

# No Strings Attached: The Nature of Casual Sex in College Students

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*The purpose of this article was to identify the circumstances associated with casual sex encounters, as well as to identify the link between casual sex, depressive symptoms, and infidelity among college students. We found that casual sex was a fairly common occurrence related to early sexual transition, engaging in first sex with a casual sex partner; drug use, and alcohol consumption. Casual sex occurred more often between "friends" than with strangers. Depressive symptoms were associated with engaging in casual sex differently for males and females. Males who engaged in casual sex reported the fewest symptoms of depression, and females who had a history of casual sex reported the most depressive symptoms. Frequencies of affectionate and genital behaviors were associated with expectations of the relationship, the relationship to the partner, infidelity, and the individual's relationship style. We discuss results in light of evolutionary and sociocultural theories of sexuality.*

The transition to adulthood is a time of exploration and experimentation, as young people hone the life skills, relationship styles, and behavior patterns that will impact their emotional functioning and health as adults (di Mauro, 1995). The journey to adulthood often includes experimentation with sexual behaviors: the majority of adolescents first engage in intercourse before they graduate high school (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). Using a nationally representative sample of adolescent females, Manning, Longmore, and Giordano (2000) found that first intercourse experiences occurred in the context of a romance for the majority of young people. However, large numbers transitioned to sex with a partner who was "a friend" or with someone they "had just met." In general, engaging in casual sexual intercourse appears to be a function of the amount of time an adolescent is sexually active (Træen & Lewin, 1992). In other words, those who begin having intercourse at younger ages are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse with casual partners. It is a relatively common occurrence rather than a subgroup trend. Nationally representative studies reveal that 70-85% of *sexually experienced* adolescents age 12-21 reported engaging in intercourse with a casual sex partner during the previous year (Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickson, 2003). Similarly, college student samples suggest that 70% of college students report having engaged in intercourse with partners they did not consider romantic (Feldman, Turner, & Araujo, 1999).

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Casual sexual relationships or encounters are referred to by a variety of lexis in research literature and in popular discourse. For example, in research these relations have been referred to as "chance encounters" (Fisher & Byrne, 1978), "one-night stands" (Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), "hookups" (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000), "sociosexuality" (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), "anonymous sex" (McGuire, Shega, Nicholls, & Deese, 1992), and "casual sex" (Regan & Dreyer, 1999). In the popular press, it has been referred to as "meaningless sex" (Solomon & Taylor, 2000), "friends with benefits," and "booty call" (Marklein, 2002). Casual sexual relationships can be sexual interludes with strangers (Manning et al., 2000) or they can be sex with a friend (Shaffer, 2000). They can be brief or long in duration (Shaffer; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Regardless of terminology, all are describing sexual relationships in which the partners do not define the relationship as romantic or their partner as a boyfriend or girlfriend. These meetings are often superficial, based on sexual desire or physical attraction, spontaneous, and often impulsive (Regan & Dreyer; Simpson & Gangestad, 1992), and they frequently involve drugs or alcohol (Desiderato & Crawford, 1995).

The majority of research on sexuality has focused exclusively on sexual intercourse, although adolescent and young adult sexuality is not limited to intercourse alone and includes a variety of activities, from non-coital behaviors such as kissing and mutual masturbation to genital sexual behaviors including oral sex, intercourse, and anal sex (Paul et al., 2000). Broadening research to examine the context and full spectrum of sex behaviors of adolescents is theoretically important to the development of effective education programs and clinical interventions (Whitaker, Miller, & Clark, 2000), as some adolescents may use oral sex as a substitution for intercourse by defining oral sex as "not having sex" (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999).

Awareness of the prevalence of casual sexual relationships is just beginning to emerge in empirical literature, as well as in popular discourse. Parents, policymakers, and researchers have begun to ask about the nature of these relationships. This article investigates sexual behaviors in context to identify the nature of college students' casual sexual relationships and their link with well-being and interpersonal behaviors.

### *Gender Differences and Casual Sex*

There is abundant evidence that gender is an important factor in casual sex participation, as males have consistently been found to have significantly more casual sex partners than females (Buss, 1988; Hill, 2002). In their sexual relationships, late adolescent males and females both state that emotional investment is a priority (Hill). For females, however, emotional investment is far more important, and sexual intercourse is often rewarding in contexts that command intimacy and emotional commitment (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Hill). Females tend to engage in sex behaviors with partners when they believe that by doing so, they are meeting their partner's needs and are providing nurturance and comfort (Hill).

Females may comply and engage in sexual behavior with a casual sex partner if they believe or want the relationship to evolve into a new romance (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Traditional gender roles may foster such sexual compliance, as many females believe that it is their responsibility to be responsive to males' sexual desire (Impett & Peplau). Females tend to have more restrictive attitudes toward casual sex (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). They are often more partner- or relationship-conscious and may romanticize their partners even when they do not know them well (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Gilligan, 1982). It is this attribution or relational perception that may lead them to engage in sexual behavior with a partner before a relationship is established. Impett & Peplau found when males comply with sex in a casual relationship, their motivation is often to increase their sexual experience, peer status, or popularity. On the other hand, females were more likely to comply with sex in a casual relationship to satisfy their partner or to increase intimacy in a potential relationship.

### *Love Styles and Casual Sex*

Individuals appear to have a variety of styles or approaches to relationships. Lee (1988) developed a series of ethnographic studies to assess love relationships. Following qualitative analyses, Lee identified several love styles or approaches to interpersonal relationships: Eros (passionate love), Ludus (game-playing love), Storge (friendship love), Pragma (practical love), Mania (neurotic love), and Agape (altruistic love). These styles or approaches to relationships may influence the likelihood or risk of engaging in casual sexual relationships. Of particular interest are the Ludic and the Eros lovers.

Ludic lovers are in it for the game or conquest. They generally enter their romances with no intention of com-

mitment. They will frequently have several partners simultaneously and rarely approach their relationships seriously (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992; Lee, 1988). They are attracted to a variety of partners and enjoy sex in the absence of deep involvement. Individuals with a Ludic style thrive on attention and are often willing to take risks (Paul et al., 2000). Thus, it is expected that an individual who primarily approaches relationships with a Ludic style would engage in numerous casual sex unions.

Eros is often described as passionate love, being struck by Cupid's arrow, or immediately falling deeply in love at first sight. The Eros lover possesses a definite idealized preference of the physical qualities of the romantic partner (Lee, 1988). He or she will typically experience powerful physical and sexual attraction for the desired partner early in the relationship. Although sex and passion are primary, the Eros lover is sensuous rather than promiscuous. Those who endorse an Eros style would also likely engage in casual sex relationships; however, the meaning of the relationship is likely different than that of the Ludic lover. Where the Ludic lover engages in sex for physical pleasure, the Eros lover does so with the expectation of emotional intimacy.

