Two Sides of the Same Coin or Two Different Coins? The Differential Predictors of Casual and Committed Sex

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Two Sides of the Same Coin or Two Different Coins? The
Differential Predictors of Casual and Committed Sex

Carson R. Dover

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze potential predictors of accumulating casual vs. committed sexual partners in emerging adulthood. Using a large, national sample of emerging adults in the United States, I examined how alcohol use and attachment orientation differentially predicted accumulating casual and committed sexual partners. I found that higher anxious attachment positively predicted the number of committed sexual partners, while higher avoidant attachment negatively predicted the number of casual sexual partners. I also found that alcohol use positively predicted both the number of casual and committed sexual partners emerging adults accumulated. Further, I tested the strength of the various associations and found that anxious attachment more strongly predicts committed sexual partners, while avoidant attachment and alcohol use more strongly predict casual sexual partners. This work highlights the need for scholars to distinguish between the type of sexual partners emerging adults accumulate during this time of life.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, sexual partners, alcohol use, attachment orientation
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Two Sides of the Same Coin or Two Different Coins? The Differential Predictors of Casual and Committed Sex

Human development has long been noted as occurring across the life course, with important ideas such as the notion that decisions and events alter and influence developmental trajectories (see Elder, 1998). Scholars have also long noted that certain periods of life are more influential in development, including the young adult years (Erikson, 1950). Emerging adulthood, as an extension of developmental theory, is concerned with understanding how young adults make decisions about transitions in their lives, and how they form a stable adult identity (see Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2007; Arnett, 2023; Schwartz et al., 2013). This theory highlights specific roles in life where emerging adults spend a lot of time focusing on identity formation, including certain “tasks” they need to accomplish (Ranta et al., 2014; Scharf et al., 2004; Shulman et al., 2005; Shulman & Connolly, 2013; Trible, 2015). Scholars have suggested that gaining experience with romantic relationships is among the most important areas of identity formation for emerging adults (Fincham & Cui, 2010; Gala & Kapadia, 2013; Reifman, 2011; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Sexual experimentation is often cited as a key process which allows emerging adults to explore their romantic and sexual identity in more depth (Lyons et al., 2014; Olmstead, 2020). This sexual experimentation during emerging adulthood may involve a variety of sexual experiences including engaging in casual sexual encounters or having sex within committed relationships.

In addition to the importance of sexual experimentation generally on identity formation, a plethora of research has suggested that the accumulation of many sexual partners during emerging adulthood is linked to many negative outcomes such as worse emotional health and negative relationship outcomes, but has also been linked with some positive outcomes, such as
higher reports of sexual pleasure and social validation (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Fisher et al., 2012; Grello et al., 2006; Paul et al., 2000; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Wesche et al., 2021). Taken together, this research suggests that understanding what factors predict sexual experimentation and decision-making regarding the number of sexual partners during the crucial period of emerging adulthood should be a key priority for social scientists.

However, limitations in this research continue to hinder our full understanding of what factors determine how emerging adults decide to accumulate sexual experiences. First, there is a lack of longitudinal research on the number of sexual partners obtained for emerging adults (see Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). More longitudinal work with better samples is needed to fully unpack some of the nuances that may exist. Second, no research has examined if similar factors during emerging adulthood predict the number of casual and committed sexual partners.

To help address both of these key gaps, alcohol use and attachment orientation were used as potential predictors of sexual experience during emerging adulthood as they have been noted as salient predictors (Burdette et al., 2009; Claxton et al., 2015; Cooper et al., 1998; Feeney et al., 1993; Kim & Miller, 2020; Tucker et al., 2022; Wesche et al., 2021) but have not yet been studied to differentiate between different types of sexual partners. Higher attachment anxiety is positively associated with emotional closeness as a reason for sex, while higher avoidant attachment is negatively associated with emotional closeness as motivation for sex (Davis et al., 2004) revealing that attachment may have important connections with choice of sexual partners. Scholars have additionally noted that higher frequency of drinking before sex is related to stronger intentions to engage in casual sex and that the belief that alcohol promotes risky sexual behaviors is associated with drinking in potentially sexual situations (Conner & Flesch, 2001; Cooper, 2002; Dermen & Cooper, 1994; Leigh, 1990). Because these factors have been found to
be important predictors of sexual decision-making in emerging adulthood but may predict casual and committed sex differently, I elected to focus on these key predictors as they may provide evidence that casual and committed sexual experience are distinct behaviors. In this paper, I seek to analyze potential predictors of sexual experience during emerging adulthood and how these factors may differently predict casual vs. committed sexual experience.

**Emerging Adulthood**

Human development is a lifelong process and is not limited to any one period of life (Elder, 1998). This theory of life course development includes crucial theoretical implications, such as the idea that as lives change, developmental trajectories may shift as well. Another central theoretical notion from the life course perspective is that there are many different stages of life in which development takes place (Elder, 1998). These theoretical ideas lay a foundation for the current study considering that decisions and events throughout the life course are influential in developmental trajectories. Going on, the model of psychosocial development proposed by Erikson (1950) contains important ideas about development as well, including the concept that relationship and identity formation are crucial in adult development. Vaillant (2012) expanded on this and proposed that young adults are tasked with developing the capacity to be intimate and emotionally connected with others. Taken together, these theoretical implications are central to the current study in that the young adult years may be an especially salient time to examine influential developmental decisions about intimacy.

