



## Interest in partner orgasm: Sex differences and relationships with attachment strategies

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### ABSTRACT

A large body of research has investigated relationship and sexual satisfaction; however, little extant research has investigated interest in partner orgasm. The purpose of this study was to investigate sex differences in interest in partner orgasm, as well as the relationship between adult attachment and interest in partner orgasm among college men ( $n = 262$ ) and women ( $n = 745$ ) who are in committed romantic relationships. Women indicated having greater motivation to ensure their partner has an orgasm, but men and women did not vary in their reaction to a partner having or not having an orgasm. Attachment anxiety was associated with greater interest in partner orgasm, and attachment avoidance was associated with lower interest in partner orgasm. Overall, the results are consistent with evolutionary and attachment theory.

Orgasm is a physiological response involving “genital reactivity, involuntary rhythmic contractions of pelvic musculature, changes in heart rate and blood pressure, and neurohormonal activation/deactivation” (Garcia, Lloyd, Wallen, & Fisher, 2014, p. 1). Oxytocin levels increase after orgasm (Carmichael et al., 1987), which has been found to intensify feelings of closeness and pair-bonding (Ditzen et al., 2009; Ross & Young, 2009). Some view an orgasm primarily from a biological perspective (for review Mah & Binik, 2001; Milam, Brown, Linqvist, Fuller, & Lloyd, 2006); however, orgasm also has personal and interpersonal psychological importance beyond the physiological response (Fahs, 2011; Mah & Binik, 2001). Frequency/consistency of orgasms are positively associated with sexual satisfaction (Frederick, Lever, Gillespie, & Garcia, 2016; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Sprecher & Cate, 2004), which in turn is associated with relationship satisfaction (e.g., Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Byers, 2005; Impett, Muise, & Peragine, 2014; Kisler & Christopher, 2008; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Sprecher, 2002; Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder Jr., 2006). Previous research has examined sexual satisfaction; however, little research has investigated interest in a partner’s orgasm, with one study considering interest in partner orgasm but only among men (McKibbin, Bates, Shackelford, Hafen, & LaMunyon, 2010). The purpose of this study was to investigate sex differences in interest in partner orgasm and relationships between attachment strategies and interest in partner orgasm.

### 1. Evolutionary theory and orgasm

Evolutionary factors may influence individuals’ interest in their partner’s orgasm. Women may be interested in a male partner’s orgasm

because it is necessary for conception and may promote pair-bonding, which helps ensure the survival of offspring. Men may be interested in a female partner’s orgasm because women who experience an orgasm are motivated to copulate with the same partner again (Puts, Dawood, & Welling, 2012), increasing the male’s chances of reproductive success. Thus, one way to view interest in partner orgasm may be as a mate retention tactic. One tactic of mate retention includes performing sexual inducements to keep their partner around (Buss, 1988; Goetz et al., 2005). Oral sex has been found to be a male retention strategy (Pham & Shackelford, 2013). Performing oral sex increases the likelihood of female orgasm (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, & Smith, 2006), which can increase pair-bonding. Increase sexual satisfaction as well as relationship satisfaction can decrease infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). McKibbin et al. (2010) found that men’s relationship satisfaction was associated with higher interest in partner orgasm, which may decrease infidelity and increase the odds of procreation with that partner.

Beyond mate retention tactics, interest in partner orgasm may play a role in sperm retention and competition. Some researchers (e.g., Masters & Johnson, 1966) have argued that the female orgasm plays a role in sperm retention. That is, men may have a biological incentive to ensure that their female partner has an orgasm because the orgasm may drive sperm closer to the ovum (Baker & Bellis, 1993; Thornhill & Gangestad, 2008). Interest in partner orgasm may be particularly important in connection with sperm competition. Sperm competition is defined as the presence of rival sperm in a female’s reproductive system within a short time period (Shackelford & Goetz, 2007; Shackelford & Pound, 2006). The female orgasm may bias retention of a particular

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male's sperm (McKibbin et al., 2010) and may therefore be desirable when considering the evolutionary goal of impregnation and reproduction.

Mate retention tactics and semen displacement behaviors may both be used by men to combat sperm competition (Goetz et al., 2005). Men use a range of mate retention strategies when they believe their partner is more likely to be unfaithful (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Goetz et al., 2005). Both men and women have reported that, when there was risk of sperm competition, the male had quicker, deeper copulatory thrusts (Gallup & Burch, 2004; Goetz et al., 2005) and were more likely to be interested in their partner's orgasm (McKibbin et al., 2010).

