

Emotional Dependency and Sweethearting in The Bahamas (II): Sexual Promiscuity among Unmarried Persons

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between emotional dependency and *sweethearting* or infidelity among single adults in The Bahamas. Using data from an internet-based survey of 1,571 single men and 4,640 single women currently in intimate partner relationships, the article explores the number and nature of sexual relationships over the six months prior to the study. Respondents who had multiple sexual partners reported higher levels of emotional dependency ($M = 35.3$, $SE = .54$) than those with one partner ($M = 29.3$, $SE = .32$). Where respondents had multiple partners in the previous six months, information was collected on partners other than their primary partner. In the study, having multiple partners was associated with elevated emotional dependency. Respondents with elevated emotional dependency levels were more likely to report being victims or perpetrators or sexual abuse within their relationships. These findings highlight important psychosocial dynamics within non-marital romantic relationships in the Bahamian context.

Introduction

Building on previous research on relationships in The Bahamas (Rolle-Sands et al., 2026), this paper explores the emotional dependency of unmarried persons involved in intimate relationships. In the Bahamian culture, the term *sweethearting* traditionally refers to infidelity involving at least one married partner. However, similar dynamics can occur among single persons when one partner engages in concurrent sexual

relations. As persons are marrying later (Rolle-Sands et al., 2026), we can speculate that there is increased opportunity for unmarried sexual partners to experience infidelity in relationships which might be considered as a prelude to marriage. As such, these relationships may be subject to what could be termed sweethearting in married relationships. This paper explores such occurrences among single persons.

Marriage is associated with changes in the way partners view each other (Cornelius & Sullivan, 2009) and is often understood as a symbol of commitment to a monogamous relationship. In contrast, single persons may view intimate relationships as transitional, potentially leading to reduced emotional investment. However, emotional dependency, “an individual’s excessive need for validation and emotional support from their intimate partner, frequently leading to feelings of insecurity and fear of abandonment” (Rolle-Sands et al., 2026) may still arise, particularly when persons hope to establish lasting connections. Given reports indicating that Bahamian men are more likely than women to engage in multiple sexual partnerships (Bahamas Ministry of Health, 2019), the emotional dynamics in these relationships warrant closer examination.

While this study focuses on sexual intercourse as a defining criterion on promiscuity, which may be considered a limited view (Rokach & Chan, 2023), it aligns with local cultural interpretations of infidelity (Bethell-Bennett, 2016). Single men in The Bahamas are reportedly more open to sexual encounters than single women, regardless of the partner’s marital status (unpublished data from Fielding & Ballance, 2022). This behaviour may reflect a more self-centred approach to sexual activity. Additionally, tensions can arise between the prevalence of such behaviours and the moral values espoused by The Bahamas as a self-proclaimed “Christian nation” (Wallace, 2017).

Despite limited research on evolving sexual attitudes, trends in Western countries, such as Britain, suggest a growing acceptance of non-traditional norms in heterosexual relationships (Watt & Elliot, 2017), but this is not without risks (Vink et al., 2023). Infidelity, while generally linked to negative

consequences such as addiction and suicide (Rokach & Chan, 2023), may also result in positive outcomes for some persons, such as emotional support (Rolle-Sands et al., 2026), challenging the uniformly negative perception of infidelity (Selterman et al., 2023). The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between emotional dependency and sexual promiscuity among single adults.

Methodology

Data for this study was drawn from the investigation of infidelity, sweethearting, and emotional dependency (Rolle-Sands et al., 2026), which was approved by University of The Bahamas’ IRB. The sample included adults aged 18 years and over who were single (never married, divorced, or widowed) and currently involved in at least one intimate sexual relationship. Respondents in common-law relationships were excluded, as such unions were categorised as equivalent to marriage.

Respondents with multiple partners in the six months prior to the study were asked to identify their primary partner. If undecided, they were asked to report on their most recent sexual partner. To maintain focus on current relationship dynamics, only data on sexual activity within the previous six months was included. Respondents who were not in a sexual relationship (as of the date the survey was taken) were excluded from this study. Risk of domestic violence was measured using the Hitting, Insulting, Threatening, Screaming (HITS) tool (Sherin et al., 1998) and emotional dependency was measured using the Partner’s Emotional Dependency Scale (Camarillo et al., 2020).

