The role of women's orgasm goal pursuit in women's orgasm occurrence

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ABSTRACT

Heterosexual women's low orgasm rates are widely acknowledged within sexuality research. However, researchers have not accounted for whether women are even pursuing orgasm (actively and purposefully attempting to orgasm) in their sexual encounters with men. Given that heterosexual sexual scripts often de-prioritize women's pleasure, women may vary in their orgasm goal pursuit – whether they set orgasm as a goal and strive to have an orgasm – in any given sexual encounter, with some women being less likely to pursue orgasm than others. Across two studies, we investigated the association between women's orgasm goal pursuit and orgasm occurrence. By examining the variations in women's orgasm goal pursuit, we aimed to explain why some women orgasm in their sexual encounters and other women do not. Women who reported greater orgasm pursuit were more likely to report that they orgasmed in their most recent sexual encounter. These findings suggest that researchers should not assume that women equally pursue orgasm in their sexual encounters, and that this important individual difference can help explain differences in orgasm occurrence between women.

Women who have sex with men (WSM) report that they frequently do not have orgasms in their partnered sexual encounters (Frederick, John, Kate, Garcia, & Lloyd, 2018; Richters, De Visser, Rissel, & Smith, 2006). In two national samples of U.S. adults, researchers found that only 65% of heterosexual women reported that they usually or always orgasm during heterosexual sexual encounters (Frederick et al., 2018) and only 69% of women reported that they orgasmed in their most recent sexual encounter with a man (Richters et al., 2006). The patterns for bisexual women's orgasm rates are similar, with only 66% of bisexual women reporting that they usually or always orgasm during their sexual encounters with men (Frederick et al., 2018). Moreover, research has found that, compared to women who have sex with women, WSM are less likely to orgasm across various sexual activities (including clitoral manipulation by self and by partner and oral sex but not during vaginal intercourse); however, these results were not examined based on participants' self-reported sexual orientations (Blair, Cappell & Pukall, 2018). In contrast to the orgasm rates for heterosexual and bisexual women, 95% of heterosexual men and 88% of bisexual men reported that they usually or always orgasm during sexual encounters (Frederick et al., 2018) and 95% of heterosexual men orgasmed in their most recent sexual encounter with a woman (Richters et al., 2006).

The low frequency of orgasm in women has led some researchers to draw conclusions about women's anatomy, biology and health, with the implication that women's bodies are simply not designed to have orgasms at the same frequency as men (Brody & Costa, 2017; Emhardt, Siegel & Hoffman, 2016). Likewise, the findings about WSM's low orgasm rates have created the assumption that the problem of low orgasm frequency lies in women themselves because they are difficult to please, their bodies are difficult to navigate, their biology is to blame (Bell & McClelland, 2018; Butler, 2013; Matsick, Conley & Moors, 2016; Nicolson & Burr, 2003). Thus, WSM often end up internalizing beliefs that they are sexually dysfunctional (at least vis-a-vis men), particularly if they do not orgasm during penile-vaginal intercourse. These instances of self-blame most likely occur because women compare themselves against their perception that “normal” women should be capable of orgasming (Nicolson & Burr, 2003).

Given these messages about women's orgasmic abilities, it is conceivable that WSM end up with differing levels of investment in and desire to pursue orgasm. Although some women do not consider orgasm to be essential to their sexual satisfaction (McClelland, 2014), many women still consider orgasm to be important with research showing that approximately 80% of the women surveyed considered orgasm to be either important or very important (Kontula & Miettinen, 2016). Moreover, the women who considered orgasm to be important were more likely to orgasm compared to women who reported orgasm was not important to them (Kontula & Miettinen, 2016). However, it remains unclear why ascribing importance to orgasm is associated with
orgasms occurring and what mechanisms may be behind this association. For example, although the types and variety of sexual acts that women engage in influence whether they orgasm (Frederick et al., 2018; Fugl-Meyer, Öberg, Lundberg, Lewin & Fugl-Meyer, 2006; Herbenick et al., 2010), no research to our knowledge has explored whether women are engaging in specific sexual acts or in a greater variety of sexual activities with the goal of pursuing orgasm.

In the present research we pose the question: do WSM work to make orgasm possible? If orgasm is something some WSM consider important, do they then pursue orgasm, thereby acting in accordance with their belief that orgasm is important? To answer this question, we integrate research on goal pursuit to offer the conceptual framework of orgasm goal pursuit. Orgasm goal pursuit is defined as the setting and striving towards having an orgasm in a given sexual encounter. In examining WSM’s orgasm goal pursuit, we measure whether they are purposefully acting in ways that they believe will result in orgasm for them. In the present study, we examined the association between orgasm goal pursuit and orgasm occurrence in WSM’s most recent sexual encounters. Our goal was not to explain how or why WSM pursue orgasm, but whether they pursue it – that is, whether they engaged in any actions for the purpose of improving their chances of orgasm. We expected orgasm goal pursuit would explain WSM’s low rates of orgasm: women who are not pursuing orgasm – perhaps because they do not feel entitled to pursue it – are almost certainly less likely to orgasm. In this research, we predicted that orgasm goal pursuit may be an individual difference among women that can explain why some WSM orgasm in their sexual encounters and others do not.

Goals and goal pursuit

The outcomes of sexual encounters are often influenced by the goals that individuals set out for themselves. Sexuality researchers frequently attempt to understand the motivations behind having (approach motives) and avoiding (avoidance motives) sex (Impett, Peplau & Gable, 2005). However, the reasoning behind why people set sexual goals is different than having sexual goals and working towards those goals and should thus be measured separately (Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944). Although there may be many reasons why women pursue orgasm, it is also important to ask whether women are pursuing orgasms in the first place.

