

# The role of sexual passion in romantic relationship functioning: A dyadic analysis

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## Abstract

The dualistic model of sexual passion defines sexual passion as a strong motivational drive to engage in various types of partnered and non-partnered sexual activities and distinguishes two types of sexual passion that lead to distinct consequences, obsessive sexual passion (OSP) and harmonious sexual passion (HSP). The purpose of the present research was to examine the associations between these two types of sexual passion and relationship functioning in partners of romantic relationships using dyadic analyses. Heterosexual participants (132 couples;  $n = 264$ ) completed an online survey which included three indicators of relationship functioning: relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and level of conflict. An actor-partner interdependence model analysis (APIM) revealed that, for both men and women, HSP was positively associated with relationship functioning, whereas OSP was negatively associated with it. In addition, results unveiled significant partner effects, such that both men's and women's HSP were associated with their partners' perceptions of relationship functioning, but not for OSP. Finally, there were a significant moderation between men's HSP and women's OSP on women's relationship functioning, suggesting that men's HSP can buffer the negative effect of women's OSP. The present results provide evidence that sexual passion can either

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facilitate or hinder relationship functioning through multiple personal and dyadic pathways.

### **Keywords**

APIM, dyadic design, relationship functioning, romantic relationship, sexual passion

Research has frequently highlighted the importance of sexuality in romantic relationships and showed its strong association with key variables pertaining to the sustainability and quality of relationships over time (Edwards & Booth, 1994; Sprecher, 2002; Yeh et al., 2006). However, most indicators of couple's sexuality have relied on a one-dimensional continuum. For instance, constructs such as sexual desire, sex drive, or sexual satisfaction focus on the strength of partners' sex drive, arousal, or satisfaction with respect to their sexuality and are usually assessed as ranging from low to high (but see Shaw & Rogge, 2016). The present research departs from this more common perspective in that we used the dualistic model of sexual passion to examine the impact of sexual passion on romantic relationship functioning. The dualistic model of sexual passion posits that there exist two types of sexual passion, a harmonious sexual passion and an obsessive sexual passion, which are both characterized by high interest in sex and sex drive, and frequent engagement in sexual activities. However, they strongly differ in the consequences they have on relationship functioning (Busby et al., 2018; Guilbault et al., 2020; Philippe et al., 2017, 2019). In the present research, we sought to examine how each type of sexual passion relates to key indicators of relationship functioning, as reported by both partners of the relationship. Therefore, in addition to extending research on the role of sexual passion on relationship functioning, the present research will also examine its dyadic or partner effect, thereby highlighting how the expression of sexuality of one partner can affect the perceptions of relationship functioning of the other partner.

### **The dualistic model of sexual passion**

The literature on passionate activities specifies that people can develop a passion toward an activity that is liked, highly valued, and in which they engage in frequently (e.g., Vallerand, 2015; Vallerand et al., 2003). Drawing from this literature, Philippe and colleagues (2017) proposed to define sexual passion as the motivational inclination to engage in sexual activities. Having a sexual passion is characterized by the display of 1) a strong identification to sex in general, 2) a strong emotional connection to sex in general, 3) a high valuation of sex, and 4) a frequent engagement in sexual activities. As per this definition, sexual passion is a stable and self-defining motivational drive leading people to engage in either partnered (e.g., sexual intercourse, oral sex) or non-partnered sexual activities (e.g., fantasizing, masturbation) and to spend a considerable amount of time and energy in these activities. This definition drastically departs from the lay definition of sexual passion, often conceptualized as a strong and temporary sexual desire toward a partner leading to passionate sex. It is related, but distinct from the definition of sexual desire, which is typically conceptualized as a subjective psychological state (Regan & Berscheid, 1999),

most often oriented toward a partner (Birnbaum, 2018). Sexual passion as a motivational inclination is a stable person-sexuality interface part of one's identity (e.g., identifying as a sexual person) and which drives all kind of sexual behaviors across contexts (Philippe et al., 2017).

