

The impact of sexual relationship types and attachment styles on relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of sexual relationship types and adult attachment styles on relationship satisfaction among American college students. Drawing on attachment theory and recent research on casual sexual relationships and experiences (CSREs), the study examined whether committed relationships, friends with benefits, hookups, and one-night stands differed in levels of relationship satisfaction, and whether attachment styles moderated these effects. A total of 519 American college students aged 18–25 completed an online questionnaire measuring sexual relationship type, attachment style, and relationship satisfaction. Attachment styles were categorized as secure, anxious, or avoidant using the Adult Attachment Scale. Data were analyzed using a two-way ANOVA. The findings revealed that attachment style had a significant effect on relationship satisfaction, with securely attached individuals reporting substantially higher satisfaction than anxious or avoidant individuals. In contrast, sexual relationship type did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction, and no interaction effect between relationship type and attachment style was found. These results suggest that internal psychological characteristics, particularly attachment patterns, play a more important role in determining relationship satisfaction than the structural form of the relationship itself. The study highlights the importance of considering attachment-related emotional and cognitive processes when examining well-being within both casual and committed relationships among college students.

Keywords

relationship types; attachment styles; relationship satisfaction; casual sexual relationships; college students; adult attachment theory; friends with benefits

1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a prevalent shift in the sexual behavior of college students, with casual and non-committal relationships becoming a prominent pattern. Casual sexual relationships and experiences (CSREs) refer to sexual interactions between two individuals without commitment, often occurring unexpectedly (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Garcia et al., 2012). CSREs encompass one-night stands, hooking up, friends with benefits, and so forth (Mark et al., 2015; Wentland & Reissing, 2014). Research by Garcia and Reiber (2008) revealed that 64% of American university students engaged in sexual activities with non-intimate partners, such as friends, strangers,

or acquaintances. Furthermore, 24.4% had one to two instances of casual experiences, and 27.6% had three or more casual experiences in the past year (Owen et al., 2010), indicating the prevalence of casual behavior in the United States. CSREs has seemingly evolved into a trend of sexual relationships outside of committed relationship, prompting scholars to begin examining the correlation or impact of CSREs with psychological factors.

Reviewing past research on sexual relationship types and psychological variables, some studies suggest a link between involvement in CSREs and negative psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, regret, low self-esteem, and 2 Satisfaction within relationships

and attachment insecure attachment (Owen & Fincham, 2011; Owen et al., 2010). However, other studies propose a correlation between casual behavior and positive psychological factors (Owen & Fincham, 2011; Vrangalova, 2015), indicating a shifting societal perspective on casual relationships. In the study by Mark et al. (2015), a detailed discussion was provided on the differences in sexual satisfaction and emotional satisfaction among different genders and sexual orientations within the seven types of sexual relationship. According to descriptive statistical data, committed relationships tend to exhibit higher levels of satisfaction. However, the study lacked inferential statistical comparisons. Therefore, this study will focus on examining the impact of different types of sexual relationships on satisfaction.

Moreover, since Bowlby introduced attachment theory (2008), research on relationships has expanded to include intimate relationships established and maintained as individuals age. Adult attachment patterns often originate from early childhood parent-child relationships, significantly impacting individuals, including the influence of secure attachment on self-esteem and insecure attachment on anxiety. Attachment styles also affect individuals' relationships with partners, with secure attachment associated with support and trust, while insecure attachment may lead to relationship instability and conflicts (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). Snapp and the colleagues (2014) investigated the correlation between motivation 3 Satisfaction within relationships and attachment for engaging in casual sex and attachment styles, finding that individuals with anxious attachment were more likely to engage in casual sex for intimacy needs, while avoidant attachment individuals were less inclined. The subsequent impact on individual psychological factors varied, highlighting the significant influence of attachment styles on individuals' experiences and perceptions in sexual relationships. In the present study, we will explore the association between attachment styles and casual relationships.