Erikson’s (1950) original work characterized young adults who married and were full-time workers by the early 20’s. Expanding on this theory and narrowing in on this important time of life (the young adult years), Arnett (2007) explains that emerging adulthood stemmed from important theories about development across the life course. Considering the many societal shifts
such as a rising age of first marriage, cohabitation becoming more widely accepted, and an increasing need for financial independence (Butterbaugh et al., 2020; Lamidi & Manning, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), Arnett proposed emerging adulthood to help frame the transition to adulthood in a more unique light (Arnett, 2000). It is important to note that emerging adulthood goes beyond a re-naming of this time of life after adolescence and is more about understanding crucial transitions and development that may occur (Côté, 2014; Arnett, 2007).

Specifically, the theory of emerging adulthood highlights that this stage of life is one where young adults participate in self-exploration, especially in terms of identity formation (Arnett, 2007; Arnett, 2023; Schwartz et al., 2013). Identity formation during emerging adulthood is critical because it is linked with more global measures of well-being (Karaś et al., 2015; Sumner et al., 2015). This theory also highlights where emerging adults spend a lot of time focusing on who they are and what they want to become, including certain “tasks” that many feel that they need to accomplish within the realms of education, career, and romantic relationships (Ranta et al., 2014; Scharf et al., 2004; Shulman et al., 2005; Shulman & Connolly, 2013; Trible, 2015). As emerging adults strive to accomplish these tasks, they engage in critical developmental identity processes as they come to understand who they are.

Using the theoretical lens of emerging adulthood, scholars have suggested that sexual experimentation is often noted as a key process which allows emerging adults to explore themselves and their romantic identity in more depth (Lyons et al., 2014; Olmstead, 2020). This sexual experimentation during emerging adulthood may involve engaging in casual sexual encounters, as evidenced by trends which suggest that casual sex tends to increase from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Lyons et al., 2015; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Despite research which suggests casual sex may be a focus for emerging adults as they explore their
sexual and relational identities, having sex within committed relationships is also important to consider, especially as it may also be included as sexual experimentation for emerging adults.

**Committed vs. Casual Sex**

Emerging adults gain sexual experience through both committed and casual sexual experiences. Studies have shown that accumulating only one sexual partner is common among college students, but there are still many that report having multiple sexual partners and sex with a casual partner at least once (Critelli & Suire, 1998; Paul et al., 2000). An abundance of research has analyzed the outcomes associated with obtaining various amounts of sexual experience. Much of this research has suggested that the accumulation of many sexual partners is linked to negative well-being in both individual and relational outcomes. Some of the negative outcomes of having more casual sexual partners include worse emotional health and negative relationship outcomes (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Fisher et al., 2012; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Paul et al., 2000; Wesche et al., 2021). Research has yet to examine the accumulation of committed sexual partners specifically. However, research has examined how sex influences outcomes more generally. Across various studies, outcomes are almost ubiquitously positive for relationships, including fostering emotional bonds, higher relationship satisfaction and stability, and engaging in more relationship-enhancing behaviors (Birnbaum et al., 2006; Birnbaum, 2010; McNulty et al., 2016; Roels & Janssen, 2020; Sprecher et al., 2004). To be clear, these studies are not focused on the accumulation of committed sexual partners, but on sex within committed romantic relationships. It may be that having sex within committed relationships may not have the same negative outcomes as casual sex does. However, it is also important to note that accumulating more sexual partners has been shown to be associated with negative relationship outcomes, especially within marriage (see Wolfinger, 2016). Overall, this research suggests that
well-being and correlates of accumulating sexual partners may have differing effects depending on the relational context of the experience (or lack thereof).

In addition to the various outcomes associated with casual and committed sexual partners, the motivations and reasons for these behaviors in emerging adulthood are often unique. For example, studies have found that sexual pleasure, sexual desire, social validation, peer influence, and sexual experimentation are main reasons for hooking up among emerging adults who attend college (Lyons et al., 2014; Luz et al., 2022; Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021; Weitbrecht & Whitton, 2020). On the other hand, motivations for sex within committed relationships often include emotional closeness, reassurance, procreation, and expressing love (Cooper et al., 1998; Davis et al., 2004). Cooper and colleagues (1998) specifically found that emerging adults in romantic relationships have more intimacy motives for sex compared to those in non-exclusive relationships or in no relationship at all. Sex within romantic relationships seems to be more focused on the relationship and maybe even one’s partner (as is the case with the motivation of expressing love). On the other hand, casual sex seems to be more focused on the individual and the self, which may also be more evidence as to why scholars have generally focused on casual sex as a behavior that is linked to individual identity development (see Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Theoretically speaking, it seems likely that casual sex and committed sex are inherently different in both their correlates and motivations within emerging adulthood, even beyond the purposes that they may serve.