### *Psychological Functioning and Casual Sex*

Buss (1989) suggested that vulnerability may increase the likelihood of females engaging in casual sex, yet surprisingly, few investigations have examined the association between psychological functioning and casual sex. While there is some research that focuses on sexual behavior in adolescent romantic relationships (Abma & Sonenstein, 2001; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), research is especially limited on examining college students' sexual behaviors in casual sex relationships (see Paul et al., 2000, and Feldman et al., 1999, for exceptions). Only a few studies have investigated psychological differences in functioning among non-virgin adolescents (see Grello, et al., 2003, and Paul et al., 2000, for exceptions). Those studies provide evidence of differences not only between virgin and non-virgin individuals, but also within those who are sexually active.

Using longitudinal data of virgins who had never dated, Grello and colleagues (2003) found that adolescents who transitioned one year later to romantic sex, but not to casual sex, did not appear significantly different in terms of depressive symptoms, delinquent behaviors, and victimization from those adolescents who had maintained their virgin status. However, adolescents who transitioned to casual sexual relationships during the year reported more symptoms of depression, participated in more delinquent behaviors, and were exposed to more physical violence. This finding was especially pronounced among younger adolescents. Interestingly, the constellation of problem behaviors, although exacerbated following transition to sexual intercourse, existed *prior* to transition while the adolescents were still virgins (Grello et al., 2003). In other words, sexual intercourse in the context of an emotionally committed relationship was not found to be associated

with problematic behavior or functioning, but casual sex was associated with problematic functioning, and the problems existed before the adolescents ever engaged in sexual intercourse. Sexual behaviors have been strongly linked with depression, especially in younger females; accordingly, depressive symptoms may be a salient factor, especially for females who engage in casual sex (Welsh, Grello, & Harper, 2003).

In a similar study, Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) examined the relationship between psychological functioning and sexual behaviors. They found that college students with a history of casual sex had lower levels of self-esteem than college students who had been involved in romantic sexual relationships or who had no sexual experiences. They also found that individuals who had participated in casual sex relationships experienced significant guilt associated with their casual sexual encounters and suggested that feelings of guilt may further exacerbate feelings of low self-esteem (Paul et al., 2000). It is possible that sexual experiences in a romantic context may serve as a forum for the development of healthy sexual attitudes and relational behaviors, whereas the meaning and effects of sex in a relationship without commitment may be quite different.

These studies showed that the typical dichotomous view of “did they” or “didn’t they” is limited and fails to take into account the context of the couple. Couple members often have differing sexual histories and expectations in their relationships; therefore, research needs to address the social and psychological context in which sex occurs, not just whether or not an individual has had sex (Whitaker et al., 2000). In other words, not all sexual relationships or encounters are alike. There appear to be distinctions between casual sex and romantic sex. Further disentanglement may reveal even more differentiation. For example, sex with a stranger may be very different than sex with a friend.

### *Alcohol Use and Casual Sex*

Alcohol consumption appears to have a direct link with casual sex. The relationship seems to be linear in that the more alcohol is consumed, the more the probability of a casual sex encounter increases (Leigh & Schafer, 1993). Moreover, when it comes to the risky combination of sex and alcohol, gender makes little difference; males and females are more likely to engage in casual sex behaviors when alcohol is involved (Cooper & Orcutt, 1997; Testa & Collins, 1997). Besides lowering sexual inhibitions, consuming alcohol increases perceptions of attraction to members of the opposite sex, further strengthening the likelihood of casual sexual encounters (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Jones, Jones, Thomas, & Piper, 2003; Paul et al., 2000).

In sum, low self-esteem, intoxication, relational style, (Paul et al., 2000), and symptoms of depression (Grello et al., 2003) may be factors that increase the probability for some individuals to engage in casual sex.

### *Infidelity*

Heterosexual college students’ romantic relationships are

typically characterized by mutual expectations for emotional and sexual fidelity (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a). Adolescents and emerging adults appear to value fidelity, regardless of their own sexual experiences, and to define infidelity with a range of behaviors that include talking, kissing, and intercourse with another person outside of the partnership (Grello, Woody, & Welsh, 2002). Sexual betrayal can be devastating to individuals who value exclusivity because they may experience the violation of trust and loyalty in addition to the loss of the partner (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a; Welsh et al., 2003). The betrayed partner often experiences feelings of anger, sadness, and depression. He or she may feel inadequate and unattractive and blame him/herself for the partner’s betrayal. The unfaithful partner may also experience an array of negative affect, including feelings of guilt and confusion over violating personal and societal values, that may contribute to some depressive symptoms (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b).

### *Research Hypotheses*

The purpose of this article was to identify factors and circumstances associated with engaging in casual sex and to examine the link between casual sex and depressive symptoms and infidelity. We investigated the following hypotheses:

1. We expect factors such as gender, age of first intercourse, satisfaction of first sex experience, number of sexual partners in the previous year, and substance use to be associated with casual sex behavior among young adults. Moreover, we expect the context in which couple members meet and partners’ relationship expectations will predict the types of sexual behaviors engaged in during the casual sex relationship.

2. The Ludic lover is hypothesized to enjoy sex without emotional involvement, whereas the Eros lover’s approach is driven by passion (Lee, 1988). Therefore, we expect the game-playing love style, Ludus, will be associated with engaging in casual sex and the passionate, Eros, to engage primarily in sex in romantic relationships. We expect males will be higher in Ludus aspects than females, and we expect females will endorse more Eros aspects than males. Those who are Ludus are likely to conceptualize the casual encounter as a casual sexual encounter, whereas the other love styles, particularly Eros, will likely conceptualize the encounter as the beginning of a new romance. We also expect those with a higher Ludus orientation will be more willing to engage in future casual sex relationships than those with other relational styles.

3. Based on previous research, we expect depressive symptomatology will be associated with engaging in casual sex (Grello et al., 2003). Specifically, we predict females with higher levels of depressive symptoms will be more likely to engage in casual sex than females with fewer symptoms. However, we predict the converse for college males. In addition, we believe the nature of the first sexual relationship and number of sexual partners in

the past year will also be associated with depressive symptoms. We expect those who have high levels of depression will regret that they engaged in casual sex more than those with less pathology. Gender differences will be examined.

4. Infidelity is a specific context where casual sex encounters may occur. We expect infidelity to be common among college students. We predict the sexual behaviors in an unfaithful context will be less affectionate than their romantic counterparts. We also expect that individuals who cheat on their romantic partners will regret their casual sex relationships more.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were a sample of 404 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Data for this study was collected over two semesters, the fall of 2001 and the fall of 2003. All respondents were given course credit for participation. Students who chose to participate were instructed to go to one of several centralized locations for administration of the questionnaire. Included in each questionnaire packet was an information sheet describing the purpose and nature of the study. To protect student identification and comply with IRB recommendations, we informed participants that participation in the study would imply their consent. They were also told that they could discontinue the questionnaire at any time without penalty should they find any question offensive.

