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Are Hookups Replacing Romantic Relationships? A Longitudinal Study of First-Year Female College Students

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Abstract

Purpose—To assess the prevalence and frequency of sexual hookups across the first year of college and to compare rates of hookups and romantic relationship sex.

Methods—We surveyed 483 first-year female college students (*M* age = 18.1 years, range: 18–21, 64% White) monthly over the first year of college about the frequency of sexual behavior in the context of hookups and romantic relationships.

Results—The prevalence of hookups involving oral or vaginal sex was 34% before college and 40% during the first year, compared to 58% and 56%, respectively, with romantic partners. Fewer than 1 in 5 participants (7–18%) had a sexual hookup each month, whereas 25–38% had sex in the context of relationships each month.

Conclusions—Hooking up varies in frequency over the first year in college, but remains less common than sex in the context of relationships.

Keywords

hooking up; casual sex; romantic relationships; adolescents; college students; sexual behavior

Hookups are sexual interactions between partners who are not dating or in a romantic relationship and do not expect commitment [1–3]. Scholars claim that hooking up is increasingly common [1–6] and may be supplanting romantic relationships [1–3,7]. Little is known about the frequency of sexual hookups, how prevalence changes over time, and

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Conflicts of Interest: None.

Implications and Contribution: A third of female college freshmen reported sexual hookups before college. Forty percent reported sexual hookups during the first year of college, with the monthly prevalence ranging from 7–18%. Romantic relationship sex remains at least twice as prevalent as hookup sex.

whether hookups are replacing romantic relationships. We assessed the prevalence and frequency of hookup and romantic relationship sex among first-year college women.

Methods

Procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants were 483 first-year female college students recruited through mass mailings, research pool, word of mouth, and fliers. After providing written informed consent, participants completed a baseline and 12 monthly follow-up online surveys (August 2009–2010), receiving \$10–20 per survey.

Participants provided demographic and sexual history information at baseline. Sexual behavior with casual and romantic partners was assessed monthly [9]. Casual partners were defined in such a way to capture the defining feature of hookups [1–3,5,9]: “someone whom you were not dating or in a romantic relationship with at the time of the physical intimacy, and there was no mutual expectation of a romantic commitment. Some people call these hookups.” Romantic partners were defined as “someone whom you were dating or in a romantic relationship with at the time of the physical intimacy.” A sexual hookup was defined as oral or vaginal sex with a casual partner. We assessed the number of oral sex (performed and received) and vaginal sex hookup and romantic events. Participants were asked about their entire lifetime at baseline and the last month at waves 2–13.

We created summary variables and present prevalence rates over time along with descriptive statistics for hookup and romantic events by wave. Using a longitudinal regression model implemented with Generalized Estimating Equations (GEEs), we assessed whether the prevalence of oral, vaginal, and any sex changed over time. An unstructured working correlation matrix accommodated within-subject correlations. We similarly explored the association between race/ethnicity (dummy-coded) and prevalence of hookups.

Results

On average, participants (M age = 18.1 years) completed 11.7 surveys. Retention ranged from 81% to 97%. The racial distribution was 64% White, 11% Asian, 9% Black, 9% Hispanic, and 6% other; 96% identified as heterosexual. Throughout the study, 29–33% reported being in a relationship each month.

Lifetime prevalence rates for any oral sex, vaginal sex, and any sex prior to college entry were 30%, 21%, and 34%, respectively, with hookup partners, and 55%, 48%, and 58%, respectively, with romantic partners.

Figure 1 displays the monthly prevalence of oral, vaginal, and any sex with hookup and romantic partners. Each month, the prevalence of any sex with hookup partners ranged from 7–18%; the prevalence of any sex with romantic partners ranged from 25–38%.

GEE showed significant differences in rates of oral, vaginal, and any sex hookups over time. For all three outcomes, the largest difference was found between June and October ($p < .001$), and prevalence rates were greater in April compared to February ($p < .01$). GEE also showed a main effect of race/ethnicity, such that rates were lower among Asian participants compared to Whites ($p < .01$). In addition, the prevalence of oral sex hookups was lower among Blacks compared to Whites ($p < .01$). There were no differences between Hispanics and Whites.

During the year-long study, 37% had oral sex, 32% had vaginal sex, and 40% had oral and/or vaginal sex with a hookup partner, whereas 53% had oral sex, 51% had vaginal sex, and

56% had oral and/or vaginal sex with a romantic partner. Each month, 2–4% of women reported having both hookup and romantic partners within the same month.

By study's end, lifetime prevalence rates for oral sex, vaginal sex, or any sex were 47%, 37%, and 51%, respectively, for hookup partners, and 65%, 59%, and 68%, respectively, for romantic partners. Table 1 displays the number of oral and vaginal sex events with hookup and romantic partners.

Discussion

Seven findings emerged. First, corroborating prior findings [4], 34% reported a pre-college oral or vaginal sex hookup. Second, consistent with prior research [6,9], 40% engaged in sexual hookups during the first year of college. Together, these results suggest that hooking up is a frequent practice among emerging adults [1–5]. Third, hooking up was more common among Whites compared to Asians and Blacks [6]. Fourth, 7–18% of participants reported sexual hookups each month. Hooking up was more common at the start of the academic year compared to the start of the summer, suggesting that the college environment may facilitate hookups through proximity to other youth and opportunities for socializing [1–3]. The peak in hookup prevalence at the beginning of the year is consistent with research suggesting that students view college as a time to experiment with hooking up, whereas they perceive committed relationships to prevent full exploration of options [1]. Moreover, all types of hookups were more common at the end compared to the middle of the academic year. These temporal trends can help guide health programming efforts. Fifth, romantic relationship sex was approximately twice as common as hookup sex. Thus, although college students may report more hookups than first dates [7], they continue to develop romantic relationships—the most common context for sexual behavior. Sixth, the average number of oral and vaginal sex hookups per month ranged from 1 to 3, suggesting that these behaviors are likely experimental rather than a regular pattern. Finally, only 2–4% of participants reported having both a hookup partner and a romantic partner within the same month.