Of importance, sexual passion is not just a sexual motivational force or sexual incentive motivation (Toates, 2009), but also a cognitive organization. Following the dualistic model of passion (Vallerand, 2015; Vallerand et al., 2003), Philippe and colleagues (2017) distinguished two types of sexual passion, obsessive sexual passion (OSP) and harmonious sexual passion (HSP). These two types of sexual passion differ in the way sexual representations have been internalized. In OSP, sexual representations have been internalized in a controlled fashion. That is, the norms, beliefs, and values that people hold with regards to sexuality and sexual activities have been imposed onto the person by the social environment and are therefore not fully self-endorsed (Philippe et al., 2017). They are therefore less likely to reflect the person's own values and preferences (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Consequently, with OSP, individuals feel compelled to express their sexuality or to engage in sexual activities according to what is socially prescribed or valued by certain social groups (e.g., sexual intercourse should last long), even if these assumptions do not fit with their own values (Philippe et al., 2019). As a result, cognitive sexual representations remain poorly integrated with other mental representations, such as relational representations (Philippe et al., 2017, 2019), which tends to form relatively isolated sexual cognitive networks, separated from other interconnected networks of representations (Philippe et al., 2017). Therefore, whenever a sexual representation is activated, its activation is restricted to sexual representations only, rather than spreading to other types of representations (e.g., relational representations). The sphere of sexuality is therefore more likely to conflict with other life spheres, such as relationships (e.g., Guilbault et al., 2020).

In contrast, in HSP, individuals have internalized sexual representations in an autonomous fashion (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which leads them to more readily engage in sexual activities according to beliefs and values they freely endorse (Philippe et al., 2017). For instance, they will be sexually attracted by people who correspond to their own personal preferences rather than to social standards (e.g., being thin, tall, and physically fit), they will dress according to their own taste, rather than according to socially prescribed norms, or they will engage in sexual activities according to what they personally consider pleasurable and enjoyable rather than according to social expectations (e.g., anal intercourse). When sexual representations have been autonomously internalized, little conflict arises among representations and between sexuality and other life spheres (Guilbault et al., 2020). Thus, in HSP, sexual representations are more coherently interrelated with other types of representations. Therefore, when sexual representations are activated, non-sexual representations, such as relational representations, can also be triggered because activation spreads to larger networks of representations that are not exclusively constrained to sexual representations (Philippe et al., 2017).

## **Empirical support for a dualistic model of sexual passion**

Research has empirically supported the aforementioned model of sexual passion. First, both OSP and HSP were found to be positively related to each passion criterion of loving,

valuing, and engaging frequently in sexual activities (Guilbault et al., 2020; Philippe et al., 2017, 2019) and to frequent engagement in various sexual behaviors (Philippe et al., 2019). In addition, both types of sexual passion have been positively associated with high solitary (Philippe et al., 2019) and dyadic sexual desire (Busby et al., 2018; Philippe et al., 2019) and with high arousal states during sexual activities (Philippe et al., 2017). Thus, both OSP and HSP correspond to what a sexual passion is and correlate positively with indicators of sexual passion strength (frequent engagement in sexual activities, sexual desire, arousal states during sexual activities). OSP and HSP represent two different ways through which this strength of sexual passion can be expressed. Each has therefore distinct determinants and lead to distinct consequences.

It should be underscored that OSP and HSP are not an assessment of the level of sexual passion (the strength), but of its type, that is, how sexual representations have been internalized (autonomously or in a controlled fashion) and are cognitively organized. As such, the strength of one's sexual passion does not moderate the effect of its type. This means that even at a low level of sexual passion (strength), HSP will have some positive effect on relationship functioning, but this positive effect of HSP will monotonically increase as the level of sexual passion (strength) increases. The same is expected of OSP (see Philippe et al., 2019).