Although casual sex is often the focus of much research in emerging adulthood because of its connection to sexual exploration, it is likely that committed sex also plays a salient role in the lives of emerging adults. Because of the salient, yet distinct, roles that having casual and committed sex play in emerging adulthood, research on what predicts engaging in these
behaviors is critical to examine. Further, because outcomes tied to committed and casual sexual experiences appear to differ, it is critical to distinguish how casual sex may be different than committed sex within emerging adulthood. Despite noted differences throughout the literature, studies often fail to capture different reports for casual sexual partners and committed sexual partners, instead opting to group them into one number (Ashenhurst et al., 2017; Rossi et al., 2017). There have been some studies that have distinguished between casual and committed sexual partners, but often fail to capture all of the nuance. For example, Wesche et al. (2021) distinguished between outcomes from casual and committed sexual partners, but not the specific number of partners. Tucker and colleagues (2022) differentiated between them, but only to examine condom use in casual vs. committed experiences. In fact, when examining the number of sexual partners, only one measure was used for the total number of partners. This demonstrates an important gap in the literature that needs to be filled, with the number of committed vs. casual sexual partners being established as unique outcomes. In another study, scholars found that only the number of casual sexual partners, not the number of committed sexual partners, is associated with remaining single in one’s 30s (Busby et al., 2020). While these studies have hinted that differences may emerge in distinguishing between accumulating casual or committed sexual partners, more work is needed to help explore this further.

**Predictors of Sexual Experience**

There are many different predictors for the number of sexual partners that one is likely to obtain in emerging adulthood. Some examples of these predictors include alcohol use, attachment, religiosity, substance use, partner-focused reasons for sex, conservative perspectives, adverse childhood experiences, levels of ethnic identity and commitment, depression, permissive attitudes, and sexual orientation (Busby et al., 2020; DiBello et al., 2018; Ertl et al., 2022; Hubel
et al., 2021; Huggins et al., 2015; Koletić et al., 2021; McMahan & Olmstead, 2020; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2013; Patrick et al., 2007; Simons et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2022). While these general predictors for the number of sexual partners may be useful, alcohol use and attachment are especially crucial to understand for a few of reasons. First, alcohol use and attachment have also been shown to be consistently associated with each other. For example, those with both avoidant and anxious attachment orientations are more likely to have an alcohol disorder diagnosis compared to securely attached individuals, with scholars suggesting that drinking may be used for coping (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Ennis & Trearty, 2019). To be sure, not all individuals with insecure attachment use alcohol and vice versa, but there is a consistent connection between the two which means that analyzing how they are associated with casual and committed sex can provide important insight.

Second, with alcohol use being a very critical and consistent predictor of casual sex (Claxton et al., 2015; Owen et al., 2011), it provides a salient point of comparison with committed sex considering that no research has examined specific differences in how alcohol use may predict casual versus committed sexual partners. Third, attachment has also been consistently noted across many studies, but studies often fail to specifically measure the number of sexual partners and instead capture differences that may arise between attachment orientation and reasons or motivations for sex (see Davis et al., 2004). Because of the consistent findings across studies, but also a lack of examining these predictors to explore the number of casual and committed sexual partners separately, alcohol use and attachment were selected as the key predictors for the present study.
Attachment

Attachment theory suggests that individuals are naturally inclined to be in close proximity to those responsible for their care (see Ainsworth et al., 2015; Bowlby, 1973). When it comes to romantic relationships, individuals are inclined to different beliefs about romantic love, including the availability of love partners and their own love-worthiness (Shaver & Hazan, 1987). What is more, research has shown that attachment is associated with general expectations of relationships and evaluation of couple interaction (Feeney, 2004). Narrowing in on emerging adulthood specifically, attachment seems to be salient during this time of relationship exploration and development. For example, emerging adults with avoidant attachment orientations tend to be less likely to form committed romantic relationships (Schindler et al., 2010), which is in line with research on non-emerging adult populations.

Attachment style and sex have been shown to be associated with each other, but with some mixed results (Cooper et al., 1998; Feeney et al., 1993; Kim & Miller, 2020; Paul et al., 2000; Tucker et al., 2022). Studies have found that avoidant individuals are more accepting of casual sex compared to other attachment groups but are less likely to report actually engaging in sexual intercourse (Cooper et al., 1998; Feeney et al., 1993). Other research has suggested, however, that individuals who have experienced hookups are more likely to have an avoidant attachment style (Paul et al., 2000). In a meta-analysis, Kim and Miller (2020) suggested that there are small but significant associations between multiple sexual partners and both avoidant and anxious attachment styles. Within emerging adulthood specifically, results from a longitudinal study found that attachment avoidance was associated with having fewer sexual partners, while attachment anxiety was not directly associated with number of sexual partners (Tucker et al., 2022). This has implications for research on sexuality in emerging adulthood.
because crucial information may be lost from not differentiating between casual and committed sexual partners. For example, if avoidant attachment is positively associated with casual sex, but more negatively associated with committed sex, an overall negative association may be found for number of sexual partners, but we may miss out on those more nuanced relationships. Although most studies do not clearly differentiate whether sexual partners were in or out of romantic relationships, understanding the expectations for sexual behaviors may shed more light on this issue.

Research has shown that there are various motivations for sex based on attachment orientation. Davis and colleagues (2004) found, for example, that attachment anxiety was associated with motivations for sex such as emotional closeness, procreation, and reassurance. On the other hand, they found that avoidant attachment was strongly negatively associated with emotional closeness as motivation for sex. Based on these findings, it is likely that anxious attachment is more strongly associated with committed sex, while avoidant attachment is more strongly associated with casual sex. While emerging adults may feel the need to engage in sexual experimentation in order to develop a clearer identity of themselves (Shulman & Connolly, 2013), it is clear that there may be other factors at play, such as alcohol use and attachment, which may be influencing the number of both committed and casual sexual partners that they are likely to gain over time.