The difference between motivation and goals is captured by the process of goal pursuit, which is comprised of goal setting and goal striving. Goal setting refers to what goals people create for themselves, such as the goal of having an orgasm. However, setting a goal does not always translate to working to achieve that goal, which requires engaging in the process of goal striving, which refers to implementing actions in order to achieve a goal. For example, a student in an introductory psychology class might be more likely to do well on an exam if they set a goal of studying for that exam compared to someone who is less goal-oriented about their educational success in college. However, the student with the goal of studying for their exam is even more likely to be successful if they take the next step and actually prioritize studying for that exam and implement actions to achieve their goal of study. This is because people with self-determined motivation are more likely to adopt achievement goals, which are how an individual goes about pursuing a goal (Cho & Kim, 2019; Elliot, 2005).

Goal pursuit has not yet been studied in relation to orgasm. However, in one recent study, researchers examined the frequency of women’s self-oriented orgasm goals, or how often they reported that orgasm was a goal for them (Willis, Jozkowski, Lo, & Sanders, 2018). Willis et al. (2018) found that women who had high self-oriented orgasm goals were more likely to report orgasm during a sexual encounter. The authors suggested that women who frequently focus on their orgasm are challenging the male orgasmic imperative, which prioritizes men’s orgasms over women’s.

In the present research we draw on the goal pursuit literature and Willis et al.’s (2018) study by offering goal pursuit as a potential mechanism through which women work to make orgasm possible. We conceptualize orgasm goal pursuit as the combination of both goal setting and goal striving in order to provide a holistic picture of whether women pursue orgasm.

Sociological and interpersonal factors’ influence on orgasm occurrence

The context in which a person is situated plays a crucial role in goal pursuit (Gollwitzer & Güttingen, 2012). Thus, to understand why WSM are not pursuing orgasm it is important to critically analyze the sexual landscape that women navigate. Research on WSM’s orgasms must be situated within the normalization of sexual inequality that contributes to women’s lack of orgasm motivation in particular encounters.

Our research draws upon an intimate justice framework (McClelland, 2010), which considers how social and political forces influence the inequity people experience in their sexual lives. An intimate justice framework asks researchers to consider how expectations about sex, and, in our research, orgasm, are created and how people’s adaptation to prolonged injustice influences their sexual lives. Applied to WSM’s low rates of orgasm, intimate justice elucidates how WSM’s low orgasm rates have become normalized.

WSM are forced to contend with their orgasmic absence in light of two distinct sets of messages about their orgasm: (1) orgasm is necessary for optimal sexual health and (2) orgasm is an experience that is out of reach. In interviews with women about their experiences of orgasmic absence, women described their contradictory expectations of orgasm (Bell & McClelland, 2018). On the one hand, women suggested that experiencing orgasm was “not a big deal” and that orgasm should not play an important role in their partnered sexual encounters. On the other hand, women said that orgasm might be something that they would like to experience someday, suggesting that orgasm held some degree of importance to them. Women also reported they were aware of sexual norms that dictate that women should orgasm in their partnered sexual encounters. However, many women thought that orgasmic absence could be attributed to biological differences between women and men (e.g., a lower need to orgasm in comparison to men, differences in testosterone levels) despite lack of empirical evidence for these claims (van Anders, 2012). These themes suggest that women navigate a difficult sexual terrain in which they must contend with their experiences of orgasm and orgasmic absence as well as the sexual norms that govern their sexual decision-making.

We now turn to several factors that influence WSM’s sexual lives and orgasm frequency. Although these factors are not exhaustive, they offer an explanation of some of the barriers that women may face while developing their views towards orgasm. Understanding these sociological and interpersonal factors helps to establish why orgasm goal pursuit is an important concept to consider when trying to understand WSM’s low orgasm frequency.

Sexual scripts

The sexual scripts that WSM are expected to follow may influence whether they pursue orgasm in their sexual lives. Sexual scripts are cognitive schemata that instruct people how to act in, and understand, sexual situations (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). According to Sexual Scripts Theory, sexual attitudes and behaviors are socially and culturally constructed. This means that social norms about sexuality influence how people behave during sex. Because there are differences in gender socialization (McClelland, 2010; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004), sexual scripts differ for WSM and men who have sex with women, contributing to norms for gendered behavior in sexual encounters (Parker & Gagnon, 1995).

Although sexual scripts are not the only reason that may influence why WSM do or do not pursue orgasm in their sexual encounters, we highlight these sexual scripts because they play significant roles in shaping their sexual encounters. Thus, any attitudinal and behavioral
differences that arise in sexuality, including in WSM’s orgasm goal pursuit, should be viewed in light of differing sexual norms and socialization that individuals internalize.

Sexual passivity. Gender socialization results in a sexual script that encourages women to be passive recipients of men’s sexual desires (Sanchez, Kiefer & Ybarra, 2006), likely due to the historical trend of suppressing women’s sexuality in modern Western societies (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). This script of sexual passivity likely dampens women’s sexual autonomy causing women to feel like their sexual actions are not freely chosen (Sanchez, Crocker & Boike, 2005). Engaging in sexually passive behavior may lead to lower sexual arousal due to decreases in sexual autonomy (Sanchez et al., 2006). Importantly, sexual passivity is associated with reduced sexual satisfaction and greater difficulty having an orgasm (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007).