Research has shown that HSP was associated with a general autonomous internalization, that is, doing things for personal and self-determined reasons (Philippe et al., 2019). As such it was found to be unrelated to sexual contingencies, such as valuing normative thin women or muscular men (Philippe et al., 2019). Conversely, OSP was found to be associated with a controlled internalization (doing things out of external pressure) and with the endorsement of sexual contingencies relative to men and women normative body stereotypes (Philippe et al., 2019). As a consequence of this internalization, in OSP, once sexual representations are activated, perceptions and judgments are rigidly constrained to the sexual sphere. In HSP, once sexual representations are activated by a situation, they spread to other types of representations than sexual ones (e.g., relational representations), which facilitates more nuanced and alternative interpretations of the situation than strict sexual interpretations and increases the capacity to inhibit sexual activation when necessary. For instance, in one study (Philippe et al., 2017, Study 2), participants read an ambiguous scenario depicting two students interacting in a way that could be perceived as either sexual or friendly. Results showed that OSP predicted more attributions of sexual intentions to the protagonists in the scenario, whereas that was not the case with HSP. Similar results have been obtained with a word classification task. In this task, participants had to classify neutral words (e.g., pizza), ambiguous sexual words (e.g., uniform, heels, nurse), or unambiguous sexual words (e.g., intercourse) as quickly as possible as sexual or non-sexual words. Results showed that OSP, but not HSP, predicted the number of ambiguous words classified as sexual, suggesting the difficulty in OSP for a stimulus to be considered alternatively once it has acquired a sexual connotation.

Because sexual representations are not well integrated with other representations in OSP, they are expected to conflict more often with other life spheres, whereas it should not be the case with HSP. Indeed, OSP has been found to be positively associated with self-reported conflict between sexuality and other life spheres (Philippe et al., 2017), and

between sexuality and long-term relationships (Guilbault et al., 2020), whereas HSP was unrelated to these types of conflict. This conflict between sexual representations and other types of mental representations was also found to exist at the cognitive level. Philippe and colleagues (2017, Study 4) subliminally primed heterosexual participants with photos of attractive or low-attractive opposite-sex targets while participants completed a picture classification task unrelated to sexuality. OSP predicted slower reaction times during the classification task in the attractive-target condition compared to the low-attractive condition, suggesting that OSP led to greater attentional disruption due to the cognitive conflict engendered by the triggering of sexual stimuli. Furthermore, in the attractive-target condition, HSP predicted faster reaction times than in the low-attractive condition, suggesting that HSP may help inhibiting the activation of sexual representations and goals when contexts for such an activation are inappropriate or untimely.

Because sexuality conflicts with other life spheres in OSP, particularly the relational sphere, OSP is likely to be detrimental to relationship functioning. Conversely, because in HSP sexuality is well integrated with other life spheres, HSP should facilitate relationship functioning. Research has indeed shown that HSP was positively related to various aspects of relationship functioning, like sexual satisfaction and relationship quality (Busby et al., 2018; Philippe et al., 2017, 2019). Furthermore, HSP was found to be unrelated to the occurrence of extradyadic sex (Guilbault et al., 2020) and to the dissolution of the relationship over time (Philippe et al., 2017). Conversely, studies have shown that OSP was negatively associated or unrelated to relationship functioning indices such as sexual satisfaction and relationship quality (Busby et al., 2018; Philippe et al., 2017, 2019) and positively associated with violent jealous behaviors (Philippe et al., 2017, 2019). Finally, OSP was found to be positively associated with difficulties maintaining relationships because of sexuality (Guilbault et al., 2020), extradyadic sex intentions and occurrences (Guilbault et al., 2020), and relationship dissolution over time (Philippe et al., 2017).

Research has also gathered evidence of discriminant validity regarding this dualistic model of sexual passion. Both HSP and OSP were found to be unrelated to self-control and psychological distress (Philippe et al., 2017). They were also found to be both positively associated with a willingness to engage in sex without love (sociosexuality), erotic or passionate feelings toward one's partner (relational or romantic passion), and solo and dyadic sexual desire, and to be each differently associated with attachment dimensions, self-determined motives for sex, sexual satisfaction, and sexual compulsivity, yet predicting outcomes over and above all these constructs (Busby et al., 2018; Guilbault et al., 2020; Philippe et al., 2017, 2019).

