



# Who engages in serious and casual sex relationships? An individual differences perspective



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## ABSTRACT

We examined ( $N = 281$ ) the role of love styles and personality in people's choice to engage in serious and/or various kinds of casual relationships (i.e., one-night stands, booty-calls, and friends with benefits) within the last year. Men were more eager than women were to engage in all types of casual relationships, however, love styles and personality traits were more important in accounting for this behavior. For instance, those with secure attitudes about love expressed an aversion to casual relationships; those with casual attitudes about relationships and who were dishonest reported involvement in various casual sex relationships; and conscientiousness was associated with engaging in serious romantic relationships but not one-night stands. The current study documents how an individual difference perspective can provide unique insights into people's relationship behaviors to compliment work in social and evolutionary psychology.

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## 1. Introduction

Personality traits and individual differences are important in understanding various aspects of human sexuality and relationships. Traits like disordered attachment (Fielder, Walsh, Carey, & Carey, 2013; Garneau, Olmstead, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013), psychopathy, and narcissism (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Luévano, & Adams, 2012) are related to the engagement in short-term, sexual relationships. However, recent research has seen an expansion of the kinds of relationships being investigated (Jonason, Valentine, & Li, 2012). There now appears to be a number of middle-ground relationship types individuals can choose from including (but not limited to) friends-with-benefits<sup>1</sup> (Jonason, 2013; Puentes, Knox, & Sussman, 2008) and booty-call relationships<sup>2</sup> (Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009; Wentland & Reissing, 2011).

Prior work examining these middle-ground or “hybrid” relationships (Jonason, Valentine et al., 2012) relationships has examined sociocultural (e.g., Smiler, 2008) and evolutionary hypotheses (e.g., Jonason, 2013) which, may respectively be

limited by qualitative methods (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Wentland & Reissing, 2011) and an (over) emphasis on sex differences (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Schmitt, 2005). Both bodies of work tend to examine these relationships in a void, thereby failing to make important within-subjects comparisons (but see, Jonason, 2013). Importantly, these studies have examined why individuals engage in various relationships but with the exception of a few factors (e.g., sex of the participant, alcohol use), little work has examined who engages in various relationships. In the current study, we take an individual differences perspective to see if we can discriminate whether people engaged in various relationships within the last year with individual differences in love styles and personality traits.

Personality traits may bias individuals towards engaging in certain kinds of relationships. For instance, attachment styles may create systematic biases in the types of relationships individuals engage in and how they react to relationship stressors (Fielder et al., 2013; Garneau et al., 2013; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) but traditional measures of attachment contain only three or four dimensions. In contrast, Love Styles (Hatfield, Hutchison, Bensman, Young, & Rapson, 2012; Hatfield, Luckhurst, & Rapson, 2012; Hatfield & Rapson, 2010; Katz & Schneider, 2013) may capture a larger range of individual differences in how people orient towards relationships, capturing individual differences in attachment (i.e., secure, clingy, and skittish) and attitudes about love (i.e., fickle, casual, and uninterested).

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<sup>1</sup> Friends who also engage in sexual behavior together without any formal commitment.

<sup>2</sup> Sexual relationships that tend to occur among acquaintances.

While we agree that attachment models may help us understand who engages in various relationships, we feel it would better to adopt a more varied (and perhaps less biased) framework of individual differences in people's relationship schemas. This is important to the current study because we are trying to incorporate a wider range of relationships than typically investigated and, therefore, want to provide a more robust picture of who engages in these relationships. Unlike attachment models, which may only contain a few as three types, love styles contain those three dimensions and three more (Hatfield & Rapson, 2010); creating a wider net to assess individual difference in love styles. The *secure* love style refers to individuals who are comfortable with both emotional closeness and independence. The *clingy* love style refers those who desire a great deal of closeness. The *skittish* love style refers to those who desire a great deal of independence. The *fickle* love style refers to people who change their mind often. The *casual* love style refers to people who prefer easy relationships. The *uninterested* love style refers to people who might be considered anhedonic in reference to relationships and even asexual.