Socializing women to be more sexually passive and less sexually assertive may have an effect on their orgasm goal pursuit. If women have internalized societal beliefs about how they should behave this may negatively impact whether they pursue orgasm. For women who are able to reject traditional scripts of high sexual passivity and low sexual assertiveness, this may have positive impacts on their desire to have orgasms. As evidence of this previous research has found that women who focus on their own sexual pleasure are more likely to orgasm (Goldey, Posh, Bell & van Anders, 2016).

The male orgasmic imperative. During sexual encounters between women and men, the male orgasmic imperative suggests that men’s orgasms take precedence over women’s orgasms (Armstrong, England & Fogarty, 2012; Opperman, Braun, Clarke & Rogers, 2014; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). This sexual script results in sexual encounters centering around men’s pleasure because both men and women prioritize men’s pleasure and orgasm (Armstrong et al., 2012; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). The male orgasmic imperative manifests in sexual encounters in several ways, including women placing great importance in their male partners orgasm and worrying if their partners do not orgasm (Lavie & Willig, 2005; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014), men’s orgasms signaling the end of a sexual encounter (McPhillips, Braun & Gavey, 2001), and the majority of sexual encounters including vaginal intercourse because it is a reliable source of orgasm for men (Byers, Henderson & Hobson, 2009; Richters, De Visser, Rissel & Smith, 2006).

Because the male orgasmic imperative centers around men’s sexual pleasure and orgasm, it marginalizes women’s pleasure, which may make many women feel disempowered and unable to dictate whether and how they orgasm (Braun, Gavey & McPhillips, 2003). Indeed, compared to men, women rank orgasm as a less important reason for having sex (Meston & Buss, 2007), report less desire for orgasm (Mark et al., 2014), are less likely to rate orgasm as extremely important, and are less likely to expect orgasm during sexual intercourse (Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). By prioritizing their partner’s pleasure over their own, women often forgo pursuit of their own orgasm.

Sexual behaviors

The types of stimulation and types of activities that WSM engage in also predict orgasm occurrence. Certain sexual behaviors are engaged in more often than others likely because sexual scripts create hierarchies for what sexual activities are most acceptable (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). For example, vaginal intercourse is the most frequently engaged in and valued sexual behavior (Byers et al., 2009; Richters et al., 2006). However, WSM are more likely to experience orgasm during nonpenetrative sexual activity in which stimulation of the glans clitoris is involved (Fugl-Meyer et al., 2006). Although vaginal-penile intercourse provides indirect clitoral stimulation, most WSM report that they cannot orgasm from penetrative sex without the accompaniment of direct clitoral stimulation. Instead, WSM are more likely to orgasm from penetrative sex when concurrent clitoral stimulation is present (Brewer & Hendrie, 2011; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014; Shirazi, Renfro, Lloyd & Wallen, 2018). Comparatively, WSM experience orgasm twice as frequently in encounters with concurrent genital stimulation compared to encounters of penetration only (Shirazi, Renfro, Lloyd & Wallen, 2018).

In general, sexual behaviors that provide clitoral stimulation are associated with orgasm. Women who masturbate during their sexual encounters are more likely to have an orgasm (Laan & Rellini, 2011). Unfortunately, WSM frequently feel uncomfortable masturbating in front of their partners (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016). Receiving oral sex is also associated with greater odds of orgasming and WSM who receive oral sex more frequently have more frequent orgasms (Armstrong et al., 2012; Frederick, John, Kate, Garcia & Lloyd, 2018).

Additionally, combining different sexual acts during partnered sex is associated with increases in orgasm frequency. Richters et al. (2006) found that 85.6% of heterosexual women orgasmed when they combined vaginal stimulation, manual stimulation, and oral sex and that 90% of heterosexual women orgasmed when they combined manual stimulation and oral sex.

This is corroborated by Frederick et al. (2018) who similarly found that the combination of certain sexual practices – oral sex, manual stimulation and deep kissing in particular – is associated with the highest orgasm frequencies among heterosexual women and bisexual women. Looking at a wider range of sexual practices, Willis et al. (2018) found that both WSW and WSM who engaged in a greater number of 16 sexual behaviors were more likely to orgasm in their sexual encounters.

In connection to orgasm goal pursuit, the number of sexual activities women engage in may be a result of high orgasm goal pursuit. For example, women who are pursuing orgasm may engage in more sexual activities because certain activities help her orgasm. Although women may combine sexual practices to please their partner, it is also plausible that women are combining sexual behaviors because they are pursuing orgasm. Thus, in the present study we control for the occurrence of intercourse, receptive oral sex, receptive manual stimulation, and masturbation given their association to orgasm occurrence. Although behaviors that promote orgasm extend beyond these four behaviors, we have chosen to focus on these four behaviors given how frequently they occur and their established association with orgasm occurrence.

Casual sex and relationships

Previous research also suggests that whether the sexual encounter is a hookup or occurs in a committed relationship matters for orgasm occurrence. Heterosexual women are more likely to orgasm in a repeated hookup, with 34% reporting an orgasm if they had three or more previous hookups with that partner, compared to 11% and 16% of women orgasmed in a hookup with no prior relationship or 1–2 hookups, respectively (Armstrong et al., 2012). One potential reason for these differences in orgasm occurrence is because of the male orgasmic imperative. For example, in qualitative interviews men revealed that they had little investment in women’s orgasms during hookups, instead suggesting that they prioritized their own orgasm (Armstrong et al., 2012).

The odds of orgasm are higher for heterosexual women in a committed relationship, with 67% of women reporting that they orgasmed in their most recent sexual encounter when they were with a partner of six months or more (Armstrong et al., 2012). This may be because the strength of sexual scripts has been shown to diminish within the context of established relationships with some research suggesting that women and men exhibit more overlap in the sexual behaviors they engage in (Byers, 1996; Herald & Milhausen, 1999). For the present study, it is plausible that women in relationships are more likely to have stronger orgasm goal pursuit because they find themselves in a context in which their pleasure and orgasm might be more valued than it would be...
during a hookup centered around the male orgasmic imperative (Armstrong et al., 2012).

