

Identity Theory in College Hookup Culture

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### ABSTRACT (Academic)

Hooking up can carry a vast array of definitions, embody a multitude of implications, and is still somehow an almost unavoidable part of college life. The present study applies identity theory to the relatively new culture of sex and dating at college, more predominantly known as hookup culture, in order to examine the types of identities that might affect hookup behaviors. Identity theory is a particularly useful framework to understanding hookup culture because of its ability to examine how the individual (college student) situates oneself in the larger social environment (college). This study also incorporates *commitment* to identity as well as how certain meanings reflect that identity. Utilizing two waves of data from the “College Identity Study”—collected between 2015-2016 and surveying college students at a large, southeastern public university, aged 18-24—listwise deletion was employed ( $n = 187$ ) and regression analyses were run in order to predict hookup behaviors using the *partier identity*, *commitment to partier identity*, and *partier identity meanings*. Ultimately, the model supports the hypothesis that college students who claim the partier identity are more likely to hook up, though commitment to this identity is low overall.

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### ABSTRACT (General Audience)

Hooking up can mean many different things to different people, but is still somehow an almost unavoidable part of college life. This paper looks at this relatively new culture of sex and dating on campus, also known as hookup culture, in order to better understand who is more likely to hook up. By using survey data from a “College Identity Study”—collected between 2015-2016 at a large, southeastern public university, from students aged 18-24—the study analyzes what kinds of college identities are most likely to engage in hooking up behaviors. Ultimately, the hypothesis that college students who claim the partier identity are more likely to hook up was supported, meaning there is a positive relationship between partying and hooking up.

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## Introduction

The hookup. A once pragmatic term that referenced a connection to a utility service, the word has since evolved into a highly debated expression—one now attributed to “intimate interactions outside of dating or exclusive relationship” (Holman and Sillars 2012:205). Despite this seemingly simple definition, however, the phrase continues to remain amazingly vague, even amongst people who use it in conversation (Currier 2013). A hookup, for instance, can refer to a kiss between two or more people, but it can also reference sexual intercourse. For college students in particular, hooking up is an almost inescapable part of their four-year experience. According to Lisa Wade (2017), there is a widespread belief on campus that if one does not hook up, they are “failing at the college experience” (p.19). In fact, both she and Kathleen Bogle (2008), in acknowledging the prevalence of hooking up in college, argue for the acknowledgement of *hookup culture*, which Wade posits as “an occupying force, coercive and omnipresent” (p.19).

Because hookup culture has been shown to affect all students on campus—regardless of whether they “opt in” or not (Wade 2017)—the intention of this study is to investigate the types of individuals who might be more likely to hook up. More specifically, I ask: what types of identities predict hookup behaviors? This inquiry is both important and relevant for several reasons, the first being that because hookup culture is entwined with college drinking culture, students who interact within these spaces are more at risk for drug and alcohol abuse. In fact, research has shown that higher levels of alcohol and marijuana usage are associated with riskier sexual activity, as well as continued alcohol abuse into adult years (Staton et al. 1999). Additionally, it’s been shown that students who party are more at risk to experience sexual assault (Boyle 2015; Boyle and Walker 2016), which justifies the need to investigate why certain

individuals pursue hooking up. In fact, Vander Ven and Beck (2009) found that college students use alcohol as an excuse for hooking up, both before and after an encounter occurs. This perhaps begs the question, what else is used as a reason to hook up?

Furthermore, this study will mark an important step towards studying college students' agency in claiming and verifying their varying identities, particularly since college is a formative time for young people.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

**Symbolic interactionism.** The classic symbolic interactionism perspective posits that people come to understand the world through interactions with others, as well as their shared understandings of symbols (Charon 1995; Stryker and Vryan 2006). Furthermore, individuals do not simply react to one another, but actually decipher the actions of others and then respond to those interpretations. To further clarify, these responses are a result of the meanings attached to behaviors and not the behaviors themselves (Blumer 1962).

Another crucial concept in symbolic interactionism is the concept of the “looking glass self,” which comes from Cooley (1902) and states that individuals have the ability to see themselves as others would see them. In viewing oneself through the eyes of others, and “using social interaction as a type of ‘mirror,’” (Lesley University n.d.) individuals can judge their own behaviors and subsequently modify their actions in accordance with their evaluations. To that end, people are constantly deciphering and creating meaning in their daily lives. (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934).

These concepts prove particularly useful in the context of drinking and party culture because they capture the active nature of social interaction—how students define their present



situations, situate themselves within these situations based on how they believe others are perceiving them, and then utilize these perceptions to justify actions (Blumer 1962; Charon 1995; Cooley 1902; Stryker 1980). Similarly, Vander Ven (2011) utilizes the overarching frame of symbolic interactionism in his book, *Getting Wasted: Why College Students Drink Too Much and Party So Hard*, and cites that: “Society is a process; it’s what we do every day when we interact with one another” (p. 22). For instance, if a casual, low-key evening of drinking amongst a few friends morphs into a raucous night of overconsumption, it happens because the individuals (or social actors) involved decided collectively (and possibly covertly) to drink heavily despite initial expectations. Vander Ven (2011) terms this “dynamic interactionism” and cites many ways in which it fuels the intoxication process, one of which is the fact that college is synonymous with drinking (p. 22). Even though students might begin an evening with the best of intentions (i.e. to go out for a few drinks and head home early), if someone—either within the group or outside of it—suggests doing a shot, collectively the group might agree because drinking is an expected pattern of behaviors in college. In this way, the situation shifts in meaning; the actors can broaden their interpretation of a “few drinks” to mean a few shots. They take cues from one another as well (in the form of peer pressure) and might act in accordance to how they feel their peers expect them to act.