**Alcohol Use**

Research has hinted that alcohol use may have most ubiquitous associations of engaging in casual sex for emerging adults (Claxton et al., 2015; Jaffe et al., 2021; Owen et al., 2011; Wray et al., 2015). In a meta-analysis, Claxton and colleagues (2015) noted that alcohol use was significantly associated with engaging in casual sexual relationships and experiences. Critically
for the present study, these scholars also found that the association between alcohol use and casual sexual engagement was especially poignant for emerging adults as opposed to older adults. These scholars also noted that this makes sense theoretically speaking because alcohol use tends to peak in early emerging adulthood (O’Malley, 2004). Because of this, using alcohol use in early emerging adulthood to predict future behavior is a useful analytical strategy.

There are other reasons why alcohol may be importantly linked to casual sex for emerging adults as well (Conner & Flesch, 2001; Cooper, 2002; White et al., 2009). Scholars have proposed that alcohol may make social behaviors more extreme in that they block some response conflict, and that alcohol may serve as a sort of “social lubricant” in flirtatious interactions (Monahan & Lannutti, 2000; Steele & Josephs, 1990). For sexual behaviors specifically, studies have found that those who increased their frequency of drinking before sex also increased in casual sexual engagement, and even that alcohol use is associated with stronger intentions to engage in casual sex (Conner & Flesch, 2001; White et al., 2009). Drinking in a potentially sexual situation increases the probability of intercourse because alcohol may affect the instigating or inhibiting sexual cues that one perceives regarding having sex with a particular partner (Cooper, 2002; Steele & Josephs, 1990). Taken with the previous research about how drinking and sexual behavior are both salient in early emerging adulthood, it may be that alcohol use is connected with casual sex specifically because of people’s beliefs about how alcohol plays a role in risky sexual behavior. Binge drinking in particular is an important point of emphasis, with research finding that gaining new sexual partners may be associated with how much alcohol was consumed (Hone et al., 2023). This is also crucial to understand because alcohol use in emerging adulthood tends to increase in the first few years before slightly decreasing (Thompson
et al., 2014). Understanding the nuance in how the amount of alcohol use may play a unique role early in emerging adulthood can provide important insight.

No study has specifically examined how alcohol use predicts the number of committed sexual partners for emerging adults. However, Kiene and colleagues (2009) found in a daily diary study that, for women specifically, consuming higher amounts of alcohol was associated with an increased likelihood of sex that evening. This study did not specify whether the sexual experience was casual or with a committed partner, but it is possible that alcohol use is associated with having more sexual partners generally. As noted previously, alcohol use tends to peak in emerging adulthood (see O’Malley, 2004), which may mean that alcohol use is seen by emerging adults as useful to expanding sexual opportunities and experiences. Because it is likely that alcohol use predicts more sexual partners (i.e. experimentation) for emerging adults, it is also important to examine how it may uniquely predict gaining casual vs. committed sexual partners. This is especially true considering that no research has isolated an association between alcohol use and a higher number of committed sexual partners.

**What’s Missing**

The early emerging adult years may be an especially salient time to examine gaining sexual partners because it seems to be a time of heightened experimentation with both sex and alcohol (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; O’Malley, 2004). Sexual experiences during this time of life are also crucial to examine from a theoretical perspective considering that intimacy is an important developmental task during this time of life, and that developmental trajectories are influenced by decisions and events that happen throughout life (see Elder, 1998; Erikson, 1950; Vaillant, 2012). However, there are also gaps which remain regarding research on the number of sexual partners that are critical to address. First, the lack of longitudinal research that exists
about sexual partners for emerging adults specifically is important. Indeed, Claxton and van Dulmen (2013) noted this gap and have called for more research. Better longitudinal work can help scholars further understand the salient links between attachment, alcohol use, and accumulating sexual partners across time. In addition, more diverse samples (including college students vs. non-college students) are also needed, as this can help scholars further understand how emerging adults are exploring sexuality across a variety of contexts. Second, little research has analyzed how casual sex and committed sex may be differently or similarly predicted by key factors in emerging adulthood, such as alcohol use and attachment orientation. More research is required to fill this gap and analyze how committed and casual sex may be distinctly predicted over time, but also where they may have some overlap in terms of alcohol use and attachment.

The choice of alcohol use and attachment as predictors for the number of casual and committed sexual partners was aided by previous research. This research shows that they both predict the number of sexual partners one is likely to obtain, albeit without making clear distinctions between whether the sexual partners are casual or committed (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Cooper et al., 1998; Feeney et al., 1993). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to analyze how alcohol use and attachment style in early emerging adulthood predict the number of casual and committed sexual partners obtained over the next few years using a six-wave, longitudinal dataset of emerging adults in the United States.

Previous work has hinted that there are mixed results when it comes to how both anxious and avoidant attachment styles are associated with engaging in sexual intercourse (see Feeney et al., 1993; Paul et al., 2000). However, research generally suggests that anxious attachment would be more consistently associated with committed sex, while avoidant attachment would be more
consistently associated with casual sex. Therefore, the following hypotheses and research questions were formed:

(H1) Anxious attachment style will be positively associated with the number of committed sexual partners. (R1) Does anxious attachment more strongly predict the number of committed sexual partners or the number of casual sexual partners?

(H2) Avoidant attachment style will be negatively associated with the number of casual sexual partners. (R2) Does avoidant attachment more strongly predict the number of casual sexual partners or the number of committed sexual partners?