Summary and connection to orgasm goal pursuit

Taken together, research on sexual scripts, the sexual behaviors WSM engage in, and the type of relationships women have with their partner, suggests it is likely that women vary in the extent to which they set orgasm as a goal that they strive towards. The devaluation of women’s sexuality and the normalization of sexual inequality may contribute to the persistence of women’s low orgasm rates and explain why women may not pursue orgasm in sexual encounters. If WSM are placed in sexual situations in which they believe it is futile to pursue orgasm, their low orgasm rates should be unsurprising. WSM may not deprioritize orgasm simply because they think it is unimportant; instead, many WSM may not think that it is worth the effort to pursue orgasm in sexual encounters that operate under the male orgasmic imperative. For example, if a woman believes that her male partner’s orgasm is more important than hers, she may lower her expectation that she will orgasm. Her partner’s sexual skills may not be sufficient for her to orgasm through his stimulation and if she feels uncomfortable stimulating herself she may give up on pursuing orgasm. She may have faced these situations so many times that she just wants the encounter to be over quickly, so she does not bother thinking about her own orgasm. She may enjoy the encounter but see the probability of her orgasm so low that she is thinking more about irrelevant matters (e.g., preparing for a presentation at work) than her orgasm. However, orgasms generally do not just happen spontaneously. Actions need to be taken for orgasm to occur (e.g., by paying attention to one’s bodily reactions, touching one’s genitals, fantasizing, moving rhythmically). Thus, orgasm goal pursuit becomes a meaningful framework to help explain orgasm occurrence differences amongst women.

The current studies

In the current studies, we examined if WSM orgasm goal pursuit predicted orgasm occurrence in their most recent sexual encounter. To do this, we conducted two studies in which WSM completed an online questionnaire and reflected on their most recent sexual encounter. The two samples were collected approximately one year apart. In both studies, we used women’s endorsement of orgasm goal pursuit to predict orgasm occurrence. We predicted that women who scored higher on a measure of orgasm goal pursuit would be more likely to orgasm in their most recent sexual encounter than women who had a weaker endorsement of orgasm goal pursuit.

Given the replication crisis, we measured variables as similarly as possible (Amir & Sharon, 1990; Galak et al., 2012; Open Science Collaboration, 2015). Relationship status, orgasm importance, and orgasm goal pursuit were measured in the same ways across both studies. Two variables were measured differently between Study 1 and Study 2: length of the sexual relationship was measured as a discrete variable in study 1 and as a continuous variable in Study 2 and the combination of sexual practices was measured as a checklist in study 1 whereas each sexual practice was asked about individually in Study 2. In both study 1 and Study 2 we performed additional analyses testing the association between relationship status and orgasm goal pursuit given the link to my sexual satisfaction.” Women rated their agreement on a 5-point

behavioral measures. Based on prior research, we examined women’s relationship status, length of sexual relationship, variety of sexual activities, and the importance of orgasm in addition to measuring women’s orgasm goal pursuit.

Method

Participants

The sample included 689 WSM who had engaged in at least one sexual encounter in which genital touching occurred and responded to all the main variables of interest (i.e., orgasm occurrence, orgasm goal pursuit). The majority identified as heterosexual (N = 608) with 81 identifying as bisexual or pansexual. Participants’ ages ranged from 18–55 years old (M = 21.55, SD = 6.57). The racial composition of the study was 73.7% White, 9.0% African American, 7.4% Asian American, 4.1% Multi-Racial, 2.5% Hispanic/LatinX, 1.7% Middle Eastern, 0.3% Native or Indigenous Tribe/American Indian, and with the remaining 1.3% not reporting their racial/ethnic identity.

Procedure

Students enrolled in a Psychology of Sexuality course recruited participants online through various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) and through direct requests to participants (e.g., email). This approach to participant recruitment has been successfully used in other sexuality research (La France, 2010). Participants were asked to complete a survey that asked them to reflect on their last sexual encounter which included genital touching. They then completed our measures of interest and provided demographic information. No personally identifying information was collected in order to ensure that all responses were anonymous and confidential.

Measures

Relationship status. Relationship status was measured by asking participants “Right now, do you consider yourself to be single or do you consider yourself to be in a relationship?” Participants responded by clicking “single” or “in a relationship.”

Length of sexual relationship. To assess length of the sexual relationship, participants were asked “How long have you been having sexual contact on a regular basis with your most recent partner?” Participants were given 10 answer choices, including “My most recent partner and I do not engage in sexual contact on a regular basis.” Given limited variance in the responses, answers were collapsed into 3 categories for analysis: first time, less than one year, more than one year.

Sexual practices. We asked participants to report on four sexual practices they engaged in during their sexual encounter using a sexual practices checklist. The items were modeled on research by Armstrong et al. (2012) that looked at 7 sexual practices. We excluded 2 items that associated with stimulating the male partner as these actions are not directly associated with the woman orgasmizing. Additionally, we removed the item related to anal sex because there are mixed results on the association of anal sex with orgasm occurrence and because the low frequency of engagement in anal sex would create floor effects. Thus, the included items were engaging in penile-vaginal intercourse, receiving oral stimulation, receiving manual stimulation, and engaging in masturbation. Participants reported whether or not they engaged in each sexual practice. Scores for these four sexual practices were summed, similar to Willis et al. (2018), creating scores from 0 to 4.