Despite previous research, certain limitations persist. First, varying definitions of casual sex and friends with benefits across studies contribute to a lack of clarity in understanding casual behavior (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). With the prevalence of dating apps and online hookups (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018), this study seeks to provide a clearer definition of hookups, one-night

stands, and friends with benefits on college campuses. Second, few studies simultaneously investigate casual behavior and intimate relationships, resulting in conflicting views on the positive or negative outcomes of casual sex. Therefore, this study aims to explore the impact of sexual relationship types on individuals using relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction as independent variables. Third, previous research on casual behavior often neglects to discuss attachment 4 Satisfaction within relationships and attachment styles. However, attachment needs are inherent in all individuals, influencing internal working models in interactions with others, including behavior, cognition, and emotions (Bowlby, 2008). This study aims to incorporate attachment styles into the discussion to understand their impact on sexual partner dynamics. The primary aim of this study is to explore the impact of various types of sexual relationships—committed relationships, friends with benefits, hookups, and one-night stands—combined with adult attachment styles (secure, anxious, and avoidant) on relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction using quantitative research methods. The core objectives include: (1) investigating the distribution of sexual relationship types and attachment styles among American university students, (2) examining the influence of different sexual relationship types and attachment styles on relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, and (3) testing whether there is an interaction between sexual relationship types and attachment styles. This study assumes that different types of sexual relationships and different attachment styles will lead to significant differences in both relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. It is hypothesized that committed relationships and individuals with secure attachment styles will exhibit the highest levels of relationship satisfaction. Additionally, there is expected to be an interaction effect between sexual relationship types and attachment styles.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The study's objective was to enlist 400 American college students aged 18 to 25 for questionnaire completion. Purposive sampling was employed via online platforms, and the survey was disseminated through discussion communities at diverse universities. Individuals presently

involved in open relationships were not considered for participation in the study. 2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Sexual Relationship types

Participants' intimate relationship types were assessed through a single inquiry: "Among the following four types of relationships, which one most accurately characterizes your sexual activity over the past three months? Options included (a) Committed relationship (b) Friends with benefits (c) Hookups (d) One-night stand (Note: Participants in agreed-upon open relationships were instructed to terminate the survey response)." Participants provided self-reported responses reflecting their personal experiences.

2.2.2 Attachment styles

Utilizing the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990), participants' attachment styles were evaluated. This scale consisted of 18 items rated on a 5-point 2 Satisfaction within Relationship and attachment Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Comprising three subscales - Close, Depend, and Anxiety - scores on each dimension were analyzed to determine participants' attachment styles as secure, anxious, or avoidant.

2.2.3 Relationship Satisfaction

The assessment of relationship satisfaction utilized the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976; Spanier & Thompson, 1982), which consisted of four items rated on a 6- or 7-point Likert scale. After reverse scoring, higher scores were indicative of increased levels of relationship satisfaction.

2.2.4 Sexual Satisfaction

The Index of Sexual Satisfaction (Hudson et al., 1981) was employed to evaluate participants' sexual satisfaction. The questionnaire comprised 25 items rated on a fivepoint Likert scale. Following reverse scoring, higher scores indicated enhanced sexual satisfaction.

2.3 Design

A cross-sectional comparative research design was employed, with types of sexual relationships and attachment styles serving as independent variables, while relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction were regarded as dependent variables. The analysis sought to investigate whether various types of sexual relationships or attachment styles exhibited differences in either relationship or sexual satisfaction. 3 Satisfaction within Relationship and

attachment

2.4 Procedure

When participants came across recruitment posts on different platforms and channels, they made independent decisions about whether to engage in completing the questionnaire. If they decided to take part, they anonymously provided responses to the survey using their personal internet-connected devices. It was estimated that completing all the items would require approximately 15 to 20 minutes. 2.5 Data Analysis Plan Given the present study involved two independent categorical variables and a continuous dependent variable, two-way ANOVA was planned for statistical analysis. This statistical method was utilized to analyze the influence of two independent categorical variables on a continuous dependent variable and to examine the interaction effect between these variables. Significant differences were anticipated in relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction across different types of sexual relationships and attachment styles.

