



Examining Self-Esteem as a Moderator of Attachment Styles and Sexual Partners

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine self-esteem as a moderator of attachment styles and the number of sexual partners an individual has had in their lifetime. Previous literature has found that an individual's level of self-esteem affects a person's number of sexual partners (e.g., those with low self-esteem tend to have more sexual partners). Studies have also been conducted examining the correlation between attachment styles and number of sexual partners, finding that those with an insecure attachment style, namely anxious or avoidant attachment, tend to have more sexual partners. While previous literature has examined these factors separately, this study aims to examine self-esteem as a moderator of attachment style on the number of sexual partners an individual has. In doing so, we aim to determine if self-esteem may predict when attachment styles influence decisions regarding sexual partners.

Introduction

Attachment – Independent Variable

- Three attachment styles were studied via this research: **anxious, avoidant, and secure**. Anxious attachment is characterized as anxiety about relationship issues; often in which individuals feel unworthy of love (Kim & Miller, 2020). Avoidant attachment can be defined as avoiding intimacy due to fear of rejection; often in which individuals have a motivation to be independent. Individuals with an anxious or avoidant attachment style often had multiple sexual partners. Secure attachment can be defined as having high levels of interpersonal well-being and interpersonal trust (Hackathorn & Malm, 2022). Those with a secure attachment style tended to have fewer sexual partners.

Self-Esteem – Moderator

- High and low levels of self-esteem were variables of interest for this research. Those with high levels of self-esteem are likely to have fewer number of sexual partners, whereas those with low levels of self-esteem were more likely to have higher number of sexual partners (Fielder et al., 2013). More specifically, men with high levels of self-esteem did not engage in casual sex as often as those with low levels of self-esteem (Wang et al., 2018).

Introduction (cont.)

Number of Sexual Partners – Dependent Variable

- When better social competence, as well as substance-abuse, was apparent, individuals tended to engage in hookup culture more frequently (Rossi et al., 2017). However, those with higher values and feelings of unreadiness tended to engage in hookup culture less frequently (McMahan & Olmstead, 2020).

Hypotheses

- H1:** Individuals scoring high on **avoidant** attachment will report more sexual partners when self-esteem is low.
- H2:** Individuals scoring high on **anxious** attachment will report more sexual partners when self-esteem is low.
- H3:** Individuals scoring high on **secure** attachment will report less sexual partners when self-esteem is high.

Methodology

- Participants completed the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* and *Revised Adult Attachment Scale – Close Relationships Version*. Participants were also asked to report on their number of sexual partners to date.

Participant Information	
Sample Size	223 total participants
Age	$M = 34.01$; $SD = 9.24$
Sex	133 Males; 90 Females
Race	A majority of participants identified as White (90%)
Relationship Status	A majority of participants reported being married (81%)
# of Sexual Partners	$M = 6.87$; $SD = 8.74$

Methodology (cont.)

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

- 10 item questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1979)
- Likert Scale 1-5 ($1 = strongly\ agree$; $5 = strongly\ disagree$)
- Example Questions:
 - On the whole, I am satisfied with myself
 - I feel that I have a number of good qualities

Revised Adult Attachment Scale

- 18 item questionnaire (Collins, 1996)
- Likert Scale 1-5 ($1 = not\ at\ all\ characteristic\ of\ me$; $5 = very\ characteristic\ of\ me$)
- Example Questions:
 - I find it relatively easy to get close to people
 - I find it difficult to depend on others
 - I often worry that other people don't love me

Number of Sexual Partners

- Participants were asked how they define sex (i.e., oral, vaginal, anal, other) and then provided the number of sexual partners they have had to date.

Results

- Moderation analysis was used to test the hypotheses. Findings indicate that significant moderation did not occur for each tested hypothesis.
- H1:** Avoidant Attachment
 - Overall model: $F(3, 215) = 1.01, p = .39$
- H2:** Anxious Attachment
 - Overall model: $F(3, 215) = 1.10, p = .35$
- H3:** Secure Attachment
 - Overall model: $F(3, 215) = 5.11, p = .002$

Results (cont.)

Hypothesis	Moderation Analysis
H1: Avoidant	Average Self-Esteem $-\beta = -.15, t(215) = -1.45, p = .12$
H2: Anxious	Average Self-Esteem $-\beta = -.002, t(215) = -.02, p = .98$
H3: Secure	Average Self-Esteem $-\beta = .31, t(215) = 3.66, p < .001$

Conclusions & Recommendations

- Some future directions for this research consist of investigating the differences between men and women, as well as their age, and further understanding the variables as predictors. Although these results did not indicate a significant moderation over the sample as a whole, investigating a possible difference in men versus women would be a future direction.
- Furthermore, looking at this difference between men and women in relation to each variable as a predictor (i.e., self-esteem and attachment) of sexual partners may produce further information.
- Lastly, if looking at the individual's number of sexual partners as a range, rather than as its own number, may help future researchers understand more of the implications of the study.

References & Contact Information

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