In addition to drinking culture, symbolic interactionism is a useful framework for examining sex and sexuality. Just as individuals interact within their external world by creating communities with one another and developing meaning for themselves, so too do they create internal understandings of their sexuality by way of these interactions (Waskul and Plante 2010). Sexuality is a socialized concept; social structures provides the knowledge of what constitutes a sexual encounter. A gynecological exam, for instance, is considered vastly non-sexual, despite

the fact that both lubrication and vaginal penetration are involved (Waskul and Plante 2010). Conversely, when sexual interactions do occur, they are rife with overt actions amongst individuals, as well as the constant covert processing of these actions (Charon 1995; Mead 1964).

Sexual scripting theory, first coined by Simon and Gagnon (1986), fits well into the parameters of symbolic interactionism. The theory suggests that it is the individual who imbues a situation with sexual meaning, rather than the circumstance itself being inherently sexual. Furthermore, these sexual scenarios emerge from a learned understanding of what is considered sexual by society, rather than from the individual's biological makeup informing their sexual desire and experience. Sexual encounters also tend to unfold in predictable patterns or stages, a notion that originates from scripting theory, which posits that all human behavior unfolds in expected patterns (see Lacan 1977, or Tomkins 1978). These expected phases of sex, though certainly gendered and heteronormative (Frith and Kitzinger 2001), are highly relevant to college hookup culture. The entire process of achieving a hookup is scripted, starting with the preparations (alcohol use) and later engaging in nonverbal cues to indicate interest (Bogle 2008; Gagnon and Simon 1973; Ven and Beck 2009; Wade 2017).

Social interaction in general—whether it involves a room full of college students chugging watery beer or two people removing one another's clothing in a dark bedroom—is a constant interplay between a person's internal expectations and the external reactions they receive, both of which are informed by shared meaning (Charon 1995; Stryker 1980). People play a delicate balancing act between representing themselves, while also seeking validation from others. And it is this equilibrium between the internal and the external, coupled with the importance of shared symbolic understandings, that helps provide the basis for identity theory.

**Identity Theory.** The most important framework to this study, however, is identity theory. Evolving out of symbolic interactionism, identity control theory encompasses the ways in which individuals act to reaffirm who they believe they are. Similar to symbolic interactionism, the theory expounds that the individual cannot be separated from the structures of society—the two are intertwined. Furthermore, the concept of social structure is abstract: “it is not something we experience directly” (Burke and Stets 2009:5). This is particularly crucial to examining hookup culture since for many students who “opt out” (i.e. choose not to pursue hooking up) they are still embedded within the environment and the expectations that emerge from that culture. Wade (2017) cites this particular circumstance as “being an outsider within,” a notion originally coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986). These individuals are still affected by the structures and identities associated with a college institution and the culture it promotes, but are unable to directly confront them, even while choosing not to engage.

According to identity theory, individuals in similar social structures have shared understandings of “concepts” and “labels,” which enables them to both designate one another’s identities and define the situations from which those identities arise (Burke and Stets 2009; Thomas and Thomas 1928). These situations carry symbolic meaning in themselves and dictate the types of behaviors one can expect, very much like the sexual scenarios cited previously.

Furthermore, there are three different bases of identities: *role*, *social*, and *person* identities (Burke and Stets 2009). Role identities are most often determined by the expected behaviors affiliated with them, or how they relate to other roles (i.e. student, worker, or parent); social identities refer to involvement or memberships in certain groups (i.e. Democrat); and person identities are ways in which people recognize themselves as unique (i.e. funny or shy). Each base of identity operates in the same way and carries various meanings that people apply to

themselves, typically comparing oneself to an *identity standard*, which is comprised of a collection of meanings that serve as a point of reference for a particular identity. A person will compare and contrast their conceptions of themselves to this identity standard; for instance, most people in a given society have a shared understanding of what it means to be a student. Students are expected to learn, to complete assignments, to prove their knowledge of the subject matter through tests, quizzes, papers, or other forms of assessment—this is the standard. Individual perception proves crucial to this notion for it is these perceptions that drive the comparison to the standard. For one person, perhaps achieving all A's is necessary to fully occupy a student identity, whereas to another, it might simply be enough to pass a course.

Whether it's a role, social, or person identity, individuals will engage in behaviors that help them to verify these identities (Burke and Stets 2009). In the case of a student, one might attend class regularly as a means of verification, or spend a certain number of hours studying. However, when the “looking glass self” (or “self-in-situation,” as used by Burke and Stets [2009]) perceives a discrepancy in their actions compared to the identity standard, an “identity non-verification” occurs (Burke and Stets 2009:112), which typically gives the individual a negative reaction and will cause them to alter their behaviors and perceptions.