Sexuality is a multidimensional construct requiring more, not less nuance, in measurement. This might be especially important when assessing mating behaviors as opposed to mating preferences. Success in various relationships is likely the result of numerous factors and, thus, a broad-band assessment of love styles will be essential to capture individual differences in mating behavior over the course of a year. Having had positive childhood and adult relationships should predispose people to prefer "substance" over "triviality" in their relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Therefore, consistent with previous work, we expect those with a secure love style to have engaged in serious relationships in the last year (H1a) but also for them actively avoid engaging in casual sex relationships (H1b). In addition, we expect (H2) those who desire emotional closeness will be more likely to engage in serious romantic relationships but may also engage in booty-call relationships to experience some of the emotional satisfaction they may provide (Jonason, 2013; Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2010). People who desire emotional closeness may "use" relationships to satisfy their emotional needs. And lastly, as a defining characteristic of various short-term relationships, we also expect those with casual attitudes about love and relationships to engage in various casual sexual relationships (H3). As attitudes have at least a loose association with behaviors, such an association seems reasonable.

In order to assess a similarly wide range of personality (i.e., wider than the Big Five) we adopted the HEXACO (i.e., Honesty/Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness) model (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Importantly, the inclusion of the traditional Big Five factors allows us to replicate (with a different measure) previous findings but the inclusion of the Honesty/Humility factor allows for a unique prediction related to the "darker" side of personality. First, extraversion may allow for more mating opportunities, given its social nature (Jonason, Cetrulo, & Ortiz, 2011), and thus, might be associated with engaging in short- and long-term relationships (H4). Second, conscientiousness may be associated with a long-term mating orientation (Schmitt et al., 2004) and thus, we expect it to be associated with involvement in a serious romantic relationship within the last year (H5). In contrast, one-night stands may be linked to increased risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, which may partly relate to (1) their extreme brevity and (2) contextual factors like alcohol use (Johnson, 2013) that may lead to diminished prefrontal lobe functioning and judgment (i.e., less likely to use sexual protection). Third, we expect low rates of conscientiousness to be associated with having a one-night stand within the last year (H6). Last, we expect (H7) that "darker" aspects of people's personality (i.e., dishonesty) will be related to engaging in casual sex relationships as part of an

exploitive/opportunistic mating strategy (Jonason, Li, Webster et al., 2009; Jonason, Valentine et al., 2012).

In the current study we document who engaged in various relationships over the last year. However, because there are sex differences in attitudes (H8a) and behaviors (H8b) related to various relationships (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009) and older people may have more relationship experience than younger people but young people may engage in more casual sex than older people (H9), we include these in our analyses as well. In sum, we include these and the aforementioned individual differences to get a multidimensional assessment of who engages in serious and casual sex relationships.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample was composed of 281 American participants (36% male), aged 17–76 years old ( $M = 32.26$ ,  $SD = 11.70$ ), who were paid US\$1 for their completion of a series of measures on MTurk. Five percent self-identified as African American, 80% as European American, 9% as Asian American, and the remainder (6%) reported belonging to an "other" ethnic group. Participants were informed about the nature of the study, completed a series of self-report measures (the order of which was randomized), reported their demographic details, and upon completion were debriefed and thanked for participation.

## 3. Measures

### 3.1. Relationship-choice

Participants were provided with definitions taken from prior work (Jonason, 2013) of the four different kinds of relationships being studied: one-night stands (i.e., "a one-night stand is a relationship where you meet someone and you have sex that night and only that night"), booty-call relationship (i.e., "a booty-call relationship is one where you have repeated sexual encounters with someone else but have little more than that in terms of a relationship"), friends-with-benefits (i.e., "a friends-with-benefits relationship is one where you have sex with the person but also do nonsexual things in a more social/public context"), and serious romantic relationships (i.e., "a serious romantic relationship is one that involves social and sexual monogamy and has high levels of commitment and might include marriage"). They were then asked to indicate (yes/no) which of these relationships they engaged in within the last year. They were permitted to select more than one option. This was done because people could possibly engage in any combination of activities sequentially or concurrently (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) and also to increase the power of our tests given restrictions imposed by asking only about relationship experience within the last year.

### 3.2. Love styles

The Love Styles Questionnaire (Hatfield et al., 2007) was designed to assess attitudes about romantic and sexual relationships. Participants were first given lay-person definitions of these styles (Appendix A). Then they were asked to what extent (0–100%) these six definitions reflected their feelings and experiences in romantic and passionate affairs. Participants were also given slightly different and shorter descriptions of these schemas and asked to pick the *one* schema that best described them from a list (i.e., I am comfortable with closeness and/or independence; I need a great deal of closeness; I need a great deal of

independence; I am not quite sure what I need; I am fairly casual about relationships; I am uninterested in relationships). The use of both methods allowed for better clarity and nuance than simply asking normative or ipsative questions and was done as this was the primary focus of our investigation (cf., Jonason, 2013).

