Eyes wide open: Gender similarities and differences in sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification in today's hook-up culture

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Abstract

Sexual behavior among college students today is significantly different than in the past. Hooking-up captures this difference and getting some satisfaction seems to capture hooking-up. Although this may have always been the intent of college-age men, what seems new is that women are now adopting a similar mantra. The purpose of this study was to assess this trend by measuring sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification in male and female college students. One hundred and ninety one students (105 women, 86 men) took an online survey consisting of 20 items from the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory developed by Horne and Zimmerman (2006) and 30 items from the Sexual Objectification Scale – Revised developed by Morse (2007). Gender similarities as well as gender differences were found. Men and women did not differ in self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure or sexual objectification. Sexual self-reflection was greater in women than men as was sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner. A major limitation of the study was its unorthodox use of instruments developed to assess sexual subjectivity and objectification in women and men, respectively, in the case of both men and women.

Key words: sexual subjectivity, sexual objectification, gender

Eyes wide open: Gender similarities and differences in sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification in today's hook-up culture Hooking up is a phenomenon attracting considerable attention in the media and in social science research. Hooking up is a broad term used by adolescents and young adults to describe a variety of sexual activities they may engage in, ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse (Bogle, 2007). Encounters in which hooking up occurs are typically spontaneous and superficial. Grello, Welsh & Harper (2006) found, for example, that many participants reported they were hooking up simply because their partner was attractive. Participants also stated that drugs and alcohol were frequently involved in these hookups. Hook ups may occur with someone the person knows or may just have met. Paul, Wenzel & Harvey (2008) stated that, of the college students they sampled between the ages of 18-24, 80% had reported engaging in sexual intercourse during a hook-up; and of those, 60% had indicated they had done so with someone they were not in a relationship with. Hook ups are now a very common occurrence on college campuses and, in fact, have become the dominant form of sexual interaction among college students. Bogle (2007) argues that the traditional dating script no longer applies to the sexual encounters or relationships that develop among college students today. College students today seem to prefer hookups to committed relationships. Hooking up is seen as a means of satisfying sexual desire and needs without the time investment and "strings attached" associated with being in a committed relationship (Downing-Matibag, 2008).

Previous research has found that participation in hooking up varies with year in college (Gilmartin, 2006). Research has shown that during the first year of college the motivations men and women have for hooking up are similar. Both men and women see their first year in college as a time for sexual experimentation during which they can explore their sexual options (Paul, McManus & Hayes, 2000). First year students experience a new level of freedom often expressed by hooking up with multiple people rather than committing to a monogamous relationship (Paul, 2002). By the sophomore year, however, the motivations of women and men for hooking – up begin to diverge (Gilmartin, 2006). While men still enjoy hooking up for its own sake, many women, while still hooking up, begin looking for something more, expressing the hope that a hook-up will turn into something more (Bogle, 2007). For women, achieving that something more, i.e., establishing and maintaining a committed relationship in college, can be difficult. Not as many men as women are interested in doing so. As a result, women often wind up pressuring their partner for a committed relationship which may result in their being "dumped" (Gilmartin, 2006). With more and more young men and women engaging in hook ups, research has focused on the motivations and outcomes of these seemingly "random" sexual experiences.

Both men and women have reported that peer pressure is one of the major reasons they engage in hooking up (Paul, McManus & Hayes, 2000). Many young people think, since the majority of their peers are hooking up, they should be too (Lambert, Kahn & Apple, 2003). Bogle (2007) reported that 91% of college women believed hook ups occurred very often or fairly often on their campus. This high percentage is indicative of the misperception that exists among many college students concerning the prevalence of hooking up, a phenomenon termed "pluralistic ignorance" by Downing-Matibag (2008). Research indicates that the majority of men who hook up are motivated by desire, lust, attainment of sexual pleasure and to increase their social status on campus (Leigh, 1989; Paul, 2002). Hooking up by men and women tends to elicit very different reactions from peers. Men who hook up typically experience peer support and approval; women, on the other hand, are often subject to peer criticism (Regan, & Dreyer, 1999; Paul, McManus & Hayes, 2000). Hooking up seems to enhance men's reputation but not women's, resulting in hooking up being more appealing to them.