## 2. Sex differences related to orgasm

Although both men and women have concerns about their ability to gratify their partners sexually (Byers, 2011), there are a number of sex differences related to orgasm. Men orgasm more consistently than women, with 91.3% of men reporting that they had an orgasm in their last sexual encounter compared to 64.4% of women (Herbenick et al., 2010). Men place greater emphasis on the importance of orgasm in relation to sexual satisfaction (e.g., Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2009; McClelland, 2011, 2013; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). Even though orgasm appears to be necessary for sexual satisfaction among most men, it may not be so among women (McClelland, 2011; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). Women often believe having an orgasm is important to sexually satisfy their male partner (Nicolson & Burr, 2003) and the lack of orgasm affects his self-esteem (Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). For men, interest in their partner's orgasm may function as a masculine achievement (Chadwick & Van Anders, 2017). Salisbury and Fisher (2014) reported that among men who believed a woman achieving orgasm was a sexually satisfying experience, distress was triggered if a female partner did not achieve orgasm. In this study, we investigated sex differences in interest in partner orgasm and its subfactors.

## 3. Adult attachment and interest in partner orgasm

Adult attachment has been linked with relationship and sexual satisfaction (Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Davis et al., 2006; Khoury & Findlay, 2014), yet no known extant research has investigated attachment strategies and interest in partner orgasm. Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) theorized that interactions between infants and their primary caregivers contribute to personal characteristics that affect relational bonds or attachments with significant others throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Specifically, individuals' views of themselves and others influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in future relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

Insecure attachment has two primary dimensions: attachment anxiety, which involves hypersensitivity and hypervigilance (e.g., desires closeness and needs reassurance), and attachment avoidance, which involves a minimization of affective experience and disinterest in emotional connection (e.g., disengages and has decreased need for closeness; Davis et al., 2006). Individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety are more likely to view sexual satisfaction as important in a relationship (Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Peloquin, Brassard, Delisle, & Bedard, 2013) and are fearful of being abandoned by their partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Individuals with high levels of attachment avoidance are less likely to desire emotional closeness (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004), and less concerned with long term relationships, commitment, and sexual satisfaction (Birnie-Porter & Hunt, 2015) as well as less sensitive to partner's needs (Peloquin et al., 2013). For women, both high attachment anxiety and high attachment avoidance is related to sexual dysfunction (Dunkley, Dang, Chang, & Gorzalka, 2016). For men, there is evidence for associations between high attachment anxiety and sexual dysfunction but no significant relationship between high attachment avoidance and sexual dysfunction.

## 4. Current study

A large body of research has investigated relationship and sexual satisfaction; however, little extant research has investigated interest in partner orgasm. The purpose of this study was twofold. First, we investigated sex differences in interest in partner orgasm. We hypothesized ( $H_1$ ) that women would have higher interest in partner orgasm than men. For women, this is consistent with the notion that male orgasm is necessary for successful reproduction and promotes long-term pair-bonding which would increase the likelihood of males assisting with child-rearing and also with research finding that women believe orgasm is important to sexually satisfy their male partner (Nicolson & Burr, 2003). For men, evolutionary theory suggests it may be more beneficial for passing along genes to have multiple partners and not invest in long-term relationships which may decrease attention to satisfying their partner.

Second, we investigated the relationship between attachment strategies and interest in partner orgasm. Since having an orgasm is linked to enhanced pair-bonding as well as sexual/relationship satisfaction, we hypothesized ( $H_2$ ) that attachment anxiety would be associated with higher interest in partner orgasm. Because individuals with avoidant attachment strategies tend to be less concerned about sexual satisfaction in a relationship, have less interest in committed relationships (Birnie-Porter & Hunt, 2015) and were less sensitive to partner's needs (Peloquin et al., 2013), we hypothesized ( $H_3$ ) that high attachment avoidance would be associated with lower interest in partner orgasm. Finally, as an exploratory component of the study, we investigated relationships between interest in partner orgasm and adult attachment among men and women separately.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Participants

In this study, participants consisted of undergraduate students age 18–30 ( $M = 20.58$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ) who reported involvement in a committed romantic relationship and were currently enrolled in a psychology course at a large public university in the southern U.S. ( $N = 1007$ ; men ( $n = 262$ ) and women ( $n = 745$ )). Regarding ethnicity, 531 (52.7%) identified as white/Caucasian, 127 (12.6%) as black/African American, 230 (22.8%) as Latino, 75 (7.4%) as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 44 (4.4%) as "other." Relationship demographics are displayed in Table 1. Participants were recruited through the department research website, where students who are seeking course credit can sign up to participate in studies. Participants signed up to take a survey about human sexuality.

### 5.2. Procedure

This study was approved by the university committee for the protection of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants completed an online survey (remotely) and received course credit for participation. In order to encourage self-disclosure, the survey emphasized that responses were anonymous, confidential, and no identifying information was requested from participants.

### 5.3. Measures

#### 5.3.1. Demographics

Participants provided demographic information (e.g., gender, age, and ethnicity).

#### 5.3.2. Relationship status

Individuals were asked for their marital status. Those who identified as married were included in the study. Those who identified as having

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