

HOW DOES ALCOHOL INFLUENCE HOOKING UP?

Researchers have defined hooking up as an encounter where two people engage in physically intimate behaviours such as kissing, touching, oral sex, vaginal sex, or anal sex when they are not dating or in a romantic relationship, and where it is understood that there is no mutual expectation of a romantic commitment (Lewis, Granato, Blayne, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2011). In other words, hooking up is roughly the same as having casual sex or a “one night stand”. Using the above definition, recent studies have found that over half of university students reported having hooked up at some point (Lewis et al., 2011; Owen, Rhoades, Stanelly, & Fincham, 2010).

People often meet casual sex partners in settings where alcohol use is expected and encouraged such as bars and parties (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006). Hooking up and drinking alcohol may often occur together because alcohol lowers inhibitions (attitudes or feelings that restrain desires or behaviours) related to sexuality. Alcohol can also increase a person’s confidence in approaching partners and it may allow the person participating in a hook up to believe or suggest to others that their hooking up was caused by drinking alcohol (Fielder & Carey, 2010a). In this installment of Check the Research we look at research investigating the role that drinking alcohol plays in hooking up. In addition, we’ll summarize research that has examined how drinking affects the way people emotionally respond to hook up experiences and whether consuming alcohol reduces the likelihood that people practice safer sex when hooking up.

THE ASSOCIATION OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION WITH HOOKING UP

A number of studies have investigated the relationship between alcohol consumption and hooking up. Studies have usually looked at this association in one of two ways. In one approach, researchers sought to determine whether college students who drink more frequently are more likely than other students to hook up. In the other approach, they asked whether college students who hook up are likely to consume alcohol immediately before or during the hook up. Let’s look at several of these studies.

In a study of 832 male and female undergraduate university students (average age = 20 years) in the United States, Owen et al (2010) investigated a variety of different factors that might be associated with hooking up. The students filled-out questionnaires on hooking up experiences and associated factors including alcohol use. The researchers created a score for alcohol use based on two questions: “How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?” and “How many drinks containing alcohol do you have on a typical day when you are drinking?”. The results showed that higher amounts of alcohol consumption were associated with a greater likelihood of hooking up. This finding is consistent with other studies showing that university students who drink more are more likely to hook up than students who drink less (e.g, Fielder & Carey, 2010a).

Several studies asked participants about their level of alcohol consumption just before hooking up. In their research on hooking up behaviour among 118 first-semester female college students, Fielder and Carey (2010b) asked participants whether they had consumed alcohol before hooking up. Those who had done so were asked how many drinks they had. Almost two thirds of the women said they had consumed alcohol before hooking up and those who drank reported consuming an average of three drinks. Fielder and Carey also looked at the alcohol consumption of women who had non-hook up romantic relationship partners during the time period covered by the study. They found that the women were much less likely to consume alcohol prior to having sex with a romantic partner (16%) than with a hook up partner (64%). Among the women who did drink prior to having sex with a romantic partner, they tended to drink considerably less than they did prior to having sex with a hook up. Thus, it is not surprising that women were more likely to list alcohol as a factor motivating them to have sex in hooking up situations (51%) compared to situations where they had sex with a romantic relationship partner.



Lewis et al (2011) extended research on the association of hooking up and alcohol consumption in a survey of 824 undergraduate male and female university students with an average age of 19.9 years who reported that they had hooked up. Most respondents (60.9%) indicated that they had consumed alcohol during their most recent hook up. Men reported a higher average number of drinks during the hook up than women (4.03 versus 2.76). In sum, for many young people consuming alcohol is part of the hooking up process. What are the outcomes and implications of alcohol consumption, especially heavy drinking, in conjunction with hooking up?

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO HOOKING UP

In the Lewis et al (2011) study discussed above, the researchers gathered information on student's positive (e.g., "happy", "attractive") and negative (e.g., "regretful", "depressed") emotional reactions to their most recent hooking up experience. As noted above, they also asked students to report how many drinks they had consumed prior to their most recent hook up. Thus, Lewis et al. were able to determine whether the amount of alcohol students consumed was related to how the respondents subsequently felt about the hook up. The results showed that as the number of drinks consumed during the hook up increased, the less likely it was that students would report positive emotional reactions and the more likely it was that they would report negative emotional reactions.