### 3.3. Personality traits

Personality was assessed by the 60-item HEXACO-PI-R (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Participants were asked their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with the statements. For instance, as an indicator of the Honesty/Humility factor, participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the item, “I’d be tempted to use counterfeit money if I were sure I could get away with it”. The corresponding items were averaged to create indexes of Honesty/Humility (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .78$ ), Emotionality ( $\alpha = .78$ ), Extraversion ( $\alpha = .85$ ), Conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .79$ ), Agreeableness ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and Openness ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

In Table 1 we report the overall rates of engaging in various relationships in the last year and sex differences. Relationships that had a greater potential to involve emotional intimacy (e.g., serious romantic relationship) occurred more frequently than those that promised less emotional intimacy (i.e., booty-call relationships). Women were more likely than men were to indicate they engaged in serious romantic relationship ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.26, p < .05, \Phi = .07$ ), but were less likely to participate in a booty-call relationship ( $\chi^2(1) = 18.50, p < .01, \Phi = -.26$ ) or a one-night stand ( $\chi^2(1) = 17.33, p < .01, \Phi = -.26$ ) within the last year than did men (H8b). There were no significant differences between the sexes for friends-with-benefits ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.76, ns, \Phi = -.08$ ).

In Table 2 we report descriptive data on forced-choice love schema data. There were two sex differences ( $\chi^2(5) = 13.21, p < .05, \Phi = .22$ ) in the way men and women described themselves (H8a). Women labeled themselves as more comfortable with closeness/independence than did men. They were also more likely than men to indicate they were unsure as to what they wanted.

### 4.2. Love styles

We ran a Stepwise Discriminant Function Analysis<sup>3</sup> to see how participant’s age, sex, and scores on the Love Schemas questionnaire predicted engagement in the four different types of relationships while controlling for any shared variance within the group. Being casual about relationships (Standardized Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients =  $-.52; \Lambda = .88, F(1, 265) = 35.42, p < .01$ ) and a man (SCDFC =  $.79; \Lambda = .85, F(1, 265) = 24.16, p < .01$ ) was associated with (65% accuracy) having had a one-night stand within the last year (H3, H8b). Being casual about relationships (SCDFC =  $.51; \Lambda = .90, F(1, 265) = 28.74, p < .01$ ), being a man (SCDFC =  $.46; \Lambda = .86, F(1, 265) = 21.57, p < .01$ ), and wanting closeness (SCDFC =  $.75; \Lambda = .83, F(1, 265) = 17.99, p < .01$ ) was associated with (71% accuracy) having a booty-call relationship within the last year (H2, H3). Being casual about relationships was the only factor related

**Table 1**

Rates (%) participants overall and by participant’s sex engaged in various relationships within the last year overall and across the sexes.

	Total (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
One-night stand	18	62	38
Booty-call relationship	17	64	36
Friends-with-benefits	32	42	58
Serious romantic relationship	71	32	68

Note. Participants were free to say they engaged in more than one of the relationships within the last year.

**Table 2**

Descriptive statistics for forced-choice assessments of love styles.

Love Styles	Total (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)
Comfortable with closeness and/or independence	52	68	32
I need a great deal of closeness	10	61	39
I need a great deal of independence	15	56	44
I am not quite sure what I need	15	74	26
I am fairly casual about relationships	6	29	71
I am uninterested in relationships	2	50	50

(51% accuracy) to engaging in a friends-with-benefits relationship within the last year (SCDFC = 1.00;  $\Lambda = .88, F(1, 265) = 35.87, p < .01; H3$ ). Being low on the disinterested love schema (SCDFC =  $-.42; \Lambda = .81, F(1, 265) = 63.61, p < .01$ ) and high on wanting closeness (SCDFC =  $.35; \Lambda = .76, F(1, 265) = 40.64, p < .01$ ) but also having casual attitudes about relationship (SCDFC =  $.64; \Lambda = .74, F(1, 265) = 30.48, p < .01$ ) was related (81% accuracy) to having a serious romantic relationship within the last year (H2).