Results

The total number of respondents in this paper ($N = 6,211$) included 1,571 single men and 4,640 single women. However, respondents were not required to answer every question, so this represents the maximum sample size. The modal age group was 20-29 years, with the median ages being 26.7 for males and 27.5 for females. Single men were more than twice as likely as single women to report having multiple sexual partners in the past six months (41.5% vs. 22.4%, $OR = 2.46$, 95% CI [2.07, 2.93]). This finding is consistent with other studies from The Bahamas (Moxey-Adderley & Fielding, 2024) and the long-standing social acceptability of men having sex before marriage (Otterbein, 1966).

The emotional dependency scale had a $\alpha = .89$ in this study, indicating good reliability. Overall, of the 5,407 respondents in intimate relationships, the mean emotional dependency score was 29.4 ($SE = .21$). The overall mean emotional dependency scores for the 1,359 men was 34 ($SE = .37$), and for the 4,048 women, it was 27.8 ($SE = .21$). Consequently, these figures provide a frame of reference for considering the emotional dependency scores of subsets of respondents. According to Camarillo et al. (2020), scores over 22 indicate elevated emotional dependency.

For simplicity, single respondents who reported more than one intimate partner in the six months prior to the study are referred to as philanderers, while those with only one partner are classified as monogamists. The overall mean emotional dependency score among single respondents was 30.9 ($SE = .28$). Using the classification by Camarillo et al. (2020), approximately 67.7% of the 2,960 respondents reported high emotional dependency (scores over 22) while 37.9%

reported very high emotional dependency (scores above 35).

The mean emotional dependency score of monogamists was significantly lower ($M = 29$, $SE = .32$) compared to philanderers ($M = 35.3$, $SE = .64$), as determined by an analysis of covariance controlling for sex and length of time respondents had been involved with their primary partner ($F_{1, 2,859} = 92.3$, $p < .001$). Additionally, a significant positive association was observed between the numbers of intimate partners and emotional dependency scores, with $r_s = 0.2$ ($p < .001$), indicating that emotional dependency increased as the number of intimate partners increased among philanderers.

Table 1 highlights an apparent misunderstanding among single respondents regarding the question identifying their primary partner, with approximately 17% of both males and females designating their spouse as their primary partner. This suggests that some respondents may have used the term *spouse* to refer to a long-term partner, conflating the concept of committed partnership with formal marriage. This interpretation is further supported by the finding that emotional dependency scores associated with spouse and long-standing partner classifications were similar (t-tests for males and females, $p > .34$). Additionally, Table 1 illustrates the dynamic nature of the relationships among single respondents as latest partner was a frequent designation for both males and females. Relatively few respondents identified a sweetheart as their primary partner. For both males and females, sweethearts were least likely to be considered primary partners.

Emotional dependency patterns varied by sex and primary partner classification (Table 2). Among men, identifying their latest partner as their primary partner was associated with

lower emotional dependency scores, suggesting limited emotional attachment and possibly reflecting relationships or liaisons formed for convenience rather than commitment. This supposition is supported by the comment of Participant A, who noted

being “just in it for the thrill of having multiple woman”. In contrast, among women, elevated emotional dependency was observed when a sweetheart was designated as the primary partner, indicating a greater emotional investment in these relationships.

Table 1
Nature of Primary Partner by Sex of Single Respondents

	Sex of respondent	
	Male	Female
Primary partner		
My spouse	17.5%	17.7%
My long-standing partner	34.4%	40.4%
My latest partner	36.9%	34.4%
My sweetheart	11.2%	7.6%
N	724	2,118

Table 2
Mean Emotional Dependency Scores by Nature of Primary Partner

Primary partner	Male	Female	Overall	
My spouse	36.8	28.6	32.7	
My long-standing partner	35.4	29.1	32.3	$p = .035$
My latest partner	33.3	30.1	31.7	
My sweetheart	36.7	33.6	35.1	
Overall	35.5	30.3		

$p < .001$

Note: Interaction from analysis of covariance, $F_{3, 2,737} = 3.12$, $p = .025$, covariate length of relationship with principal partner.

Further analysis indicated that philanderers who did not regard any of their intimate partners as sweethearts had lower emotional dependency scores compared to those who did. This association was statistically significant ($r_s = .17$, $p < .001$), suggesting that for some philanderers, maintaining multiple partners may be motivated by the pursuit of excitement or status rather than emotional attachment.

