



“Mamma Mia, Here I Go Again”

Predicting Romantic Partner Accumulation in Emerging Adulthood



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BACKGROUND

- Relationship development during emerging adulthood is unique, and many feel the drive to be fully ready for serious commitments. This may lead individuals to try things out with a number of others before fully committing to a relationship (Willoughby & Carroll, 2010).
- Previous factors shown in research which predict the number of romantic partners one obtains include quality of the relationship with parents, mental health, interpersonal competency, sexual experience, relationship status, alcohol use, and accomplishing emerging adult tasks such as becoming a parent (Boisvert & Poulin, 2016; Jamison & Sanner, 2021; O’Connor et al., 2017; Rauer et al., 2016; Shulman et al., 2019).
- The purpose of this study is to analyze predictors of romantic partner accumulation in emerging adulthood to understand which factors are most important when accounting for others.

METHOD

The final sample consisted of 740 participants.

Measures

Number of Romantic Partners. At each wave, participants were asked how many exclusive romantic partners they’ve had. The total at Wave 3 was subtracted from the total at Wave 5, leaving the total number of new romantic partners over the course of those three waves.

Interpersonal Competency. Interpersonal competency was assessed using a subscale from the Criteria for Marriage Readiness Scale (Carroll et al., 2009).

Relationship with Parents. Survey participants were given 2 separate questions that asked: “Overall, how happy are you with the way things are between you and your [mother/father]?”

Emotional Health. Participants were asked to rate how often they experienced various emotions with higher scores representing lower emotional health. Reliability for this scale was high ($\alpha = .924$).

Cohabitation. Participants were cohabiting if they were living with their romantic partner and were not married to them.

Alcohol Use. Individuals in the sample recorded how frequently during the past 12 months they drank alcohol.

Number of Children. Participants were asked to report the number of children that they had.

Control Variables

The final model controlled for biological sex, race, sexual orientation, student status, and religiosity.

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations Between Main Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Romantic Partners	1									
2. Interpersonal Competency	.07	1								
3. Relationship with Mother	-.02	.06	1							
4. Relationship with Father	-.04	.03	.38***	1						
5. Emotional Health	.06	.04	-.31***	-.28***	1					
6. Sexual Partners in Relationships	.13***	.02	-.01	.00	.08*	1				
7. Sexual Partners out of Relationships	.23***	.01	-.06	-.07	.07	.41***	1			
8. Cohabitation Status ^a	.12**	-.03	-.08*	-.04	.05	.13***	.05	1		
9. Alcohol Use	.16***	-.02	.01	-.05	.05	.09*	.29***	.04	1	
10. Number of Children	.15***	-.01	-.03	-.08*	.05	.08*	.09*	.10**	-.05	1

Table 2
OLS Regression Results Predicting the Number of Romantic Partners

Variable	β (Robust SE)	Standardized β	p-value
Intercept	-2.81 (1.80)	-	
Promotion of Interpersonal Competency	.84 (.40)	.07	*
Emotional Health	.08 (.17)	.02	
Relationship with Mother	.00 (.13)	.00	
Relationship with Father	-.02 (.14)	-.01	
Sexual Partners in Relationships	.03 (.04)	.03	
Sexual Partners out of Relationships	.13 (.04)	.16	**
Cohabitation Status ^a	1.41 (.89)	.10	
Alcohol Use	.48 (.20)	.12	*
Number of Children	1.29 (.53)	.11	*
Female ^b	-.23 (.27)	-.03	
Race ^c	-	-	-
Black	-.09 (.44)	-.01	
Latin@	.14 (.40)	.02	
Asian	-.17 (.38)	-.01	
Other	-.34 (.38)	-.02	
Sexual Orientation ^d	-	-	-
Homosexual	-.17 (.32)	-.02	
Bisexual	.57 (.46)	.06	
Student Status	-.49 (.35)	-.06	
Religiosity	.18 (.08)	.07	*

Note. R-squared = 0.11; F(18, 721) = 2.85
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
^aReference group = Not Cohabiting

^bReference group = Male
^cReference group = White
^dReference group = Heterosexual

RESULTS

- Overall, the model did not have great fit and predicted very little of the variance in romantic partners accumulation ($R^2 = 0.11$), but the model was statistically significant ($F(18, 721) = 2.85$; $p < .001$).
- Interestingly, the number of sexual partners one had in committed relationships was not significantly related to number of romantic partners ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = .495$), but the number of sexual partners had outside of committed relationships was significantly and positively associated ($\beta = 0.13$, $p = .001$).
- Two other behaviors, alcohol use and number of children, were also positively associated with the number of romantic partners ($\beta = 0.48$, $p = .001$; $\beta = 1.29$, $p = .002$, respectively).
- Cohabiting behavior was not significantly associated with romantic partner accumulation ($\beta = 1.41$, $p = .112$).
- Examining the standardized beta coefficients from this regression model show that other behaviors seem to be most closely tied with the number of romantic partners on accumulates.

DISCUSSION

- Interestingly, parent-child relationships in the current study were not significantly related to the number of romantic partners. Previous work suggested that parent-child relationships were key indicators of romantic relationships through an attachment lens (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).
- Having more casual sex may be linked with finding more romantic partners. To be sure, not every casual sexual experience leads to a romantic partner (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018), but the odds of finding a partner may be increased.
- Perhaps the most alarming finding from the current study is that the number of children was positively associated with the number of romantic partnerships, given that children tend to have worse outcomes if they grow up in unstable relationships (Waldfogel et al., 2010).
- Romantic partner accumulation seems to be consistently associated with other behaviors during emerging adulthood. Future research could focus on examining the quality of romantic relationships.