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Negative Affect as a Moderator of the Relationship between Hookup Motives and Hookup Consequences

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Abstract

Objective—The current study examined the extent to which negative affect moderates the relationships between distinct hookup motives and hookup consequences.

Participants—Data were collected from 271 heavy drinking undergraduate college students.

Methods—Students from three U.S. universities completed online surveys assessing hooking up related motives, behaviors, and consequences.

Results—The results showed that conformity motives to hookup and negative affect predicted hookup consequences. Furthermore, negative affect moderated the relationship between hooking up for relationship reasons and hookup consequences. Specifically, heightened motivation to hookup to secure a long-term relationship was associated with increased hookup consequences among students with high negative affect but decreased hookup consequences among students with low negative affect.

Conclusions—These findings highlight the role that motives and negative affect play in the prediction of negative hookup consequences. Moreover, the findings from the current study have the potential to inform prevention efforts designed to reduce hookup consequences.

Hooking up is generally defined as the engagement in sexual behaviors ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse between two people who are not in a committed relationship.^{1,2} Approximately 60% of college students report having hooked up at least once during their first year in college.³ Although hooking up is associated with positive experiences such as increased self-esteem and sexual pleasure,^{4,5} students also report experiencing an array of negative consequences such as regret,⁶ embarrassment,⁷ and contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI).⁸ Additionally, past research indicates that hookup frequency may not be associated with hookup consequences,⁹ suggesting that other predictors may influence the extent to which students experience hookup-related consequences. The current

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study advances research in this domain by investigating whether hookup motives are predictive of hookup consequences, and the extent to which negative affect moderates these relationships. A better understanding of the predictors and moderators of hookup consequences could help inform prevention efforts to assuage the frequency or severity of hookup consequences that college students experience.

Sexual motives are the goal-directed reasons for which an individual chooses to engage in sex and are among the most proximal predictors of sexual behavior.^{10,11} People engage in sexual behaviors for a range of reasons intended to fulfill desired needs^{10,12} and these motives are differentially related to negative sex-related outcomes.^{13,10,12} For example, Cooper and colleagues¹⁰ reported that enhancement (e.g., to enhance positive emotions), coping (e.g., to escape or avoid negative emotions), and partner approval motives (e.g., to impress one's partner) were associated with having sex with multiple partners, unprotected sex, unplanned pregnancies, and STI whereas affirmation (e.g., to bolster one's sense of self) and peer approval (e.g., to fit in with one's peer group) motives were not associated with these outcomes. With respect to hooking up outcomes, Owen and colleagues⁷ demonstrated that sex motivated by seeking partner approval, but not intimacy (e.g., to feel emotionally close to my partner) and affirmation, was associated with negative reactions to hooking up. While this study was novel in that it specifically examined predictors of the negative hookup outcomes, it employed a general measure of sex motives that may not adequately capture the motives associated with hooking up. Research on hookup motives suggests that coping (e.g., hooking up to escape or avoid negative emotions) and conformity (e.g., hooking up to conform to the expectations of a partner or friend) motives are more strongly associated with depression, anxiety, and stress than other hookup motives.¹² Taken together these studies suggest negative reinforcing hookup (i.e., coping and conformity) motives may be particularly influential with respect to negative hooking up outcomes.

While previous research indicates that negative affect is positively associated with hookup consequences,^{7,9,14} there has been a lack of research examining whether hookup motives and negative affect interact to predict hookup consequences. For example, although Owen and colleagues⁷ alluded to the interactive relationship between partner approval sexual motives and anxious attachment (e.g., emotional closeness with others while fearing abandonment) in predicting more negative reactions pertaining to hooking up, the researchers did not examine negative affect as a moderator of the relationship between sex motives and negative hookup outcomes. Research from the general risk-taking literature suggests that negative affect might moderate the influence of motives on negative consequences. For instance, Martens and colleagues¹⁵ reported that the relationship between alcohol use and alcohol-related consequences was strongest among participants high in both coping motives and negative affect. The authors contend that individuals who drink to cope with negative affect may lack the skills to effectively navigate drinking situations. Extending this finding to hooking up, it may be that individuals who endorse negatively reinforcing hookup motives and experience elevated levels of negative affect may lack the skills to effectively negotiate hookup situations and may therefore experience greater negative hookup consequences.

