



Gender Differences in Psychological Distress Following Casual Sexual Encounters

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Abstract: This study examined gender differences in psychological distress related to casual sexual encounters, focusing on the role of sociosexual orientation. Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from young adults through standardized self-report measures, including the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale – Short Form (DERS-18). Sociosexual orientation reflects an individual's openness to uncommitted sexual relationships, while psychological distress was assessed through negative affect and difficulties in emotion regulation. Positive affect was also included to provide a broader understanding of emotional outcomes. The study aimed to examine whether higher sociosexual orientation is associated with greater psychological distress and whether these relationships differ across gender. It was expected that individuals with a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation would report higher negative affect and more difficulties in regulating emotions, with gender differences influenced by sociocultural factors. These findings are expected to contribute to existing literature by clarifying how individual differences and gender shape emotional responses to casual sexual experiences, with implications for understanding both positive and negative outcomes.

Keywords: *Gender Differences, Casual Sexual Relations, Psychological Distress*

1. Introduction

In recent years, psychological research has increasingly focused on understanding how

young adults experience and respond to casual sexual encounters, particularly within university and urban contexts. Changing social norms, increased acceptance of premarital sexuality, and the rise of digital dating platforms have contributed to the growing prevalence of non-committed sexual relationships. However, the psychological consequences of such encounters remain mixed. While some individuals report positive experiences such as pleasure, autonomy, and increased confidence, others report negative emotional outcomes including guilt, regret, and psychological distress. These inconsistent findings suggest that emotional responses to casual sexual encounters are not uniform but are shaped by individual differences and sociocultural influences. In this context, sociosexual orientation and gender emerge as key variables in understanding variations in psychological outcomes.

Sociosexual Orientation

Sociosexual orientation refers to an individual's willingness to engage in sexual activity outside of committed relationships (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). It is a multidimensional construct that includes attitudes, sexual desire, and behavioral history related to uncommitted sexual interactions. Individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation are generally more open to casual sexual experiences and may experience fewer negative emotional consequences. In contrast, individuals with a restricted sociosexual orientation tend to associate sexual activity with emotional intimacy and commitment, making them more vulnerable to distress following casual encounters.

The psychological impact of casual sex may depend on the degree of alignment between an individual's behavior and their underlying sociosexual orientation. When individuals engage in behaviors that are inconsistent with their personal values or preferences, they may experience emotional discomfort, including guilt, shame, and regret. Conversely, when behavior aligns with one's sociosexual orientation, individuals may experience more positive or neutral emotional outcomes. Thus, sociosexual orientation provides a useful framework for understanding why similar experiences can lead to different psychological responses across individuals.

Psychological Distress, Affect, and Emotion Regulation

Psychological distress in the context of casual sexual encounters can be understood through emotional experiences such as negative affect and difficulties in emotion regulation. Negative affect includes emotions such as guilt, anxiety, sadness, and shame, whereas positive affect reflects feelings of pleasure, excitement, and enthusiasm (Watson et al., 1988).

Importantly, positive and negative affect are independent dimensions rather than opposite ends of a single continuum, meaning individuals can experience both simultaneously. Casual sexual encounters may therefore lead to emotional ambivalence, where individuals experience both positive and negative emotions at the same time.

In addition to affective experiences, emotion regulation plays a critical role in shaping psychological outcomes. Emotion regulation refers to the processes through which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotional responses (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Difficulties in emotion regulation, such as problems with emotional clarity, impulse control, or acceptance of emotions, may increase vulnerability to prolonged distress following emotionally significant experiences. Given that casual sexual encounters can evoke complex and sometimes conflicting emotions, individuals with lower emotion regulation abilities may be more likely to experience heightened psychological distress.

Gender Differences

Gender is an important factor influencing emotional responses to casual sexual behavior. Despite increasing sexual liberalization, traditional sexual double standards persist in many societies. Men's engagement in casual sexual activity is often socially accepted or even encouraged, whereas women may face greater social judgment for similar behavior. These expectations can influence internalized beliefs, emotional experiences, and perceived consequences associated with casual sexual encounters.

As a result, women may be more likely to experience guilt, shame, or psychological distress following casual sexual encounters, particularly in contexts where traditional norms remain influential. Gender may therefore function as a moderating variable, influencing the strength and direction of the relationship between sociosexual orientation and psychological distress.

Cultural Context

Most research on casual sexual behavior has been conducted in Western, individualistic societies, where such behaviors are relatively normalized. In contrast, collectivistic cultures such as India continue to emphasize traditional values related to sexuality, family honor, and social expectations. Although young adults in India are increasingly exposed to more liberal attitudes, these often coexist with conservative norms, creating a context of cultural conflict.

