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## Queering Hookup Motives in a Diverse Sample of LGBTQ+ Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

There is a paucity of research on hookup motives among LGBTQ+ young adults, despite the importance of such sexual encounters for the development of LGBTQ+ young adults' identities. In this study, we examined the hookup motives of a diverse sample of LGBTQ+ young adults through in-depth qualitative interviews. Interviews were conducted with 51 LGBTQ+ young adults across college campuses at three sites in North America. We asked participants, "What sorts of things motivate you to hook up?" and "Why do you hook up?" Six distinct hookup motives emerged from participants' responses. They included: a) *pleasure/enhancement*, b) *intimacy and social-relationship motives*, c) *self-affirmation*, d) *coping*, e) *cultural norms and easy access*, and f) *multifaceted motives*. While some of our themes cohered with previously identified hookup motives among heterosexual samples, LGBTQ+ young adults identified new and distinct motives that illustrate major differences between their hookup experiences and that of heterosexual young adults. For example, LGBTQ+ young adults were motivated to *pleasure* their hookup partner, not just themselves. They were also motivated by *cultural norms* within the queer community, *easy access to hookup partners*, and *multifaceted motives*. There is a need for data-driven ways to conceptualize hookup motives among LGBTQ+ young adults, instead of unquestioningly using heterosexual templates for understanding why LGBTQ+ individuals hook up.

The term "hookup" has been used to describe a casual sexual relationship without a long-term commitment and may include kissing, touching, oral sex, and/or penetrative sex (Epstein et al., 2009; Garcia et al., 2012; Kuperberg & Padgett, 2015; Lewis et al., 2012; Paul et al., 2000). In addition, hookups may be initiated between a friend or a stranger (Hughes et al., 2005; Littleton et al., 2009; Paul et al., 2000).

The majority of research on hooking up has predominantly focused on the pursuit of physical pleasure within White, heterosexual, cisgender relationships, and has neglected the experience of LGBTQ+ young adults or anyone who identifies outside of the cisgender binary (Watson et al., 2017). For example, Glenn and Marquardt (2001) defined a hookup as: "When a girl and a guy get together for a physical encounter and don't necessarily expect anything further" (pg. 82). Scholars have recognized this limitation in the hookup scholarship and discrepancies in how hookups are defined (Bible et al., 2022) and urged future studies to include the experiences of same-sex attracted youth as well as the entire queer community (Garcia et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2017).

Historically, research about sexuality and hooking up in early adulthood has largely focused on risky behaviors and negative outcomes and consequences of sexual behaviors such as condom use, STI transmission, sexual assault, and negative mental health outcomes, especially among LGBTQ+ individuals (Garcia et al., 2012; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Prestage et al., 2001; Tolman & McClelland, 2011; van den Boom et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2017). It is important to acknowledge that

coercion, rape and sexual assault are possible outcomes of a bad hookup (Littleton et al., 2009; Paul & Hayes, 2002) and warrant further attention. Yet, hooking up has also been described as a positive and normative experience, especially during young adulthood (Shepardson et al., 2016; Snapp et al., 2015), and additional research is needed to understand the conditions and motivations that lead to such experiences, especially among sexual- and gender-diverse (SGD) young adults (Watson et al., 2017).

### Hooking up as a Positive, Normative Developmental Experience

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are important developmental periods for sexuality (Arnett, 2000). Erikson (1959) argued that adolescence is defined by exploration of identities. This exploration and identity formation applies to sexuality and sexual behaviors as well. Welsh et al. (2000) posited that sexuality is a critical aspect of identity formation during adolescence. During adolescence and emerging adulthood, youth are exploring sexuality as they attempt to solidify a sexual identity (Morgan, 2013) and seek emotional and physical intimacy. Watson et al. (2017) argued that sexual exploration and experimentation during emerging adulthood is particularly important for LGB individuals as contexts and challenges of adolescence may have limited LGB youth's ability to be out and seek sexual and romantic relationships.

In recent years, scholars have begun to formulate their research through a lens of sex positivity. Sex positivity commonly places an emphasis on being open-minded and non-judgmental of an individual's consensual sexual choices (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017). Along this line, research that examines the sexuality of adolescents and emerging adults has begun to shift its focus and frame sexuality as a normative aspect of development, leading to an expansion of sexuality research beyond risky sexual behaviors and negative consequences (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

To that end, several studies have documented positive traits or rewards associated with hookups, albeit among predominantly or exclusively heterosexual, cisgender samples (Hahlbeck et al., 2022; J. J. Owen et al., 2010; Kettrey & Johnson, 2020; J. Owen et al., 2013; Snapp et al., 2015). Scholars have measured positive sexual variables such as sexual satisfaction, pleasure, and the other rewards of hooking up, in part, to reduce the stigma of hooking up, especially among women (Snapp et al., 2014, 2015). For instance, both men and women expressed positive and negative emotions after a hookup (J. J. Owen et al., 2010) and reported feeling more positive as opposed to negative outcomes (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Wade & Heldman, 2012).