We next analyzed the forced-choice data to improve the resolution of the extent to which the six love schemas predicted engaging in four relationship-types (Table 3). We found one strong pattern. Those who reported being open to both independence and closeness—an ostensible measure of secure attachment—indicated they did not have a booty-call relationship ( $\chi^2(5) = 14.22, p < .05, \Phi = .23$ ) or a friends-with-benefits relationship ( $\chi^2(5) = 18.57, p < .05, \Phi = .26$ ) within the last year (H1a, H1b). The effect was not significant—albeit just—for those who reported having a one-night stand in the last year ( $\chi^2(5) = 10.41, p < .07, \Phi = .19$ ) and fully reversed for those who had a serious romantic relationship within the last year ( $\chi^2(5) = 56.04, p < .01, \Phi = -.45$ ).

### 4.3. Personality traits

We repeated the analyses above but replaced love styles with personality traits. The engagement in one-night stands was correlated with (69% accuracy) with being a man (SCDFC =  $-.47; \Lambda = .82, F(1, 265) = 15.69, p < .01; H8b$ ), dishonesty (SCDFC =  $.58; \Lambda = .91, F(1, 265) = 25.05, p < .01; H7$ ), extraverted (SCDFC =  $-.53; \Lambda = .88, F(1, 265) = 18.73, p < .01; H4$ ), and un conscientiousness (SCDFC =  $.42; \Lambda = .85, F(1, 265) = 15.73, p < .01; H6$ ). Engaging in a booty-call relationship within the last year was correlated with (73% accuracy) with dishonesty (SCDFC =  $-.53; \Lambda = .92, F(1, 265) = 23.36, p < .01; H7$ ), being a man (SCDFC =  $.49; \Lambda = .88, F(1, 265) = 18.55, p < .01; H8b$ ), extraversion (SCDFC =  $.52; \Lambda = .85, F(1, 265) = 16.00, p < .01; H4$ ), and youth (SCDFC =  $-.36; \Lambda = .83, F(1, 265) = 13.63, p < .01; H9$ ). Engaging in a friends-with-benefits relationship within the last year was related (63% accuracy) to dishonesty (SCDFC =  $.45; \Lambda = .98, F(1, 265) = 6.57, p < .05; H7$ ), unemotionality (SCDFC =  $.68; \Lambda = .96, F(1, 265) = 5.83, p < .01$ ), and agedness (SCDFC =  $.62; \Lambda = .94, F(1, 265) = 5.87, p < .01; H9$ ). The engagement in a serious romantic relationship was associated with being conscientious (SCDFC = 1.00;  $\Lambda = .98, F(1, 263) = 4.33, p < .05; H5$ ).

<sup>3</sup> This analysis is mathematically equivalent to a MANOVA but allows one to have a categorical dependent variable. It is a more conservative test than a binary logistic regression, with more assumptions that must be met. Given the large number of tests, we felt this was the best test. The goal was to determine what love styles and personality traits (continuous IVs) predicted involvement in various relationships in the last year (categorical DVs) and this this was an appropriate statistical technique (see Lachenbruch, 1975).

**Table 3**  
Rates (%) of whether someone had various relationships within the last year as a function of love styles (forced-choice).

Love styles	ONS (%)		BCR (%)		FWB (%)		SRR (%)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Comfortable with closeness and/or independence	6	45	6	46	13	38	0	7
I need a great deal of closeness	2	9	2	9	2	8	8	3
I need a great deal of independence	4	11	3	12	5	10	9	5
I am not quite sure what I need	4	11	3	11	7	8	6	8
I am fairly casual about relationships	2	4	3	4	4	2	3	4
I am uninterested in relationships	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	3

Note. ONS = one-night stand; BCR = booty-call relationship; FWB = friends-with-benefits; SRR = serious romantic relationship

## 5. Discussion

While most research on relationships focuses on social or evolutionary models (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Smiler, 2008), we have adopted the perspective of personality psychology. In so doing, we have provided a number of unique insights of how individual differences can account for whether people engage in various relationships in the last year. For instance, in contrast to prior work that has accentuated the role of sex of the participant, we found sex of the participant was a significant predictor of the engagement in casual and serious relationships in a minority of cases but individual differences in love styles and personality were more important. In addition, while we confirmed contentions (H1a, H1b), based on attachment research (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), that securely attached people will have serious romantic relationships and avoided booty-call and friends-with-benefits relationships (i.e., both are variants of casual sex relationships). This is distinct in that prior research often has focused on preferences over behavior and did not make the distinction between seeking and avoiding. However, we also confirmed contentions by evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Schmitt, 2005), that those with insecure attachment styles did not necessarily report having had one-night stands in the last year. We have also reinforced the role of personality traits in understanding sexuality by showing (1) conscientiousness was correlated with involvement in serious relationship (Schmitt et al., 2004), (2) dishonesty was associated with involvement in casual sex relationships (Jonason, Li, Webster et al., 2009), and (3) extraversion was associated with involvement in relationships in general (Jonason et al., 2011). Importantly, by using multivariate tests with broad-band measures of personality and love styles we were able to better isolate the important predictors than previous research but also to cover a wider nomological area for understanding who engages in various relationships.