The current study is a re-analysis of data used to develop a measure of hookup consequences.⁹ The current study extends this work by examining hookup motives as a predictor of negative consequences, and if negative affect moderates the relationship between hookup motives and hookup consequences. Based on previous research,^{7,10,12} we hypothesized that negative reinforcing hookup motives would be predictive of negative hookup consequences and that this relationship would be stronger among participants reporting higher levels of negative affect.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate students from three U.S. universities completed online surveys assessing hookup related motives, behaviors, and consequences (see Napper et al.⁹ for more details). The registrar's office on each campus provided a random list of enrolled students ($N=9,528$), and these students were sent an email invitation to participate in the study and a link to an online consent form. Data were collected from October 2012 through December 2012. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of each participating university. The final sample in the current study ($N=271$) consisted of participants who completed all relevant measures, reported hooking up in the past three months, and reported engaging in heavy episodic drinking (4/5+ drinks for women/men) in the past month. Participants (55% male) were, on average, 20 years old ($SD=1.55$). The racial composition was White/Caucasian (68.9%), Asian (10.7%), Other (7.0%), Multi-racial (6.4%), Black or African American (4.4%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (1.5%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1.1%). In addition, 21.4% of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino.

Measures

Participants were provided with the following definition of hooking up, "Consensually engaging in physically intimate behaviors ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse with someone with whom you are not in a committed relationship."

Hookup motives—The 19-item Hookup Motives Questionnaire¹² assesses five dimensions of motives that participants report for hooking up: social-sexual (e.g., "...it allows me to avoid being tied down to one person"; $\alpha = .79$), social-relationship (e.g., "...hooking up is a way to find a relationship"; $\alpha = .87$), enhancement (e.g., "...it's fun"; $\alpha = .86$), coping (e.g., "...helps me feel less lonely"; $\alpha = .86$), conformity (e.g., "...it helps me fit in"; $\alpha = .91$). The response options range from 1 (*Almost Never / Never*) to 4 (*Almost Always / Always*) with higher scores indicating that a participant had hooked up more frequently for that reason.

Hookup partners and consequences—Participants were asked about the number of partners with whom they had hooked up with in the past three months. To assess hookup consequences, the 14-item Negative Impact of Hookups Inventory⁹ was administered. Participants were asked to indicate (*Yes* = 1, *No* = 0) if they experienced each outcome (e.g., I have felt lonely after a hookup) in the past three months. Items were summed to create a composite ($\alpha = .79$).

Negative affect—The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale¹⁶ measures dimensions of negative affect. Participants reported to what degree each of the 21 items (e.g., I felt life was meaningless) applied to them over the past week ranging from 0 (*Did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*Applied to me very much, or most of the time*). An overall composite score¹⁷ was created by summing all 21 items and represented a general measure of negative affect ($\alpha = .92$).

Results

An examination of bivariate correlations revealed that hookup consequences were positively associated with negative reinforcing hookup motives (coping: $r(269) = .20, p = .001$; conformity: $r(269) = .21, p < .001$) and hooking up for social-relationship reasons ($r(269) = .17, p = .005$), but not with the other motives ($.00 < r < .03$). In the regression model, after controlling for gender and number of hookup partners, elevated endorsement of conformity motive to hookup and negative affect were predictive of more hookup consequences (Table 1). Negative affect was also found to moderate the relationship between social-relationship hookup motives and hookup consequences. Simple slopes analyses¹⁸ revealed that among participants with high negative affect (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean), hooking up for social-relationship reasons was positively associated with hookup consequences ($\beta = .85, p < .001$). Conversely, among participants with low negative affect (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean), hooking up for social-relationship reasons was negatively associated with hookup consequences ($\beta = -.58, p = .02$). In additional analyses where three-way interactions between hookup motives, negative affect, and sex were examined, participant sex was not found to moderate the interactions between motives and negative affect.

Comment

The current study examined whether distinct hookup motives were predictive of negative hookup consequences and if negative affect moderated these relationships in a multi-site sample of heavy drinking undergraduate students. Examining the extent hookup motives predict negative consequences, and if negative affect moderates the relationship between hookup motives and hookup consequences among heavy drinkers is advantageous given the notable link between risky alcohol use and hooking up.^{2,5,19} In partial support of our first hypothesis, hooking up for conformity reasons (but not coping reasons) predicted greater experience of hookup-related consequences. Students who felt pressure from friends to hookup appeared to be particularly susceptible to adverse outcomes related to hooking up. These findings extend prior research that has emphasized the role of partner approval in risky sexual behaviors¹⁰ and hooking up consequences⁷ by highlighting that broader peer group influences may be particularly risk-enhancing for students seeking to fit in with peer groups. Future research is needed to more closely examine if peer expectations are explicitly communicated or implicitly perceived by students who hookup to conform.