Depending on the situation, people also enact different identities, bearing in mind that a specific identity does not represent the entire individual. Rather, each aspect of an individual stands in as a “smaller self” within the whole person. These multiple identities constitute separate identities; for instance, someone can identify as a college student, a daughter, a partier, and a feminist. Another person can identify as a college student, a son, a brother, a Republican, and an athlete. Each of these identities, or categories of self, operates within the individual and the social structures they reside within.

When it comes to individuals managing these multiple identities, there are several factors involved: *activation*, *salience*, and *commitment*. Activation of an identity refers to the process by which an individual actively engages with a specific identity through behavior and/or self-verification, and salience is the likelihood that said identity will be activated (Burke 2003). Commitment is defined as “the strength of the tie that an individual has to an identity” (Burke 2003:195). It was Stryker and Serpe (1982) who outlined two specific types of commitment: the number of people one knows who are associated with a particular identity, as well as the level of emotional attachment to said people.

The concept of commitment is a particularly crucial component to this study, as well as to understanding how identities operate within a collegiate setting. Commitment allows for greater precision in measuring the tie an individual has to their social worlds (Stryker 1980). Burke and Reitzes (1991) take the definition one step further by describing commitment as: “the sum of the forces, pressures, or drives that influence people to maintain congruity between their identity setting and the input of reflected appraisals from the social setting” (p.243). In this way, commitment mediates the link between an individual’s identity and their behavior (Burke and Reitzes 1991; Burke and Stets 2009). If a college student belongs to a sorority, for instance, she might have expectations of what it means to be a sorority sister upon joining, or develop these meanings through interaction; this perception is her identity standard. Higher personal commitment to this identity—which typically means having more ties to others through the identity (i.e. friends made as a result of joining a sorority), as well as receiving rewards or praise specific to it—results in a stronger tie between identity meanings and behavior meanings. If being both social and loyal to fellow members is indicative of a sorority sister, then someone highly committed to this identity might go out of her way to attend as many functions as possible

and even potentially be more likely to cyber bully someone outside of the group in protection of a fellow sister.

Burke and Reitzes (1991) outline two bases of commitment: cognitive bases of commitment (both positive and negative), and socioemotional bases of commitment (both extensive and intensive). These bases operate as “factors which give rise to the forces of commitment” and help to quantify the rewards and costs of an identity, as well as the ties to and interactions with others as a result of an identity. By measuring these bases of commitment, it becomes possible to calculate how attached an individual is to their specific identity, and how hard they might work to maintain reflected appraisals of said identity (Burke and Reitzes 1991).

One final concept to consider with regards to identity theory is Stryker’s (1980) *salience hierarchy*, which operates as a ranking and examines the likelihood that a particular identity will be invoked in a given situation: “Identity theory predicts that a highly salient identity is likely to be enacted or to define a situation to promote its own enactment” (Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker 2014:232). Though Burke and Stets (2009) lean more heavily on the *perceptual control system* as a means of organizing identities, the salience hierarchy proves particularly useful in the context of hookup culture because it acknowledges the ways in which structure affects the juggling of identities:

But to the degree that there is structural overlap among situations...different identities are likely to be concurrently called up. If different identities are called up, they may or may not carry conflicting or contradictory expectations. If they do, their relative location in the identity salience hierarchy becomes a potentially important predictor of subsequent behavior. (Stryker 1980:61)

A college student, for instance, may identify as both a student and a partier. Say the individual is at a happy hour the night before an exam and their friends suggest that the group stay out and continue drinking. Both of these identities will manifest in this situation: should they

stay out and party or should they return home to study? The salience hierarchy helps organize these identities in such a way that one might predict what this individual will do, based upon which identity is more salient.

### **Overview of Hookup Culture**

The pervasiveness of hookup culture throughout college campuses can be attributed to two factors: young people are postponing marriage significantly longer than previous generations, and they are also predominantly spending the early part of their adult years on college campuses—more so than ever before (Bogle 2008). Because of this, the dominant script for forming intimate relationships has shifted drastically from the earlier dating scenes common throughout the twentieth century. Rather than coupling first and pursuing sexual relations second, in hookup culture, the reverse is expected.

Further expectations of hookup practices include the assumption that an encounter be “no strings attached”—meaning the exchange must be void of any romantic or emotional leanings. It is furthermore understood that both parties engaging in the hookup must be consuming alcohol. For this reason, binge drinking is arguably inextricably linked with the pursuit of the hookup. Vander Ven and Beck (2009), in their work on college drinking coupled with sexual behaviors, assert that “the cultural norms that guide drinking and sexuality in college produce patterns of behavior and promote risk” (p.628), in regards to both overconsumption, as well as the potential for sexual assault. Indeed these are just a couple of the moral complaints with both hookup culture and college drinking culture; it is also worth noting that a great deal of students embrace and find pleasure in both lifestyles (Bogle 2008; Vander Ven 2011; Wade 2017). They arrive to college with the expectation to party and feel sexually liberated, and for many individuals their experience lives up to this ideal.