3 Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

After excluding invalid samples or incomplete responders, this study recruited 519 participants whose age ranged from 18-25 years old ($M = 21.64$, $SD=2.30$). The final sample consists of 250 males (48.2%) and 269 females (51.8%). Regarding attachment styles, there were 173 participants classified as secure (33%), 162 as anxious (31%), and 184 as avoidant (36%). In terms of sexual relationship types, 113 individuals reported being in a committed relationship (22%), 126 reported being in friends with benefits arrangements (24%), 155 reported engaging in hookups (30%), and 125 reported having one night stands (24%) (Table 1).

The range of relationship satisfaction scores is from 4 to 25, with participants reporting their relationship satisfaction during questionnaire completion ($M = 13.44$, $SD = 5.540$). For a more detailed score distribution, refer to Table 2.

3.2 Inferential Statistics

A two-way ANOVA was used to examine whether different types of sexual relationship or different attachment styles lead to differences in relationship satisfaction. This study found that different styles of attachment significant-

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ly affect relationship satisfaction, $F(2,507) = 72.599, p < .001$. However, relationship satisfaction is not influenced by sexual relationship types, $F(3,507) = .611, p = .608$. Additionally, the interaction between sexual relationship

type and attachment style also does not have a significant impact on relationship satisfaction, $F(6,507) = .404, p = .876$ (Table 3).

Table 1. Distribution of the Participants

Sexual Relationship Types	Attachment Styles			
	Secure	Anxious	Avoidant	Total
Committed Relationship	31	34	48	113 (22%)
Friends with Benefits	47	41	38	126 (24%)
Hookups	51	51	53	155 (30%)
One Night Stand	44	36	45	125 (24%)
Total	173 (33%)	162 (31%)	184 (36%)	519

Table 2. Scores of Relationship Satisfaction

Attachment Styles	Sexual Relationship Types									
	CR		FWBs		HUs		ONS		Total	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Secure	16.94	4.472	16.62	4.812	17.57	4.253	17.45	3.873	17.17	4.342
Anxious	11.65	4.966	11.71	4.568	11.16	5.420	11.61	4.747	11.50	4.931
Avoidant	11.15	5.754	10.82	4.975	12.02	5.168	12.38	5.206	11.63	5.291
Total	12.88	5.729	13.27	5.419	13.56	5.699	13.94	5.293	13.44	5.540

Note. CR= committed relationship, FWBs= friends with benefits, Hus= hookups, ONS= one night stand

Table 3. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type II Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	D	Sig.
Corrected Model	3722.390	11	338.399	14.094	.000
Intercept	90919.849	1	90919.849	3786.707	.000
attachment	3486.240	2	1743.120	72.599	.000
relationship	44.025	3	14.675	.611	.608
attachment * relationship	58.242	6	9.707	.404	.876
Error	12173.198	507	24.010		
Total	109581.000	519			
Corrected Total	15895.588	518			

a. R Squared= .234 (Adjusted R Squared= .218)

Further comparison of relationship satisfaction across different styles of attachment revealed that individuals with secure attachment style reported the highest level of relationship satisfaction ($M = 17.17, SD = 4.342$), compared to those with anxious attachment style ($M = 11.50, SD$

$= 4.931$) and those with avoidant attachment style ($M = 11.63, SD = 5.291$) (Figure 1).