Excluded from analyses were 16 non-traditional students (6 married, 10 over the age of 21) and 5 students who reported engaging in sexual behaviors exclusively with same-gendered partners, because we did not have a large enough sample to examine this group of individuals. The remaining sample ( $N = 382$ ) was comprised of 33.7% males and 67.3% females. The majority of the sample was freshman (71.2%) or sophomores (18.6%), with fewer juniors (7.9%) and seniors (2.4%). Eighty-two percent of the participants were between the ages of 18-19, and 18% were between the ages of 20-21. Participants were 88.2% White/non-Hispanic, 6.6% African American, 1.1% Hispanic, 2.4% Asian, and 1.9% other. Participants were predominantly Christian; 29.4% identified themselves as Baptist, 31% Protestant, 14.2% Catholic, 4.2% Church of Christ, 13.1% Other, with 7.3% reporting no religious affiliation and less than 1% identifying as Jewish.

### Measures

We collected general information regarding participants' age, racial background, religious affiliation, educational status, dating status, and history of sexual activity (age of transition, relationship with partner, sexual behaviors, and contraception history). Participants were also asked about their romantic and casual sexual experiences.

*Love styles.* Participants' love styles were assessed with a 36-item revised and abbreviated version (Levesque,

1993) of the Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). The scale was designed to measure attitudes toward love based on Lee's (1988) typology. Some sample items include, "We have the right chemistry between us" (Eros), "I try to keep her/him uncertain about my commitment to her" (Ludus), "I expect to always be friends with the people I date" (Storge), "I consider what a person is going to become in life before I commit myself to her/him" (Pragma), "I would rather suffer myself than let my girlfriend/boyfriend suffer" (Agape), and "When she/he doesn't pay attention to me, I feel sick all over" (Mania). Each of the six subscales consists of 6 items rated on a 6-point Likert response format, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Aggregate means were calculated to produce a score on each of the subscales. Reliability was acceptable, with coefficient alphas ranging from .73 to .90.

*Sexual behaviors.* The Sexual Behaviors Questionnaire (SBQ) was designed by our research lab to investigate sexual behaviors in romantic relationships and was modified for this study to include sexual behaviors with casual partners. The SBQ is comprised of several frequency ranges, checklists, and open-ended questions that ask about general sexual behaviors and contraceptive use.

Lifetime sexual behaviors were assessed by asking participants, "Have you ever engaged in sexual intercourse (that is, penis in the vagina)?" and "Have you ever engaged in oral sex (that is, mouth on vagina or penis)?" Alcohol and casual sex use was assessed by asking, "Think about the last time you had sex (that is, intercourse, oral sex, and/or anal sex) with someone whom you did not consider a romantic partner. . . Had either you or your partner been drinking alcohol or using drugs when you had sex?"

Other items assessing infidelity behaviors ("Have you ever cheated on your current girlfriend/boyfriend?"), casual sex behaviors ("How many different people have you had sexual intercourse with, who you did not consider a girlfriend/boyfriend at the time?"), and history of sexual behaviors, including age and context of casual and first sexual intercourse experiences ("Who was this person?"), description of first intercourse (9-point scale from *disaster* to *awesome*), and expectations for the relationship (*thought it was the beginning of a romance* to *thought it would be a one-time thing*) were administered.

Items also included questions about sexual behaviors specifically in the context of the current romantic relationship and the most recent casual sex relationship, including the frequency with which the individual engaged in the behaviors rated on a 6-point behavioral frequency scale, ranging from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*51 or more times*). For example, items assessing sexual behaviors in the romantic relationship of the participant included, "In the last month (30 days), how many times have you engaged in light petting (that is, intimate touching with clothes on) with your partner?" and "In the last month (30 days), how many times have you engaged in intercourse (that is, penis in the vagina) with your partner?" For casual sexual relations, participants were asked, "In your most recent casual relationship,

how many times have you engaged in light petting with your partner?" and "In your most recent casual relationship, how many times have you engaged in intercourse with your partner?" Analyses of the frequency of romantic sexual behaviors, with principal-components factor analysis using Varimax rotation, produced two factors for romantic and casual sexual behaviors. Factor one, affectionate behaviors, included holding hands, hugging, kissing, and massage ( $\alpha = .86$  and  $.92$ , respectively). Factor two, genital behaviors, included fondling without clothes, oral sex, and genital intercourse ( $\alpha = .87$  and  $.87$ , respectively).

**Depressive symptoms.** We measured depressive symptoms using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D was developed as a self-report instrument to measure depressive symptoms in the general population. Higher values signify more symptoms of depression. A score of 0-14 has been found to be equivalent to the levels of depressive symptoms in the general population; a score of 15-36 has been found to indicate the individual is "at risk" for depression; and a score of 37 or higher has been found equivalent to scores found in clinically depressed individuals. Respondents were presented with a list of feelings or behaviors and were asked to indicate how frequently they might have experienced the particular feeling or behavior during the past seven days. Items included, "I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me"; "I thought my life had been a failure"; "I felt depressed"; and "I had crying spells." Responses ranged from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*5-7 days*). Reliability analysis performed on this scale revealed a Cronbach's alpha of  $.93$ .

## RESULTS

### Individual Factors Associated With Casual Sex

**Gender differences.** Seventy-six percent ( $N = 291$ ) of the sample reported having engaged in intercourse, oral sex, or anal sex, and more than half (53%) of those who were sexually experienced reported having engaged in sex with a partner with whom they were not involved in a romantic relationship. Consistent with our expectations, significantly more males (52%) than females (36%) reported having engaged in casual sex relationships ( $\chi^2 [1] = 8.863, p = .003$ ).

**Age of first sex.** A series of analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to identify factors associated with casual sex. To examine the role of age of transition to first sexual intercourse, a 2 (gender) X 2 (ever have casual sex) ANOVA was performed with the age of first sex variable as the dependent variable. We found significant main effects for having engaged in casual sex ( $F [1, 243] = 19.260, p = .000$ ) and gender ( $F [1, 243] = 6.552, p = .011$ ). The interaction of gender and casual sex was not significant ( $F [1, 247] = .396, p = .530$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed that participants who reported engaging in casual sex reported having transitioned to sexual intercourse approximately one year earlier than those who did not

report having casual sex ( $F [1, 247] = 19.260, p = .000$ ). Females reported transitioning to sexual behavior approximately 6 months earlier than males ( $F [1, 247] = 6.552, p = .011$ ; see Table 1).

**Description of first sex experience and casual sex.** To examine the relationship between the participants' description of their first sexual intercourse experiences (*disaster* to *awesome*) and casual sex, a 2 (ever have casual sex) X 2 (gender) ANOVA was performed. There was a non-significant trend indicating that those who had engaged in casual sex described their first sexual intercourse experience more negatively than those who only engaged in romantic sex ( $F [2, 237] = 3.608, p = .059$ ). There was a significant main effect for gender ( $F [1, 237] = 5.334, p = .022$ ), and the interaction of gender and casual sex was significant ( $F [1, 237] = 5.778, p = .017$ ). Follow-up tests indicated females who reported having engaged in casual sex described their first intercourse experience more negatively than males or females who reported no casual sex experiences (see Table 1).