Another important—and arguably understudied—component of hookup culture is the effect an individual’s perception has on behavior. Most college students are under the impression that all of their peers are hooking up frequently (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). Bogle (2008) found this impression to actually influence students’ likelihood of hooking up, citing a “pressure to conform” and be perceived as sexually active (p. 90). There was also an implied relative acceptability (see Henry 1990) for other students, whereby they felt that “everyone was doing it,” and often judged their own behaviors on the basis of this belief. These perceptions, cultivated from the symbols and meanings embedded within the wider hookup culture, are crucial to understanding its influence on the individual, and draw heavily from the theoretical frameworks outlined above.

### **The Current Study**

Several major components of the literature inform this study. First of all, college hookup culture operates as a normative part of the university experience and incorporates a universally accepted script in the form of expected patterns of behavior. Furthermore, hookup culture is entirely entangled within college drinking culture, the latter of which has shown to be heavily reliant on social interactions between actors, whereby they “construct definitions within their reference groups to plan and execute patterns of action” (Vander Ven 2011:23). In short, drinking and partying are social experiences and individuals participate based on their expectations and interpretations of the situations they find themselves in. Identities also affect these situations, and individuals are likely to behave in certain ways based upon their most salient identities, as well as the commitment they feel towards that identity.

In general, students perceive that alcohol allows them the ability to pursue sexual encounters by imbuing them with an agency located in their perceived self confidence that arises



from intoxication (Bogle 2008; Vander Ven 2011). However, drinking alcohol and hooking up might not necessarily exist as a cause and effect relationship; rather, “drinking and sexuality may be reciprocally related” (Vander Ven 2011:67). From this perspective, a hookup might actually be a mere extension of a party-related behavior, arising out of the commitment to a partier identity. Additionally, Bogle (2008) notes that individuals who struggle to engage with hookup culture and find potential partners seemed “less involved with social events, particularly events that involved alcohol” (p. 62), meaning that non-partiers are less likely to be hooking up.

Identity theory is particularly effective in understanding hookup culture because it provides a framework with which to consider the notion that a college student who hooks up may do so to affirm their identity as a sexual actor, or they might actually exhibit sexual behaviors that relate to a different identity. It is possible, for instance, that hooking up ties more into a person’s “partier identity,” in that the act of a hookup verifies how committed one is to partying. This brings about the examination of the following hypothesis:

*Individuals who a) identify as a partier, b) are committed to the partier identity, or c) identify with role-identity meanings affiliated with being a partier are more likely to hook up.*

## **Methods**

The dataset used is a “College Identity Study,” collected by Dr. Kaitlin Boyle in 2015-2016 at a large, Southeastern, public university, which boasts a prominent party culture, including a heavy Greek life presence, football team, and a downtown drinking environment. The survey itself was informed by identity theory in order to assess college students’ own sexual experiences and their identification with specific roles and identities.

There are two waves of data, collected six months apart—once in April and then again in October. All students of the university who were pursuing a bachelor’s degree were contacted and asked to complete an online survey, and offered a chance to be entered into a drawing for three 50 dollar gift cards in exchange for participation. Those who completed Wave 1 (n = 732 after listwise deletion) were then contacted five months later and asked to participate in Wave 2, and 248 respondents agreed and were paid ten dollars to complete the second survey. Due to varying levels of missing data, as well as significant attrition, only 25 percent of Wave 1 participants and 34 percent of those invited to take Wave 2 are rendered in the current analysis.

The first wave measures identities while the second wave measures students’ behaviors. For the purposes of my inquiry, I will be focused on which identities (at Wave 1) most predict whether college students will engage in hookup behaviors (at Wave 2).

**Dependent Variable.** The dependent variable in this study is *hooking up*, which was asked in Wave 2 of the data. Participants were asked: “On any given day, how likely is it that you would do the following things?” Responses ranged from “Very unlikely” (1) to “Very likely” (7), with a mean of 2.17 and a standard deviation (SD) of 1.75. This indicator is heavily skewed, as 56.8 percent of respondents selected “Very unlikely,” and only 1.7 percent claimed they would be “very likely” to hook up (see Table 1 for a list of descriptive statistics).

**Independent Variables.** *Partier identity.* A singular indicator was used to measure *partier identity*. Respondents were asked: “To what extent does the word ‘partier’ describe you?” Response categories range from “Does not describe me at all” (1) to “Describes me” (7). The mean for this variable is 3.05, with a SD of 1.88.

*Commitment to partier identity.* To capture commitment, four survey items are used that measure both cognitive and socioemotional bases of commitment (see Burke and Stets 2009): “I

get a lot of satisfaction/fulfilment from being a partier” (positive cognitive), “Being a partier causes me to have a lot of stress/negative feelings” (negative cognitive), “I would miss a lot of people if I were no longer a partier” (extensive socioemotional), and finally, “I discuss being a partier with my close friends family” (intensive socioemotional). The response categories for each of these range from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (4).

The justification for keeping these indicators separate comes from Burke and Reitzes (1991), who found that each of these bases for commitment operate separately from one another. Though the items function well as a latent construct (factor loadings between 0.69 and 0.93, and a Schwarz-Bayesian information criteria of -12.76), disentangling them allows for a more nuanced examination of respondents’ commitment levels. Regarding cognitive bases of commitment, these two variables allow us to identify the “overall reward-cost balance of maintaining the identity” (Burke and Reitzes 1991:244). Similarly, in the case of the socioemotional indicators, these bases of commitment measure the influence of an individual’s social network on their identity, which is particularly crucial to the highly social world of college drinking culture.