### Hookup Motives

In addition to implementing a lens of sex positivity, Manning et al. (2006) argued that sexuality research also needs to pursue more nuanced understandings of the motivations and functions that hookups serve for adolescents and young adults. In the earlier research on sexual motives, scholars (Cooper et al., 1998) identified six motives for sex (sex being one activity that may or may not be part of hooking up) that have been applied to the research on hooking up. These motives include: a) *enhancement* (i.e., pleasure), b) *intimacy* (i.e., emotional closeness), c) *self-affirmation* (i.e., to boost self-worth), d) *coping*, e) *partner approval*, and f) *peer approval* (Cooper et al., 1998). While there have been several studies that have utilized Cooper et al.'s (1998) framework to examine hookup motives (e.g., Snapp et al., 2014, 2015), Kenney et al. (2014) developed a *Hookup Motives Questionnaire* that classified hookup motives a bit differently than past research. These motives included: a) *enhancement*, b) *social-sexual* (i.e., to have sex without a commitment), c) *social-relationship* (i.e., to develop a relationship), d) *coping* and e) *conformity* (Kenney et al., 2014).

While the measurement of hookup motives has varied, the commonality among this research is that enhancement or pleasure is the most widely endorsed hookup motive (Blayney et al., 2018; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Kenney et al., 2013; Snapp et al., 2014, 2015; Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021; Uecker et al., 2015; Weitbrecht & Whitton, 2020).

### Heteronormative Hookup Motives

Much of the literature on hooking up and consequently hookup motives has been heteronormative in nature, focusing on heterosexual, cisgender men and women (for a critique, see Watson et al., 2017). In a study of college women, enhancement was cited as the predominant motive for hooking up

(Blayney et al., 2018). While some studies have shown that men endorse pleasure and peer pressure more than women (Snapp et al., 2014), others have found that hookup motives did not differ by gender, with both men and women similarly endorsing pleasure, intimacy, coping, self-enhancement, and peer pressure (Snapp et al., 2015). Additionally, men and women reported that both sexual gratification and emotional gratification are important motives (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). In a sense, these observations seem contrary to expected gendered differences in hookup motives (i.e., men are motivated by pleasure and women by intimacy; Grello et al., 2006; Hill, 2002; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Levant, 1997; Mahalik et al., 2003).

### LGBTQ+ Hookup Motives

Even as LGBTQ+ college students may want to deconstruct heteronormative and heavily gendered hookup practices and pursue novel ways to have sexual relationships (e.g., seeking orgasms for both or more parties; Sarson, 2019), they face significant barriers (e.g., heteronormative expectations) and an unwitting ascription to heteronormative scripts (e.g., viewing sex as a conquest; Lamont et al., 2018). Subsequently, they may be disincentivized or otherwise unmotivated to engage in future casual sex/hookups (Lamont et al., 2018).

While hookup motives in the LGBTQ+ community have not been studied using standardized measures of sexual motives (e.g., Cooper et al., 1998), the limited literature on LGBTQ+ young adults illustrates the importance of intimacy and pleasure as motivations to hook up. For example, lesbian respondents in Lamont et al.'s (2018) study chose to hook up for the emotional aspects of the encounter (e.g., seeking an emotional connection), which for some were described as inseparable from the experience of hooking up. Similarly, gay undergraduate males were more likely than heterosexual males to *not* want to hook up so as to enhance the chances of developing a relationship (Barrios & Lundquist, 2012). A qualitative analysis of intimacy-related narratives among 18 Black college students (of which 4 identified either as LGBTQ+ or as straight but with same-sex attraction and experiences), further illustrates the nuance of emotional motives in hookups among LGBTQ+ youth of color. While there appeared to be some ascription to the notion of sex as "no strings attached," the 4 LGBTQ+ participants indicated that an emotional or mental connection is ideal but rarely happens (Dogan et al., 2018). In addition to the obvious pleasurable aspects, gay men who engage in group sex also frequently report closely associated motives that veer into the realm of finding community and bonding among like-minded peers (Sarson, 2019).

Although bisexual people tend to be heavily underrepresented in hookup research, some quantitative evidence exists as to the sexual (not hookup) motives of bisexual individuals. In a sample of 148 bisexual Latino men, Muñoz-Laboy and Garcia (2019) found that stronger depressive symptoms were associated with sex as a stress-relief mechanism. Further, the endorsement of hypermasculine machismo beliefs were associated with: a) the pursuit of sex as an assertion of power and dominance, b) pleasure, and c) a way of nurturing their sexual partner during the sexual encounter.

Even less is known about the hookup motives of gender minority (including trans\*, gender fluid, gender queer, and non-binary) young adults. One recent study assessed motivations for first-sexual experiences in an LGB+ sample. Given this study was about “first sexual experiences” and not necessarily hooking up and only included one trans woman, it is not possible to draw conclusions about what motivates gender minorities to hook up (Gillespie et al., 2022). In sum, the research to date illustrates that stress-relief, dominance, pleasure, and nurturance are the known motives for LGBTQ+ young adults’ sexual activity.