Though some women engage in hook ups for reasons similar to men, most women, especially after their first year in college, hook up in the hopes of forming a committed relationship (Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006). Women seem to place considerably more importance on the emotional aspects of a hook up experience than men (Leigh, 1989). Compared to men, women tend to have more restrictive attitudes towards casual sex evident in the reasons given for hooking up, namely, to experience emotional closeness, intimacy and love (Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006). For many women, sex and love go hand in hand which is not the case for many men (Hughes, Morrison & Asada, 2005). Given these differences in reasons for engaging in hook ups, it is not surprising that the experience itself often leads to different outcomes in men and women (Paul, 2002). While, prior to the experience, both men and women share feelings of excitement and optimism, after the experience, their feelings typically diverge. Men generally report satisfaction with their hook up experiences. This may be because the only expectation most men have going into a hook up is to have their sexual needs and desires met (Bogle, 2007). Women, in contrast, more often report feeling unsatisfied and regretful (Paul, Wenzel & Harvey, 2008). Perhaps, since many women engage in hook ups in the hopes of forming a relationship, when this doesn't happen, they experience regret and sometimes even depression (Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006).

Eshbaugh & Gute (2008) found that men also sometimes report feeling regret after a hook up encounter. In the case of men, however, these regrets most often stem from *inaction*, from not having pursued or engaged in sexual activity when the opportunity presented itself. Regrets, for women, on the other hand, tend to center on *action*, what they did or let happen during a hook-up. Given the difference in emphasis men and women place on the satisfaction of their own sexual desires as a reason for hooking up, it is, perhaps, not surprising that women, more often than men, have reported complying with or giving in to their partner's wishes to hook up (Impett & Peplau, 2002). This greater compliance on the part of women may be due to the continuing relevance to women of sexual scripts based on traditional gender roles. "Traditional gender roles may foster such sexual compliance, as many females believe that it is their responsibility to be responsive to males' sexual desires" (Grello,Welsh & Harper, 2006, p.256). Indeed, Impett & Peplau (2002) report that satisfying their partners' needs was among the most common reasons given by women for sexual compliance. Additional reasons included to promote intimacy in the relationship, and to avoid being rejected by their partner. It was also found that many women cited the fact that men have a much stronger sex drive than they do as a reason for compliance. Men, aware of this belief, sometimes capitalize on it to successfully pressure their partner into hooking up (Impett & Peplau, 2002).

Although many women believe that hooking up may lead to a relationship, Paul, Wenzel & Harvey (2008) found that only 12% of college students in their study reported a hook up experience that did evolve into a romantic relationship. Even when women freely consent to hooking up, many still feel emotionally vulnerable, and worry about their partners' motives and investment in the encounter (Weaver & Herold, 2000). The findings that many women who engage in hooking up are doing so to comply with their partner's requests suggests that women's participation in hooking up may not be fully consensual. A consensual hook up occurs when both partners want to and willfully choose to engage in a hook up. Non-consensual hook ups can occur, however, when one partner wants to and chooses to hook up but the other doesn't, but feels obligated to for any number of reasons. With respect to non-consensual hook-ups, it is not so much that someone is being physically forced to hook up, but rather that one partner feels pressured by the other to hook up and accedes to that pressure. Although obvious changes have occurred in the sexual behavior of college men and women on campuses today, the traditional sexual script still seems to be influencing their behavior. Research has shown that men more often act as initiators of a hook up encounter and women more often as restrictors (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992).

