators of college hookups and casual sex; our research suggests that social contexts, social scripts and social location are important factors to take into account when examining sexual and other risk-taking behavior, both in terms of shaping motivations themselves, and in shaping selection into those motivations. Future research should incorporate both psychological, physical and social contextual motivations for hookups, and how motivations are related to outcomes.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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