### Purpose of the Current Study

While research on hookups among heterosexual college students has provided a solid foundation on the most widely-endorsed hookup motives among a specific population, more research is needed to understand what motivates LGBTQ+ young adults to hook up. In this study, we examined the hookup motives of a diverse sample of LGBTQ+ young adults through in-depth qualitative interviews. While we are interested in determining if previously established hookup motives may be relevant to our sample, we are most interested in documenting the motivations LGBTQ+ young adults share with us from their direct experiences.

### Method

The co-principal investigators (PIs) designed an exploratory study that was initially meant to examine the hookup experiences of LGB young adults. These data were collected in 2015–2016 from participants at a mid-sized university in Canada and served as a pilot study that was later expanded to include trans and queer young adults. From 2018–2020, we collected data in two additional North American locations: a large public

university (from 2018–2019) in Connecticut and a small public university in California (from 2019–2020).

### Participants

Participants’ ( $n = 51$ ) demographics across the three data collection sites are summarized in Table 1. Participants were asked to indicate their gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity on a demographic form prior to the interview. For gender, 43% identified as cisgender male (43%) and nearly 20% identified as non-cis (including non-binary, trans male, or queer). For sexual orientation, gay (27%) and bisexual (25%) participants made up approximately half of the total sample size. One participant in California identified as straight and was not included in our analysis as he gave no indication of having any queer identity or experience through attraction, behavior, or orientation. Twelve percent of participants chose more than one sexual orientation to represent them (e.g., bisexual/pansexual). For race/ethnicity, the majority of participants (57%) were White, and the remaining 29% of participants who shared their race/ethnicity identified as Asian origin, Hispanic/Latinx, Black, or Multiracial.

### Canada

Participants were recruited through fliers, e-mail, and targeted advertisements on Facebook. The goal of recruitment was not to target a single LGB community or program; thus recruitment materials were spread throughout the university, non-profit health agencies, and neighborhoods with higher rates of SGD individuals. Following their response to the recruitment materials, participants had access to a telephone contact where they could gain a detailed explanation of the study and had an opportunity to ask questions.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants.

Study location	Canada ( $n = 17$ )		Connecticut ( $n = 18$ )		California ( $n = 16$ )		Full sample ( $N = 51$ )	
	$n$	%	$n$	%	$n$	%	$N$	%
<i>Gender Identity</i>								
Cisgender woman	7	14	6	12	7	14	20	39
Cisgender man	10	20	9	18	3	6	22	43
Nonbinary	1	2	1	2	2	4	4	8
Trans man	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	2
Queer	0	0	0	0	4	8	4	8
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>								
Lesbian	2	4	1	2	3	6	6	12
Gay	6	12	6	12	2	4	14	27
Straight	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	2
Bisexual	7	14	4	8	2	4	13	25
Pansexual	0	0	1	2	3	6	4	8
Asexual	0	0	1	2	1	2	2	4
Queer	1	2	1	2	2	4	4	8
Heteroflexible	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	2
Two Orientations	2	4	2	4	2	4	6	12
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>								
Black	0	0	2	4	1	2	3	6
Hispanic/Latinx	0	0	2	4	2	4	4	8
White	14	27	7	14	8	16	29	57
Asian Origin	5	10	0	0	1	2	6	12
Multiracial	0	0	2	4	0	0	2	4
Did Not Report	0	0	3	6	4	8	7	14

Note. Average age of participants was 22 years old. Percentages may exceed 100% for full sample due to rounding up site-specific percentages.

### Connecticut

Participants were recruited either from within or outside of the university's psychology participant pool. Non-participant pool participants were either other students on campus (including graduate students) or from the community. These participants were recruited via word-of-mouth or flyers distributed on-campus or off-campus in collaboration with LGBTQ+-serving organizations (e.g., social groups, health organizations, bars, and community centers) in Connecticut. In the latter method, participants responded to the flyers by sending an e-mail of interest to a Google account created by and only accessible by the research team, after which they were contacted to schedule the interview and allowed to express preferences for particular members of the three-person interviewing team.

### California

Similar to the previous sites, recruitment flyers were posted throughout campus and in coffee shops and community boards at local businesses within 20 miles of campus. Targeted e-mails were sent to LGBTQ+ serving organizations and clubs, both on campus and locally. Undergraduate research assistants (RAs) also made an in-person announcement about the study at a local LGBTQ+ community-based organization (CBO). Interested participants either emailed RAs directly or signed up to be contacted by our research team. Once e-mail contact was established, RAs sent a secured Google document to the possible participant and asked them to identify preferred interview times/days and interview location (campus research lab, coffee shop, or the LGBTQ+ CBO). RAs then followed up to confirm a meeting time and location.

### Procedure

In order to address the lack of knowledge on LGBTQ+ hookups, the study's PIs created an interview protocol with approximately 20 questions that would provide foundational information about LGBTQ+ hookups (e.g., hookup motives; how hookups are defined and facilitated; and STI protection). Many of these questions addressed gaps in the research and were modeled after what we know about heterosexual young adult hookups but do not yet know about LGBTQ+ hookups (see Watson et al., 2017 for more information). The initial protocol that was piloted in Canada with LGB young adults was amended slightly to include questions that were also inclusive of trans, gender fluid, and queer participants. All procedures were approved by the respective Behavioral Research and Ethics Board (for Canada) or Institutional Review Boards at each U.S. based university.