This difference clearly derives from traditional gender roles which accord men but deny women the prerogative to initiate sexual activity. Recent research suggests, however, that the strength of traditional gender roles is diminishing and women are exerting more control over their sexual experiences. O'Sullivan & Byers (1992) report that, compared to previous findings, more women are initiating hook ups. This shift may indicate that women are adopting some aspects of the relationship patterns typically characteristic of men. Yet gender differences persist. While men initiate sexual encounters in a direct manner, women who initiate sexual encounters, which happens less often, generally do so in an indirect manner, such as through the use of subtle verbal cues (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992). Much of the research on hooking up to date has focused on describing the incidence and nature of hooking up experiences among college men and women. The purpose of this study is to extend this research by exploring the attitudes men and women hold about their own sexuality (sexual subjectivity) and the instrumental role that others play in their sexual arousal and/or satisfaction (sexual objectification). Sexual subjectivity is defined as "the capacity to own one's sexuality, to feel pleasure in one's body, and to be the subject of one's own desires" (Schalet, 2009, p. 142). subjectivity implies being aware of and in control of one's sexuality. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) recently reported on the development of a scale to measure sexual subjectivity in adolescent women, the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (FSSI).

The FFSI is the first valid and reliable measure of its kind. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck view it as gender-specific, for use with women only, encouraging the development of a complementary measure for use with adolescent men. Tolman (2002) identified experiencing entitlement to sexual pleasure as a core characteristic of sexual subjectivity. A common accompaniment to a sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure observed in men is the phenomenon of sexual objectification, viewing one's partner as a sex object, instrumental in the attainment of one's sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Morse (2007) defined sexual objectification as the dehumanization of the other person by valuing them only for their ability to arouse and/or satisfy one's sexual needs. Men are generally viewed as the primary agents in this process that reduces women from subjects to objects. This view is reflected in much of the research conducted on sexual objectification which has focused either on men's sexual objectification of women or women's experience of sexual objectification.

Central to both have been efforts to develop psychometrically sound measures of these phenomena. Morse's (2007) development and refinement of the Sexual Objectification Scale (SOS) represents an example of the former. Although the focus of most research in this area has been on men's sexual objectification of women, it should be noted that men can also be viewed and treated as sexual objects by women. Research in this area is limited with no studies yet assessing women's tendency to engage in sexually objectification of men. Given the limited research on both sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification as well as the significant changes that have occurred in the roles and status of men and women in American society including the liberalization of sexual attitudes and behaviors, especially in women, a study assessing sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification in college-age men and women seemed warranted, if not, overdue. In addition to assessing and comparing sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification scores of male and female college students, this study sought also to determine whether the relationship between these two constructs vary by gender.

Method

Participants

One hundred and ninety-one students attending a religious-affiliated comprehensive university in the mid-Atlantic region participated in the study, 105 females and 86 males. Although students from all years participated, the majority were first year students. Participants who did not answer a question or selected more than one response to a question were dropped from the study with none of their data used in any of the analyses. This reduced the number of participants to one hundred and thirty-four, 70 females and 64 males. Although some students volunteered to participate without compensation, the majority of participants were recruited through the Psychology department's Curricular Enhancement Program (CEP). All student's enrolled in Psychology-1000 level courses are required to participate in the CEP and to amass a given number of credits through research participation, write-ups of approved lectures attended and/or write-ups of approved research articles.

Materials

Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (FSSI). Sexual subjectivity was assessed using a modified version of the FSSI developed by Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006). The FSSI consists of 20-items representing three core elements and 5 factors that assess (a) sexual body-esteem (self-perceptions of sexual attractiveness and desirability),

(b) sexual desire and pleasure (includes three subscales: sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from self, sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner, and self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure), and (c) sexual self-reflection (critical reflection of sexual self and sexual experiences). Horne and Zimmer-Gemreck (2006) demonstrated that the FSSI has a sound factorial structure,

moderate to high internal consistency and convergent validity. Because of the multidimensional nature of sexual subjectivity, Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck caution that FSSI scales are not intended to be summed to form a single indicator of sexual subjectivity. For this study only those items assessing sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner (4 items), self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure (3 items) and sexual self-reflection (5 items) were used. Students were instructed to respond to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 5 (very true of me).