In contrast to our expectations, negative affect did not moderate the relationship between negative reinforcement reasons for hooking up and hookup consequences. However, hooking up for social-relationship reasons (e.g., to form a committed relationship) was associated with greater hookup consequences among students with high negative affect and fewer

consequences among students with low negative affect. Hookups commonly do not progress into committed, long-term relationships.²⁰ While students with positive mental health may possess more resilience to withstand potential rejection, students with high negative affect may ruminate on disappointment and interpret rejection in hookup contexts more negatively. Future research should explore whether differences in hookup consequences exist between students who are aware that hookups do not typically lead to a long-term relationship and students who are not cognizant of the uncommitted nature of hookups.

Limitations

Methodological limitations in the current study should be considered. Participants in the current study reported engaging in at least one heavy episodic drinking occasion in the past month. Future studies should examine the relationship between hookup motives and hookup consequences within a more diverse sample of student drinkers and nondrinkers. Moreover, global measures of hookup motives, consequences, and negative affect were used. Measurement of motives, consequences, and negative affect at the event-level, using ecological momentary assessment for example,²¹ would allow for a more precise understanding of the conditions under which specific hookup motives are related to specific hookup consequences, and how event-level negative affect influences the relationship between motives and consequences. In addition, past research suggests that more intimate forms of hooking up (e.g., penetrative vs. non-penetrative hookups) are differentially related to hookup consequences.⁴ Future research should examine if the results from the current study differ between participants who engage in more intimate forms of hooking up relative to those who engage in less intimate forms. Lastly, due to the small sample size and homogeneity with respect to the racial composition of the sample, the results from the current study should be replicated with a larger, and more racially heterogeneous, sample.

Implications for College Health Professionals

The results from the current study suggest possible avenues for college health professionals to help reduce the prevalence of negative hookup consequences on college campuses. Given that students whose hookup behavior was more heavily influenced by their friends' expectations experienced more consequences, prevention efforts that help students better identify sources of peer pressure may be beneficial. Indeed, increased awareness of internal and external influences using mindfulness-based training on behavior has been associated with reductions in negative alcohol-related consequences and depression symptoms; thus, it may be that these positive intervention effects may generalize to hooking up.^{22,23} In addition, students may benefit from skills training on how to deal with indirect and direct pressure from both friends and hookup partners which could include exploring ways to promote greater sexual assertiveness. These findings also point to the potential for normative feedback interventions that have demonstrated efficacy in reducing college student sexual risk behaviors.²⁴ Students tend to overestimate peers' hookup behaviors and approval.²⁵ Therefore, interventions that provide students who overestimate peer hookup behaviors with personalized normative feedback may lead to the modification of students' attitudes and decreased engagement in risky hookup behaviors. Moreover, normative reeducation may be particularly effective for students motivated to hookup in order to conform to peer expectations.

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Table 1

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Hookup Consequences from Hookup Motives and Negative Affect

	HU Consequences			
	<i>R</i> ²	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Step 1: Control Variables	.06			
Gender		-.91	.35	-.15 *
HU Partners		.65	.18	.22 ***
Step 2: Main Effects	.14			
HU Social - Sexual		-.21	.21	-.07
HU Social - Relationship		.17	.18	.06
HU Enhancement		-.25	.20	-.08
HU Coping		.21	.21	.07
HU Conformity		.45	.19	.15 *
Negative Affect		.79	.18	.27 ***
Step 3: Two-Way Interactions	.07			
HU Social-Sexual x NA		-.23	.20	-.08
HU Social-Relationship x NA		.71	.17	.26 ***
HU Enhancement x NA		-.32	.21	-.11
HU Conformity x NA		.18	.18	.06
HU Coping x NA		-.17	.19	-.06

Notes. HU = Hooking up. NA = Negative Affect. Gender coding (Female = 0; Male = 1). Final step, $F(13,257) = 7.03^*$.

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$,

*** $p < .001$