We found discriminating between various forms of casual sex problematic. People characterized by the casual love style and dishonesty reported engaging in all three casual sex relationships (H3). In contrast, conscientious people (H5) were inclined towards serious romantic relationships (Schmitt et al., 2004). It seems as though we were able to differentiate only short- and long-term relationships, which might mean the boundaries between various forms of “casual” relationships are not as well defined as we hoped they would be or that the research on these various relationships is splitting hairs unnecessarily. Indeed, an attempt at defining casual sex relationships by their perceived functions was met with mixed support (Jonason, 2013). However, two possibilities exist. First, it is possible we were insufficiently powered to discriminate between the relationships. Second, it is possible that hopes of putting each relationship into distinct boxes may be naïve in that the relationships may co-occur (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). For instance, one might have a friends-with-benefit and serious relationship partner who they make booty-call requests of occasionally. People

may not define and operate in relationships in clean, categorical ways. Future research should explore these possibilities.

## 6. Limitations and Conclusions

The current study has a number of limitations. First, it was conducted with a small, WEIRD (i.e., western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), online sample. We did not rely on college-aged participants like most research on sexuality (e.g., Smiler, 2008). Second, while the sample size is commonly found in personality research, given the nature of the dichotomous dependent variables, we may have suffered from some diminished power. Although we tried to maximize our sensitivity (and ecological validity) by allowing participants to indicate they had engaged in more than one relationship within the last year, targeted sampling might be warranted in the future. Third, we measured individual differences with a short questionnaire (in the case of the HEXACO) and a single-item measure (in the case of the love styles measure). Short measures have reduced sensitivity and, therefore, may have attenuated our findings. Fourth, some might criticize our use of Discriminant Function Analysis as opposed to simpler tests (e.g., *t*-tests, ANOVAs) or logistic regression. The former tests would force us to treat our DVs as IVs and they lack the ability to easily control for shared variance among our predictors. While logistic regression would be a reasonable test, it is relatively more liberal (i.e., requires fewer assumptions to be met) than our tests; as there was an exploratory element to our paper we wanted to avoid this. Fourth, the possibility exists that our terms “sex” or “sexual” were interpreted differently in men and women (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Despite these limitations, we have provided new details about who engages in four relationship-types from a hitherto under-used perspective: personality, trait, or differential psychology.

In conclusion, we have created profiles of individuals who engage in various types of relationships based on individual differences in love styles and personality traits. We have shown how the engagement in serious relationships may be about the active avoidance of relationships that lack substance whereas the engagement in casual sex relationships may be facilitated by having a casual approach to relationships in general. We have reinforced the utility of personality traits to capture individual differences in relationship behavior; drawing new attention to the role of dishonesty. Importantly, we have studied (self-reported) relationship experiences over preferences (Jonason, Luévano et al., 2012) which may offer a more ecologically valid way of understanding the role of personality in relationships.

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### Appendix A. Definitions of different love styles

**Secure:** These individuals are comfortable with both emotional closeness and independence. They may be swept up in romantic love affairs, but they know that if things fall apart, they will survive. Some attachment theorists have labeled such people as securely attached.

**Clingy:** These people desire a great deal of closeness and feel uneasy when they have to be independent. Such people, in attachment terms, are labeled as anxious, preoccupied, and fearful.

**Skittish:** The skittish desire a great deal of independence and if forced to be close may run. Such people have been labeled as dismissing and avoidant.

**Fickle:** Fickle people fall in love with those who do not love them. They change their mind often. They will doggedly pursue someone only to lose interest when they have won their target's affection. In attachment terms, one might describe them as ambivalent.

**Casual:** These are people looking for relationships that lack drama or problems; easy relationships.

**Uninterested:** Some people lack any interest in relationships whatsoever and might be considered anhedonic in reference to relationships and even sexual.

For detail about the psychometrics of the Love Schemas scales see Hatfield and Rapson, 2010.

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