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Can Practice Make Perfect: Sexual experience and consensual behaviors in hookups

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Abstract

College students have significantly varied levels of sexual experience due to differing numbers of previous partners, years sexually active, and frequency of sexual activity. As repeated practice often improves performance in both psychological and physical behaviors, this poster analyzes whether the extent of one’s sexual experience has an effect on the consensual behaviors they elect to utilize during hookup encounters, and how confident they are that these behaviors are effective in obtaining and submitting consent. Data is taken from a survey of undergraduate students from a mid-size northeastern university who were asked questions about their most recent hookup experiences, including their frequency and duration of sexual activity, and methods used to consent to sexual activity. Results are analyzed across trends in consensual practices.

Background

According to Reinforcement Theory, behavior modification through instrumental conditioning occurs as a result of the consequences of a behavior (Gordon 2014). The more frequently a behavior is practiced, the greater the possibility for it to be modified through various outcomes. Because negotiating consent is a human behavioral pattern, it can be said that consent practices can be modified through instrumental conditioning.

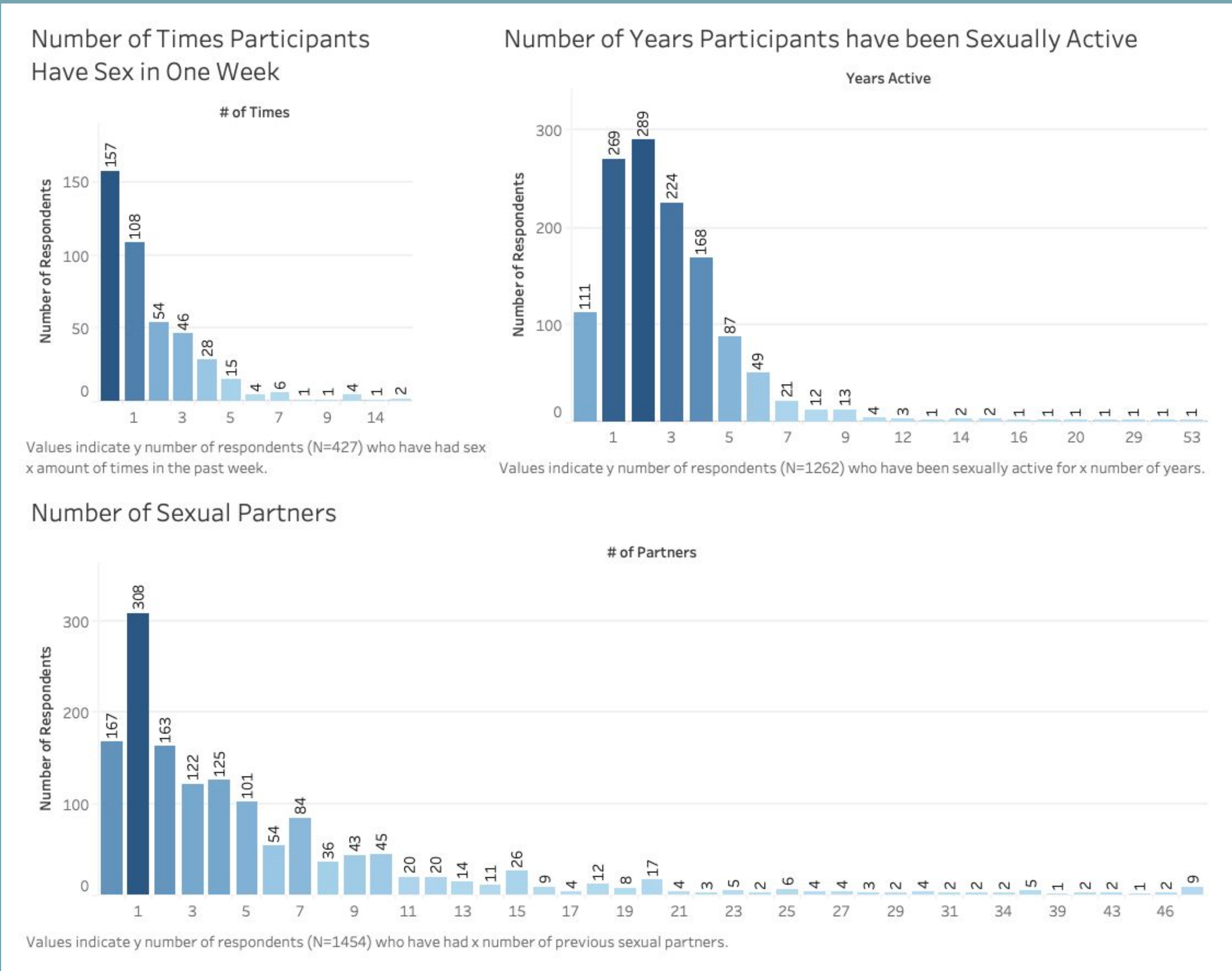
Frequency of consent negotiation is highly individualized and is a result of sexual experience, which varies in regards to frequency of years an individual is sexually active and number of previous partners. As such, consensual behaviors can vary amongst individuals as a result of modification through sexual experience.

If the action of successfully engaging in intercourse is positive reinforcement of consensual behaviors practiced by an individual, those with more sexual experience will have stronger reinforcement of their consensual practices, regardless of what they are. Additionally, research indicates that those with sexual experience stressed the importance of explicit, verbal consent less than those without sexual experience (Humphreys 2007). This could be due to a degree of overconfidence as explained as a result of positive reinforcement. This overconfidence causes an individual to feel a stronger belief in their practices, such that they do not need to confirm with explicit communication, or to a lesser degree.