Because previous research has found that alcohol use is closely associated with casual sex (Claxton et al., 2015), and due to the limited research suggesting an association with committed sex (Tucker et al., 2022), we hypothesized that:

(H3) Alcohol use will be positively associated with the number of casual sexual partners and (H4) will be positively associated with the number of committed sexual partners. However, we also hypothesized that (H5) alcohol use will more strongly predict the number of casual sexual partners compared to the number of committed sexual partners.

Method

Sample

The data used for this study comes from Waves 1-6 of Project READY. Project READY is a national study of emerging adults in the United States. Participants for READY were recruited using a simple random sampling approach of 18-year-olds in the US. Although all participants were recruited at age 18, some participants took the survey at age 19 based on the time of year they took the survey. The sample was identified by Qualtrics and administered an online survey. Once identified, they were contacted either by mail, email, or telephone (including
text messages). They were screened for eligibility and interest and then were given a link to complete the survey. Survey questions include demographic information, background information (such as family of origin questions), and behavioral questions (such as the frequency of sexual activity). Participants were compensated for their time in taking the survey.

Upon completion of the initial survey, participants were invited to participate in the longitudinal study that would be conducted each year. Approximately 2133 participants opted into this longitudinal study and were contacted one year later and then each subsequent year for a total of five years. The retention rate between Wave 1 and Wave 2 was 67.8%, while the retention rate between Wave 2 and Wave 3 was 85.9%. In addition, a purposeful sample of additional men was included into the sample at Wave 2 to increase the proportion of men in the study. This new male sample was given the baseline survey during Wave 2 and then introduced into the main sample at Wave 3. This included 272 additional men. The retention rate for the full sample between Wave 3 and Wave 4 was 100%. Between Wave 4 and Wave 5, the retention rate was 93.6%. Finally, the retention rate between Wave 5 and Wave 6 was 95.7%.

The final sample for the present study included 1714 unmarried emerging adults. The reason for dropping emerging adults who got married is because their sexual behaviors and attitudes may follow unique patterns in that they are less accepting of sexual permissiveness (see Carroll et al., 2009). Missing data was handled using maximum likelihood so that even individuals with incomplete data could be included in the final analysis. The sample was approximately 57.1% women. About 55.6% of the sample was White, 18.1% of the sample was Latin@, 14.0% of the sample was Black, 7.8% of the sample was Asian, and 4.5% of the sample was another race (grouped together into one “Other” category due to small sample sizes on their own). For sexual orientation, 70.4% of the sample was Heterosexual, 14.0% were Bisexual, and
15.6% were Homosexual\textsuperscript{1}. The sample had considerable religious diversity, with about 20.6% of the emerging adults who reported no religion, 18.4% reported being Catholic, 18.0% reported being Protestant, 10.5% reported being Agnostic, 10.1% reported being Atheist, and 22.4% reported being another religion. Finally, about 50.2% of the sample had at least some college experience when it came to education. See Table 1 for the full demographics.

**Measures**

**Number of Sexual Partners**

The variables for the number of sexual partners involved two different variables: the number of sexual partners inside a committed relationship and the number of sexual partners outside of a committed relationship. During each wave, participants were asked to record the number of sexual partners for their life on both of the variables mentioned. For the purposes of analysis the two variables were kept distinct in the final model. This is in line with previous research (Busby et al., 2020) which shows that having committed and uncommitted (casual) partners are associated with different outcomes.

The number of sexual partners at Wave 1 was subtracted from the number of sexual partners at Wave 6. This allowed me to examine only the number of sexual partners gained during the course of the study when participants were in their late teens and early 20’s. Any individual who had a negative number was counted as missing data because that means that they were reporting bad data. Finally, because of the extreme skewness of the variables, they were log +1 transformed for the final analysis.

\textsuperscript{1} We acknowledge that the term “Homosexual” is outdated and no longer supported by the APA. However, this was the original language used in the survey and we opted to use this so as not to extrapolate beyond what the participants reported their sexual orientation to be.
**Predictors**

**Attachment Security.** Attachment security was measured at Wave 1 using 11 items from a study by Lafontaine et al. (2015) that asked respondents to report their agreement on a scale that ranged from 1 (Disagree strongly) to 7 (Agree strongly). Anxious attachment included statements such as: “I worry that others won’t care about me as much as I care about them”. For avoidant attachment\(^2\), items measured feelings such as: “I feel comfortable depending on others”. Items were reverse coded so that higher scores represent higher levels of these two types of attachment. These different measures were averaged for the correlations but were included as a latent variables in the multivariate SEM analysis. Latent variable loadings for anxious attachment were all $\geq .52$, while latent variable loadings for avoidant attachment were all $\geq .41$.

**Alcohol Use.** I used data from Wave 1 to measure alcohol use. Participants were asked to report on how many days they engaged in a variety of behaviors over the past 12 months. One of the questions asked how many days they drank alcohol. The possible response options ranged from 0 (None) to 5 (Every day or almost every day). Research has shown that binge drinking may have unique associations with gaining new sexual partners (see Hone et al., 2023), so I also included binge drinking in the final measure for alcohol use. This included another question from the data which asked emerging adults to report on how many days they engaged in binge drinking (defined as drinking 4-5 drinks on one occasion) and was measured on the same scale. These measures were averaged for the correlation results but were included as a latent variable in the multivariate SEM analysis. Latent variable loadings for alcohol use were both $\geq .80$.