**Number of sexual partners.** To examine the role of number of sex partners, a 2 (gender) X 2 (ever have casual sex) ANOVA was performed with the number of sexual partners in the past year as the dependent variable. Significant main effects were found for having engaged in casual sex ( $F [1, 254] = 31.609, p = .000$ ). Gender ( $F [1, 254] = .263, p = .609$ ) and the interaction of casual sex and gender ( $F [1, 254] = 1.556, p = .213$ ) were not significant. Pairwise comparisons revealed those who reported having engaged in casual sex reported more sexual partners in the past year than those who did not report having casual sex.

**Alcohol, drug use, and casual sex.** Alcohol and drug use were also common factors, with 65% of those who engaged in casual sex reporting using alcohol or drugs before or during their most recent encounter. More than one third of respondents reported meeting their most recent casual sex partner at a party or in a bar, almost 18% met at a school event, 2% met on the internet, and more than 41% met through other means.

**Table 1. Means and Standard Errors of Factors Associated With Casual Sex Status and Gender**

	Mean	SE
<u>Age at first intercourse</u>		
Casual sex status		
No casual sex	18.11 <sup>a</sup>	.164
Yes casual sex	17.20 <sup>a</sup>	.126
Gender		
Male	17.92 <sup>b</sup>	.174
Female	17.39 <sup>b</sup>	.112
<u>Description of first sexual intercourse</u>		
No casual sex		
Male	6.000	.530
Female	6.035	.276
Yes casual sex		
Male	6.189 <sup>c</sup>	.349
Female	4.425 <sup>c</sup>	.284

<sup>a</sup>  $p = .000$ , <sup>b</sup>  $p = .011$ , <sup>c</sup>  $p = .017$

### Nature of the Casual Sex Relationship

*Context of how participants knew their partners.* Participants reported that approximately 37% of their most recent casual sex experiences were with strangers or partners whom they did not know well, and 63% of those who reported engaging in casual sex reported their most recent casual sex partner was a friend.

*Expectations for the casual sex encounter.* Males and females significantly differed on their expectations of the outcome of the casual encounter ( $\chi^2 [3] = 13.332, p = .004$ ). Specifically, 18% of females and only 3% of males believed that their most recent casual sex encounter was “the beginning of a romance.” One third of males and 16% of females thought the experience was “the beginning of a casual sex relationship.” Over half of all males (57%) and females (52%) thought their most recent casual sex encounter was “just a one-time thing.” Seven percent of males and 14% of females thought that their most recent casual sex experience was “experimentation.”

*Sexual behaviors within casual sex relationships.* To examine the association between sexual behavior and the relationship to the casual sex partner, a 4 (casual sex partner) X 2 (gender) MANOVA was performed on the dependent variables affectionate and genital sexual behaviors. With the use of the Wilks’ criterion, the combined sexual behavior dependent variables were significantly associated with relationship to casual sex partner ( $F [6, 278] = 2.522, p = .022$ ). Gender ( $F [2, 139] = 1.864, p = .159$ ) and the interaction of relationship to the casual sex partner and gender ( $F [6, 278] = .415, p = .869$ ) were not significant. Tests of between-subjects effects revealed significant differences between the relationship to the casual sex partner and affectionate sexual behaviors ( $F [3, 147] = 4.846, p = .003$ ) and genital sexual behaviors ( $F [3, 147] = 2.793, p = .043$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed that those who reported their casual sex partner was a friend reported engaging in more affectionate sexual behaviors than those participants whose partner was a friend of a friend ( $p = .001$ ) or someone they had just met ( $p = .024$ ). Those who reported their casual sex partner was a friend also reported engaging in more genital sexual behaviors than those participants whose partner was a friend of a friend ( $p = .009$ ; see Table 2).

To examine the association between sexual behaviors and relationship expectations, a 4 (expectations) X 2 (gender) MANOVA was performed on the dependent variables affectionate and genital sexual behaviors. With the use of the Wilks’ criterion, a significant multivariate main effect was found for relationship expectation and the dependent variables ( $F [6, 278] = 2.469, p = .024$ ). Gender was not significant ( $F [2, 139] = 1.585, p = .209$ ). The interaction of relationship expectations and gender was not significant ( $F [6, 278] = .672, p = .673$ ). Tests of between-subjects effects revealed significant differences between relationship expectation and affectionate sexual behaviors ( $F [3, 147] = 3.861, p = .011$ ) and genital sexual behaviors ( $F [3, 147] = 2.900, p = .037$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed

**Table 2. Means and Standard Errors for Frequency of Sexual Behaviors with Relationship to Casual Partner and Expectations of the Casual Sex Relationship**

	Mean Sex Behavior	SE
Affectionate sexual behavior		
Relationship to casual sex partner		
Just met	8.461 <sup>a</sup>	1.149
Friend of a friend	6.559 <sup>b</sup>	1.265
Seen around before	9.600	2.115
A friend	11.432 <sup>a, b</sup>	.620
Expectations		
New love relationship	13.821 <sup>c</sup>	2.202
New casual sex relationship	12.346 <sup>d</sup>	1.015
“One-time thing”	8.946	.656
Experimentation	8.654 <sup>c, d</sup>	1.666
Genital sexual behavior		
Relationship to casual sex partner		
Just met	4.930	.790
Friend of a friend	3.764 <sup>e</sup>	.870
Seen around before	6.400	1.453
A friend	6.338 <sup>e</sup>	.426
Expectations		
New love relationship	6.321	1.488
New casual sex relationship	7.382 <sup>f</sup>	.686
“One-time thing”	5.006 <sup>f</sup>	.443
Experimentation	5.423	1.125

<sup>a</sup>  $p = .024$ , <sup>b</sup>  $p = .001$ , <sup>c</sup>  $p = .036$ , <sup>d</sup>  $p = .006$ , <sup>e</sup>  $p = .009$ , <sup>f</sup>  $p = .004$

those who believed the encounter was the beginning of a new romance engaged in significantly more affectionate sexual behaviors than those who thought the encounter was “just a one-time thing” ( $p = .036$ ). Those who believed the encounter was the beginning of a casual sex relationship reported having engaged in more affectionate sexual behaviors ( $p = .006$ ) and genital sexual behaviors ( $p = .004$ ) with their partner than those who believed the encounter was “just a one-time thing” (see Table 2).

*Casual sex and love styles.* Respondents were classified into three sexual behavior groups: virgins (those who had never had oral sex or sexual intercourse), romantic sex (those who had had oral sex or intercourse with a romantic partner only), and casual sex (those who had had oral sex or intercourse with at least one casual partner). Twenty-four percent of the sample fell into the virgin group, 36% into the romantic sex group, and 40% were classified as engaging in casual sex. Chi square analyses revealed significant gender differences ( $\chi^2 [2] = 8.735, p = .013$ ). A greater percentage of females (40%) than males (27%) were classified in the romantic sex group, and more males (50%) than females (35%) were classified in the casual sex group. Percentages for males (24%) and females (25%) in the virgin group did not differ.