Hypotheses

H₁: Due to a greater frequency of positive reinforcement as a result of their consensual behaviors, those with more sexual experience will feel more confident and comfortable while negotiating consent.
H₂: Due to confidence from positive reinforcement as a result of their consensual behaviors, those with more sexual experience will feel less of a need to explicitly communicate consent.

Results



Pearson Correlations			
Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Sex History: Number of Previous Sexual Partners	How many years sexually active	0.362 **	0.000
	Last hookup: How COMFORTABLE you and your partner were in figuring out consent during your last hookup encounter	-0.118 *	0.017
	Last hookup: How CONFIDENT you were in obtaining consent during your last hookup encounter	-0.084	0.089
	Last hookup: How GOOD A JOB do you think you and your partner did in figuring out consent	-0.024	0.623
	Last Hookup: I told my partner verbally what felt good	0.069 *	0.025
	Last Hookup: I told my partner verbally what I didn't like	0.000	0.995
	Last Hookup: I told my partner verbally what I wanted to do sexually	0.036	0.246
	Last Hookup: My partner told me verbally what felt good	0.114 **	0.000
	Last Hookup: My partner told me verbally what he/she didn't like	0.041	0.193
	Last Hookup: My partner told me verbally what he/she wanted to do sexually	0.041	0.188
How many years sexually active	Sex History: Number of Previous Sexual Partners	1.000	
	Words or Actions: I rely on my partner's ACTIONS to indicate whether or not they give consent	0.063	0.200
	Words or Actions: I rely on my partner's WORDS to indicate whether or not they give consent	-0.157 **	0.001
	Words or Actions: I use ACTIONS to indicate whether or not I give consent	0.033	0.502
	Words or Actions: I use WORDS to indicate whether or not I give consent	-0.229 **	0.000
	How many years sexually active	1.000	
	Last hookup: How COMFORTABLE you and your partner were in figuring out consent during your last hookup encounter	-0.842	0.417
	Last hookup: How CONFIDENT you were in obtaining consent during your last hookup encounter	-0.003	0.951
	Last hookup: How GOOD A JOB do you think you and your partner did in figuring out consent	-0.008	0.868
	Last Hookup: I told my partner verbally what felt good	0.014	0.653
	Last Hookup: I told my partner verbally what I didn't like	-0.051	0.115
	Last Hookup: I told my partner verbally what I wanted to do sexually	0.029	0.367
	Last Hookup: My partner told me verbally what felt good	0.029	0.360
	Last Hookup: My partner told me verbally what he/she didn't like	0.023	0.471
	Last Hookup: My partner told me verbally what he/she wanted to do sexually	0.017	0.606
	Sex History: Number of Previous Sexual Partners	0.362 **	0.000
	Words or Actions: I rely on my partner's ACTIONS to indicate whether or not they give consent	0.027	0.597
	Words or Actions: I rely on my partner's WORDS to indicate whether or not they give consent	-0.020	0.699
	Words or Actions: I use ACTIONS to indicate whether or not I give consent	0.021	0.682
	Words or Actions: I use WORDS to indicate whether or not I give consent	-0.018	0.726

Pearson Correlations between factors of sexual experience and behaviors and attitudes about negotiating consent. Significance at the 0.01** and 0.05* levels are indicated.

Methods

Sample:

Participants (N=1893) were students from a midsize northeastern university who received credit for their participation.

- Sexual activity and experienced varied amongst participants.
- 26.8% have had 0 sexual partners in the last 12 months.
- 32.5% have had 1 sexual partner in the last 12 months.
- 22.2% have had 2-3 sexual partners in the last 12 months.
- 13.9% have had 4 to 7 sexual partners in the last 12 months.
- 4.6% have had 8 or more sexual partners in the last 12 months.

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey through Qualtrics. Each provided basic demographic information and answered a series questions about consent practices in their most recent hookup and their hookup partners. Participants answered a series of questions about their sexual history, including number of years sexually active, number of previous sexual partners, and frequency of sex activity. A variety of other questions were answered as well.

Discussion

Those with more sexual partners were *significantly less comfortable* negotiating consent. No correlation existed with *level of confidence* in negotiating consent. Additionally, no such correlations were present amongst those who have been sexually active for more years. Thus, H₁ is rejected. This absence of confidence and comfort may be rooted in the provided definition of a hook-up, as a “short-term” encounter may result in a lack of familiarity with a partner. However, those who have had more sexual partners *do not prefer to give and receive consent verbally*, supporting H₂.

Despite the significant rejection of verbal exchange of consent, participants who have had more sexual partners *do prefer to verbally communicate about what feels good for both themselves and their partner* during sex. This correlation was not hypothesized, but may be due to a greater knowledge of sexual pleasure as a result of experience. Again, no such correlations exist amongst participants who have been sexually active for more years.

Number of sexual partners correlates significantly with the number of years sexually active, supporting that a greater length of sexual activity often results in sexual encounters with more people. However, as demonstrated, there were no other significant correlations with number of years sexually active. This may be due to the fact that our hypotheses were based in frequency of sexual activity. Number of sexual partners explicitly provides insight to the frequency of sexual activity, while years sexually active does not. A person may have engaged in sexual activity only once within a large span of years sexually active. However, a greater number of previous partners indicates with more certainty a greater frequency of sexual activity. In the future, frequency of sexual activity in the past year and the past week should be analyzed.