Importance of orgasm. Women answered one question regarding the importance of orgasm in their sexual encounter. We asked, “How much do you agree with the following statement: orgasm is important to my sexual satisfaction.” Women rated their agreement on a 5-point
scale (1 = not important at all; 5 = very important).

**Orgasm goal pursuit.** We assessed participant's orgasm goal pursuit using a scale composed of three original items ($\alpha = 0.84$). Each item began with the stem “During my most recent sexual encounter” and included the following items: “I tried to have an orgasm,” “My goal was to orgasm” and “I did whatever I had to do to have an orgasm.” Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement using a 6-point Likert-scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated that participants endorsed orgasm as a goal whereas lower scores indicated that participants did not consider orgasm to be a goal in their sexual encounter.

**Orgasm occurrence.** The main outcome variable in our study was orgasm occurrence. Participants were asked if they orgasmed during their most recent sexual encounter. Women were also asked if they had ever had an orgasm prior to this most recent encounter. Participants responded “yes”, “no,” or “unsure.” However, given the low frequency of women who said “unsure” ($N = 20$), they were removed from the sample prior to performing any analyses.

**Analyses**

To answer our research questions we conducted a logistic regression in which we regressed orgasm occurrence onto age, women's relationship status, length of sexual relationship with their partner, the variety of sexual activities they engaged in, and the importance they attributed to orgasm in the first step and orgasm goal pursuit in the second step. We report both the Cox and Snell $R^2$ and Nagelkerke $R^2$ statistics as measures of the predictive value of our models. Both serve to summarize the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the predictor variables although there are debates surrounding the utility of these pseudo $R^2$’s.

**Results**

**Descriptives**

Of the 689 women in the study, 40.6% reported that they orgasmed during their most recent sexual encounter, with similar rates of orgasm for heterosexually identified women (40.1%) and bisexually identified women (44.4%). Most women in the sample (80.3%) reported that they had experienced an orgasm at least once in their life. Of the women who orgasmed, 67.9% were in a relationship and 32.1% were single. Of the women who did not orgasm, 32.3% were in a relationship and 67.7% were single. Regarding the duration of sexual relationship, 14.4% of women reported that this was their first sexual encounter with this partner, 58.4% reported they had been having a sexual relationship for under one year, and 27.1% had been having a sexual relationship for over 1 year. Approximately half (52.7%) of participants were in a relationship at the time of their sexual encounter and 46.0% reported that they were single. Of participants in a relationship, 95.9% reported that they were monogamous.

Manual stimulation was the most frequent sexual behavior with 85.5% of women receiving manual stimulation. The next most frequent sexual behavior was vaginal intercourse (74.2%), followed by oral sex (53.5%), and with the fewest percentage of women engaging in masturbation (35.7%). On average, participants engaged in 2.49 sexual activities ($SD = 1.07$).

**Correlations**

We conducted Pearson’s product moment correlations between age, variety of sexual activities, importance of orgasm, and orgasm goal pursuit (Table 1). Age was positively correlated with both orgasm importance and orgasm goal pursuit. Variety of sexual activities was positively correlated with orgasm importance and orgasm goal pursuit.

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<th>Measure</th>
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<tr>
<td>Orgasm Importance</td>
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<td>Orgasm Goal Pursuit</td>
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Note. * $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$.

Orgasm importance and orgasm goal pursuit were positively correlated.

**Predictors of orgasm occurrence**

We found support for our hypothesis that endorsement of orgasm goal pursuit would predict orgasm occurrence. The logistic model containing all of our predictor variables was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (7) = 302.54, p < .001$. The model correctly classified 78.4% of all cases. In the full model containing orgasm goal pursuit the Cox Snell $R^2$ and Nagelkerke $R^2$ were 0.36 and 0.49, respectively. In the partial model containing only the covariates the Cox Snell $R^2$ was 0.34 and the Nagelkerke $R^2$ was 0.46.

In the full model, age, being in a sexual relationship for over 1 year, relationship status, importance of orgasm, and orgasm goal pursuit predicted women’s orgasm occurrence (Table 2). In support of our hypothesis, women’s orgasm goal pursuit predicted the likelihood with which a woman would orgasm. A one unit increase in orgasm goal pursuit was associated with log odds of 1.61. Thus, a woman with a score of 2 has a 61% increase in the odds of orgasming compared to a woman with a score of 1. Likewise, for a woman with a score of 6, the odds her orgasming is 1082% greater than a woman with a score of 1. This suggests that in addition to other known factors that contribute to orgasm occurrence, orgasm goal pursuit accounts for unique variance in why women orgasm in their partnered sexual encounters.

**Additional analyses concerning relationship status**

Consistent with prior research, relationship status was a significant predictor of women’s orgasm occurrence. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between orgasm and relationship status. The relation between these variables was significant, $X^2 (1, N = 680) = 83.39, p < .001$. Women in relationships were more likely to orgasm than single women during their most recent encounter. We conducted additional analyses to test the association between relationship status and orgasm goal pursuit$^{1,2}$. A Welch’s $t$-test showed that women who were in a relationship endorsed higher orgasm goal pursuit ($M = 3.64, SD = 1.29$) compared to single women.

$^1$ We found high correlations in Study 1 and Study 2 between orgasm importance and orgasm goal pursuit and the high correlation between age and length of sexual relationship in Study 2, so we performed multcollinearity diagnostics. Because logistic regression does not have these diagnostics, we ran a linear regression for this purpose (Menard, 2002). However, given that multicollinearity diagnostics are performed on predictor, not dependent, variables, this process is suitable to determining problems of multicollinearity. The VIF for predictor variables did not exceed 2 in Study 1 and did not exceed 3 in Study 2, suggesting that there are no issues of multicollinearity.