Thus far, research has shown that the type of sexual passion one holds has important consequences for one's romantic relationship (Busby et al., 2018; Guilbault et al., 2020; Philippe et al., 2017, 2019). However, little is known on how the type of sexual passion one partner holds can impact the other partner's perceptions of the relationship. Since HSP allows for sexual representations to enmesh with other types of mental representations, including relational representations, HSP might lead to positive consequences for romantic relationships that transcend the individuals holding the sexual passion to ultimately positively affect their partners. Conversely, with OSP, sexual representations are isolated from other representations, which prevent them from promoting relational

aspects, and thereby, from sustaining the romantic relationship. Ultimately, this should have negative consequences on the other partner of the relationship. The purpose of the present research was to examine these potential dyadic influences that sexual passion can have by investigating both partners of romantic relationships.

## **Partners' influence as a function of gender**

To fully understand the extent of dyadic influence in a romantic relationship, it is important to determine whether the influence partners have on each other is equivalent or if there is an imbalance in that influence. An obvious potential source of imbalance of dyadic influence is gender. Indeed, dyadic research has shown that partners' influence on each other is often moderated by gender (Blais et al., 1990; Brunell & Webster, 2013; Campbell et al., 2001).

Research has sometimes shown that in a dyadic context, women have a greater influence on their male partners. For instance, women's motivation to maintain the relationship was found to predict their male partners' couple adjustment, but men's motivation was not associated with women's couple adjustment (Blais et al., 1990). Other research has found that women's autonomous motivation for sexuality was associated with men's sexual well-being, but not the opposite (Gravel, 2017). Conversely, other studies have shown that men had a greater influence on their female partners. Specifically, men's self-determined motivation for sexual intercourse (Brunell & Webster, 2013), their support (Jensen et al., 2013), and their coping strategies to reduce stress (Bodenmann et al., 2006) were linked with women's perceptions of relationship functioning, but not vice versa. Guilbault and Philippe (2017) showed that the level of need satisfaction characterizing males' recalled couple-related memories was related to their female partners' commitment and perceptions of need satisfaction in the relationship. Finally, some research uncovered mutual influences between relationship partners. For instance, correspondence of partners' romantic ideals was found to be associated with relationship functioning (Campbell et al., 2001). Similarly, the degree to which relationship goals are perceived as shared by the other partner was found to be associated with relationship functioning (Avivi et al., 2009).

Overall, research suggests that both males and females could respectively influence their partner in their perceptions of relationship functioning. Therefore, we did not make any specific hypothesis with regards to which gender would influence more preponderantly his or her partner in the case of sexual passion. However, these differences will be explored.

## **The present research**

The present research sought to examine the associations between partners' OSP and HSP on their perceptions of relationship functioning. To investigate these associations, we asked both the participant and his or her partner to complete, separately from each other, scales assessing sexual passion and various relational outcomes, including perceived relationship quality, relational conflict, and sexual satisfaction. All these outcomes were selected because they are key relational variables that can all be affected by each partner's sexual passion. Based on past research on the dualistic model of sexual passion

(Busby et al., 2018; Guilbault et al., 2020; Philippe et al., 2017, 2019), it was hypothesized that OSP of both partners would be negatively associated with their own and with their partners' perceptions of relationship functioning. Conversely, it was hypothesized that HSP of both partners would be positively associated with their own and with their partners' perceptions of relationship functioning. Given that very few moderations of sexual passion by gender have been found in past research on sexual passion, we did not make any specific hypotheses to this effect. Finally, for exploratory purposes, we will investigate whether the type of sexual passion of one partner can moderate the effect of the sexual passion of the other partner.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

A power analysis using a Monte Carlo simulation (Muthén & Muthén, 2002) of an APIM with distinguishable variables based on gender and two latent variables of three indicators each (loadings of .80) revealed that, with a sample size of 130 dyads, the power was .80 to detect actor and partner effects of .235 (standardized coefficient) and above (see Mplus syntax in supplemental material).