\(^2\) The item “I don’t feel comfortable opening up to others” from the original measure was removed for this study due to a very poor factor loading in the final model.
Control Variables

In the final model, I controlled for a number of demographic variables which may be associated with sexual behaviors, alcohol use, and attachment in emerging adulthood. Specifically, I used religiosity, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and education.

Religiosity. Differences in sexual behaviors between those who are religious and those who are not (Busby et al., 2020; Koletić et al., 2021; Uecker, 2008), as well as differences in alcohol use and attachment (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000; Russell et al., 2020). To control for these differences, a variable measuring religious attendance was included in the final model. At Wave 1, participants were asked: “How often do you attend religious services?” Participants responded on a scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Weekly).

Race/Ethnicity. The present study controlled for race in the final analysis. This decision was made because of previous research which indicates that rates of casual sexual partners differ between races (see Eisenberg et al., 2009). I also controlled for race because of its associations with attachment style and alcohol use (Cooley & Garcia, 2012; Meyers et al., 2017) Race was assessed at Wave 1 and was included in the final model as a categorical variable with White being the reference category. Other possible options for race included Black, Asian, Latin@, and Other. Those coded into the Other category included those who identified themselves as Mixed/Biracial, American Indian, Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, or Other. This decision was made because of small sample sizes for each of those options.

Gender. To control for differences between men and women when it comes to sex, attachment styles, and alcohol use (see Feeney et al., 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004), the final analysis controlled for gender. Gender was left as a dichotomous variable in the models with a 1
representing women and a 0 representing men. Gender was measured at Wave 1, and this analysis did not take into account whether or not someone identified as another gender at other waves. This decision was made because I only used data from Wave 1 for the predictor variables.

**Sexual Orientation.** Past research has shown that individuals who identify as a sexual minority are more accepting of casual sex, are at higher risk for alcohol use, and attachment orientations tend to be more complex (Ciocca et al., 2020; Currin et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2002). Because of this, I included sexual orientation as a control in the final analysis. I used participants’ reports from Wave 1 where they were given the prompt: “Your sexual orientation is…”. Participants were then given five options: Completely homosexual (1), Mostly homosexual (2), Bisexual (3), Mostly heterosexual (4), and Completely heterosexual (5). This measure was left continuous for the final analysis. Although sexual orientation has been conceptualized as a fluid experience for many individuals (Diamond, 2016), it was only used from Wave 1 in the present study because the predictor variables were from that wave and I was interested in predicting gaining future sexual partners.

**Education.** Education was included in the final model because of research showing that those enrolled in college tended to have less casual sexual partners, and there are also differences in both alcohol use and attachment style (Civilotti et al., 2021; Lyons et al., 2010; Slutske, 2005). In order to control for these differences, and to help expand the work on accumulation of sexual partners in emerging adulthood to both college and non-college samples (see Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013), a variable measuring education was included in the final analysis. This variable was measured on a scale from 1 (*Less than High School*) to 9 (*Graduate or professional degree completed*).
Analytical Plan

The purpose of this study was to longitudinally analyze how binge drinking and attachment style predict the number of committed and casual sexual partners among emerging adults. To begin the analysis on a bivariate level, I first used basic Pearson correlation analysis. After establishing these baseline bivariate analyses, I used a structural equation model for the multivariate analysis using maximum likelihood estimation. Finally, I used the Wald test to examine whether the independent variables differently predicted casual vs. committed sexual partners. Missing data was handled using maximum likelihood so that even individuals with incomplete data were included in the analysis. I used alcohol use, binge drinking, and attachment styles as the predictors for the number of committed sexual partners and the number of casual sexual partners, and I controlled for race, gender, religious attendance, sexual orientation, and education. The predictors were correlated with each other, as were the outcome variables. See Figure 1 for a conceptual model.

Results

Results at the bivariate level showed a number of patterns which are important to note (see Table 2). The number of committed sexual partners was positively correlated with anxious attachment \((r = .11, p < .001)\), alcohol use \((r = .14, p < .001)\), but was not significantly correlated with avoidant attachment \((r = -.04, p = .195)\). Interestingly, the number of casual sexual partners was significantly correlated with alcohol use \((r = .25, p < .001)\), but was not significantly correlated with either anxious \((r = .03, p = .390)\) or avoidant \((r = -.05, p = .082)\) attachment. These results indicate that at the bivariate level, the number of committed sexual partners is positively predicted by anxious attachment and alcohol use, while the number of casual sexual
partners is only positively predicted by alcohol use. Also of note, I found that the number of committed sexual partners is positively correlated with the number of casual sexual partners at moderate strength ($r = .47, p < .001$), which indicates that they are connected to each other, but also may be distinct in many ways. Results at the multivariate level, including control variables, highlight more distinct patterns.

Fit for the current SEM was guided by research and suggestions by scholars (see Hu & Bentler, 1998; Steiger, 2007; Wang & Wang, 2012). Recommendations included having comparative fit index (CFI) > .90, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) > .90, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) ≤ .07, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) ≤ .08. Based on these suggestions, the present model had good overall fit ($\chi^2 (182) = 765.19, p < .001$; RMSEA = .04 [90% CI = .04, .05]; CFI = .93; TLI = .92; SRMR = .05). The model accounted for 4.1% of the variance in committed sexual partners and 10.6% of the variance in casual sexual partners.