This cultural duality may intensify emotional responses to casual sexual encounters,

particularly when behavior deviates from perceived societal expectations. Despite its importance, there is limited empirical research examining these relationships within Indian populations, highlighting a significant gap in the literature.

1.1 *Integration and Research Gap*

Taken together, existing research suggests that the psychological outcomes of casual sexual encounters are shaped by a combination of individual dispositions, emotional processes, gender norms, and cultural influences. However, several limitations remain. Many studies focus on behavioral aspects of casual sex without adequately considering sociosexual orientation as a dispositional factor. Psychological distress is often assessed using general well-being measures rather than specific emotional processes such as negative affect and emotion regulation. Positive affect is rarely examined alongside negative outcomes, limiting understanding of emotional ambivalence. Additionally, gender is often treated as a descriptive variable rather than being tested as a moderating factor, particularly in non-Western contexts.

1.2 *Rationale and Significance of the Study*

The present study aims to address these gaps by examining the relationship between sociosexual orientation and psychological distress, operationalized through negative affect and difficulties in emotion regulation, while also considering positive affect as a parallel outcome. It further investigates gender differences in these relationships within an Indian young adult sample.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by integrating sociosexual orientation with emotional and regulatory processes in a culturally relevant context. Practically, the findings may be useful for mental health professionals working with young adults, particularly in helping individuals understand the emotional consequences of their choices and develop more effective emotion regulation strategies. Overall, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how casual sexual behavior is linked to both positive and negative psychological outcomes.

1.3 *Objectives*

1. To study the relationship between sociosexual orientation and negative affect among young adults.
2. To study the relationship between sociosexual orientation and emotion regulation difficulties.

3. To study the relationship between negative affect and emotion regulation difficulties.
4. To study if sociosexual orientation can predict negative affect.
5. To study if emotion regulation difficulties can predict negative affect.

1.4 Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant relationship between sociosexual orientation and negative affect among young adults.
2. There will be a significant relationship between sociosexual orientation and emotion regulation difficulties among young adults.
3. There will be a significant relationship between negative affect and emotion regulation difficulties among young adults.
4. Sociosexual orientation will significantly predict negative affect.
5. Emotion regulation difficulties will significantly predict negative affect.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships among sociosexual orientation, negative affect, and emotion regulation difficulties. A correlational approach was used to assess associations, along with regression analysis to examine predictive relationships.

2.2 Participants

The sample consisted of 262 college students drawn from various universities across India. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, allowing for adequate representation and meaningful gender-based comparisons.

Inclusion criteria:

- Individuals aged 18–25 years
- Ability to understand

Exclusion criteria:

- Individuals below 18 or above 25 years
- Inability to comprehend English

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using self-report questionnaires administered through both online (Google Forms) and offline (paper-pencil) modes to ensure accessibility and improve response rates. Participants were provided with clear instructions regarding the purpose of the study and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were encouraged to respond honestly based on their personal experiences. The average time taken to complete the questionnaires was 15–20 minutes.

2.4 Measures

Sociosexual Orientation Inventory-Revised (SOI-R; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008): Assesses sociosexual orientation across behavior, attitudes, and desire, indicating openness to uncommitted sexual relationships, with good reliability and validity.

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988): The negative affect subscale measures emotional distress, including anxiety, guilt, and fear, demonstrating high internal consistency and validity.

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale – Short Form (DERS-18; Victor & Klonsky, 2016): Measures emotional dysregulation across domains such as awareness, clarity, and impulse control, with strong reliability and construct validity.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

1. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS. Preliminary screening ensured suitability for non-parametric analysis.
2. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed for all variables.
3. Spearman's rank correlation was used to examine relationships among sociosexual orientation, negative affect, and emotional dysregulation.
4. Regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive role of sociosexual orientation and emotional dysregulation on negative affect.

3. Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the central tendency and variability of the study variables. The results indicated that participants demonstrated moderate levels of sociosexual orientation, emotional dysregulation, and negative affect.