Accordingly, we sampled 132 heterosexual dyads (total  $n = 264$ ) who were in a romantic relationship for at least 3 months. Females' and males' mean age was 25.08 ( $SD = 6.40$ ) and 27.45 years ( $SD = 8.33$ ), respectively, and couples had been partnered for 39.95 months on average (48.55 months). A similar relationship length average has been reported by Lantagne and Furman (2017) for a sample of young adults of 25.67 years of age (37.54 months,  $SD = 32.87$ ). However, the sample of the present study has a larger standard deviation. Thus, our sample can be characterized as a sample of adults in the end of their early adulthood. The vast majority of the participants were Caucasian (85.6%). They were undergraduates and graduates from a Canadian university contacted through their institutional email to take part in a study on couple relationship with their partners. Participants were asked after completing the questionnaire to provide the email of their partner, who then received a link to complete a similar questionnaire. A total of 65% of the participants accepted to provide the email of their partner and 85% of these partners accepted to complete the study (final  $n = 132$  dyads). Instructions stressed how important it was to respond without the presence of their partner and as a function of their own opinion and not according to their partner's opinion. As a compensation for their time, both the participants and their partners were entered into a draw for one of three prizes of \$125 CAD.

### *Measures*

**Sexual passion.** The Sexual Passion scale (Philippe et al., 2017) was used to assess the two types of sexual passion. OSP is measured using three items, which include: "Sex is the only thing that really turns me on." HSP is also measured with three items, such as "Sex is in harmony with the other activities in my life." Items were responded to on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) and the same Likert scale was

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and paired t-tests between women and men on study variables.

| Variables                 | Women |      | Men  |      | Paired t-test |
|---------------------------|-------|------|------|------|---------------|
|                           | M     | SD   | M    | SD   | t(130)        |
| Harmonious sexual passion | 5.31  | 1.50 | 5.38 | 1.26 | -.53          |
| Obsessive sexual passion  | 1.79  | .94  | 2.61 | 1.20 | -6.54**       |
| Relationship quality      | 5.99  | .87  | 5.76 | .91  | 3.06**        |
| Sexual satisfaction       | 4.82  | 1.44 | 4.82 | 1.50 | .02           |
| Relational conflict       | 1.54  | .70  | 1.59 | .71  | -.82          |

Note.  $n = 132$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

used for all scales in the present study, unless otherwise stated. Alphas were .71 and .95 for females and .70 and .90 for males for OSP and HSP, respectively.

*Perceived relationship quality.* The 7-item Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (Fletcher et al., 2000a, 2000b) measures seven components of romantic relationships (satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, love, and romance), each with one item (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your relationship?”). The passion item (“How sexually intense is your relationship?”) was not used in the present study to avoid overlap with the sexual satisfaction scale. Alphas were .87 for females and .91 for males.

*Sexual satisfaction.* Sexual satisfaction was assessed with five items from the general sexual satisfaction subscale of the Pinney Sexual Satisfaction Inventory (Pinney et al., 1987). Items included “I am satisfied with the frequency with which I have sexual intercourse.” This adapted version was used because it excludes all reference to what a partner does (e.g., “I am satisfied with the quality of the time my partner and I spend together immediately after intercourse”), which could have unduly increased partner effects in the model. Alphas were .92 and .89 for females and males, respectively.

*Relational conflict.* Three items from the Relationship Assessment questionnaire (Luo & Klohnen, 2005) were used to measure the frequency of interpersonal conflict in the relationship, such as “How often do you and your partner quarrel?”. These items were responded to on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*, 6 = *Always*). Alphas were .82 for both males and females.

## Results

### Preliminary analyses

Paired t-tests (see Table 1) showed that men scored significantly higher on OSP than women. Furthermore, women scored significantly higher than men on relationship quality. However, there were no significant differences between women and men on HSP, sexual satisfaction, and relational conflict.

**Table 2.** Correlations among study variables.

| Variables                 | 1     | 2      | 3    | 4    | 5      | 6      | 7      | 8      | 9     |
|---------------------------|-------|--------|------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1. W HSP                  | —     |        |      |      |        |        |        |        |       |
| 2. M HSP                  | .36*  | —      |      |      |        |        |        |        |       |
| 3. W OSP                  | .18*  | -.01   | —    |      |        |        |        |        |       |
| 4. M OSP                  | .01   | .14    | .10  | —    |        |        |        |        |       |
| 5. W relationship quality | .40** | .40**  | -.16 | .00  | —      |        |        |        |       |
| 6. M relationship quality | .18*  | .52**  | -.04 | -.04 | .52**  | —      |        |        |       |
| 7. W sexual satisfaction  | .55** | .43**  | -.07 | .13  | .58**  | .34**  | —      |        |       |
| 8. M sexual satisfaction  | .41** | .61**  | .07  | -.07 | .43**  | .63**  | .47**  | —      |       |
| 9. W relational conflict  | -.19* | -.28** | .04  | .12  | -.43** | -.33** | -.40** | -.29** | —     |
| 10. M relational conflict | -.21* | -.34** | -.01 | -.01 | -.35** | -.39** | -.21*  | -.38** | .55** |

