

When it comes to college hookups, more is said than done

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College students talk about hooking up -- a lot. In fact, they talk about it much more than it actually happens, and they believe other students are having the encounters more often than they actually are, as a new study shows.

The research from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln examined how college students' social networks often lead them to define, perceive and participate in "hookups" -- the slang term for casual intimate encounters outside of dating or exclusive relationships. The study also looked at the extent to which those networks influenced [risky sexual behavior](#).

In the study, 84 percent of [students](#) said they had talked with their college friends in the previous four months about hookups. But when asked how many hookups they had had during the school year, students reported far fewer for himself or herself than what they assumed a "typical student" had experienced.

Yet, the study found, such regular talk about hookups had a "normalizing" effect on students' views about the practice. That led to a more approving attitude toward hookups and, often, riskier sexual behavior, researchers said.

"We were interested in how communication about hooking up with friends and family may justify or normalize a potential risky behavior," said Amanda Holman, a graduate student in UNL's Department of [Communication Studies](#) and the study's lead author. "Students with

strong ties to peers and frequent peer conversation about sex were more strongly related to participation in hookups and more favorable attitudes towards hooking up."

Holman said that rather than unearthing a uniform campus "hookup culture," the study found students had varied definitions of hookups, ambivalence toward them and moderate participation in the activity. But among students who participated in hookups, the most common definition was unplanned, inebriated sex. In most student accounts, the hookup also originated in social contexts in which friends were initially present.

The study also found that the more frequent peer communication there was about such non-relationship sex -- particularly among close college friends -- the greater chance those students would participate in sexual hookups.

"Students who engage in hookups may find encouragement in the belief that the practice is widespread, as suggested by the observed association between self-reported hookups and the estimated hookups for the average student," the study said.

Among the study's findings:

- Ninety-four percent of participating students had heard of the phrase "hooking up" in reference to sexual activities. Slightly more than half described a hookup as involving sex, 9 percent roughly described it as not having sex and about one-third indicated that the term was ambiguous.
- Fifty-four percent reported having participated in a sexual hookup during the school year. A greater number of males (63 percent) reported engaging in a sexual hookup than females (45

percent).

- Thirty-seven percent of students reported two or more hookups during the school year. But 90 percent of the participants assumed that a "typical" student had been involved in two or more hookups.

"This demonstrates the diversity of students' sexual goals and experiences," Holman said. "Second, it highlights the influence communication has on students' attitudes and behavior towards non-relationship sex. Interpersonal communication is a powerful influence, especially in peer networks."

The study, which was co-authored by Dr. Alan Sillars of the University of Montana, drew its findings from a nearly 300-student sample at a large public university. Holman's and Sillars' work is in the current edition of the journal *Health Communication*.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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