To examine the association of love styles and casual sexual behaviors, a 3 (sex behaviors group) X 2 (gender) MANOVA was performed on the dependent variables Eros, Ludus, Mania, Storge, Pragma, and Agape. The Wilks’ criterion indicated a significant multivariate main effect for the combined love style dependent variables with casual sex ( $F$

[12, 410] = 2.543,  $p = .003$ ) and gender ( $F [6, 205] = 3.706$ ,  $p = .002$ ). The interaction of casual sex and gender was not significant ( $F [12, 410] = 1.436$ ,  $p = .147$ ). Tests of between-subjects effects revealed significant differences between sex behavior groups and Eros ( $F [2, 210] = 3.404$ ,  $p = .035$ ) and Ludus ( $F [2, 210] = 5.903$ ,  $p = .003$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed those in the virgin group endorsed significantly lower levels of Eros when they were compared to the romantic sex group ( $p = .010$ ) and slightly lower levels of Eros than those in the casual sex group ( $p = .082$ ). Those in the casual sex group endorsed higher levels of Ludus when they were compared to those in the virgin group ( $p = .008$ ) and the romantic sex group ( $p = .004$ ). Tests of between-subjects effects showed significant differences between gender and Ludus ( $F [2, 210] = 8.015$ ,  $p = .005$ ). Males endorsed higher levels of Ludus than females ( $p = .005$ ). No other gender differences were found (see Table 3).

To examine the role of love styles and the expectations of the casual sex encounter, a 4 (expectation) X 2 (gender) MANOVA was performed on the dependent variables Eros, Ludus, Mania, Storge, Pragma, and Agape. Use of the Wilks' criterion indicated significant multivariate main effects for the combined love style dependent variables and expectations ( $F [18, 198] = 2.066$ ,  $p = .008$ ). Gender was not significant ( $F [6, 70] = 1.499$ ,  $p = .191$ ), and the interaction of love style and gender was not significant ( $F [18, 198] = .818$ ,  $p = .678$ ). Tests of between-subjects effects revealed significant differences between expectations and Eros ( $F [3, 75] = 2.916$ ,  $p = .040$ ), Storge ( $F [3, 75] = 4.867$ ,  $p = .004$ ), Mania ( $F [3, 75] = 3.788$ ,  $p = .014$ ), and Agape ( $F [3, 75] = 3.786$ ,  $p = .014$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed that those who believed the casual sex encounter was the beginning of a new romance, rather than just a one-time thing, experimentation, or the beginning of a new casual sex liaison, endorsed higher levels of Eros (passion), Storge (friendship love), Agape (altruistic love), and Mania (obsessive love) orientations (see Table 3).

To examine the willingness to engage in future casual sex unions, a 2 (would you do it again if you had the opportunity?) X 2 (gender) MANOVA was performed on the dependent variables Eros, Ludus, Mania, Storge, Pragma, and Agape. With the use of the Wilks' criterion, significant main effects were indicated for the combined love style dependent variables and future casual sex ( $F [6, 72] = 3.254$ ,  $p = .007$ ) and gender ( $F [6, 72] = 2.274$ ,  $p = .046$ ). The interaction of future casual sex and gender was not significant ( $F [6, 72] = .750$ ,  $p = .611$ ). Specifically, tests of between-subjects effects showed that those who stated that they would engage in casual sex in the future if given the opportunity were more likely to endorse a higher Ludus orientation ( $F [1, 77] = 4.710$ ,  $p = .033$ ). Males who reported that they would likely engage in casual sex in the future if given the opportunity were more likely to endorse a higher Ludus orientation ( $F [1, 77] = 8.495$ ,  $p = .005$ ; see Table 3).

### **Depressive Symptoms and Casual Sex**

To examine the relationship of depressive symptoms and

casual sex, a 3 (sex behavior group) X 2 (gender) ANOVA was performed with depressive symptoms as the dependent variable. No main effects were identified for sex behavior group ( $F [2, 376] = 2.208$ ,  $p = .111$ ) or gender ( $F [1, 376] = .629$ ,  $p = .428$ ); however, analyses revealed a significant interaction for group and gender ( $F [2, 376] = 4.856$ ,  $p = .008$ ). Follow-up pairwise comparisons revealed males who reported the lowest levels of depressive symptoms and females who reported the highest of depressive symptomatology were the most likely to be classified in the casual sex group (see Table 4).

*Depressive symptoms and first sexual intercourse partner.* To examine the association of depressive symptoms and the relationship status of the first sexual intercourse partner, a 5 (relationship to first partner) X 2 (gender) ANOVA was employed with depressive symptoms as the dependent variable. No main effects were found for relationship status of first sex partner ( $F [4, 241] = 2.142$ ,  $p = .076$ ). Significant main effects were found for gender ( $F [1, 241] = 5.457$ ,  $p = .020$ ). The interaction of relationship to first intercourse partner and gender was significant ( $F [4, 241] = 2.910$ ,  $p = .022$ ). Follow-up tests indicated females whose first sexual intercourse partner was someone whom they did not know well reported the most symptoms of depression. Males who reported their first intercourse partner was "a friend of a friend" reported the fewest symptoms of depression (see Table 4).

*Depressive symptoms and number of partners.* To examine the association of depressive symptoms and the number of sex partners during the past year, a 6 (number of sex partners) X 2 (gender) ANOVA was performed with depressive symptoms as the dependent variable. Only participants who were non-virgins reported the number of sex partners during the past year; thus, virgins were excluded. No main effects were found for number of partners in the past year ( $F [5, 249] = 1.542$ ,  $p = .177$ ). There was a significant main effect for gender ( $F [1, 249] = 12.313$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The interaction of gender and number of sexual partners during the past year was also significant ( $F [4, 249] = 2.541$ ,  $p = .040$ ). Pairwise comparisons suggested that for females, as the number of sexual partners during the past year increased, symptoms of depression also increased. Female participants who had the greatest number of partners had the highest symptoms of depressive pathology (see Table 4).

*Depressive symptoms and regret.* To examine the association of feelings of regret following the casual sex encounter and depressive symptoms, a 2 (regret) X 2 (gender) ANOVA was performed with depressive symptoms as the dependent variable. Significant main effects were found for feelings of regret ( $F [1, 136] = 11.002$ ,  $p = .001$ ). No main effects for gender ( $F [1, 136] = 1.505$ ,  $p = .222$ ) were revealed, and the interaction of gender and regret was not significant ( $F [1, 136] = 2.956$ ,  $p = .088$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed that those who engaged in casual sex and regretted having the encounter had more symptoms of depression than those who did not regret the encounter

**Table 3. Means and Standard Errors for Love Styles and Sexual Behavior Group, Expectations, and Willingness to Engage in Future Casual Sex**