The purpose of this study was to examine how different sexual relationship types and attachment styles influence relationship satisfaction among American college

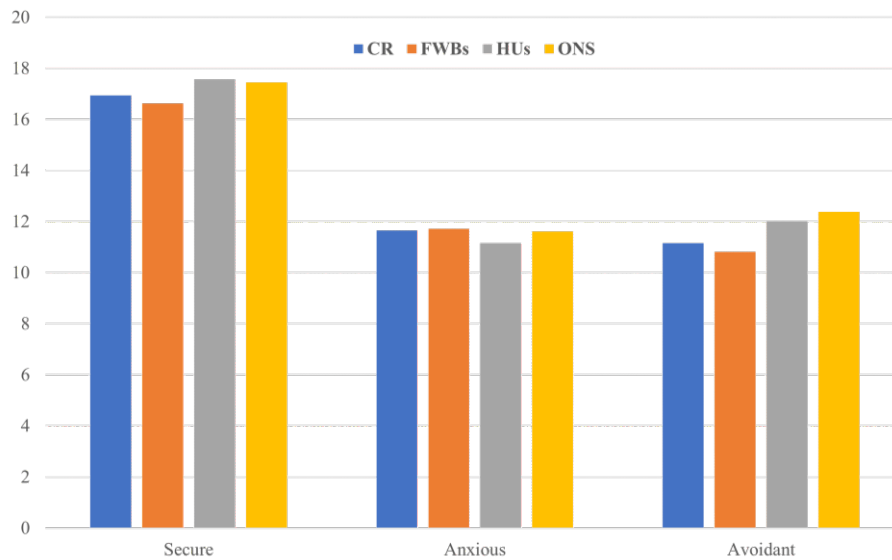


Figure 1. Scores of Relationship Satisfaction between Groups

students. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the results showed that sexual relationship type did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction, nor did its interaction with attachment style. Whether participants were in committed relationships, friends-with-benefits arrangements, hookups, or one-night stands, their levels of relationship satisfaction did not differ in a statistically meaningful way. These findings differ from previous research suggesting that committed relationships generally yield higher satisfaction (Mark et al., 2015). One possible explanation is that relationship satisfaction may be influenced by subjective expectations rather than relationship structure. For instance, individuals who choose casual relationships voluntarily may experience satisfaction aligned with their goals, reducing differences across relationship categories. In contrast, attachment style demonstrated a robust and significant effect on relationship satisfaction, consistent with prior literature (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). Participants with secure attachment reported the highest satisfaction, while anxious and avoidant attachment groups reported substantially lower levels. This suggests that internal working models of attachment may play a more influential role than relationship type itself. Secure individuals are more likely to perceive their relationships—casual or committed—as emotionally supportive, stable, and fulfilling. Meanwhile, anxious individuals may experience heightened fear of rejection or unmet intimacy needs, and avoidant individuals may struggle with emotional close-

ness, both of which can diminish satisfaction regardless of relationship structure.

The absence of interaction effects further indicates that the influence of attachment style on satisfaction is consistent across all sexual relationship types. In other words, a secure individual in a hookup may still report higher satisfaction than an anxious or avoidant individual in a committed relationship. This supports theories suggesting that attachment patterns are relatively stable interpersonal frameworks that shape how individuals interpret and respond to relational experiences across diverse contexts.

These results highlight the importance of moving beyond categorical distinctions of sexual relationships when studying well-being. Instead, individual psychological characteristics, such as attachment style, may offer a more accurate understanding of how college students experience satisfaction in romantic or sexual interactions. As casual sexual behavior becomes increasingly normalized on college campuses, emphasizing internal psychological factors may capture variations in satisfaction more effectively than focusing solely on relationship labels.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that attachment style—not sexual relationship type—is the key predictor of relationship satisfaction among college students. Securely attached individuals consistently experience higher satisfaction across all relationship categories, while anxious and avoidant individuals report lower satisfaction. These results suggest that the emotional and cognitive frame-

works individuals bring into relationships play a more central role in shaping their relational well-being than whether the relationship is casual or committed. Future research should consider incorporating additional psychological variables, such as sexual motivations, communication patterns, or emotion regulation, to further understand the complexities of satisfaction within both casual and committed relationships.

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