Table 1. *Descriptives*

Descriptives				Statistic	Std. Error
Socio Sexual Orientation Scores	Mean			21.97	.595
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	20.80		
		Upper Bound	23.14		
	5% Trimmed Mean		20.84		
	Median		19.00		
	Variance		92.708		
	Std. Deviation		9.629		
	Minimum		13		
	Maximum		65		
	Range		52		
	Interquartile Range		10		
	Skewness		1.939	.150	
	Kurtosis		4.649	.300	
Difficulties in Emotion Regulation	Mean		47.96	.805	
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	46.38		
		Upper Bound	49.55		
	5% Trimmed Mean		47.64		
	Median		46.00		
	Variance		169.707		
	Std. Deviation		13.027		
	Minimum		18		
	Maximum		90		
	Range		72		
	Interquartile Range		19		
	Skewness		.466	.150	
	Kurtosis		-.059	.300	
Positive Affect Scores	Mean		31.21	.542	
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	30.15		
		Upper Bound	32.28		
	5% Trimmed Mean		31.27		
	Median		31.00		
	Variance		76.843		
	Std. Deviation		8.766		
	Minimum		10		
	Maximum		50		
	Range		40		
	Interquartile Range		13		
	Skewness		-.034	.150	
	Kurtosis		-.394	.300	
Negative Affect Scores	Mean		25.05	.556	
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	23.96		
		Upper Bound	26.15		
	5% Trimmed Mean		24.68		
	Median		24.00		
	Variance		81.078		
	Std. Deviation		9.004		
	Minimum		10		
	Maximum		50		
	Range		40		
	Interquartile Range		12		
	Skewness		.545	.150	
	Kurtosis		-.186	.300	

Table 2. Correlational Analysis

Correlations												
			Socio Sexual Orientation Scores	Difficulties in Emotion Regulation	Positive Affect Scores	Negative Affect Scores	DERS (Awareness)	DERS (Clarity)	DERS (Goals)	DERS (Impulse)	DERS (Nonacceptance)	DERS (Strategies)
Spearman's rho	Socio Sexual Orientation Scores	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.022	.045	.046	-.008	.011	-.014	.119	-.006	.046
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.729	.467	.459	.898	.854	.828	.055	.927	.460
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	Difficulties in Emotion Regulation	Correlation Coefficient	.022	1.000	.132	.533*	.233*	.659*	.819*	.737*	.696*	.823*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.729		.033	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	Positive Affect Scores	Correlation Coefficient	.045	.132	1.000	-.071	.410	.181	.059	.086	-.066	-.036
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.467	.033		.252	.000	.003	.341	.165	.285	.558
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	Negative Affect Scores	Correlation Coefficient	.046	.533*	-.071	1.000	-.048	.332	.361	.403	.493	.569
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.459	.000	.252		.436	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	DERS (Awareness)	Correlation Coefficient	-.008	.233*	.410*	-.048	1.000	.283	.107	-.064	-.107	-.102
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.898	.000	.000	.436		.000	.085	.298	.085	.099
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	DERS (Clarity)	Correlation Coefficient	.011	.659*	.181*	.332*	.283*	1.000	.405*	.370*	.372*	.440*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.854	.000	.003	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	DERS (Goals)	Correlation Coefficient	-.014	.819*	.059	.361*	.107	.405*	1.000	.616*	.426*	.648*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.828	.000	.341	.000	.085	.000		.000	.000	.000
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	DERS (Impulse)	Correlation Coefficient	.119	.737*	.086	.403*	-.064	.370*	.616*	1.000	.458*	.624*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.055	.000	.165	.000	.298	.000	.000		.000	.000
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	DERS (Nonacceptance)	Correlation Coefficient	-.006	.696*	-.066	.493*	-.107	.372*	.426*	.458*	1.000	.658*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.927	.000	.285	.000	.085	.000	.000	.000		.000
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262
	DERS (Strategies)	Correlation Coefficient	.046	.823*	-.036	.569	-.102	.440*	.648*	.624*	.658*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.460	.000	.558	.000	.099	.000	.000	.000	.000	
		N	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262	262

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Spearman correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between emotional dysregulation and negative affect ($r = .536$, $p < .001$). However, sociosexual orientation was not significantly related to negative affect ($r = .056$, $p = .181$) and showed minimal association with emotional dysregulation.

Table 3. Regression Analysis

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	6476.675	3	2158.892	37.931	.000 ^b
	Residual	14684.577	258	56.917		
	Total	21161.252	261			

a. Dependent Variable: Negative Affect Scores

b. Predictors: (Constant), Positive Affect Scores, Socio Sexual Orientation Scores, Difficulties in Emotion Regulation

Multiple regression analysis revealed that the overall model was significant ($F(3, 258) = 37.93$, $p < .001$), explaining 30.6% of the variance in negative affect ($R^2 = .306$). Emotional dysregulation was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .554$, $p < .001$), while sociosexual orientation was not significant ($p = .649$). Positive affect showed a small negative predictive effect ($p < .01$).