It should be noted here that respondents who selected “Does not describe me at all” (1) in response to the *partier identity* indicator were coded as 0 in the subsequent commitment items, and therefore excluded from further analysis using these variables.

*Partier identity meanings.* A pilot of the “College Identity Study” was used to gauge individuals’ responses to terms frequently associated with varying identities. An initial sample of 96 students at the same large university were recruited and asked what words describe specific identities. For instance, they were asked to list up to ten terms associated with being a partier, with the most frequent being: fun, social, outgoing, crazy, and irresponsible.

The survey itself incorporates identity theory methodology (see Burke and Stets 2009) in order to develop antonyms for each term that would contribute to bipolar continuum measures. Respondents were asked to rate themselves along the continuum of items affiliated with the varying identities and were included in a larger list of items.

For the purposes of this study, I have taken these five items representing *partier identity meanings* and combined them into a sum scale, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.56 (though it should be noted that this degree of internal reliability is less than satisfactory, and will be further discussed in the Limitations and Future Research section).

**Control Variables.** I include demographic items within my analyses that further depict student identities and have been found to have associations with both party and hookup behaviors. Dummy variables were created for gender (labeled as *woman* and *man*), sexuality (split into *heterosexual* and *non-heterosexual*), race (*white* and *black*), and affiliation with both athletics teams and Greek life. I also incorporate *academic year* which is on a scale from 1 to 5 (any cases coded as 6 or “Other” were dropped). Finally, an indicator measuring drinking behavior was used as a control. As with the dependent variable, *drinking* was asked in Wave 2 as: “On any given day, how likely is it that you would do the following things?”

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics of all variables**

<b>Variables</b>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD.</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>
Hooking up	187	2.17	1.75	1.0	7.0
Partier	187	3.05	1.88	1.0	7.0
Positive Cognitive	187	2.05	1.52	0.0	4.0
Negative Cognitive	187	1.52	1.25	0.0	4.0
Extensive Socioemotional	187	1.07	0.91	0.0	4.0
Intensive Socioemotional	187	1.13	0.99	0.0	4.0
Identity Meanings	187	3.99	0.85	1.8	5.8
Drinking	187	2.98	1.86	1.0	7.0
White	187	0.85	0.36	0.0	1.0

Woman	187	0.80	0.40	0.0	1.0
Heterosexual	187	0.83	0.38	0.0	1.0
Greek	187	0.16	0.37	0.0	1.0
Athlete	187	0.10	0.30	0.0	1.0
Academic Year	187	2.11	1.17	1.0	5.0

### Analytic Strategy

For the purposes of this analysis, I utilize listwise deletion of missing values to account for the sample size inconsistencies across Waves 1 and 2 ( $n = 187$ ). To test the three components of my hypothesis, I first ran an ordinal logistic regression model that incorporates only the seven control variables (Model 1). Afterwards, I added in all independent variables to test their effects on hooking up (Model 2).

### Results

Model 1 presents results for an ordinary least squares regression on the effects of various demographic features on likelihood of hooking up (see Table 2). As I would expect based upon the literature, the model illuminates both a positive and significant relationship between drinking and hooking up ( $b = 0.26, p < 0.001$ ), which shows that, at least within this model, drinking behaviors appear to predict the likelihood of an individual hooking up (see The Role of Drinking in the Discussion section for more on this). However, contrary to prior research on hookup culture, none of the other demographic items show a significant effect.

Consistent with Hypothesis a), Model 2 displays a significant and positive association between *partier identity* and the likelihood of hooking up ( $b = 0.31, p < 0.01$ ). Odds ratios are also reported, revealing that the *partier identity* increases the odds of an individual claiming they are likely to hookup by 36 percent.

In spite of initial expectations however, *partier identity meanings* showed as having no effect on hooking up (Hypothesis c), nor did the majority of *commitment to partier identity*

measures. The model does present a significant result for the extensive socioemotional base of commitment, indicating that the social ties one has to the partier identity has a slight effect on likelihood of hooking up ( $b = 0.86, p < 0.05$ ).

Unlike Model 1, however, the relationship between drinking and hooking up dissipates in Model 2, which indicates a possible mediation effect. To further explore this, I ran a Sobel test to test for mediation and found that the indirect effect of *partier identity* on hooking up via drinking behaviors is significant. Additionally, to test for multi-collinearity between the partier and drinking variables, I ran a variance inflation factor test yielding low results (1.53), which indicates that multi-collinearity does not affect these indicators.