Sexual Objectification Scale-Revised (SOS-R). Sexual objectification was measured using the Sexual Objectification Scale-Revised (Morse, 2007). The SOS –R contains 30 statements adapted from the Sexual Objectification Scale (Morse and DiDalla, 2002) designed to assess: a) adherence to traditional masculine values (Traditional Masculinity), b) belief in gender inequality (Inequality), c) attending to the physical appearance of women (Female Form) and d) focusing on the instrumental value of women at the expense of their intrinsic value (Instrumental Value). Morse reported high internal consistency and good convergent and discrimenant validity for the SOS-R. In this study, two forms of the SOS-R were generated, one for males, the other for females by modifying gender references as needed. For example, the item "A female coworker's physical appearance isn't important to me" found in the SOS-R version developed for use with men was modified to read "A male co-worker's physical appearance isn't important to me" in the female version. Students were instructed to indicate their agreement with each SOS-R item/statement on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 6 (*Strongly Disagree*). Several items were keyed in a negative direction (and then reverse-scored) to reduce the probability of a response set bias. For this study, only responses to the Instrumental Value subscale (10 items) were c analyzed.

Procedure

The survey consisting of the modified FSSI and the SOS-R embedded in a larger sexual attitudes and behavior questionnaire was distributed in two ways. Students in the CEP pool signed up for the study on the CEP website maintained by the Psychology department. They were then emailed or redirected to the link for the study, available at http://www.survey.sju.com. Students who were randomly selected from the entire student body and recruited via an email from the registrar's office were also provided with the link for the study. All participants gave informed consent by clicking on the survey's web URL and then verifying their consent by answering the first question on the survey form. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Upon completion, those students in the CEP pool were compensated with 1 CEP credit. The order of the questionnaires within the questionnaire was held constant with the FSSI items preceding the SOS-R items.

Results

Modified FSSI Analyses

In our analysis, we first calculated means and standard deviations for men's and women's scores on each the three factors of the FSSI: Element 2b: sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner, Element 2c: Self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure, and Element 3: sexual self-reflection, separately (See Table 1). To determine if gender significantly effected scores on each of the three factors of the FSSI, independent sample t-tests were calculated. Levene's test for equality of variances indicated that male scores on the FSSI element 2b were significantly more variable than female scores, F(1, 132) = 4.689, p = .032. The results of the t-test with unequal variances indicated that mean male scores (M = 3.85, SD = .599) on FSSI element 2b differed significantly from mean female scores (M = 4.03, SD = .520), t(125.4) = -4.39, p < .000. Women's sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner exceeded that of men.

Levene's test for equality of variances indicated that male scores on the FSSI element 2c were significantly more variable than female scores, F (1, 132) = 6.005, p = .016. The results of the t-test with unequal variances indicated that mean male scores (M = 3.48, SD = .732) on FSSI element 2c did not differ significantly from mean female scores (M = 3.29, SD = .955), t (128.2) = 1.33, p = 1.87. Men and women's self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure did not differ from each other. Levene's test for equality of variances indicated that male scores on the FSSI element 3 were not more variable than female scores, F (1, 132) = .207, p = .650. The results of the t-test with equal variances indicated that mean male scores (M = 2.70, SD = .321) on FSSI element 3 differed significantly from mean female scores (M = 2.82, SD = .362), t (132)=1.97, p = 051. Sexual self-reflection was greater in women than men.

SOS – R Instrumental Value Subscale Analyses

The means and standard deviations for the SOS-R Instrumental Values subscale were calculated and tested using an independent samples t-test. Levene's test for equality of variances indicated that male scores on the SOS-R IV subscale were not more variable than female scores, F(1, 132) = .349, p > .05. The results of the t-test with equal variances assumed indicated that mean male scores (M = 3.83, SD = .411) did not differ significantly from mean female scores (M = 3.77, SD = .423), t(132) = .72, p = .556.