$^2$ Given that orgasm goal pursuit and orgasm occurrence was higher among women in relationships we conducted moderation analyses to determine if the association between orgasm goal pursuit and orgasm occurrence was stronger for women in relationships. Although the overall model was significant, the interaction term failed to reach significance in either study 1 or study 2, providing support that orgasm goal pursuit is an influential individual differences variable for women.
Given that orgasm goal pursuit is a new concept, we conducted a direct replication to increase our confidence in these findings. Increasingly, psychologists are finding that a single study is inadequate in demonstrating that a construct is reliable and valid (Amir & Sharon, 1990; Galak et al., 2012; Open Science Collaboration, 2015). Thus, in Study 2, we replicated the results of Study 1, in a new sample collected one year later. We again asked participants to reflect on their most recent sexual encounter, their orgasm goal pursuit, and their orgasm occurrence.

### Method

#### Participants

In Study 2, we recruited a sample of 214 women, 181 of whom identified as heterosexual and 33 of whom identified as bisexual or pansexual. All of the women had engaged in at least one sexual encounter in which there was genital touching and responded to all the main variables of interest (e.g. orgasm occurrence). Participants’ ages ranged from 18–66 years old ($M = 22.10$, $SD = 8.39$). The racial composition of our study was 74.3% White, 6.5% African American, 7.5% Asian American, 3.7% Multi-Racial, 3.3% Hispanic/LatinX, 2.3% Middle Eastern, 0.5% Native American, with the remaining 1.9% not reporting their racial identity.

#### Procedure

We followed the same procedure as Study 1.

#### Measures

Measures for relationship status, importance of orgasm, orgasm occurrence, and orgasm goal pursuit ($\alpha = 0.83$) were identical to those in Study 1.

**Length of Sexual Relationship.** We asked participants “Is this your first sexual contact with this partner?” with the possible response options “yes” or “no.” Participants who answered yes were asked the question, “Have you been having sexual contact with this partner for more than a year?” Participants who answered “no” were asked to report the number of months (01–12) they have been having sex with that current partner. Participants who answered “yes” were asked to report the number of years they have been having sex with that partner (01–70). Results were converted into a continuous variable, represented in years, for analysis.

**Sexual practices.** For Study 2, participants reported on the same four sexual practices that were listed for Study 1. Instead of using a checklist, participants were asked whether they engaged in each of the four sexual behaviors (e.g. Did you receive oral sex from your partner?). As in Study 1, these four sexual practices were combined to create a score ranging from 0–4.

### Analyses

Our analysis plan for Study 2 was the same as in Study 1.

#### Results

**Descriptives

Of the 214 women in Study 2, 44.9% of women reported that they orgasmed during their most recent sexual encounter, with 57.6% of bisexual women orgasming and 42.5% of heterosexual women orgasming. Most women (81.3%) reported that they had experienced an orgasm at least once in their life. Of the women who orgasmed, 74% were in a relationship and 26% were single. Of the women who did not orgasm, 36.8% were in a relationship and 63.2% were single. Participants reported a sexual relationship for an average of 2.51 years with their most recent partner ($SD = 6.62$). Slightly over half (53.3%) of participants were in a relationship at the time of their sexual encounter and 46.3% reported that they were single.

The frequency distribution of sexual activity was similar to Study 1. Manual stimulation was the most frequent sexual behavior with 89.7% of women receiving manual stimulation. The next most frequent sexual behavior was vaginal intercourse (78%), followed by oral sex (47.7%), and with the fewest percentage of women engaging in masturbation (34.6%). Participants engaged in 2.5 sexual activities on average ($SD = 1.04$).

#### Correlations

We again conducted Pearson's product moment correlations between age, length of sexual relationship, variety of sexual activities, importance of orgasm, and orgasm goal pursuit (Table 3). Age and length of sexual relationship were positively correlated. Variety of sexual practices was positively correlated with both orgasm importance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 2 Correlation Matrix.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Sexual Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orgasm Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orgasm Goal Pursuit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ** $p < .001$. 

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**Table 2**

Study 1 Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Orgasm Occurrence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Wald $\chi^2$</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>6.22*</td>
<td>[1.01, 1.08]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Sexual Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 1 year</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>[.99, 4.13]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 1 year</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>6.91*</td>
<td>[1.33, 7.07]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status In a Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a Relationship</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>26.71**</td>
<td>[2.10, 5.18]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not In a Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Sexual Practices</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>9.75**</td>
<td>[1.13, 1.69]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orgasm Importance</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>33.73**</td>
<td>[1.42, 2.03]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orgasm Goal Pursuit</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>20.09**</td>
<td>[1.31, 1.98]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−7.26</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>117.42**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$ Length of Sexual Relationship: 1 = First time (reference category), 2 = Less than 1 year, 3 = More than one year; Relationship Status: 0 = Single, 1 = In a Relationship.

(M = 3.18, $SD = 1.29$), $t$ (664) = −4.67, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.66, −0.27].
and orgasm goal pursuit. Orgasm importance was positively correlated with orgasm goal pursuit.

**Predictors of orgasm occurrence**

As in Study 1, our hypothesis that endorsement of orgasm goal pursuit would predict orgasm occurrence was supported. The logistic model was statistically significant, \( \chi^2 (6) = 89.25, p < .001 \). The model correctly classified 75.5% of all cases. In the full model containing orgasm goal pursuit the Cox Snell \( R^2 \) and Nagelkerke \( R^2 \) were 0.34 and 0.46, respectively. In the partial model Cox Snell \( R^2 \) was 0.32 and the Nagelkerke \( R^2 \) was 0.43.