In addition, among philanderers who identified a sweetheart, emotional

dependency scores increased with the increased frequency of sexual intercourse. Emotional dependency rose from a mean score of 35.4 (SE = 1.24) among those who reported no sexual encounters in the past seven days to 40.4 (SE = 3.42) among those who reported having sex more than seven times. This relationship was statistically significant ($r_s = 0.14$, $p < .001$), indicating a positive association between emotional dependency and the frequency of sexual activity.

Philanderers who expressed a desire for long-term associations with their sweetheart (marriage, having children) reported higher emotional dependency scores compared to those who did not (Table 3). In contrast, there was no significant difference in the emotional dependency scores of those who did and did not report being in love with their sweetheart. Additionally, although some respondents stated that the only benefit from the relationship was financial, as illustrated by Participant B (and others) who commented that the relationship was “just money”, no significant differences in the emotional dependency scores were observed between those who did and did not receive monetary support from their partner.

Emotional dependency scores were lower among philanderers whose relationships had already resulted in having children, suggesting a potential stabilisation of

emotional needs following the establishment of a parental bond. However, it should be noted that the mean emotional dependency scores across these comparisons remained within the highly dependent range (i.e., scores of 36 and over), using the classifications by Camarillo et al. (2020). Qualitative responses further illustrated emotional tendencies of these individuals. For example, Participant C emphasized emotional compatibility and support stating, “We are compatible in so many ways he may no[t] be rich but he really tries to make and keep me happy and smiling. I feel like he's the piece of the puzzle that I was missing. We have the same birth sign and we can complete each other's sentences. We both think alike so we can really relate to each other.” In contrast, Participant D (and others) highlighted a more physical dimension to the relationship, describing it as “good coochie” and “on time coochie”.

Table 3

Mean Emotional Dependency Scores by Expectations/Actions of the Relationship with Sweetheart

Expectations/actions arising from the relationship	Yes	No	Not sure/ Sometimes	$p =$
I hope my sweetheart will marry me	42.4	36.9	37.9	.028
I want to have a baby with my sweetheart	42.1	36.4	40.4	.003
My sweetheart makes me feel needed	40.5	34.3	34	<.001
My sweetheart is a better lover than my usual partner	40.3	35.6	35.7	.004
My sweetheart pays for the upkeep of my children	39.7	37.2	39.7	.343
Do you have any children with your sweetheart?	39	37.4	39.5	.562
My sweetheart gives me money to live on	38.7	37.5	36.6	.579
My sweetheart gives me gifts (not money)	38.4	37.3	36.8	.666
We love each other	37.5	38.2	38	.933

Note: Covariates, respondent sex and duration of relationship.

Table 4

Mean Emotional Dependency Scores by Sexual Abuse within Relationships with Sweethearts

Respondent had sexual intercourse with their sweetheart against:	Yes	Not sure, maybe yes	Not sure, maybe no	No	$p =$
Respondent's will? (Victim)	41.5	43.8	43.1	36.7	.005
Sweetheart's will? (Victimiser/Perpetrators)	43	46.9	44	36.9	.001

Note: Covariates, sex and duration of the relationship.

A moderate but significant association was observed between domestic violence risk and emotional dependency among philanderers. Specifically, the correlation between HITS scores (a measure of domestic violence) and emotional dependency scores yielded a $r_s = 0.114$ ($p = .012$), indicating that higher emotional dependency was associated with higher domestic violence scores. Furthermore, both victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse reported elevated emotional dependency scores, as detailed in Table 4. These findings suggest that emotional dependency may increase vulnerability not only to victimisation but also to the perpetration of abuse within intimate relationships.

Discussion

This paper highlights relationships between emotional dependency, infidelity (sweethearting), and domestic violence among single adults in The Bahamas. An interesting finding is that about 17% of single respondents identified their “spouse” as their primary partner. Given that these respondents were unmarried, it is likely that they were using the term spouse to refer to a long-term or committed partner. Therefore, we surmise that some people may have been using this term to mean a long-term partner, reflecting a possible conflation of marital status with relationship closeness.

Respondents in this study reported higher emotional dependency scores ($M = 30.9$, $SE = .28$) than anticipated based on prior research (Camarillo et al., 2020). These elevated scores may be related to the dual vulnerability of persons in intimate relationships who are simultaneously exposed to psychological abuse (Fielding & Ballance, 2023a; Fielding et al., 2023), which has been linked to increased emotional dependency (Tezén et al., 2024). Another

possible contributing factor is digital abuse. Although not directly assessed in this study, prior research suggests that emotional dependency can be aggravated by social media manipulation (Estévez et al., 2018). With smartphone penetration estimated at 98% in The Bahamas (Hartnell, 2022), the potential influence of digital communication on emotional health warrants further exploration.

