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## Benefits of Hooking Up: Self-Reports from First-Year College Women

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### Abstract

**Objectives**—This study explored the benefits of hooking up among first-year college women.

**Methods**—Two authors coded for the presence of 10 benefits (kappas: 0.76-0.97) in 262 women's responses to an open-response survey question regarding benefits of their most recent hookup.

**Results**—The most common benefits identified were sexual satisfaction (23%), general positive emotions (21%), increased confidence (11%), and clarification of feelings (11%). Overall, 71% reported at least one benefit, but 29% reported no benefits.

**Conclusions**—For some young women, hooking up has benefits that can include meeting their needs for social connection, sexual exploration and intimacy, and fun/enjoyment.

### Keywords

hooking up; hookups; casual sex; college students; women's sexuality

### Introduction

Hookups are sexual encounters between partners who are not dating or in a romantic relationship and have no expectation of commitment (Lewis, Atkins, Blayney, Dent, & Kaysen, 2013). Hooking up has become common among college students, with 60-80% reporting hookup experience (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). From a developmental perspective, hooking up is consistent with the tasks of emerging adulthood, a time of experimentation and exploration regarding relationships and sexuality (Arnett,

2000). Young people hook up for a variety of reasons, ranging from sexual gratification, emotional gratification, social enhancement, peer pressure, and intoxication, to initiating a relationship (Garcia & Reiber, 2008).

Hooking up has received increased attention in both the popular press and the research literature, where a common theme has been that hooking up has negative consequences, especially for women (see reviews by Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Garcia et al., 2012). Negative outcomes may include regretting a partner or how far it went sexually; sexual dissatisfaction; and feelings of shame, loneliness, or embarrassment (Napper, Montes, Kenney, & LaBrie, 2015). Hookups have also been found to be associated with depression, sexual victimization, and sexually transmitted infections (Authors, 2014). However, recent work has highlighted the importance of understanding motivations for casual sex in interpreting the effects of hookups on emotional well-being (see Vrangalova, 2014).

Most research on the effects of hooking up has focused on negative outcomes (Garcia et al., 2012). Relatively little attention has been given to its potential benefits (for exceptions, see Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Owen, Quirk, & Fincham, 2014; Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2015). To enhance understanding of the benefits of hooking up from the perspective of young women, we surveyed a large sample of female college students and summarize the benefits in their own words.

## Methods

Participants were first-year female undergraduates ( $M$  age = 18.1 years,  $SD$  = 0.3) at a private university in upstate New York who participated in a larger study on women's health (Authors, 2014). Only those who provided data at the 12-month follow-up ( $N$  = 424) were eligible for inclusion in the current study. Sixty-six percent were White, 11% Asian, 10% Black, and 13% other/multiple race; 9% self-identified as Hispanic/Latina. Almost all (96%) participants identified as heterosexual.

All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board. Incoming first-year female students received a mass mailing inviting them to participate. Interested women attended a study orientation session, provided written informed consent, and completed the baseline survey in person. Subsequent monthly surveys were administered using a secure website. Participants received modest payment for completing surveys, which assessed a range of health behaviors, including sexual behavior. At the 12-month survey, we also asked a series of open-response questions, including "Please think of your most recent hookup (if you have never hooked up, please skip this question). What were the benefits, positive consequences, or good things that you experienced as a result of the hookup?" Data regarding lifetime hookup behavior were available from the monthly surveys; participants had reported on hookup behavior (i.e., physical intimacy with a casual partner, defined as "someone whom you were not dating or in a romantic relationship with at the time of the sexual interaction, and there was no mutual expectation of a romantic commitment"), which we used to create a dichotomous variable indicating lifetime history of hookup behavior.

We used a quasi-statistical coding process (Lewis et al., 2013; Miller & Crabtree, 1992) to identify specific content in the open-ended responses. After reviewing all responses, the first and second authors independently developed a list of benefit categories. Both authors identified the same categories, with only minor variation. The first, second, and fourth authors discussed the options and finalized a list of categories (Table 1). The first and second authors then independently coded all responses, later discussing all discrepancies until a consensus was reached. For each response, we coded all categories as either 0 (not present) or 1 (present). The average kappa statistic for the 10 categories was 0.90 ( $SD = 0.08$ ; see Table 1), indicating excellent agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Categories were not mutually exclusive, so a response could reference more than one.