	Means			Means	
	Love Style	SE		Love Style	SE
<b>Sexual behavior group</b>					
Eros			Expectations (cont.)		
Virgin	4.968 <sup>a</sup>	.297	New casual sex relationship	5.026 <sup>g</sup>	.371
Romantic sex partner	5.906 <sup>a</sup>	.204	"One-time thing"	4.811 <sup>h</sup>	.266
Casual sex partner	5.566	.170	Experimentation	3.719 <sup>i</sup>	.652
Ludus			Pragma		
Virgin	2.286 <sup>b</sup>	.247	New love relationship	4.318	.703
Romantic sex partner	2.409 <sup>c</sup>	.169	New casual sex relationship	4.142	.411
Casual sex partner	3.047 <sup>b, c</sup>	.141	"One-time thing"	4.285	.295
Storge			Experimentation	3.354	.723
Virgin	5.142	.311	Mania		
Romantic sex partner	4.742	.213	New love relationship	6.227 <sup>l, k, i</sup>	.650
Casual sex partner	4.968	.177	New casual sex relationship	3.760 <sup>j</sup>	.380
Pragma			"One-time thing"	4.136 <sup>j</sup>	.273
Virgin	4.119	.325	Experimentation	3.875 <sup>i</sup>	.668
Romantic sex partner	3.790	.223	Agape		
Casual sex partner	4.161	.186	New love relationship	7.106 <sup>m, n, o</sup>	.642
Mania			New casual sex relationship	5.416 <sup>m</sup>	.376
Virgin	3.667	.292	"One-time thing"	5.105 <sup>n</sup>	.270
Romantic sex partner	4.010	.200	Experimentation	4.188 <sup>o</sup>	.661
Casual sex partner	4.238	.167	Willingness to engage in future casual sex		
Agape			Eros		
Virgin	5.052	.315	Yes	5.612	.311
Romantic sex partner	5.539	.216	No	5.702	.239
Casual sex partner	5.280	.180	Ludus		
Expectations			Yes	3.546 <sup>p</sup>	.287
Eros			No	2.760 <sup>p</sup>	.220
New love relationship	7.178 <sup>d, e, f</sup>	.630	Storge		
New casual sex relationship	5.311 <sup>d</sup>	.368	Yes	5.195	.331
"One-time thing"	5.726 <sup>e</sup>	.265	No	4.920	.254
Experimentation	4.750 <sup>f</sup>	.648	Pragma		
Ludus			Yes	3.594	.324
New love relationship	2.420	.613	No	4.350	.248
New casual sex relationship	2.982	.358	Mania		
"One-time thing"	3.354	.258	Yes	4.079	.325
Experimentation	2.542	.631	No	4.282	.249
Storge			Agape		
New love relationship	7.030 <sup>g, h, i</sup>	.634	Yes	5.368	.328
			No	5.221	.251

<sup>a</sup>  $p = .010$ , <sup>b</sup>  $p = .008$ , <sup>c</sup>  $p = .004$ , <sup>d</sup>  $p = .012$ , <sup>e</sup>  $p = .037$ , <sup>f</sup>  $p = .009$ , <sup>g</sup>  $p = .008$ , <sup>h</sup>  $p = .002$ , <sup>i</sup>  $p = .001$ , <sup>j</sup>  $p = .002$ , <sup>k</sup>  $p = .004$ , <sup>l</sup>  $p = .014$ , <sup>m</sup>  $p = .026$ , <sup>n</sup>  $p = .005$ , <sup>o</sup>  $p = .002$ , <sup>p</sup>  $p = .033$

(see Table 5).

### Infidelity

Twenty-one percent of those who reported having engaged in casual sex reported having a romantic partner at the time of their most recent casual sex encounter. No significant gender differences were found for infidelity ( $\chi^2 [1] = .045$ ,  $p = .832$ ).

To examine the association of sexual behaviors and infidelity, a 2 (infidelity) X 2 (gender) MANOVA was performed on the dependent variables affectionate and genital sexual behaviors. With the use of the Wilks' criterion, significant multivariate main effects were indicated for the combined sexual behavior dependent variables and infidelity ( $F [2, 144] = 3.401$ ,  $p = .036$ ). Gender ( $F [2, 143] = .972$ ,  $p = .135$ ) and the interaction infidelity and gender ( $F$

[2,143] = 1.000,  $p = .989$ ) were not significant. Tests of between-subjects effects revealed significant differences in affectionate sexual behaviors with infidelity ( $F [1, 147] = 4.446$ ,  $p = .037$ ); there were no significant differences for genital sexual behaviors. Follow-up tests showed that those who were in a romantic relationship at the time of the casual encounter reported having engaged in fewer affectionate sexual behaviors with the casual sex partner than those who were not cheating (see Table 6).

To examine regret of engaging in casual sex while in a committed romance, a 2 (romantic relationship) X 2 (gender) ANOVA was performed on the dependent variable "did you regret having sex with this person?" There were significant main effects for romantic relationship and regret ( $F [1, 135] = 5.477$ ,  $p = .021$ ). Gender ( $F [1, 135] = 3.359$ ,  $p = .069$ ) and the interaction of gender and infidelity ( $F [1, 135] = 2.529$ ,  $p = .114$ ) were not significant.

**Table 4. Means and Standard Errors for Depressive Symptoms by Gender**

	Gender	Mean Dep. Symp.	SE
<b>Sex behavior group<sup>a</sup></b>			
Virgin	Male	14.107	1.916
	Female	12.952	1.277
Romantic partner sex	Male	17.471	1.739
	Female	15.825	.999
Casual sex	Male	13.079	1.277
	Female	18.637	1.063
<b>Relationship with 1<sup>st</sup> sex partner<sup>b</sup></b>			
Romantic	Male	14.537	1.426
	Female	16.639	.874
Friend	Male	12.300	3.315
	Female	18.600	2.707
Casual Acquaintance	Male	7.750	3.706
	Female	23.500	4.279
Just met	Male	14.000	3.706
	Female	33.250	5.241
Other	Male	29.000	10.483
	Female	27.000	10.483
<b>Number of partners in the last year<sup>c</sup></b>			
1	Male	10.750	2.633
	Female	15.111	2.027
2-3	Male	16.250	1.755
	Female	16.422	1.156
4-7	Male	11.636	2.245
	Female	18.382	1.420
8-15	Male	15.167	4.300
	Female	20.636	3.176
16-28	Male	10.000	7.447
	Female	45.000	10.532
29+	Male	17.000	10.532
	Female	-	-

<sup>a</sup>  $p = .008$ , <sup>b</sup>  $p = .022$ , <sup>c</sup>  $p = .040$

Follow-up pairwise comparisons indicated those who were involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the casual sex liaison were more likely to report that they regretted the casual sex experience when they were compared to those who did not have a romance at the time of the encounter. We investigated the relationship of infidelity and depressive symptoms; however, no differences were found.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify factors and circumstances associated with engaging in sexual behavior

**Table 5. Means and Standard Error for Depressive Symptoms and Relationship With First Sex Partner and Regret of Casual Sex**

	Mean Dep. Symp.	SE
<b>Regret having casual sex</b>		
No	13.097**	1.271
Yes	19.833**	1.584

\*\*  $p = .001$

with a casual sex partner, as well as to examine the link between casual sex and depressive symptoms and infidelity. We identified individual factors associated with casual sex, examined the role of depressive symptoms and casual sex, and investigated the role of infidelity and casual sexual behavior. Understanding the relationship context and the full spectrum of sexual behaviors in which college students engage is important to help educators to develop more effective programs. Our data suggest that casual sexual encounters are frequently associated with risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use. Furthermore, by disentangling romantic sex and casual sex, we provided evidence that casual sex, rather than romantic sex, is associated with symptoms of depression for females. Moreover, we identified a pattern linking early transition to intercourse with depressive symptoms and casual sex behaviors.