In a study of 500 university students aged 17 to 25 who reported hooking up in the previous 12 months, Owen and Fincham (2011) asked students if they drank alcohol during hooking up encounters. The students were also asked to report their positive (e.g., "pleased", "desirable") and negative (e.g., "empty", "used") emotional reactions. Similar to the results of the Lewis et al (2011) study, alcohol use during the hooking up encounter was related to fewer positive and more negative emotional reactions. Owen and Fincham suggest that consuming alcohol may have impacted the students' decisions to hook up which ultimately affected how they felt about it later on.

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND CONDOM USE DURING HOOK UPS

Several of the studies mentioned above assessed levels of condom use during hook ups. Lewis et al (2011) found that only 46% of the male and female university students participating in their study used condoms in hook ups involving oral, vaginal, or anal intercourse. In their study of college women, Fielder and Carey (2010b) found among their female participants that condoms were used in 69% of hook ups that involved vaginal intercourse. These findings indicate that a considerable proportion of hook ups among university students carry a high risk for sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Some research suggests that drinking alcohol during casual sex encounters such as hook ups may contribute to unprotected sex. For example, Kiene, Barta, Tennen and Armeli (2009) examined the link between drinking alcohol the same evening as having sex with a casual (non-steady) partner and the likelihood of not using a condom among 116 university students with an average of 19. Study participants completed a 30-day daily diary that included information on alcohol consumption, sexual activity, whether the partner was casual or steady, and if a condom was used each time they had sex. The results showed that consuming alcohol close to the time sex occurred reduced the probability that a condom was used with casual sex partners. (Consuming alcohol did not affect the likelihood of using a condom with a steady partner.) For women, the higher the number of drinks consumed, the less likely it was that a condom was used with a casual sex partner.



WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Hooking up in some form (e.g., kissing, touching, oral sex, vaginal or anal intercourse) is a common experience among young adults. Studies with university students show that alcohol consumption is associated with hooking up in several ways. First, students who drank more in general were more likely to hook up. Second, more often than not, students consumed alcohol when hooking up.

Although alcohol consumption may facilitate the occurrence of hooking up by lowering inhibitions, it is also clear that drinking can impair judgment and, therefore, contribute to behaviours that people later regret. Thus, it is not surprising that the research shows that the more alcohol the students consumed in conjunction with hooking up the more likely it was they later had less positive and more negative feelings about it.

Unprotected penetrative sex (e.g., vaginal or anal intercourse) with casual sex partners involves a high risk for STI. Research suggests that the more drinks that are consumed before having sex with a casual partner the less likely it is that a condom will be used.

In sum, the research presented here documents the association of alcohol consumption and hooking up and suggests that people should be aware of the possible effects on decision-making and safer sex practices.

REFERENCES

Grello, C.M., Welsh, D.P. & Harper, M.S. (2006). No strings attached: the nature of casual sex in college students. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 43, (3), 255-267.

Felder, R.L. & Carey, M.P. (2010a). Predictors and consequences of sexual "hookups" among college students: a short-term prospective study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 39, 1105-1119.

Felder, R.L. & Carey, M.P. (2010b). Prevalence and characteristics of sexual hookups among first-semester female college students. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 36, 346-359.

Kiene, S.M., Barta, W.D., Tennen, H. & Armeli, S. (2009). Alcohol, helping young adults to have unprotected sex with casual partners: findings from a daily diary study of alcohol use and sexual behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 44, 73-80.

Lewis, M.A., Granato, H., Blayney, J.A., Lostutter, T.W. & Kilmer, J.R. (2011). Predictors of hooking up sexual behaviors and emotional reactions among U.S. college students. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, DOI 10.1007/s10508-011-9817-2

Owen, J.J., Rhoades, G.K., Stanley, S.M. & Fincham, F.D. (2010). "Hooking up" among college students: demographic and psychosocial correlates. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 39, 653-663.

Owen, J.J. & Fincham, F.D. (2011). Young adults' emotional reactions after hooking up encounters. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40, 321-330.