Table 4. *Model Summary*

Model Summary ^b									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.553 ^a	.306	.298	7.544	.306	37.931	3	258	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Positive Affect Scores, Socio Sexual Orientation Scores, Difficulties in Emotion Regulation
b. Dependent Variable: Negative Affect Scores

Table 5. *Gender differences*

Test Statistics ^a				
	Socio Sexual Orientation Scores	Difficulties in Emotion Regulation	Positive Affect Scores	Negative Affect Scores
Mann-Whitney U	6068.500	8288.000	7801.000	7160.500
Wilcoxon W	14846.500	16803.000	16579.000	15675.500
Z	-4.104	-.476	-1.271	-2.316
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.634	.204	.021

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Mann–Whitney U tests revealed significant gender differences in sociosexual orientation ($U = 6068.50$, $p < .001$) and negative affect ($p = .021$). No significant differences were found in emotional dysregulation or positive affect.

Table 6. Rank Order

Ranks				
	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Socio Sexual Orientation Scores	Male	130	150.82	19606.50
	Female	132	112.47	14846.50
	Total	262		
Difficulties in Emotion Regulation	Male	130	129.25	16803.00
	Female	132	133.71	17650.00
	Total	262		
Positive Affect Scores	Male	130	137.49	17874.00
	Female	132	125.60	16579.00
	Total	262		
Negative Affect Scores	Male	130	120.58	15675.50
	Female	132	142.25	18777.50
	Total	262		

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationships between sociosexual orientation, emotional dysregulation, and negative affect among emerging adults, and to assess whether sociosexual orientation and emotional dysregulation significantly predict negative affect. The findings indicate that emotional dysregulation is strongly related to, and predictive of, negative affect, whereas sociosexual orientation does not significantly predict emotional distress. This suggests that emotional regulation plays a more important role in shaping psychological outcomes than sociosexual tendencies.

A significant positive relationship was found between emotional dysregulation and negative affect. Individuals with greater difficulties in regulating their emotions reported higher levels of distress. Emotional dysregulation, which includes poor emotional awareness, lack of clarity, and difficulty controlling impulses, may increase vulnerability to negative emotional experiences. As a result, individuals may feel overwhelmed and struggle to manage emotional responses effectively. When emotional regulation skills are weak, even everyday stressors may be experienced as more intense and difficult to handle.

Sociosexual orientation did not show a significant relationship with negative affect. This suggests that openness to uncommitted sexual relationships is not inherently associated with psychological distress. Rather than reflecting emotional vulnerability, sociosexual orientation may represent individual differences in attitudes and behaviors. Emotional outcomes may depend more on internal psychological processes, such as regulation abilities and coping strategies, rather than sociosexual tendencies alone.

The findings also revealed gender differences in sociosexual orientation and negative affect. Males reported higher sociosexual openness, while females reported greater levels of negative affect. These differences may reflect sociocultural norms, gender roles, and variations in emotional expression. However, emotional dysregulation did not differ significantly across gender, suggesting that differences in distress may arise from contextual or social influences rather than differences in regulatory ability.

Regression analyses indicated that emotional dysregulation significantly predicts negative affect, whereas sociosexual orientation does not contribute significantly when both variables are considered. This highlights the dominant role of emotional regulation in determining emotional outcomes. Overall, the findings suggest that individuals with better emotional regulation are less likely to experience distress, regardless of their sociosexual orientation, emphasizing the importance of emotional skills in maintaining psychological well-being.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationships between sociosexual orientation, emotional dysregulation, and negative affect among emerging adults, with a focus on understanding whether sociosexual orientation and emotional dysregulation predict emotional distress. The findings revealed that emotional dysregulation is significantly and positively associated with negative affect, while sociosexual orientation is not significantly related to distress. Additionally, emotional dysregulation was found to independently predict negative affect, explaining a meaningful proportion of variance.

Individuals with higher levels of emotional dysregulation were more likely to experience emotional imbalance, distress, and difficulty managing negative emotions. These individuals may struggle with impulse control, emotional clarity, and access to effective regulation strategies. In contrast, sociosexual orientation did not significantly contribute to emotional distress, suggesting that openness to uncommitted sexual relationships is not inherently linked to poorer psychological

outcomes.

The findings suggest that emotional regulation functions as an important psychological resource that supports healthier emotional outcomes. Individuals who possess better regulation abilities are more likely to manage distress effectively and maintain emotional stability rather than becoming overwhelmed by negative experiences.

These findings have practical implications for mental health and educational settings, where strengthening emotional regulation skills may help individuals cope more effectively with distress and maintain overall psychological well-being.

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