Age and length of sexual relationship did not significantly predict orgasm occurrence (Table 4). Relationship status, variety of sexual practices, orgasm importance and orgasm goal pursuit did predict orgasm occurrence. In support of our hypothesis, women's orgasm goal pursuit predicted the likelihood with which a woman would orgasm. A one unit increase in orgasm goal pursuit was associated with log odds of 1.81. Thus, a woman with a score of 2 has a 81% increase in the odds of orgasming compared to a woman with a score of 1. Likewise, for a woman with a score of 6, the odds her orgasming is 1943% greater than a woman with a score of 1. As in Study 1, this finding suggests the importance of studying the association between individual differences in orgasm goal pursuit and orgasm occurrence.

**Additional analyses concerning relationship status**

As in Study 1, relationship status was a significant predictor of women's orgasm occurrence. A chi-square test of independence was significant, \( \chi^2 (1, N = 213) = 29.24, p < .001 \). Women in relationships were more likely to orgasm than single women during their most recent encounter. We conducted additional analyses to test the association between relationship status and orgasm goal pursuit. A Welch's t-test showed that women who were in a relationship endorsed higher orgasm goal pursuit (\( M = 3.58, SD = 1.31 \)) compared to single women (\( M = 3.13, SD = 1.18 \)), \( t (210) = -2.64, p = .01, 95\% CI [-0.79, -0.11] \).

**Discussion**

Women navigate a sexual landscape that creates many barriers to orgasm and yet many women think of orgasm as an important part of their sexual experience. However, thinking of orgasm as important does not mean that women are setting orgasm as a goal for their sexual encounter or striving towards having an orgasm. We sought to extend previous work by asking women to reflect on their attempts to orgasm in their most recent sexual encounter in order to predict their orgasm occurrence. We were especially curious to see whether differences in orgasm goal pursuit emerged between women who did not orgasm in their most recent sexual encounter.

Across two studies, we found support that the importance that women attributed to orgasm and women's orgasm goal pursuit predicted orgasm occurrence. Women who reported a higher orgasm goal pursuit – that is, who had the goal of orgasming and strived to have an orgasm – were more likely to orgasm than women who had a weaker endorsement of orgasm goal pursuit. This research complements existing research showing that women vary in the extent to which they believe orgasm is important (Kontula & Miettinen, 2016; McClelland, 2012) and extends the research of Willis et al. (2018) which found that the frequency with which women focus on their own orgasm predicts orgasm occurrence.

These results suggest that researchers should measure orgasm goal pursuit in addition to whether women believe orgasm is important. These factors, although related, represent distinct constructs. Although women's attributions of importance to orgasm are crucial for understanding women's attitudes toward and beliefs about sexuality, research needs to account for behavioral components of women's sexual encounters. For women's orgasms to occur, simply thinking of orgasm as important is insufficient given that orgasm goal pursuit predicts orgasm occurrence.

Orgasm goal pursuit is also important because it suggests that women cannot simply be separated into women who care about and do orgasm and women who do not care about and do not orgasm. Instead, women represent a spectrum of orgasm goal pursuit. This research suggests that orgasm goal pursuit is a meaningful individual difference between women because it captures unique variance even when compared to other factors previous research has found to predict orgasm.

In both studies we found that women in relationships were more likely to orgasm compared to single women. Moreover, in both studies, women who were in relationships endorsed higher orgasm goal pursuit than women who were single. These findings are consistent with research that demonstrates that women's orgasms are prioritized differently in casual sex compared to committed relationships (Armstrong et al., 2012; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). Both women and men are more likely to think orgasm is important in the context of sex in a relationship likely because relationships provide a context in which women's sexuality and pleasure are more valued (Armstrong et al., 2012; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). In contrast, women's orgasms are not part of the sexual script for casual sex; instead, the sexual scripts that exist for casual sex tend to focus on men's pleasure and orgasm. Thus, it makes sense that women in relationships would also have a greater endorsement of orgasm goal pursuit because relationships are providing a context within which women feel comfortable setting orgasm as a goal and striving to have an orgasm.

**Implications**

As with many sexual attitudes and behaviors, women's orgasm goal pursuit may be socially constructed. That is, because women navigate their sexual encounters around the barriers of gendered sexual scripts and norms, they must contend with a gender socialization that discourages them from seeking orgasm. For example, the expectation that women should be sexually passive during sexual encounters, in addition to the rejection of women's orgasms as part of the heterosexual sexual

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**Table 4**

**Study 2: Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Orgasm Occurrence.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Wald ( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>[0.99, 1.09]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Sexual Relation</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>[0.92, 1.05]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a Relationship</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>13.53***</td>
<td>[1.93, 8.65]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of sexual practices</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>6.15*</td>
<td>[1.11, 2.36]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orgasm Importance</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.23*</td>
<td>[1.02, 2.09]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orgasm Goal Pursuit</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>7.35*</td>
<td>[1.18, 2.77]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−6.49</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>38.22**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** *p < .05, **p < .005 Relationship Status: 0 = Single (reference category) 1 = In a relationship.
script, creates barriers in women’s sexual lives that affect whether they are pursuing orgasm in their sexual encounters. Thus, understanding whether women are pursuing orgasm has implications for women in a sexual world where they contend with orgasm inequality (Armstrong et al., 2012).

The present research also has implications for how researchers can explain the orgasm gap in which WSM orgasm less frequently than men who have sex with women. Research extending the present findings should examine how accounting for women’s and men’s orgasm goal pursuit can statistically eliminate the orgasm gap. Understanding women’s and men’s attempts to orgasm may illuminate dynamics that reinforce or challenge the existence of the orgasm gap, in the same way that other gender differences in sexuality have been challenged (Fisher, 2013).