**Table 2: Ordinal logistic regression analysis on hooking up, with reported odds ratios**

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>b</i>	SE	OR	<i>b</i>	SE	OR
Partier				0.3**	0.13	1.36
Positive Cognitive				-0.23	0.14	0.79
Negative Cognitive				-0.16	0.21	0.85
Extensive Socioemotional				0.86*	0.26	2.36
Intensive Socioemotional				-0.40	0.22	0.67
Identity Meanings				0.10	0.17	1.03
Drinking	0.26***	0.07	1.29	0.11	0.09	1.12
Woman	-0.59	0.32	0.55	-0.44	0.32	0.65
Heterosexual	0.25	0.34	1.29	0.18	0.32	1.20
White	-0.07	0.35	0.93	0.27	0.36	1.31
Greek	0.28	0.35	1.33	-0.01	0.35	0.99
Athlete	-0.03	0.40	0.97	-0.22	0.40	0.80
Academic Year	-0.13	0.11	0.88	-0.06	0.11	0.94
<hr/>						
<i>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>0.07</i>			<i>0.15</i>		
<i>AIC</i>	<i>749.74</i>			<i>729.71</i>		
<i>BIC</i>	<i>778.96</i>			<i>778.26</i>		

\*\*\*=  $p < .001$ ; \*\*=  $p < .01$ ; \*=  $p < .05$

## **Discussion**

Hookup culture is a prevalent and arguably an assumed part of the college experience, which is heavily entangled with college drinking culture. The hookup script itself is rife with embedded meanings and symbols that social actors engage with in order to pursue (or not pursue) a hookup encounter. Structural symbolic interactionism helps us to understand this further by positing that individuals already possess an unconscious awareness of these embedded meanings that they are then able to interpret and react to. In addition to interacting with the situations themselves—including other actors involved—college students also confront their own identities in these circumstances, which ultimately forecast how they will behave in a given state of affairs.

With this in mind, the intention of this study was to examine what types of identities might predict hookup behaviors amongst college students, with a focus on party-related identity and measures of said identity. The data here illuminates that students who identify themselves as a partier are more likely to engage in hookup behaviors. Similarly, those who exhibit an extensive socioemotional base of commitment to the partier identity are also more likely to hook up. These findings are unique in that none of the other measures of commitment showed an effect on the likelihood of hooking up. Furthermore, the identity meanings also held no significant relationship to hookup behaviors, indicating that only Hypothesis a) was supported by the model: individuals who identify as a partier are more likely to hook up.

### **Bases of Identities, Identity Meanings, and Life Stages**

The partier identity is a complex one in that it can seemingly fit into two of Burke and Stet's (2009) bases of identities: a *role identity*, as well as a *social identity*. In conceptualizing a partier as a social identity, the results of the model can help to explain why the *partier identity*

*meanings* bear no significance on the likelihood of hooking up. In relying on the Burke and Stets (2009) framework, within a social identity—one in which an individual opts into membership and will think and act like other group members—rather than comparing oneself to an identity standard as in role identities, a social identity is contrasted against a group *prototype*. A prototype represents a set of meanings and expectations about what it means to be affiliated with that group, but it does not depict the average identity of a group member like an identity standard does. Rather, they describe an idealized membership (Burke and Stets 2009; Hogg 2006), so in terms of the prototype for a partier, Vander Ven (2011) describes “the Shit Show,” a “chaotic drinking episode characterized by dramatic drunkenness, human wreckage, and primitive behavior” (pp. 1-2). Think John Belushi’s character, Bluto, in the 1978 film, *Animal House*<sup>1</sup>, a college student who parties by yelling, chugging booze, dancing, chasing women, and falling down. And because respondents who identify as a partier are likely comparing themselves to this sort of prototype, they may not necessarily see themselves as the embodiment of these identity meanings (i.e. fun, social, crazy, and irresponsible), since doing so would be measuring up to Bluto’s level of debauchery.

Conversely, if the partier identity is categorized as a role identity—one in which the individual applies internalized meanings of that role to themselves (Burke and Stets 2009)—then it makes sense why levels of commitment are low and the majority of these indicators did not register as significant within the model. In looking at the literature, it is very clear that both college party culture and hookup culture are life-stage specific, meaning that individuals who engage in each recognize that they are temporary states (Bogle 2008; Vander Ven 2011; Wade 2017). Bogle (2008) even interviewed individuals after they graduated college in order to get a sense of how the sex and dating scene shifts. Many claimed their lives “changed overnight,” and



that not being in the campus environment made them hesitant to hook up. Instead, the expectation post-graduation was to formally date, something that some individuals never actually experience in college.

Similarly, with regards to party culture, Vander Ven (2011) cites that “a life of chronic intoxication is not compatible with the compelling demands of adult roles” (p.122), which is why most college drinkers “age out” of their heavy drinking behaviors once they graduate. But these behaviors are an expected part of the college experience for many, as is sex. Due to the pressure to conform to these expectations, students might even relinquish the “specialness” of their virginity in order to participate in hookup culture. One of Wade’s (2017) interviewees even wrote on the topic: “I mean it’s whatever...like I know it’s supposed to be ‘special’ but honestly it needed to happen” (p. 119).

So in addressing how college students identify themselves, it seems plausible that even if they self-label as a partier, they might not necessarily be strongly committed to that identity because it is both temporary and expected. Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2006) terms the college years as “emerging adulthood,” in which young people find themselves at liberty to try out new experiences without the supervision of parents, but before they must fill marital or parental roles. Additionally, the transition from life at home into college can be a dramatic one; an identity such as that of a partier is likely to be new for many. Managing reflected appraisals of a newly formed identity may lead to a lack of salience and, in the case of the current study, a lack of concrete commitment.