For all sites, a consent form and interview protocol were provided at least 24 hours before the scheduled interview time. At the start of the interview, participants were asked if they had any additional questions, and they were reminded they could skip any question or end the interview at any time. After the interview, participants were provided with a reference sheet with contacts for LGBTQ+ organizations, mental health resources (in the event they needed support), and contact information for the study's PI in case they had follow-up questions or concerns.

In Canada, interviews took place in a private setting chosen by the participant or in an interview room on campus. Compensation was not provided for participation aside from reimbursement of travel expenses for those who opted for an interview on campus.

In Connecticut, all but one interview took place in a secure research lab on campus; one interview took place at the interviewee's home. Non-psychology participant pool participants were offered a small stipend (\$20 electronic Amazon.com gift card sent directly to the participant's e-mail address). Participants recruited through the participant pool were offered the option to be compensated with the same gift card or participant pool credits.

In California, the majority of the interviews took place in a secure research lab on campus. Other participants chose to be interviewed in a private room at the local LGBTQ+ youth-serving CBO or at a coffee shop of their choosing. Participants were remunerated with \$20 worth of merchandise from Amazon. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to choose a product(s) from Amazon and send us a link to it in advance so that the item(s) could be purchased and shipped prior to the interview. In order to avoid collecting identifiable information and to ensure participant anonymity, we could not give the participants the Amazon gift card directly (per State of California stipulations for gift card distribution). In all cases, participants who selected an item from Amazon participated in the interview.

The length of the interviews ranged from 30–90 minutes. There were broad questions that asked about their overall hookup experience(s), how they navigated their sexual health, hookup preferences, as well as their hookup motivations. For the purposes of this analysis, we were most interested in participants' responses to prompts such as, "What sorts of things motivate you to hook up?" and "Why do you hook up?"

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and were conducted by trained members of the research team, which included either postdoctoral research associates, graduate RAs, or undergraduate RAs.

### Data Analysis

Interviews were coded using the qualitative software program (NVivo 12). Deductive coding was primarily used to create a codebook intended to capture key themes we anticipated to emerge in the interviews. If a narrative emerged that was not represented by our deductive codes, inductive coding was used to create a new code or codes. Members of the research team were trained on how to select and code text and to create new codes in NVivo. Because the Canadian data had been previously presented at a research conference, it was coded and checked for inter-rater reliability by two independent RAs. At that time, inter-rater reliability was excellent ( $\alpha = .96$ ). After the Connecticut and California data sets were added to NVivo, RAs once again independently coded the interviews and inter-rater reliability was checked by another RA. A second check was completed to confirm agreement on the Canadian data, especially since new codes had been created with the newer data sets. Inter-rater reliability was calculated by determining the number of agreed codes divided by the total number of



codes. In sum, inter-rater reliability across the entire sample remained excellent ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

All relevant codes specific to hookup motives were analyzed to extract quotes from our sample. Because we collected data over time and more codes were added as more data was gathered, we used the process of emergent grounded theory analysis that allows for iteration and comparison of our data (Charmaz, 2008). For example, we deductively used the code “intimacy” based on past data, and then the code “multifaceted motives” emerged as an inductive code when new data was added to the sample. We then went back to the initial interviews and reviewed them again to see if “multifaceted motives” were present in the narratives. We did this each time a code was added to the codebook. Once all codes were established, we organized data into (sub) themes (LeCompte, 2000) based on the question(s) we sought to answer. For the purposes of this analysis, we only examined the codes related to hookup motives, as explained below.

## Results

Six distinct hookup motives emerged from participants’ interviews. They included: a) *pleasure/enhancement*, b) *intimacy and social-relationship motives*, c) *self-affirmation*, d) *coping*, e) *cultural norms and easy access*, and f) *multifaceted motives*. It is important to note, however that these themes are not entirely mutually exclusive, since a few participants’ responses demonstrated links among themes or were multifaceted in nature.

### Theme 1: Pleasure/Enhancement Motives

The LGBTQ+ young adults in our study often cited sexual and physical pleasure as the predominant motive to hook up. In terms of subthemes, while their own sexual satisfaction was important to them, many also prioritized the pleasure of their partner(s). Some shared that sex or sexual activity was secondary during a hookup, and the real physical pleasure came from other forms of physical connection and touch. Lastly, some were motivated to hook up because it is considered fun and thrilling.

#### Personal Sexual Satisfaction

Several participants shared that sexual pleasure was their primary motivation for hooking up: “You know, I’m hooking up because I’m horny, because I want some sexual satisfaction” (a gay cisgender man). A queer cisgender woman who does not wanted to be “confined by labels,” shared, “I wanna cum. And I wanna be with someone that can do that for me.” Others also plainly stated their motives: “. . . I know for me right now, when I turn on Grindr or Tinder, it’s like I know I want to hook up because I want to feel pleasure, and I want to be sexually gratified” (a gay cisgender man).