At the multivariate SEM level, we found distinct patterns in predictors of committed and casual sexual partners (see Figure 2). The number of committed sexual partners across the waves was positively associated with anxious attachment ($\beta = .09, p = .013$) and alcohol use ($\beta = .15, p < .001$) at Wave 1. However, it was not significantly associated with avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.02, p = .525$). On the other hand, number of casual sexual partners across the waves was negatively associated with avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.08, p = .015$), and positively associated with alcohol use ($\beta = .29, p < .001$) at Wave 1. The number of casual sexual partners was not significantly predicted by anxious attachment ($\beta = -.03, p = .374$). See Table 3 for full SEM results.
I ran Wald tests to further understand the nuance in how the independent variables may differently predict the number of committed and casual sexual partners. The Wald tests for the equality of coefficients revealed some significant patterns, and how the independent variables differently predicted the number of casual vs. committed sexual partners. When constraining the anxious attachment coefficients to be equal I found a significant result ($W(1) = 7.10, p = .008$), which means that the unconstrained model fit the data better. This means that anxious attachment predicted the number of committed partners more strongly than the number of casual sexual partners. I also found a significant result when constraining the avoidant attachment coefficients to be equal ($W(1) = 4.57, p = .032$), again revealing that the unconstrained model fit the data better. Avoidant attachment more strongly predicted the number of casual sexual partners as opposed to the number of committed sexual partners. When constraining the alcohol use coefficients to be equal, the Wald test was also significant ($W(1) = 29.29, p < .001$) and the unconstrained model fit the data better. This indicated that alcohol use more strongly predicted the number of casual sexual partners compared to the number of committed sexual partners.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to analyze how attachment style and alcohol use during early emerging adulthood predict the number of committed and casual sexual partners one obtains during emerging adulthood. The results from the present study indicate that the number of committed and casual sexual partners one obtains in emerging adulthood are uniquely predicted. Although the number of casual and committed partners tend to be uniquely predicted, it is also important to note that they were correlated with moderate strength in my results. This means that there is overlap between accumulating sexual partners irrespective of the relational context, but my study also provides strong evidence that they are distinct in many ways.
Therefore, future research should distinguish between these when asking individuals how many sexual partners they have.

I found support for H1, with anxious attachment being positively associated with the number committed sexual partners. Because anxiously attached individuals have more difficulty in meeting attachment needs, report lower levels of sexual satisfaction, and view sex as a way to help meet their need for reassurance/intimacy (Birnbaum et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2004), they may have a harder time meeting sexual needs in committed relationships. This may lead them to seek out additional committed sexual partners. In other words, when emerging adults have more anxious attachment, they may be more likely to be in shorter-term committed sexual relationships. Their anxious attachment may simultaneously push them to enter relationships to help fulfill their attachment needs, but also may leave them feeling unfulfilled in this relationship, resulting in a greater likelihood of ending the relationship. Considering that developing a greater capacity for intimacy in close relationships is a key developmental feature during emerging adulthood (Vaillant, 2012), this finding also has further implications. It may be that individuals who have more of an anxious attachment orientation may also struggle in developing intimacy in committed sexual relationships, and thus they have more partners as they struggle to meet this need. Future research could consider how attachment orientations are associated with the length of sexual relationships.

In response to my first research question, I found that anxious attachment more strongly predicted the number of committed sexual partners compared to the number of casual sexual partners. While previous work has shown that anxious attachment was positively associated with the number of sexual partners overall (Kim & Miller, 2020), this is the first study to specifically show that anxious attachment more strongly predicts the number of sexual partners within
committed relationships compared to the number of casual sexual partners. This finding is not surprising, especially given other research suggesting that anxious attachment is associated as emotional closeness with a partner as motivation for sex (Davis et al., 2004). This higher relational motivation for sex may be part of the reason why anxious attachment is more strongly associated with the number of committed sexual partners. Future research is required to further understand the complexities about this finding, but future studies about number of sexual partners should also distinguish between whether the sexual partners are committed or casual.

I found support for H2 in that avoidant attachment was negatively associated with the number of casual sexual partners. Considering previous research, this finding makes sense (Cooper et al., 1998; Feeney et al., 1993). When emerging adults are more avoidantly attached, they tend to gain less casual sexual partners across time. Theoretically, if individuals are avoidantly attached, it would make sense that they are having more casual sex because they can get sex without commitment, but this is not what I found. It may also be that being more avoidantly attached would simply be more likely to avoid relationships in general. To expand on this idea, previous research has highlighted that those with avoidant attachment are less likely to pursue romantic relationships in general (Schindler et al., 2010), and when they do have sex, they also tend to not want the intimacy that may come with that (Brassard et al., 2007). Pulling these ideas together, it seems likely that the general aversion to potential intimacy that may come from having sex is stronger than the desire to have casual sex. Finally, it is possible that those with avoidant attachment may have more a restricted sociosexuality orientation, meaning that they are less willing to engage in casual sex (Treger & Sprecher, 2011). More research is needed to expand these findings.
This study sheds further light on this issue for emerging adults and shows that they may tend to have less casual sexual partners across time when they demonstrate higher levels of avoidant attachment. This finding, along with others in this study, also highlights how the number of committed and casual sexual partners are unique and need to be distinguished. In response to my second research question, I found that avoidant attachment more strongly predicting the number of casual sexual partners compared to the number of committed sexual partners. Building off of my other finding that anxious attachment more strongly predicted the number of committed sexual partners, this provides more evidence to the importance of distinguishing between the type of sexual partners one has. They clearly have different predictors when it comes to attachment orientation.