Women were as likely to objectify men as vice-versa.

Correlational Analyses

FSSI. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between FSSI scales were determined for males and females separately. Table 2 presents these r values and corresponding p values. Significant correlations were found between FSSI elements 2b and 2c and FSSI elements 2b and 3 for both male and female participants. Fisher's r to z transformation, calculated to determine the significance of difference between the r values for men and women for the relationship between elements 2b and 2c yielded a z=1.87, p=0.06, indicating a significant difference. The relationship between sense of entitlement to pleasure from partner and self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure was stronger in men than women. Fisher's r to z transformation, calculated to determine the significance of difference between the r values for men and women for the relationship between elements b2 and 3 yielded a z=0.34, p=0.73, indicating a non-significant difference. A small inverse relationship was found between sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner and sexual self-reflection for both men and women. The correlation between FSSI elements 2c and 3 was not significant for either male (r=0.014, p=0.012) or female (r=0.048, p=0.048) participants.

FSSI and SOS-R IV. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between FSSI scales and SOS-R IV were determined for males and females separately. For male and female participants, a significant relationship was found between FSSI element 2b and SOS-R IV (r = .35, p = .005 for males; r = .26, p = .032 for females). Fisher's r to z transformation, calculated to determine the significance of difference between the r values for men and women yielded a z = 0.56, p = .058, indicating a significant difference. A small-moderate direct relationship was found between sense of entitlement to pleasure from partner and focusing on the instrumental value of partner at the expense of their intrinsic value for both men and women. For male and female participants, a non-significant relationship was found between FSSI element 2c and SOS-R IV (r = .21, p = .099 for males; r = .20, p = .097 for females). The relationship between FSSI element 3 and SOS-R IV for males and females was also non-significant (r = .13, p = .299 for males; r = .21, p = .08 for females).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether college men and women in today's hook-up culture would show differences in their sexual self-concepts (sexual subjectivity) and in their views about their sexual partners (sexual objectification). To determine this, we employed two measures, the FSSI and the SOS-R, which were developed for use with women only, and men only, respectively. Our results suggest that these measures can be successfully used (with appropriate modification of gender references in the case of the SOS-R) with both women and men. Evidence for this comes from comparing the mean and standard deviation values reported by Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) and Morse (2008) (See Table 3) with those obtained in the current study. With respect to sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner, the means in the current study are similar for men but higher for women than those reported for women by Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck. For self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure, the means in the current study for both men and women exceed those reported for women by Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck. In contrast, men and women in the current study reported less sexual self-reflection than the women in the Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck study. For the SOS-R instrumental value scale, the means for men and women in the current study were similar to the mean for men reported by Morse. Since this study represented the first usage of these measures to assess sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification in both men and women, and used only some subscales of each measure rather than the measures in their entirety, further testing is obviously needed to determine if these measures can be validly used in this way.

With respect to sexual self- concepts, our findings are somewhat surprising in the context of stereotypic views about male and female sexuality. Traditional views about gender differences in sexuality would have predicted men in this study would have scored higher than women on those scales measuring entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner and self –efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure. Yet, our findings indicate no differences between men and women in perceived self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure and women scoring significantly higher then men on the scale measuring sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner.

These results contradict previous studies (Impett and Peplau, 2002; Welsh and Harper, 2006) which found that only men feel entitled to sex from their partner, with women more concerned with satisfying the needs of their partner than their own. Yet, they are consistent with the observation made by O'Sullivan and Byers (1992) that women are exerting more control over their sexuality in the sense of being more motivated to satisfy their own sexual needs. Our results suggest not only a growing equalization between men and women's attitudes of entitlement to sexual pleasure but possibly even a greater sense of entitlement in today's college women than men. This finding also goes against the view that women's sexuality is based on men's views of them and suggests that college women today may be developing sexual identities independent of their partners' views.