Hookups also seemed to be an easier pathway to fulfill the drive for pleasure. For example, a bisexual cisgender woman said, “Like I seek out hookups because you know I wanna have sex with somebody. And it’s a lot easier to find somebody to have a one night stand, than like somebody to like date you for a long time.” Similarly, a gay cisgender man shared,

So hooking up is more for the physical side of it . . . since everybody gets horny, and when you hook up for the first time with a stranger, I feel that it is more of using each other’s body. I don’t want to say using him, but we are using each other.

While the motive of pleasure is linked to “using each other” for this participant, others saw physical motives as connected to “having fun.” Another gay cisgender man said,

It’s fun obviously, because that’s really why we do it . . . For me, it’s like if you find them attractive and they do as well then why not? As long as it’s safe and consensual and you guys are having fun, why not do it? You only have your youth for so long, right? I enjoy it.

#### Pleasure for the Hookup Partner(s)

Many hoped the experience would be pleasurable for their partner(s) too. For example, a queer cisgender man, shared “. . . [It’s] just like fulfilling and you’re hopefully, you know, fulfilling somebody else’s desire.” Similarly, when prompted by the interviewer about what they get out of a hookup, a bisexual cisgender woman said, “hopefully an orgasm . . . just like human contact and like that feeling and uh, sharing that with someone, which it’s just more fun to do it with someone than by yourself.” Additionally, a pansexual nonbinary participant mentioned, “Typically what I was looking to get out of a hookup was sexual satisfaction . . . for myself and for my, uh, partner or partners.”

#### Physical Closeness

For some, the physical motives weren’t just about sexual pleasure, but physical contact. “That [physical] closeness is really nice, other than having that pure pleasure aspect of it” (gay cisgender man). A pansexual cisgender woman shared, “. . . It’s always nice to have like a warm body to like cuddle up against I guess.” Three gay cisgender men had similar narratives. One said they hook up to “just have fun physical contact . . . and if possible, actual sex will be good.” Another explained they were motivated to hook up to “show affection to someone,” and explained that [there] is “nothing better than physical intimacy. I mean . . . a cuddle is great.” A third said that “humans crave physical contact, so touch.” Last, a bisexual cisgender woman described her motivation for physical closeness as a craving, “It’s obviously like something people do, like you have a craving, you want to like satisfy that craving or that, like, feeling.”

#### Excitement and Fun

Participants were also motivated by a desire for fun and emotional experiences. A pansexual non-binary person noted that “it’s exciting to go and hookup.” A gay cisgender man expressed hooking up as thrilling, stating “Hooking up became about finding the next thrill as I got older.” Another gay cisgender man noted, “It’s fun obviously.” Two bisexual cisgender women said, “Hooking up can be fun because there can be a lot of passion,” and “I think it’s a lot about the fun.”

### Theme 2: Intimacy and Social-Relationship Motives

For the second theme, several participants in our study indicated that hooking up was a pathway to develop an emotional connection and intimacy with someone. In some instances,

this connection was fostered in a *friends with benefits* relationship, and in others, LGBTQ+ young people hoped that their hookup encounters would lead to more stable romantic relationships.

### **Emotional Connection and Intimacy**

Participants were motivated to hookup by a desire for emotional intimacy and connection. A queer cisgender man hooked up because “[I] want the emotional intimacy.” Similarly, a gay/queer non-binary person sought hookups for “closeness, with another person, a sense of intimacy.” Two gay cisgender men shared that they wanted “some kind of, like, more intimate emotional connection” and a “need for companionship.”

That sense of connection motivated a pansexual cisgender woman because she enjoyed “feeling loved through the connection, feeling cared for.” Likewise, a gay cisgender man noted that he was motivated to hookup because he sought “a feeling of being close to someone.” A bisexual cisgender woman expressed that she hooks up to feel “more connected with someone even if it’s just a very short period of time.”

### **Friends with Benefits**

A few participants described the social-relationship motive of hooking up in the context of a “friends with benefits” (FWB) scenario, with multiple nuances within. For example, some participants reported hooking up only with people that they had some kind of prior relationship with, transitioning from a platonic relationship to a sexual one. A gay cisgender man stated, “I usually hook up with someone I have some sort of a friendship with. Like I know the person, so even when we are done hooking up, we will chat, drink or play video games.”

Others described seeking out hookups with strangers as a way to eventually develop a FWB relationship, while maintaining the boundary from a potentially romantic relationship. A bisexual cisgender woman explained,

I want something more casual, but I also don’t want something that is just a one-night thing. So I wouldn’t mind having someone I can hang out with once a week but you know it’s kind of casual and you are not changing your Facebook status or something.

For participants with an established FWB relationship, a few narrated motives that included intimacy and pleasure, such as wanting to maintain the relationship due to the belief that the quality of the sexual experience itself will improve over time. A bisexual polyamorous cisgender woman stated, “I do believe that sex gets better with time, at least for me.”