I also found support for my third, fourth, and fifth hypotheses, with alcohol positively predicting both the number of casual and committed sexual partners. I also found that alcohol use had a stronger association with number of casual sexual partners compared to the number of committed sexual partners, supporting my seventh hypothesis. Much of the past research about alcohol use and sexual partners has found consistent associations with casual sex (see Claxton et al., 2015; Jaffe et al., 2021; Owen et al., 2011). Other research has further found that alcohol may predict the number of committed sexual partners (Tucker et al., 2022), which is what I found as well. While these findings were not surprising, it is important to note that this study uniquely finds significant differences in how alcohol use predicts the number of committed vs. casual sexual partners. Alcohol use is especially salient when predicting the number of casual sexual partners as opposed to the number of committed sexual partners, providing even more evidence as to why distinguishing between partner type is crucial in future studies. Past research has further shown that the amount of alcohol consumed (i.e., binge drinking) is important in
predicting the number of sexual partners, but the location of alcohol use may be more important (Hone et al., 2023). This study by Hone and colleagues (2023) also emphasized that finding new sexual partners was more likely when alcohol was consumed at parties or bars. Although different than this research, we incorporated binge drinking into a variable with alcohol use generally. However, I was not able to account for the location (ex: at a bar, at a party, at home, etc.) of alcohol use. Future research would be beneficial to uncover more of what may be driving associations between alcohol use, binge drinking, and accumulation of sexual partners in emerging adulthood. This would be especially important to study in more depth in future studies because the accumulation of sexual partners during the early emerging adult years may influence important development trajectories (Elder, 1998; Erikson, 1950) as individuals move more fully into adulthood.

**Limitations and Conclusion**

To be sure, this study had limitations which are important to understand when interpreting the results. First, although I used a large, national sample of emerging adults in the United States, the sample was not nationally representative, so findings cannot be extrapolated beyond the specific sample in this study. Another limitation about this study is that we only captured emerging adults’ behavior during the first few years of this time of life, meaning that these results should not be interpreted for those who are in the later emerging adult years. Further, some of the measures in the study had flaws and even had to be adjusted from the original measures. For example, a variable for the avoidant attachment measure needed to be dropped due to its poor factor loading. Because of this and other possible measurement error, caution should be taken when interpreting the results of the study. Yet another limitation of this study is that we only have self-reports for the kinds of sexual partners that emerging adults had.
This means that interpretation of what counts as a casual or committed sexual partner may vary based on individual perceptions. Future research can do more to help improve measurement around the accumulation of casual and committed sexual partners. Despite these limitations, this study provides important information into how the number of committed and casual sexual partners can be predicted in emerging adulthood.

The purpose of this study was to analyze how the number of committed and casual sexual partners can be uniquely predicted over time by attachment orientation and alcohol use in early emerging adulthood. The results showed that gaining committed sexual partners was associated with anxious attachment and alcohol use, while gaining casual sexual partners was associated with avoidant attachment and alcohol use. This demonstrates that gaining committed casual sexual partners is distinct from gaining committed sexual partners. Future research should distinguish between these types of sexual partners in order to account for differences, especially in emerging adulthood.
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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-0443.1990.tb03722.x


Figure 1

Conceptual Model for Predicting Accumulation of Sexual Partners

W1
Anxious Attachment

W1
Avoidant Attachment

W1
Alcohol Use

W1-W6 Casual Sexual Partners

W1-W6 Committed Sexual Partners
## Table 1

**Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of the sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>953</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin@</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other$^a$</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Orientation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>1199</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other$^b$</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $^a$Other races included: Mixed/Biracial, American Indian, Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, or Other; $^b$Other religions included: Jewish, Islamic, Latter-day Saint, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Easter Orthodox Catholic, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unitarian Universalist, and Other.
Table 2

*Bivariate Correlations Between Main Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Committed Sexual Partners</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Casual Sexual Partners</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.47***</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Avoidant Attachment</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Anxious Attachment</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.11***</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.18***</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alcohol Use</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.14***</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>-.000</td>
<td>.05*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001*
Figure 2

*SEM Results for Predicting Accumulation of Sexual Partners*

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001; The model controlled for race, gender, religious attendance, sexual orientation, and college attendance; Covariances are standardized*
Table 3

**Full SEM Results Predicting Accumulation Sexual Partners**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Committed Sexual Partners Standardized β (S.E.)</th>
<th>Casual Sexual Partners Standardized β (S.E.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxious Attachment</td>
<td>.09 (.02)**</td>
<td>-.03 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant Attachment</td>
<td>-.02 (.03)</td>
<td>-.08 (.05)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Use</td>
<td>.15 (.02)***</td>
<td>.29 (.04)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (Ref.)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>-.01 (.07)</td>
<td>.05 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>-.06 (.07)*</td>
<td>-.05 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin@</td>
<td>-.03 (.05)</td>
<td>.004 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.04 (.10)</td>
<td>.07 (.16)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men (Ref.)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>.03 (.04)</td>
<td>.07 (.07)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Attendance</td>
<td>-.03 (.01)</td>
<td>-.02 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>.01 (.02)</td>
<td>-.02 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.04 (.02)</td>
<td>-.05 (.02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001*