Furthermore, because being a partier is innately social—whether as a social *identity*, or as a role identity—it makes empirical sense why the extensive socioemotional base of commitment would have more of an effect on hooking up, especially if we assume that hooking up is an

extension of party-related behavior. Moreover, it is important to note it is likely that more intensive partygoers would not participated in a survey at all, since doing so violates their commitment to the drinking subculture. This is a subculture that deviates from rules and norms (again, referring back to John Belushi in *Animal House*), which means that the most invested members of this subculture would not necessarily be captured in the current data.

Also not captured in the data are the retrospective hookup behaviors themselves. Because the phrasing of the *hooking up* survey item asked respondents how likely on a given day they would be to hook up, the results shown in the models are not representative of how hookup culture functions. As the literature shows, a hook up is typically unplanned, and to claim that one will encounter a hook up “on any given day” can cause a certain amount of shame, anxiety, and pressure to the individual (Bogle 2008; Holman and Sillars 2012; Wade 2017). In this way, social desirability plays an enormous factor in how college students think about hooking up, especially since peer approval has been shown to shape an individual’s narrative regarding sexual activity (Holman and Sillars 2012).

### **The Role of Drinking in Hookups**

Another relevant finding in this study is that none of the control variables exhibited a relationship to hookup behaviors, despite the fact that much of the qualitative literature points to the notion that demographics such as race do matter. Wade (2017) cites an abstract “hierarchy of sexual desirability,” whereby “white men and women, black men, and Asian women are at the top” and “black women and Middle Eastern and Asian men tend to fall to the bottom” (p. 93–94). Though this study only includes white and black respondents, it is somewhat surprising that neither of these categories showed significance.

Perhaps one of the most surprising results of this study is the null effect that drinking has on the likelihood of hooking up. In a bivariate regression model in which *hooking up* is regressed onto *drinking*, there is a significant relationship between the two, whereby  $r = 0.30$  and  $p < 0$  (see Table 3, Appendix for a full correlation table). Within this context, it would appear that drinking is predictive of hookup behavior; however, in the larger model, this effect dissipates alongside the identity variables. Even in a model that includes only the six independent variables and controls only for drinking, there is no association between drinking and hookup behaviors. This is evidence to assume that, at least within the current sample, drinking is *not* a predictor of hooking up. This finding is highly relevant because it contributes to the qualitative research on hookup culture that highlights the relationship between drinking and hooking up by nuancing it. Drinking behaviors themselves do not forecast whether an individual will hookup or not, but a partier identity does. Based on the current model, there is evidence that identification as a partier intervenes between drinking and hooking up.

Prior research on college party culture highlights the use of drinking as a tool with respect to hooking up (Vander Ven 2011; Ven and Beck 2009; Wade 2017): alcohol operates as both a motive to pursue sexual activity, as well as an excuse. Individuals feel compelled to drink so they may lower their inhibitions, which then gives them the confidence to pursue a casual sexual encounter; conversely, if a person feels shame or anxiety after the encounter has occurred, they can justify the event by claiming they were intoxicated. As Vander Ven and Beck (2009) explain: “Alcohol...is used as a multifunctional tool in post-intoxication social processes” (pp. 646-47). Furthermore, they found that college students believed “getting drunk and hooking up” to be “natural” together, meaning these two behaviors are innate (Vander Ven and Beck 2009:646). The results of the current study further support this by illuminating a lack of

causation: drinking does not cause one to hookup. Rather, drinking influences hookup behaviors by way of self-identification as a partier. College students who drink in social settings are likely labeling themselves as a partier and it is *these* individuals who are more likely to hook up. Rather than alcohol serving as a sole motivator to pursue hooking up, it operates as an expected behavior within a party environment, as does the presumption that one will hook up.

It is important to note here though that the current ordinal logistic regression model does not fully elucidate the relationship between drinking, partier identity, and hooking up. To better examine possible mediation effects, a structural equation model would need to be run.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

One of the primary limitations of this study is the sheer phrasing of the survey item that serves as the dependent variable. Respondents were asked, “On any given day, how likely is it that you would do the following things?” with “hooking up” listed as one of several potential behaviors. Prior literature shows that even amongst college students who opt in to hookup culture, the behaviors are not necessarily a frequent or “daily” occurrence, as this question suggests (Wade 2017). Furthermore, data from Paula England’s Online College Social Life Survey<sup>2</sup> shows that 38.8 percent of the sample hadn’t hooked up with anyone since starting college, and approximately 31 percent had hooked up with less than five people.

Furthermore, as Vander Ven (2011) cites, drinking and partying are incredibly fluid social experiences. The term “drunkworld” was coined as a way to indicate how separate this environment is from the day-to-day occurrences of college students. Getting intoxicated and visiting “drunkworld” is a way to step away from routine, and furthermore “provides an opportunity for peers to take on powerful and celebrated social roles” (Vander Ven 2011:118). Due to the free-flowing and adaptable nature of both partying and hooking up, a survey item that

asks college students to estimate how often they are likely to display behaviors within this environment makes it very difficult to capture actual behaviors themselves.