The data also revealed that single respondents involved in sweethearting (i.e. non-marital emotional or sexual intimate relationships) reported higher emotional dependency scores ($M = 35.3$, $SE = .54$) than those not involved in such arrangements ($M = 29.3$, $SE = .32$). This suggests that respondents may remain in these relationships to secure perceived benefits, such as emotional support, sex, or financial assistance. Those who hoped to formalise the relationships, such as through marriage ($M = 42.4$, $SE = 1.84$) or childbearing, reported particularly elevated emotional dependency ($M = 42.2$, $SE = 1.67$), likely reflecting a strong investment in relationship continuity (Estrellado & Loh, 2019). However, emotional dependency was not statistically significantly associated with expressions of romantic love, suggesting that attachment may be more utilitarian or needs-based in nature, as has been noted in the case of “friends with benefits” relationships (Machia et al. 2020).

The desire to feel “needed” by a sweetheart was associated with increased emotional dependency ($M = 40.5$, $SE = .89$). This reliance may increase individuals’ risk of remaining in relationships despite abuse. Such patterns are supported by previous findings that emotional dependency can lead to individuals remaining in harmful relationships due to perceived emotional necessity (Dare et al., 2013). However,

higher emotional dependency scores were not noted among respondents who received monetary gifts from their sweetheart. This observation is at variance with findings in other contexts, such as Guinea (Görge et al., 1998), where material support was a motivator for sexual and romantic relationships. The frequency of sexual activity with a “sweetheart” was also associated with higher emotional dependency scores ($M = 40.6$, $SE = 3.42$ – for those having sex more than seven times in the last week), possibly indicating that sexual intimacy was used to stabilise superficial or insecure relationships. This finding is supported by qualitative data from previous studies; however, it is worth noting that engaging in multiple sexual relationships while single may predispose individuals to infidelity and marital instability in the future (McQuivey, 2019).

Additionally, findings from this study indicating an association between emotional dependency and increased risk of both perpetrating and experiencing intimate partner abuse is supported by previous research. Amor et al. (2022) found that battered women exhibited higher emotional dependency than non-battered women, which has a significant, positive association with depression, anxiety, impulsivity, and lower self-esteem. Given the observed association between emotional dependency and domestic violence in this study’s sample, similar psychological outcomes may be expected in The Bahamas. This is especially concerning given that 59% of suicides in The Bahamas are associated with relational issues (Hutcheson & Major, 2016).

The emotional dependency reported by many respondents, particularly those in relationships where sex, money, or validation are exchanged, may also pose risks to the well-being of future partners and children. Emotional health has been linked to

increased risk of child abuse by parents (Lopes et al., 2021) and adults experiencing intimate partner violence may in turn abuse their own children (Moxey-Adderley & Fielding, 2024), highlighting the broader societal impact of unresolved emotional needs in adult relationships.

Strengths and Limitations

Sampling bias may be introduced when using convenience sampling, as in this study, versus a probabilistic sampling approach. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data about emotional dependency and sexual behaviour may be subject to social desirability bias. The sample also included limited respondents from certain subgroups (e.g., respondents aged 18–20 years) limiting generalisability within these demographics. Generally, men were underrepresented, potentially reducing the variability observed in their experiences of emotional dependency. Nevertheless, the reliability of data is enhanced by the large sample size. Further, broad agreement between findings reported in this paper and those of other local sources (Bahamas Ministry of Health, 2019; Fielding & Ballance, 2023b) suggests that sampling limitations may not substantially compromise the conclusions drawn.

Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper shed light on the complex dynamics of emotional dependency among single adults engaged in intimate sexual relationships in The Bahamas. They also suggest that emotional dependency is often driven by a need for support, intimacy, and stability, rather than romantic attachment alone. While sweethearting may provide temporary emotional or material benefits, it often comes with psychological costs, including vulnerability to abuse and mental health challenges. Given the higher-than-expected levels of emotional dependency reported,

further research is needed to examine how upbringing, digital influences, and societal expectations shape dependency patterns. Addressing these issues through targeted education, mental health support, and relationship literacy initiatives may help reduce the emotional and societal risks associated with dependency-driven relationships.

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