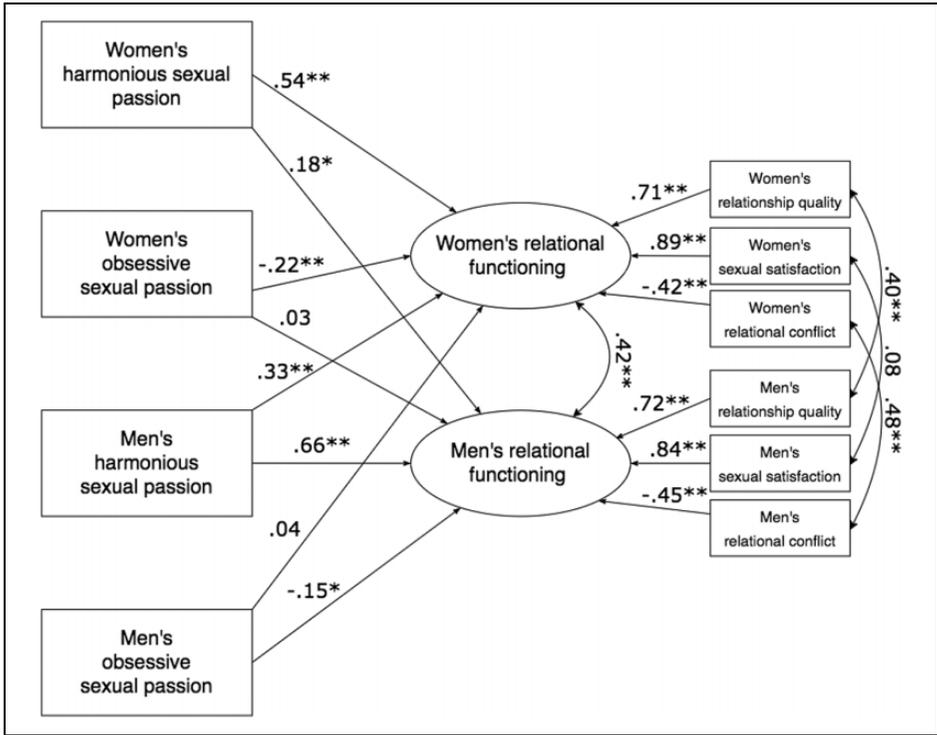
Note. HSP = harmonious sexual passion; OSP = obsessive sexual passion; W = women; M = men.  $n = 132$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Correlations among study variables are shown in Table 2. Results showed that men's HSP and OSP and women's HSP and OSP were weakly correlated, reconfirming the two orthogonal dimensions of sexual passion across gender. Both partners' HSP were positively and moderately correlated, whereas both partners' OSP were unrelated. These results suggest that partners with HSP might be more likely to find other partners characterized by HSP or that a partner with HSP is more likely to facilitate the development of an HSP in the other partner. Another possibility, that the present research design cannot rule out, is that romantic couples who are well adjusted might be more likely to develop an HSP. Regardless of which of these effects is true, it seems to occur fairly independently of OSP, as women's HSP and men's OSP as well as men's HSP and women's OSP were not significantly associated and their correlations were close to zero.

## Main analyses

The actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006) with structural equation modeling was used to model the effect of the type of sexual passion on relationship functioning, as reported by each of the two members of each dyad. APIM controls for the non-independence of the data within the same dyad, while testing for both actor (associations between participants' sexual passion and their own reported outcomes) and partner effects (associations between participants' sexual passion and their partners' reported outcomes) within the same model.