Given our finding that orgasm goal pursuit predicts orgasm occurrence, it might seem logical to argue that more women simply need to embrace orgasm as a goal and strive to have orgasms. Clearly, orgasm is important to many women; however, telling women to try harder to orgasm has two major problems. First, societal barriers can prevent women from pursuing orgasm. Maintenance of sexual scripts within contemporary society reinforces gendered expectations of women and men in sexual encounters and normalizes the maintenance of orgasmic inequality. In turn, this creates limitations for women’s sexuality because women cannot simply choose to pursue orgasm in all their sexual encounters if their sexual desire is not considered important. For example, women’s experiences of orgasms are influenced by the role their partner plays in the sexual encounter, including their attribution of importance to women’s orgasms, their sexual knowledge about women’s bodies, and their expectations and desire to engage in certain types of sexual activities.

Second, we acknowledge that in different sexual encounters, different aspects may take precedence over orgasm. To paint orgasm as a necessary event in sexual encounters can create a performance imperative in which women feel they need to continually work to make orgasm happen. The performance imperative can have negative consequences: women may feel pressured to have an orgasm either to feel sexually ‘normal’ or to please their partner (Frits, 2015). For some women, this may also lead to faking orgasm (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010). The weight of these pressures may be exacerbated if women employ behaviors to help them orgasm but are still unable.

Although we endorse efforts to achieve orgasm equality and we understand and appreciate how orgasm goal pursuit influences the orgasm gap, we believe another effective intervention would be to simply acknowledge that broad claims about women’s biological capacity for orgasm are facile. Assumptions made about women’s capacity for orgasm are unwarranted if women are not even pursuing orgasm. Before claiming that women cannot orgasm because of their biology, researchers must account for whether they are pursuing orgasm in the first place.

Limitations

The primary limitation of our studies is that they did not expand on the concept of orgasm goal pursuit beyond measuring goal setting and goal striving. Although the concept of orgasm goal pursuit can be useful in establishing that this is an important individual difference, our findings are only useful to the extent that women are pursuing orgasm for their own sexual pleasure and not just the sexual pleasure of their partner. Similarly, our research does not account for other goals that women may have for their sexual encounters that contribute to their sexual satisfaction. It may be that as women pursue their other sexual goals that they also influence the likelihood with which a woman will orgasm. Moreover, our research did not include a comparison between men who have sex with women and WSM. Without men in our sample we are unable to determine if orgasm goal pursuit is a meaningful concept in explaining why the orgasm gap persists.

The cross-sectional nature of our studies can also be considered a limitation. Having women reflect on their most recent sexual encounter does not provide a holistic understanding of women’s orgasm goal pursuit. It could be that women have different levels of orgasm goal pursuit across their sexual encounters and different partners. Likewise, asking women to retroactively report on their sexual encounters may have resulted in inaccuracy in women reporting on their orgasm goal pursuit.

Measuring only four sexual behaviors is another potential limitation. Research by Frederick et al. (2018) and Willis et al. (2018) identify many other forms of sexual activity (e.g., sex toy use, anal stimulation, anal intercourse, deep kissing, non-genital stimulation including carresses, kissing, and nibbling of various erogenous and non-erogenous zones) that have been associated with orgasm occurrence. Another construct that we did not measure but that could be related to orgasm occurrence is duration of the sexual encounter, with longer encounters potentially providing more opportunity for engaging in more sexual practices that would lead to orgasm occurrence.

Future directions

Future research should measure when, why, and how women pursue orgasm. At what point do women come to realize that they would like to have an orgasm in their sexual encounter and at what point they choose to pursue orgasm? Perhaps some women know from the onset of the sexual encounter that they would like to have an orgasm while others decide to pursue orgasm while the encounter is already happening. Next, to address why women pursue orgasm, we need to understand if women feel entitled to pursue and experience orgasm. Women navigate sexual scripts and sexual socialization that likely affect whether women feel it is acceptable to pursue orgasm. Future researchers may find it helpful to draw from McClelland’s (2010) intimate justice framework, which asks researchers to consider whether women feel entitled to the actions and cognitions necessary for sex and orgasm. This theoretical approach will further situate women’s experience of orgasm in sociopolitical contexts that determine who is entitled to sex and who has sexual agency. Furthermore, research into why women pursue orgasms may find it helpful to draw from the approach-avoidance framework to understand the reasons why women do pursue orgasm and the reasons that they avoid pursuing orgasm (Impett et al., 2005). Finally, future studies should measure how women pursue orgasm – what steps do different women take to pursue orgasm? Moreover, how do women’s beliefs of self-efficacy (belief that they can achieve orgasm) influence orgasm occurrence? By exploring when, why, and how women pursue orgasm, researchers can illuminate how women navigate the pursuit of orgasm.

Conclusion

Given the societal importance placed on orgasm as a proxy for healthy and pleasurable sex, we extended research to address how women differ in the extent to which they perceive orgasm as important and the degree to which they pursue orgasm. We found that women’s endorsement of orgasm goal pursuit predicted whether a woman orgasmated in her most recent encounter. These findings suggest that orgasm is not simply something that happens to women but, instead, women can have different intentions for their sexual experiences with some women more actively pursuing orgasm than others. We suggest that future researchers consider orgasm goal pursuit as a critical individual difference when trying to understand assumptions about women’s orgasmic capabilities and the orgasm gap between WSM and men who have sex with women.

Acknowledgements

We thank Sara McClelland for helpful comments on the manuscript.