## Results

Of the women enrolled in the larger study, 262 (62%) reported a hookup and answered the open-response item, and are included in this report. Of these, 186 (71%) reported at least one benefit from their most recent hookup; their average response consisted of 12.7 words ( $SD = 12.6$ , range 1-79). Among those reporting benefits, 65% ( $n = 120$ ) listed one benefit, 30% ( $n = 55$ ) listed two benefits, 5% ( $n = 9$ ) listed three benefits, and 1% ( $n = 2$ ) listed four benefits, for an average of 1.4 benefits ( $SD = 0.64$ , range: 1-4). Table 1 displays the benefit categories and exemplars for each. The most frequent benefits were sexual pleasure (23%) and general positive emotions (21%). Notably, 29% noted there was no benefit to their most recent hookup.

## Discussion

Due to a focus on negative consequences, considerably less research has explored the benefits or positive consequences of hookups (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013), an imbalance that undermines full understanding of the hookup phenomenon. We sought to address this imbalance, and our results suggest that hooking up can have a variety of benefits for college women.

That sexual pleasure was the most common benefit was not unexpected, as sexual gratification was found to be the most common motive for hooking up (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Women's use of hookups as a means of obtaining sexual pleasure aligns with a positive sexuality perspective (Tolman & McClelland, 2011) that acknowledges sexual exploration to be normative and healthy for emerging adults. Given that sexual interaction is central to the definition of hookups (Lewis et al., 2013), it is surprising that sexual pleasure was reported by less than 25% of women. However, using orgasm as a proxy for sexual pleasure, this is consistent with prior research in which 11-34% of women reported an orgasm during their most recent hookup (Armstrong et al., 2012).

Women also cited emotional benefits from hooking up, including happiness/fun/enjoyment (21%) and increased self-confidence (11%). They indicated attracting a partner and feeling wanted boosted their self-esteem, perhaps as an external validation of self-worth (Crocker & Knight, 2005).

Some women identified relationship avoidance as a benefit. Hookups appear to be viewed as a way to meet sexual and/or emotional needs without investing in a committed relationship (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Given that emerging adulthood is a time of transition, in which work and education goals compete with relationship goals (Shulman & Connolly, 2013), hooking up can be considered an adaptive behavior with practical benefits (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Further, hookups provide some women with a better understanding of their preferences for relationships and sexual behavior. Viewing the situation as a learning experience (Owen et al., 2014) fits with the exploratory and developmental demands of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Hooking up offers a way to experiment with intimacy in pursuit of sexuality development (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013).

Hookups can facilitate clarification of feelings towards a partner and/or progression of a relationship. The opportunity to spend time together may help partners assess their interest in progressing to friendship, dating, or a relationship. Although hooking up does not entail commitment by definition, hookup partners may still have an interest in, but not necessarily an expectation for, a more committed relationship (England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2008). In such cases, a hookup may serve as a “trial run.” Given that dating as courtship has become less popular among college students (Bogle, 2008), hooking up may be one way to initiate the transition to a relationship. Although this transition may be rare, it can occur in the right circumstances, and certain features of hookups (e.g., similar motivations, communication) may facilitate it (see Paul, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008).

Women reported that making a friend or becoming closer with a friend was a benefit of hookups. Given that social development is central to the college experience, young women appear to appreciate hookups for the social connections that can be forged with hookup partners. Hooking up may help them to discover common interests or mutual friends.

Finally, women benefited from a short-term interpersonal connection. Some indicated that feeling close to “someone” was important, suggesting that the involvement of a particular partner was not essential for them to benefit. Thus, despite young people’s stated desire to eschew relationships during college, many are seeking, or at least would prefer, a closer connection (Kelly, 2012). If educational and career goals prevent women from wanting to invest time and energy in a relationship (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009), hookups may be used to meet their needs for intimacy.

It is noteworthy that 29% of participants indicated there were no benefits of their most recent hookup. This does not necessarily indicate that the hookups had negative consequences, although for some women this may be the case. It is important to continue studying students’ motivations for and experiences with hooking up. Indeed, Vrangalova’s (2014) study highlighted the role of hookup motivation as a potential moderator of the effects on emotional well-being.

Our sample was limited to first-year women at one university, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Future research should include men and women from other settings, including non-college attending youth (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Interviews might be used to obtain more in-depth information. In addition, it is important to assess both

the positive and negative consequences of the same hookups to ascertain the overall impact in the full context.