### **Dating and Relationships**

Last, participants described hooking up as a stepping stone to longer-term romances. For example, a gay cisgender man indicated, “I think hooking up would often, for me at least, transition into dating or seeing someone. My last relationship, we met on Tinder and we hooked up and then we started dating. Then that became a relationship.” A lesbian cisgender woman also added, “A good and successful hookup is a hookup that leads to a relationship. I definitely can see myself settling with someone that I casually hooked up with.”

At the same time, a few participants reported a clear distinction between hooking up and dating, viewing them as different constructs that entailed different consequences and longevity. A pansexual cisgender woman said, “I just think hooking up is more of a one-night stand, weekend kind of thing, and dating is like extensive going out together and doing things, not just having sex.”

### **Theme 3: Self-Affirmation**

Participants reported an increase in positive emotions toward themselves as a motivation to hook up. Some said they experienced a boost in their self-worth, self-confidence, and personal power. A gay/bisexual cisgender woman indicated that she was motivated to hook up to bolster “self-esteem, sometimes confidence.” A gay cisgender man sought out hookups because “it makes me feel good about myself.”

Feeling validated about themselves was also a strong motivator. A queer non-binary person noted, “Hooking up is a source of validation, kind of reinforcing your own self-worth.” A gay cisgender man agreed, stating that he sought out hookups because they “made me feel sexually validated.” A queer cisgender woman noted that she hooked up because she “wanted to feel desirable or attractive.” This desirability was linked to personal power. A gay cisgender man expressed that “Something in hooking up also activates the ego, makes you feel desired and wanted.” Similarly, a pansexual queer young adult said, “Knowing someone wanted me that way made me feel very powerful.”

### **Theme 4: Coping with Negative Emotions**

Many participants expressed that they were motivated to hookup to cope with stress. For others, they hoped hooking up could alleviate depressive symptoms or episodes. Similarly, several participants hooked up to deal with loneliness, break-ups, or even boredom.

#### **Coping with Stress**

A pansexual genderfluid/genderqueer person reported that they “personally use it like it’s a coping mechanism.” They also noted they were motivated to seek out hookups as a distraction “instead of like dealing with my stress or anxiety.” A gay cisgender man expressed that they were motivated to hook up because it served as “an emotional band aid,” and a queer cisgender man said they do it to “feel good and let off some steam.” Coping with stress in general was a motivating factor for seeking hookups. A gay cisgender man shared, “Whenever I’m stressed, I look for a hookup.” Similarly, a heteroflexible cisgender man describes seeking hookups because “It is kind of just good to relieve stress and have an enjoyable time.”

#### **Coping with Depression**

Hooking up was also a motivator to alleviate depressive symptoms stemming from dysfunctional social relationships. A gay cisgender man shared, “I actually hook up . . . because my roommate . . . when he just uh disgraced me and all that . . . I was so depressed that I had to change my mind, so I started hooking up.” A pansexual cisgender woman said, “There was

also a point in my life where I was so depressed that I needed that attention, I needed that, um, that physical response, those endorphins from, from sex that you get.” Some participants mentioned they hooked up depending on how depressed they felt. A pansexual queer person stated,

Um, it really depended like, um when I was like getting really depressed it was kind of like a weekly thing, if not more, like it would be the same person like multiple times or like if I got tired of them like I'd end up finding someone else.

Similarly, a gay cisgender man said, “So generally when I hook up, it's like during weird depressive episodes in my life.”

### **Coping with Loneliness**

In addition to coping with stress and depression, a few participants noted that they were motivated to hookup to cope with their loneliness. For example, a lesbian cisgender woman, said “loneliness” was her main reason for hooking up, and a bisexual/asexual non-binary person indicated that they usually hook up “cause I feel lonely.” An asexual homoromantic cisgender man shared, “I'm not really interested in hooking up, but like I'm lonely, and I just want to talk to somebody about my feelings.”

### **Coping with Breakups**

Hooking up can also help some cope with breakup stress and serve as “a distraction from whatever that breakup issue was” (a gay cisgender man). Another gay cisgender man said, “Usually after a breakup, [there were a] lot of hookups.” Some people viewed hooking up as a “revenge” response to a failed romantic relationship. A queer cisgender woman was motivated by “maybe a little bit of a revenge type of thing, or like I'm trying to get over someone.”

### **Coping with Boredom**

Participants also sought out hookups as a way to alleviate boredom. When asked about their motivations for hooking up, a bisexual cisgender woman expressed, “It's always different, but I'm not going to lie, it's usually because I'm bored.” Similar sentiments were expressed by several others. For example, a different bisexual cisgender woman stated, “Sometimes, it is out of boredom.” A pansexual non-binary young person explained their motivations for past hookups: “A lot of it was boredom.” A pansexual queer person described their mood when seeking hookups as “mostly bored and wanting something to keep me occupied.” Last, a bisexual cisgender woman explained her thought process as she contemplated hooking up, “In those incidences, I really didn't have anything else to do, and I'm just like, why not?”