Data of each dyad were first classified as a function of gender, allowing analyses to distinguish men's and women's responses of each dyad. An APIM structural equation modeling was conducted in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) with males and females' relationship functioning as latent dependent variables using relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and conflict as indicators. Males' and females' OSP and HSP were kept as observed variables and served as independent variables. Covariances were freely estimated between males' and females' scores and among the two latent variables of males and females functioning. Because the model separates variances related to males and



**Figure 1.** Actor-partner interdependence model of men’s and women’s HSP and OSP associations with relationship functioning. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

females and that the dependent variables also covary, each significant effect of sexual passion on relationship functioning can be considered as an additive effect, explaining independent parts of the variance in relationship functioning.

Analysis of this model (see Figure 1) revealed adequate fit indices,  $\chi^2(21) = 35.17$ ,  $p = .03$ , CFI = .96, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .05. As hypothesized, actor effects of men’s and women’s HSP were positively associated with relationship functioning. Moreover, actor effects of men’s and women’s OSP were negatively associated with relationship functioning. These results are consistent with previous research showing that HSP and OSP are respectively related to positive and negative relational outcomes (e.g., Busby et al., 2018; Guilbault et al., 2020; Philippe et al., 2017, 2019).

In addition to these actor effects, there were also significant partner effects. Men’s HSP was positively associated with women’s relationship functioning and women’s HSP was positively associated with men’s relationship functioning. However, there was no significant partner effect of women’s or men’s OSP to relationship functioning ( $ps > .60$ ). Controlling for relationship length did not affect any of the above results and there was no significant moderation with this variable.

Gender contrasts of these actors or partners effects revealed no significant difference. Indeed, fit indices of the model with indistinguishable effects (i.e., actor and

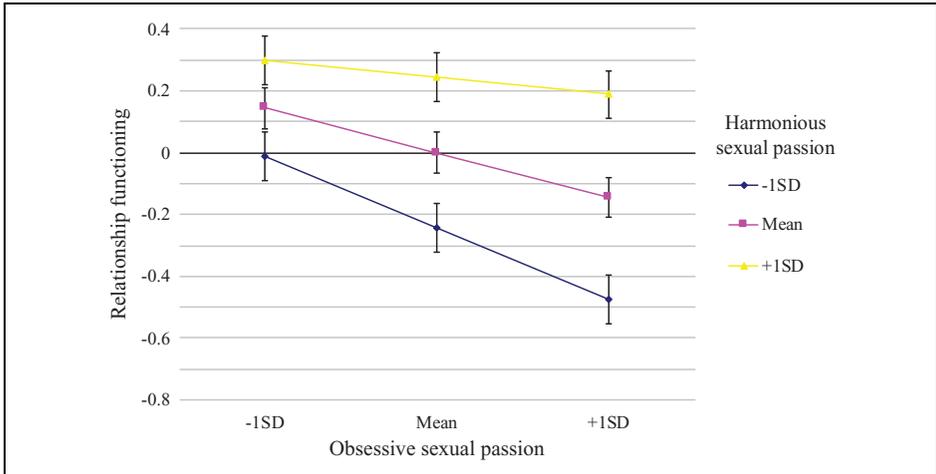
partner effects of women HSP and OSP constrained to be equaled to those of men) were adequate,  $\chi^2(25) = 37.38, p = .053, CFI = .97, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06$ , and this constrained model was not significantly different from the unconstrained model,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 2.21(4), p = .70$ . This suggests that the actor and partner effects of men's HSP or men's OSP on men's or women's relationship functioning were of the same extent as those of women's HSP or women's OSP on women's or men's relationship functioning.

To compare the size of the actor and partner effects for HSP and OSP, we estimated the  $k$  parameters of both HSP and OSP. The  $k$  parameter (Kenny & Ledermann, 2010) refers to the ratio of the partner effect divided by the actor effect. Bootstrapped confidence intervals are recommended to provide unbiased estimates of this  $k$  parameter.  $K$  parameters provide a straightforward interpretation of the partner relative to the actor effect. If the value of the  $k$  parameter is comprised between 0 and 1 (i.e., bootstrapped confidence intervals do not include 0), it suggests a couple effect, that is, equivalent actor and partner effects, with  $k = .50$  suggesting an actor effect twice as large as a partner effect (Kenny et al., 2006). If the value of  $k$  is comprised between 0 and  $-1$ , it suggests that the partner and actor effects are in opposite directions. Finally, if the bootstrapped confidence intervals of the  $k$  parameter includes 0, it suggests that there is an actor effect only (provided that the actor effect does not equal zero).