In conclusion, we found that hookups can have a variety of interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits for young women, particularly sexual pleasure and positive emotions. Although hookups are assumed to lack emotional intimacy and commitment, some women appear to use hookups to clarify their feelings, meet romantic relationship partners, and advance a relationship. Further study of the social and relational goals and functions of hookups is needed, and a balanced approach is imperative. Additional study of both the positive and negative outcomes of hookups can advance understanding of the potentially adaptive functions of this behavior as well as the potential risks.

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**Table 1**  
 Hookup Benefit Categories, Kappas, Proportion Endorsing Each Category, and Exemplar Quotations

Benefit Category	Kappa	% (n) Endorsing	Exemplar Quotations
No benefits	0.94	28.6% (75)	(a) There were none (b) Nothing (c) There were no benefits, positive consequences or good things, but I don't regret it (d) Not really anything (e) i cant think of any in my most recent
Sexual pleasure	0.93	22.5% (59)	(a) Sexual satisfaction (b) physical satisfaction for that moment (c) Benefits, I got an orgasm (d) Sexual pleasure (e) I had sex and received oral sex. I think everyone needs to have a healthy sex life and have sex often. I think as long as you take precautions sex is good for you.
General positive emotions	0.90	21.0% (55)	(a) enjoyed the moment (b) I had fun (c) temporary happiness (d) IT WAS FUN FOR THE TIME BEING (e) i was happy
Increased confidence/self-worth	0.94	11.4% (30)	(a) Renewed confidence (b) ...it made me feel wanted and desired (c) he made me feel excited, special, wanted... (d) Feeling good about myself (e) A short lived confidence rush...
Clarification of feelings/relationship	0.85	10.7% (28)	(a) I hung out with the person more and got to know them. And it turned out I liked them a lot. (b) i have started talking to the boy more often and we are becoming closer (c) ...by him hooking up with me i knew he really liked me too. it made me feel a lot closer to him and it progressed our relationship forward (d) ...Out of it I attained a much closer relationship with a man who, although I do not plan on dating, will still play a large role in my life... (e) I experienced a closer connection to someone that was more than just friendship. I gained more comfort with that person because I wasn't afraid to be with the in a more physical way.
New or improved friendship	0.97	8.0% (21)	(a) I can still talk to the person that I hooked up with. I didn't know him before, so I gained a friend (b) made a new friend (c) I made a friend, found someone I enjoy spending time with, though we mutually decided not to date. (d) I became better friends with the person.... (e) We'll that we become friends but then we never touch the subject after we hook up. Its like never happened so that's good when you forget about it and become friends.
New dating/romantic relationship	0.97	7.6% (20)	(a) I ended up dating him after we hooked up a few times (b) We started dating, and became boyfriend and girlfriend about a month

Benefit Category	Kappa	% (n) Endorsing	Exemplar Quotations
			later
			(c) My last hookup resulted me developing a relationship with someone i strongly like
			(d) I met my current boyfriend
			(e) hook up became my boyfriend
Experience of closeness/ connectedness	0.77	6.8% (18)	(a) I felt momentarily close to someone
			(b) it felt good to be close to someone again, wake up with them
			(c) not feeling lonely
			(d) Feeling like someone cares about me
			(e) company
No strings attached/relationship avoidance	0.94	6.5% (17)	(a) it was just a fun time with no strings attached
			(b) No commitment
			(c) it was fun and didn't come with complications
			(d) Sexual pleasure with no emotional attachment
			(e) ...It was good because I wasn't looking for a relationship but can still get the satisfaction that would result from being in a relationship.
Learning experience	0.76	3.0% (8)	(a) It was a learning experience and essentially I learned what it feels like to hook up and how it is better to be physically intimate while in a relationship
			(b) Pretty much nothing, learned what I don't want from a sexual partner
			(c) Because it wasn't a typical thing for me to do, it forced me to really consider myself and my morals
			(d) knowing what not to do next time
			(e) ...realizing that i don't want a serious relationship in college...
Other	0.39	3.4% (9)	(a) Memories
			(b) there positive consequences were mainly in the moment rather than what happened afterwards
			(c) satisfied what i wanted and someone to flirt with
			(d) Things did not change
			(e) it was funny, a good story...

*Note.* % endorsing is the proportion of participants who referenced each category in their response. Categories were not mutually exclusive, so participants could endorse more than one. Exemplar quotations are verbatim from participants with no editing of grammar or spelling. Responses are reported in full unless we indicate ellipses.