### **Theme 5: Motivated by Cultural Norms and Easy Access**

The LGBTQ+ young adults in our sample also described hooking up as culturally normative and relatively easy due to their geographic location during these encounters. These factors can also serve as hookup motives that contextualize real or perceived sexual norms in the LGBTQ+ community. For example, a queer nonbinary person said, “I think attitudes towards hooking up are a lot more liberal in the queer

community. It's very normal and acceptable that people hook up with people, and that's just part of our culture.”

Participants also reported being more likely to hook up in geographic locations where the pool of potential hookup partners was larger, which invariably included cities or more urbanized areas. For example, a gay cisgender man explained,

In Providence and Los Angeles, hooking up was very easy because there's lots of places to go out and meet people. Los Angeles is very concentrated and the gay community is very concentrated. In New York City, hooking up is also incredibly easy because you can open up Grindr and there are literally 700 people around under a mile.

In fact, a few also described taking advantage of being at LGBTQ+ events, where there was more potential hookup opportunities. They described the wide availability of partners and the normative nature of sexual relations in this context as a recipe for increased likelihood of hooking up. For example, another gay cisgender man noted, “I went to World Pride last year and there was, I think, every gay man ever there, so there you go. And everybody was in the mood, so it was really, really easy.”

### **Theme 6: Multifaceted Motives**

It is important to note that some participants said their motivations to hookup were multifaceted and encompassed a combination of physical, social, and emotional motives. Comparatively, these participants did not outwardly favor one particular motive. For example, a pansexual non-binary young person explained, “I had a specific need and that need was, um usually kind of multifaceted in, you know, boredom and horniness.” Similarly, a lesbian cisgender woman expressed that when seeking out hookups, she was “horny and bored,” but also noted that her hookups were sometimes due to “loneliness.” For a gay cisgender man, hookup motives evolved over time,

When I was younger, hooking up was about exploring my sexuality and then hooking up became about finding the next thrill as I got older. Um, and then hooking up became almost a, a trophy hunting . . . and now hooking up is a way of again, deepening connection. A physical, emotional, mental connection.

## **Discussion**

This research is among the first to explore complex hookup motives in a diverse sample of LGBTQ+ young adults. Some of our findings fit into previously identified hookup motives, yet there are also new motives described, as well as some previously identified motives that were not reported at all by our participants.

Within this study, there were four motives that fit into pre-established hookup motives: a) *pleasure*, b) *intimacy/social-relationship*, c) *self-affirmation*, and d) *coping*. *Pleasure/enhancement* was a widely described hookup motive by the majority of our participants; however there was a distinct aspect of pleasure that has not been as clearly outlined in the literature on heterosexual hookups. For instance, within *pleasure*, our participants described not only wanting to hook up for their own sexual satisfaction, but some said it was important for them to pleasure their partners too, a notion that aligns



with “queering pleasure” as previously defined by heterosexual hookup scripts (see Lamont et al., 2018). Within *intimacy* and *social-relationship* motives, the narratives described by LGBTQ+ participants largely reflect past research with heterosexual young adults (e.g., Blayney et al., 2018; Kenney et al., 2013), in that the motivation to hook up was associated with wanting to feel close, connected, and possibly develop a romantic relationship or even enjoy a sexual relationship with a friend (i.e., FWB). *Self-affirmation* similarly reflected past research on this hookup motive (Cooper et al., 1998) in that hooking up can be seen as a tool to strengthen one’s self-worth as well as validate one’s attractiveness and for some, provide them with an ego boost or sense of “power.” For *coping* as a motivation to hook up, some of the participants described using hookups as a way to alleviate stress and deal with loneliness, but others described being motivated to relieve their suffering from depression, depressive episodes, and even boredom. These latter nuances could perhaps be explored further, especially given the association between depression, anxiety, and sexual compulsivity in gay and bisexual men (Pachankis et al., 2015).

While the bulk of the motives described by our participants align with past research, LGBTQ+ young adults also described two new motives not highlighted in extant literature: a) *cultural norms and easy access* and b) *multifaceted motives*. Some participants describe hooking up as simply part of the queer culture and cited hookup apps and gay parties and events as pathways for easy access to multiple available and interested partners. It is possible that cultural norms around hooking up is shifting for all young people and easy access to partners is not especially unique to the LGBTQ+ population. For example, others have noted that with the accessibility of hookup apps with geographical features, more young adults are participating in hookups, slowly destigmatizing hookup culture (Lamont et al., 2018). As for *multifaceted motives*, it is important to note that several participants did not feel driven by one motive alone but a combination of multiple motives, dependent on their mood or context. Past research has illustrated, for example, that both *pleasure* and *intimacy* are the most endorsed hookup motives (e.g., Snapp et al., 2015) and that most hookup motives are highly correlated even though they may be endorsed at various rates (e.g., Hollis et al., 2022). We suspect that if heterosexual participants were asked this question in a qualitative interview, they too, would describe multifaceted motives as relevant as they navigate whether or not to hook up. It is important to highlight that multifaceted motives may be more common than previously noted, and this might not be captured through a questionnaire that categorizes motives in distinct silos.