Casual sex was a fairly common occurrence among the participants in this sample; more than half of the sexually experienced participants reported engaging in sex with partners with whom they were not involved in a romantic relationship. The majority of males and females who engaged in sex with a casual partner knew that the encounter was casual and therefore had no expectations other than a physical interlude. Even those who felt the sexual encounter would lead to a more committed relationship still described the encounter as casual rather than romantic when a relationship did not evolve. Consistent with previous research (Buss, 1988, 1989; Hill, 2002), our data supports the contention that males (52% of those who reported engaging in casual sex) are involved in more casual sex experiences than females (36%). Thus, gender plays a salient role in predicting casual sex encounters. For the most part, males and females entered casual sex unions fully aware the encounter was a casual sex

**Table 6. Means and Standard Error for Sexual Behaviors with Infidelity**

	Mean	SE
<b>Sexual Behaviors</b>		
<b>Affectionate sex behaviors</b>		
No Romantic Partner	10.699 <sup>a</sup>	.562
Yes Romantic Partner	8.124 <sup>a</sup>	1.084
<b>Genital sex behaviors</b>		
No Romantic Partner	5.842	.383
Yes Romantic Partner	5.363	.738

<sup>a</sup>  $p = .037$

encounter. Males and females in the sample did not expect a romantic relationship when they had sex in a casual context; they often expected the interlude to be either a “one-night stand” or the beginning of a casual sex relationship (i.e., a relationship void of emotional commitment). However, females (18%) were more likely than males (3%) to expect that the encounter would evolve into a romantic relationship. Nevertheless, fewer than one fifth of the females who had had casual sex experiences reported that they thought a romance might be imminent.

Casual sex appears to be a function of several factors associated with transition to first intercourse. Earlier transition may leave one more apt to engage in casual sex. We found that those who reported having casual sex began engaging in sex earlier than those who did not report a casual sex experience. The nature of the relationship with one’s first sexual intercourse partner was also associated with engaging in casual sex. When their first sexual partner was not a romantic partner, the participants in this sample were more likely to engage in more recent casual sex unions. Furthermore, there was a trend suggesting that those individuals who reported engaging in casual sexual relations also reported more negative first sexual experiences. This was especially true for females. Females who had had a casual sex encounter were less likely to have rated their first sexual intercourse experience as pleasurable. In our previous research of adolescent virgins (Grello et al., 2003), we found that symptoms of depression predicted transition to casual sex. Perhaps depressive symptoms negatively color the first sexual intercourse experience for some adolescents, leaving them less satisfied than adolescents who are more psychologically healthy. The mechanism of this link warrants further exploration.

In this sample, casual sex was associated with other lifestyle factors. Those who had had a casual sex experience reported more sexual partners than those who only engaged in sex with their romantic partners. We also found that casual sex in this sample was associated with other risk behaviors, as casual sex often occurred with drug and alcohol use. Given this evidence, it was not surprising that most students in this sample reported that they met their most recent casual sex partners in contexts that promote alcohol and drug use, such as parties and bars. This finding is consistent with the direct linear link between casual sex and alcohol identified by other researchers (e.g., Leigh & Schafer, 1993). Additionally, there was no evidence of gender difference in the association between casual sex and alcohol consumption (Cooper & Orcutt, 1997; Testa & Collins, 1997). Similarly, Træen & Lewin (1992) found a relationship between casual sex and lifestyle factors such as alcohol consumption when they examined casual sex among college students during spring break. The researchers found a relationship between casual sex and a context that promoted large quantities of alcohol consumption and the expectation of casual sex. Future research should focus on identifying the specific contexts that may promote this high-risk combination, such as membership in peer groups such as athletic

programs, fraternities, and sororities. Future research should examine the role alcohol and drugs play in sexual behavior within romantic relationships as well. The combination of context, alcohol, and expectations appears to be directly associated with engaging in casual sex.

We found that over one third of casual unions occurred with partners who were strangers or who the individual did not know well, rather than with partners who were emotionally close, such as opposite-sex friends. However, casual sex appears to occur most often between “friends.” When the partner was a friend, respondents reported engaging in more genital sexual behaviors (intimate touching, oral sex, and intercourse) than they did with partners who were acquaintances. They also engaged in significantly more affectionate sexual behaviors (kissing, hugging, holding hands, and massage) than they did with partners who were strangers or acquaintances. Casual sex relationships with opposite-sex friends may have a different meaning than when the partner is a stranger. It appears that these “friends with benefits” liaisons may be similar in some respects to romances. One of the differences we found between a casual sex relationships with a friend versus a stranger was the frequency of affectionate sexual behaviors. Behaviors such as kissing, holding hands, and hugging may be related to emotional intimacy. Perhaps it is not a fear of intimacy that prevents the relationship from being conceptualized as a romance, but rather, a problem with the commitment that is implied by a romance.

We found that the amount of affectionate and genital sexual behaviors was associated with individuals’ expectations for the relationships. When looking for more than just a “one-night stand,” participants seemed to engage in more affectionate and genital sexual behaviors. We found this significant for both the expectation of a romance and the expectation that the encounter was the beginning of a casual sex relationship. In the movie *Pretty Woman* (Milchan, Reuther, & Marshall, 1990), the prostitute portrayed by Julia Roberts explained to her client that any sexual behaviors he desired were acceptable except kissing. Kissing implied an emotional rather than physical link. Similarly, the more substance there is to a relationship, albeit casual or committed, the more affection is displayed between the partners. Thus, limiting research to “one-night stands” only captures a small portion of casual sex relations and fails to acknowledge casual sex relationships and “friends with benefits” relationships where intimacy may be present but commitment is noticeably absent. Future research should focus on further differentiation of the multitude of contexts of sexual behavior.

Engaging in casual sex relations may be a function of the lenses an individual uses when approaching sexual relationships. As we predicted, we found participants who reported Ludic (game-playing) approaches to interpersonal relationships were more likely to engage in sex with casual sex partners. Those who endorsed an Eros (passionate) style were more likely to be virgins or to engage in sexual activity only with their romantic partners. As expected, the males in this sample were more likely to

have a Ludus style, but we found no gender differences for the other five styles of love. Those with Eros, Agape, Mania, or Storge style all believed that their most recent casual sex encounter was the beginning of a romance. In other words, they did not think that the union was casual, a “one-night stand,” or sexual experimentation. Only those who endorsed a Ludus style reported that they would engage in sex with a casual sex partner in the future if given the opportunity.