Another limitation is the low alpha score of the identity meanings associated with being a partier. Furthermore, the number of items comprising the commitment scale within the survey was drastically reduced from its original version (see Burke and Stets 2009, Appendix), which could indicate that it was not possible to fully capture commitment to the identity in question. These limitations should be remedied in future research, alongside the inquiry into college students' identity as sexual actors. Since much of the research into hookup culture focuses on individuals' behaviors, and even attitudes about sex, it would be useful to investigate the motivations behind hooking up. Is hooking up an extension of party-related behaviors, or is it actually a result of sexual desire?

Another area of potential weakness is the fact that intensive partiers are likely not represented in the current data set. Similar to drug subcultures, party culture depicts a withdrawal from dominant society, where its members feel a keen separation from normative worldviews (Hawdon 2005). Because of this deliberate detachment from dominant institutions, these individuals probably would decline to engage in a survey since doing so would mean they were participating in the larger society. Furthermore, people highly committed to partying might be too busy verifying this identity through the act of partying to perform school-related behaviors such as taking a survey.

Future studies into hookup culture and student identity would also ideally include more than one university, particularly like the one used in this study which boasts a distinctly hegemonic party culture. Incorporating schools with varied populations and demographics, from

different regions, and with diverse party cultures would likely go a long way in better understanding student identities. In the short term, however, employing a structural equation model on the current data set could help to better comprehend the effects of drinking on hooking up, as stated previously.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, my primary inquiry involved querying what types of identities might predict whether college students hook up. At the core of this question is the desire to better understand the motivations that lead individuals to pursue a hookup. I presumed that hookup behaviors were more so an extension of party-related behaviors than they were an indication of sexual desire, and that individuals showing high commitment to being a partier would be more likely to hook up. Though there is evidence to suggest that there is indeed a relationship between partiers and likelihood of hooking up, I found the low levels of commitment to the partier identity to be surprising. The literature supports the notion that many students engage in party-related behaviors, particularly Vander Ven's (2011) work on college drinking culture, but yet they do not exhibit commitment to the partier identity.

This finding leads me to question the ability of standard identity control items to measure young people's identities. Burke and Reitzes (1991) claim that "commitment emphasizes that individuals are active agents who make their own decisions," but how heavily does the structure of a collegiate environment affect those decisions and that level of agency? Is it possible for young people to pursue sexual encounters for the sake of pleasure or does hookup culture dictate how sexual transactions must ensue? Do college students actively commit to being a partier or are they simply self-labeling themselves as such because it is expected?

Because of the formative nature of college, I feel it is important to better understand these varying identities, particularly since half of freshman-level students believe that they are not emotionally healthy (Wade 2017). These identity processes may very well differ from that of an adult, particularly since the transition into college—into new lifestyles and social groups—can be jarring.

Overall, this study helps to inform future research and brings predictive capabilities into the hookup literature. With additional quantitative examinations into the identities, interactions, and behaviors of college students, we can better understand the ambiguous and complex realm of the hookup.

**Notes:**

1: *National Lampoons Animal House*. 1978. Directed by John Landis. Performed by John Belushi. IMDb.com. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077975/>.

2: The Online College Social Life Survey (OCSLS) is a public data set created by Paula England that assesses college students' sexual behaviors and attitudes. The survey data was collected between 2005 to 2011 from 21 four-year colleges/universities in the U.S. The sample includes 24,131 students between the ages of 18 and 25, and is split by self-identified gender: 7,461 males and 16,479 females. Furthermore, the codebook is divided into six categories which includes demographics, sexual history, attitudes, relationships, dating, and hookups.



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## Appendix

**Table 3: Correlation matrix of all variables with reported significance**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Hooking Up	1.00													
2. Partier	0.35***	1.00												
3. Pos.Cog.	0.21**	0.77***	1.00											
4. Neg.Cog.	0.27***	0.81***	0.79***	1.00										
5. Ext.Socio.	0.34***	0.72***	0.75***	0.80***	1.00									
6. Int.Socio.	0.21**	0.71***	0.73***	0.79***	0.79***	1.00								
7. Meanings	0.18**	0.52***	0.41***	0.43***	0.30***	0.39***	1.00							
8. Drinking	0.29***	0.59***	0.50***	0.55***	0.48***	0.47***	0.30***	1.00						
9. Woman	-0.13	-0.01	-0.03	-0.09	-0.14	-0.08	-0.02	-0.04	1.00					
10. Hetero.	0.08	0.13	0.13	0.16*	0.13	0.13	0.11	0.13	0.09	1.00				
11. Greek	0.12	0.37***	0.26***	0.31***	0.21**	0.19**	0.16*	0.30***	0.04	0.16*	1.00			
12. Athlete	-0.01	0.01	-0.04	-0.05	0.03	0.03	0.11	0.11	0.08	0.06	0.00	1.00		
13. Acad. Year	-0.01	-0.08	-0.05	-0.01	-0.02	-0.03	-0.14	0.17*	-0.27***	0.01	-0.03	-0.03	1.00	
14. White	0.07	0.00	-0.11	-0.04	-0.13	-0.07	0.07	0.25***	-0.03	0.05	0.10	-0.01	0.14	1.00

\*\*\*= p<.001; \*\*= p<.01; \*= p<.05