Interestingly, there were three previously identified motives (Cooper et al., 1998; Kenney et al., 2014) that were not represented in the narratives from our participants. They include: a) *peer pressure*, b) *partner approval*, and c) *conformity*. On the one hand, it may be that none of our participants experienced these as motivations to hook up or perhaps our questions about hookup motives did not elicit these kinds of thoughts for them as the prompts were quite simple (e.g., “What sorts of things motivate you to hook up?” and “Why do you hook up?”). Taken at face value, the lack of data on these motives suggests

that LGBTQ+ young adults do not feel the need to conform and/or are not as influenced by pressure (peer or partner). While LGBTQ+ young adults still face heteronormative scripts (Lamont et al., 2018) and dominant heterosexual discourses that influence their view of sexual consent (de Heer et al., 2021), it may be that there is more freedom to express choice, define boundaries, and request pleasurable acts that may be less common-place in heterosexual sexual relationships. Further, it might also be that our participants perceived culturally normative hookup scripts positively, instead of as a source of peer pressure or seeing it as a negative pressure to conform. Nonetheless, while our questions on hookup motives did not elicit responses to reflect pressure, approval, or conformity, a separate paper on navigating safety during hookups (using the same data) has found that in some situations, if participants felt unsafe once a hookup was underway, they may go along with the hookup so as to mitigate possible violence from their hookup partner (Babcock et al., under review). More research is needed to understand if situations like these fit under the construct of motives or fit more accurately among safety (as we described in the subsequent paper).

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

As noted, this study is the first to document LGBTQ+ young adult hookup motives in a diverse sample, both demographically and geographically, albeit in North America. We had a robust sample of 51 participants from three distinct regions in the continent. Still, our participants were from medium to large cities where access to possible hookup partners was likely more plentiful than in rural areas of either country.

While the majority of the sample was White, nearly 30% of our sample did identify as non-White, giving us a more racially diverse sample than most research on this topic. While we did our best to recruit LGBTQ young people, some gender identities were clearly missing (e.g., trans women) and some sexual orientations had minimal representation. Additionally, we did not examine differences in hookup motives based on gender, sexual orientation, race, nor did we include any intersectional analysis. Doing so was outside of the purview of this paper and would be better suited to future work that could examine larger sample sizes. However, we anticipate there may be differences based on gender identity for *cultural norms/easy access* as some of the data suggest that gender minority participants have a harder time finding suitable hookup partners or at least perceive their experience as harder than cisgender people. Future research should explore this further and attend to the diverse identities that fit under the umbrella term: “gender minority.”

Because our participants identified two additional hookup motives (*cultural norms/easy access*, *multifaceted motives*) not captured in the previous research and did not endorse three motives that are assessed in others’ hookup questionnaires (*peer pressure*, *partner approval*, and *conformity*; Cooper et al., 1998; Kenney et al., 2014) it is possible that the standardized measures on hookup motives, developed from mostly heterosexual participants, would not fully capture the hookup experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. Future work could build on this research to develop a questionnaire that would

better represent the wide range of hookup motives for diverse LGBTQ+ young people. It is likely that our work is also limited in this, and perhaps additional motives would have emerged if we had more participants who identified as members of the queer community who may hook up but who identify as asexual or aromantic.

Additionally, it is important to note that all of our data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. For the California data in particular, we had to halt any future data collection efforts because of the pandemic. While sexual activity among young adults may have declined overall during the pandemic (Firkey et al., 2021; Gleason et al., 2021), some research shows that gay, bisexual, or queer men had various strategies they utilized to navigate their sexual desires, while trying to mitigate risks of contracting COVID-19 (Harkness et al., 2021).

In spite of these limitations, our data illustrate trustworthiness as defined by the process of methodological integrity (including fidelity and utility) we utilized to approach data collection and data analysis (see Levitt et al., 2016). As further explained in Levitt et al.'s flowchart of methodological integrity, our data are adequate in that they come from diverse sources (3 sites and 2 countries) and any limits to our contexts were noted in the aforementioned limitations. While data collection has taken place over a span of 5 years, we fulfill the qualities of methodological integrity with our groundedness of the data in past research, data coherence, and contribution of research to the field.

## Implications and Conclusions

Our findings contribute to the LGBTQ+ hookup literature in demonstrating a fuller spectrum of hookup motives among SGD individuals, ranging from pleasurable, hedonistic motives to a means of navigating psychological distress, to hooking up as part of the sex-positive LGBTQ+ cultural script. Future studies should continue to dive deeper into the nuances of hookup motives in clarifying why hookup encounters may lead to adaptive or dysfunctional consequences. Additionally, emergent work that aims to further clarify what it means to hook up should be integrated into forthcoming research as there are multiple aspects to consider when trying to define a hookup (e.g., behaviors and frequency of hookup) that could impact the validity and generalizability of hookup research (Bible et al., 2022). Lastly, our findings indicate the need for data-driven ways to conceptualize and queer hookup motives among LGBTQ+ young adults, instead of unquestioningly using heterosexual templates for understanding why SGD individuals hook up.

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