Those who reported engaging in sex with casual sex partners also reported having more partners in the previous year, and 20% were involved in a different romantic relationship at the time of their most recent casual sex liaison. Those who were involved in a romantic relationship during their casual sex encounter reported participating in fewer affectionate behaviors with their casual sex partner than those who were not in a romance. Research on the impact of infidelity in non-marital relationships is limited; however, there is evidence that infidelity may be associated with depressive symptoms (Welsh et al., 2003). Although many respondents in this sample were unfaithful to their romantic partners, the sample was not large enough to examine the relationship. Given the adverse effects of infidelity identified in the marital literature (Treas & Gieson, 2000), it may be relevant to examine this behavior in college students' relationships.

The link between casual sex and psychological functioning is one of the most intriguing findings from this study. Females who reported the most depressive symptomatology and males who reported the fewest symptoms were the most likely to engage in casual sex. The association of casual sex and depressive symptoms in females is provocative and worthy of further investigation. Perhaps depressed females may be seeking external validation from sex. They may be maintaining a vicious depressive cycle by unconsciously engaging in sex in doomed relationships (Welsh et al., 2003). Possibly, these females' negative feelings of self-worth or isolation may increase their desire to be wanted by or intimate with another. Thus, if they sensed a potential romance would result from the encounter, they may have engaged in sexual behavior with a casual sex partner in an attempt to feel better, at least temporarily. Furthermore, the more depressive symptoms females reported, the more partners they had. We speculate this may be associated with either little sexual satisfaction or increased efforts to fill an internal void. Whatever the specific motivation to engage in casual sex, females who were depressed expressed regretting the casual sex encounter more often than males. It is not clear if feeling bad about the encounter increased depressive symptoms or if the depressive symptoms were reinforced by the regret. Future research should examine cognitive dissonance and symptoms of depression by looking at incongruencies between attitudes toward casual sex and actual casual sex behavior. If an individual is engaging in an activity she disapproves of, the cognitive dissonance could be associated with increased depression.

For males, the relationship between casual sex and depressive symptoms was very different: males who engaged in casual sex had the fewest depressive symptoms of any of our participants. The relationship between depressive symptoms and casual sexual behaviors may be associated in part with the tenets of evolutionary theory. Buss (1988, 1989) suggested that vulnerable women and attractive males would be especially susceptible to casual sex encounters. Males look for females who personify reproductive qualities for their permanent mates; however, at times they may engage in sexual behavior with females with whom they would not be emotionally committed, simply because they can. This may be particularly true for attractive or self-confident males who females theoretically perceive as having more available resources (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). We found partial empirical support for this supposition when we found that the psychologically healthier (or least depressed) males and the psychologically most distressed females were the most likely participants to be engaging in casual sex experiences — at least, if one conceptualizes symptoms of depression as a vulnerability. Further examination of these psychological factors is required for this conjecture. Future research should explore factors such as physical attraction, athletic ability, status, and financial resources or potential. It would be expected that these factors would increase a male's ability to engage in sexual behaviors with a variety of partners.

Sociocultural theories may offer further elucidation beyond biological explanations for factors linked with casual sex. American females are socialized to value their relationships (Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Although the majority of young adults agree that premarital sex is acceptable within a romantic context (Regan, 2003), social norms and expectations continue to define casual sex encounters as acceptable for males and objectionable for females (Walsh, 1991), and females have been found to be less tolerant of other females who participate in such relationships (Hynie, Lyndon, Cote, & Weiner, 1998). Both males and females justify male casual sex because they perceive males as having stronger sexual desire than females (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Males frequently “sexualize” potential partners and oftentimes do not consider emotional commitment as a prerequisite for sexual activity (Impett & Peplau). Males have been found to experience more pleasure and less guilt than females when they engage in sexual behavior with partners who are casual (Sprecher, Barbee, & Schwartz, 1995). Guilt, regret, and the violation of societal expectations may contribute to female psychological distress.

There are several limitations in this study. First is the limitation of a convenience sample of college students. College may be a context in which casual sex is promoted, but it is unclear whether the rates of casual sex would be as high in a similarly aged, non-college population. Likewise, it is unclear whether rates of casual sex decline after college. Moreover, our sample was obtained from a university located within the Southern Bible Belt with a

fairly conservative student population. It is uncertain whether students in less conservative regions would engage in more or less casual sexual behavior. We consider our findings a starting point for future researchers to understand the nature, motivation, and meaning of casual sex relationships among young adults. In our previous study (Grello et al., 2003), using a longitudinal, nationally-representative sample of adolescents and young adults (age 12-21), we found that casual sex was associated with higher levels of delinquency, violent victimization, and symptoms of depression, but these difficulties existed prior to engaging in casual sex, rather than as a result. In this sample, we were not able to examine cause and effect because our data was cross-sectional. Longitudinal data may afford further elucidation of casual sex behaviors.

Similar to our previous research, an important finding in this study is that sexual behavior in a romantic context was not associated with symptoms of depression. This study suggests that the meaning and impact of sexual behavior may vary depending on the relationship context. These college students may have different reasons for engaging in sexual behavior with partners whom they do not consider romantic. Casual sex may be a symptom of pathology for some, or it may promote peer status for others. Some casual sex behaviors likely occur in intimate relationships that are similar to romance but are void of commitment. Further research should further investigate these differences.

The implications of these findings are relevant for sexual education programs. We found casual sex encounters to be relatively common among college students, especially when alcohol and drugs were involved. Increasing awareness of the relationship between casual sex and substance use among college students may prepare students for circumstances where casual sex encounters are likely to occur (e.g., party, bar). By imparting this information, educators can help students can make decisions regarding whether or not to engage in casual sex in this context. For example, they may want to abstain from substance use or not attend a party where substances are involved if they do not want to engage in casual sex. In addition, our finding of divergent expectations regarding the outcome of casual sex encounters suggests the relevance of increasing communication skills in sex education programs. Students can then communicate their expectations of the sexual relationship effectively to their partners. Providing education regarding the physical and emotional risks associated with casual sex will provide young adults with comprehensive information to make informed decisions regarding their behavior. Additionally, professional awareness of the link between casual sex and emotional functioning can be beneficial to those who provide mental and physical health services to students.

One of the purposes of this study was to investigate sexual behaviors in context and identify factors associated with casual sexual behaviors. We found that individual factors such as gender, age, context of transition to intercourse, and drug and alcohol use were associated with

casual sex. How an individual approaches interpersonal relationships was linked with casual sex behaviors. The majority of participants in this study knew that their casual sex encounters were not going to lead to romance. Those who believed the encounter would be casual engaged in significantly fewer affectionate behaviors with their casual partners than those who believed the encounter was going to evolve into a romance. Depressive symptoms were also associated with engaging in casual sex. Males who reported engaging in casual sex had the fewest symptoms of depression, but females who had a history of casual sex experienced the most depressive symptoms. Future research is needed to explore variation within casual sexual relationships (e.g., "friends with benefits" vs. "one-night stands").

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