Understanding the prevalence and frequency of hookup behavior can inform health promotion efforts. These results indicate the need for STD and pregnancy prevention, as condom use among students is inconsistent [5,9] and decreases over the first year of college [10].

Limitations include sampling only women from a single university and not assessing hookups involving non-penetrative sexual behaviors, number of partners, and whether oral and vaginal sex occurred during the same events. Future research should use more detailed and event-level assessments to enhance understanding of this practice.

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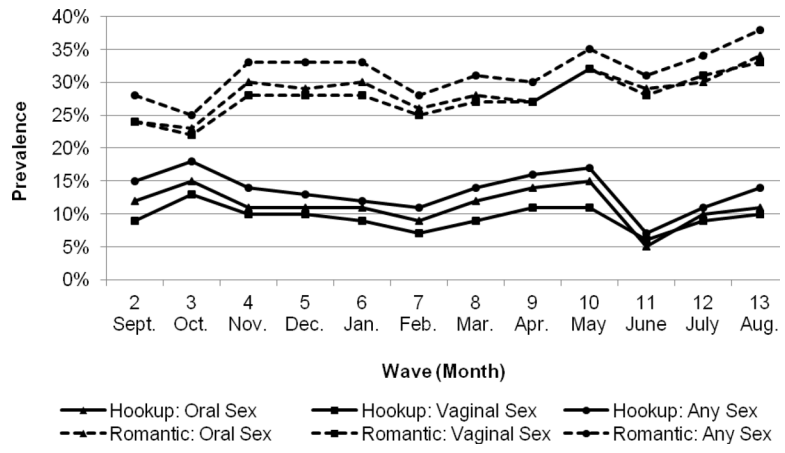


Figure 1.
Prevalence of Oral and Vaginal Sex by Wave and Partner Type

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Number of Oral and Vaginal Sex Events by Wave and Partner Type

Wave (Month)	Performed Oral Sex			Received Oral Sex			Vaginal Sex		
	N	n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)
With Hookup Partners									
1 August	483	126	4.8 (4.3)	101	3.5 (2.9)	99	6.9 (7.7)		
2 September	468	48	1.7 (0.8)	26	1.1 (0.1)	42	1.5 (0.6)		
3 October	459	55	1.9 (0.9)	41	1.5 (0.7)	60	1.8 (0.9)		
4 November	458	44	1.4 (0.5)	30	1.1 (0.1)	45	1.7 (0.8)		
5 December	439	44	1.5 (0.7)	22	1.1 (0.1)	43	1.9 (1.0)		
6 January	442	41	1.8 (0.9)	25	1.1 (0.1)	40	1.9 (1.1)		
7 February	444	39	1.8 (1.0)	20	1.5 (0.8)	32	2.2 (1.2)		
8 March	429	44	2.3 (1.6)	24	2.1 (1.2)	39	2.8 (2.0)		
9 April	412	43	2.7 (1.4)	39	1.5 (0.5)	47	2.6 (1.4)		
10 May	403	51	2.2 (1.5)	42	1.7 (1.0)	45	2.2 (1.4)		
11 June	392	19	1.4 (0.3)	14	1.1 (0.2)	22	2.0 (1.2)		
12 July	402	36	2.0 (1.2)	30	1.7 (0.9)	36	2.3 (1.3)		
13 August	424	43	1.5 (0.7)	32	1.4 (0.5)	41	2.3 (1.4)		
With Romantic Partners									
1 August	483	248	26.3 (38.5)	247	21.0 (32.1)	230	53.3 (75.8)		
2 September	468	102	4.0 (3.3)	98	4.2 (3.4)	111	7.1 (6.0)		
3 October	459	97	4.3 (3.4)	86	3.7 (2.4)	99	7.1 (5.4)		
4 November	458	127	4.3 (3.5)	115	3.9 (3.7)	130	7.1 (5.8)		
5 December	439	119	4.6 (3.4)	113	3.7 (2.9)	124	7.1 (5.4)		
6 January	442	121	4.7 (3.8)	107	4.2 (3.7)	124	7.2 (5.9)		
7 February	444	110	4.9 (3.8)	96	4.5 (3.4)	109	8.2 (5.6)		
8 March	429	115	5.0 (3.8)	98	4.4 (3.1)	115	8.4 (6.2)		
9 April	412	106	4.5 (3.6)	87	4.2 (3.2)	112	7.8 (6.5)		
10 May	403	122	4.6 (3.2)	107	4.6 (3.4)	128	7.9 (6.4)		
11 June	392	104	5.4 (3.9)	96	4.7 (3.7)	108	9.3 (7.2)		
12 July	402	111	5.1 (4.0)	99	4.5 (3.6)	125	8.1 (7.0)		

Wave (Month)	Performed Oral Sex			Received Oral Sex			Vaginal Sex		
	<i>N</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
13 August	424	134	5.1 (3.7)	125	4.2 (3.6)	140	7.6 (5.8)		

Note. Reference period is lifetime for wave 1 and past month for waves 2–13.