Interestingly, although sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner was found to be significantly related to sexual self-reflection for both men and women, self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure was not. This finding contradicts the finding of Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2008). Further research is needed to explicate this difference. Not unexpected was the finding of a stronger relationship between self-efficacy and sense of entitlement in men, than in women. Traditional gender roles place much greater emphasis on sexuality and sexual potency in the case of men than women and accord men the role of initiator of sexual activity. Women also scored higher than men on the FSSI scale that assessed sexual self-reflection indicating that perhaps women spend more time thinking about their sexuality, sexual behavior and sexual experiences than men do. This finding may mean nothing more than that women are generally more reflective than men or it may mean that men are less self-reflective in this area of their experiences. Further research is needed to determine which, if either, of these explanations is valid.

With respect to sexual objectification, our results were also surprising. Male and female scores on the SOS-R Instrumental Value subscale did not significantly differ from each other. This is an interesting finding because men have long been thought of as viewing and treating women as sexual objects but not vice-versa. This belief probably accounts for the fact that the SOS-R was developed as an instrument for use with men only. Our results show that women, similar to men, do objectify their partners, sometimes viewing them solely as a means of satisfying their sexual needs. With respect to the question of the relationship between college men's and women's sexual self-concepts (sexual subjectivity) and their views about their sexual partners (sexual objectification), a moderate direct relationship was found in both men and women between sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from partner and the tendency to sexually objectify the partner. If nothing else, this finding attests to the validity of using both scales with men and women, since this is the expected relationship given what each scale purports to measure. Interestingly, the strength of this relationship in men and women was found not to differ, indicating once again that women as well as men do view their partners as instrumental in achieving the sexual satisfaction to which they feel entitled.

The results of this study provide new insight into the evolving sexual attitudes of men and women on college campuses dominated by a hook-up culture. Our results show that women's attitudes are converging on those of men. This is very interesting because it counters previous research. Previous research has always concluded that men, but not women, objectify their partners, viewing them as objects that exist to satisfy their sexual needs. Our study indicates otherwise. It has also long been thought that women do not feel in control of or have a sense of ownership of their sexuality. Our results show a significant shift here as well. A major limitation of this study is the fact that the instruments used were recently developed and used in a nonconventional way in this study. Therefore it is essential that this study be replicated. Another limitation is the homogeneity of the sample. Additional research investigating the relationship between sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification utilizing a more diverse sample is desirable given the findings of ethnic differences in sexual attitudes and behavior (Feldman, Turner, and Araujo (1999). Finally, a study utilizing all of the scales of the FSSI and the revision of the SOS-R recommended by Morse (2007) is needed as a follow-up to the current study.

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Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores on FSSI and SOS-R Instrumental Value (IV) Scales **Participant**

	Men $(n = 64)$	Women $(n = 70)$	
Scales	M SD	M SD	
FSSI			
Element 2b	3.85^{a} .60	4.03^{a} .52	
Element 2c	3.48 .73	3.29 .96	
Element 3	$2.70^{\rm b}$.32	2.82^{b} .36	
SOS-R			
IV	3.83 .41	3.77 .42	

 $[\]begin{array}{c}
a \\
p < .000 \\
b \\
p = .05
\end{array}$

Table 2: Correlations Among FSSI Scales for Men (n = 64) and Women (n = 70)

FSSI Scale (Element)	2b	2c	3
2b 2c 3	.31** 23*	.57**	28* 01

Note. Inter-correlations for male participants are presented above the diagonal; inter-correlations for female participants are presented below the diagonal.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics from Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) and Morse (2007)

	M	SD	r	
FSSI (n = 449)				
Element 2b	3.81	.83		
Element 2c	3.00	.90		
Element 3	3.22	.85	A Total Color	
Elements 2b&2c			.47***	
Elements 2b&3			29***	
Elements 2c&3			21***	
SOS-R Instrumental				
Value $(n = 312)$	3.38	1.45		

p < .000

p = .05 (2 - tailed test)

^{**}p = .01 (2 - tailed test)