Estimation of  $k$  parameters suggested that HSP led to a couple effect for both men,  $k = .61, 95\%$  bootstrapped CI [.18; 1.27], and women,  $k = .28, 95\%$  bootstrapped CI [.02; .66], whereas OSP led to actor effects only in both men,  $k = -.19, 95\%$  bootstrapped CI [-1.78; .92] and women,  $k = -.22, 95\%$  bootstrapped CI [-2.53; 1.64]. The point estimate of each  $k$  parameter suggests that the partner effect was about half the size of the actor effect for HSP for both men and women and the negative  $k$  parameter for OSP suggests that the partner effect was slightly in the opposite direction of the actor effect, although this latter partner effect was not statistically significant.

### Exploratory moderations

The same APIM SEM with the same relational outcomes examined above was conducted, this time adding interaction terms between women's HSP and men's HSP and between men's OSP and women's OSP. None of the four interaction terms reached significance (all  $ps > .30$ ). The same APIM was conducted again, this time adding interaction terms between women's HSP and men's OSP and between men's HSP and women's OSP. Results showed that there was only one significant interaction, between men's HSP and women's OSP on women's relationship functioning,  $B = .088, SE = .045, t(125) = 1.97, p = .049$ . Simple effects (see Figure 2) revealed that women's OSP was negatively associated with women's reported relationship functioning when men's HSP was low ( $-1 SD$ ),  $B = -.23, SE = .073, t(125) = -3.17, p < .01$ , but this negative association was mitigated when men's HSP was high ( $+1 SD$ ),  $B = -.056 SE = .073, t(125) = -0.77, p = .44$ . This result suggests that men's HSP may buffer the negative effect of women's OSP on their perceptions of relationship functioning. However, this effect was not found for women's HSP on men's OSP ( $p = .37$ ).



**Figure 2.** Interaction between women's OSP and men's HSP associations with women's reported relationship functioning. Error bars are standard errors. X and Y axes were standardized.

## General discussion

The purpose of the present research was to examine the existing dyadic associations that sexual passion can have on romantic relationships functioning. Results of the present research showed that both types of sexual passion, HSP and OSP, were an important component of romantic relationships and were differently associated with relationship functioning. HSP was positively associated with one's own perceptions of relationship functioning, whereas OSP was negatively associated with them. On top of that, there were significant dyadic associations from sexual passion of one partner to the other partner's perceptions of relationship functioning, from both men and women. Indeed, men's HSP was positively and significantly associated with relationship functioning as perceived by the female partners. Women's HSP also had a positive dyadic association with men's relationship functioning. However, contrary to what was hypothesized, OSP had no significant partner effect. These results suggest that HSP, more so than OSP, seems to yield consequences beyond the individuals holding the HSP to also affect their partners. The effect of OSP seems to be more restricted to one's own perceptions of relationship functioning.

The present research extends the range of sex constructs that have been shown to transcend the individual to impact the other partner of the relationship. Indeed, several other studies have shown that motivational constructs such as self-determined sexual motivation (Brunell & Webster, 2013), sexual growth beliefs (Maxwell et al., 2017), or sexual approach motivations (Muise et al., 2013) affect the other partners' perceptions of relationship functioning. The present findings are in line with the dualistic model of sexual passion, which stipulates that HSP allows sexual representations to intertwine with other types of representations, such as relational representations. Therefore, whenever sexual representations are activated, they also activate and nourish relational

representations, which help to build the romantic relationship and ultimately lead to positive and constructive partner effects. In contrast, in OSP, sexual representations are isolated from other representations (i.e., relational and other types), which prevents these representations from sustaining the romantic relationship and the partner. The present study shows that sexual passion is an additional key sexual and motivational construct to consider when investigating dyadic relationship functioning.

Relatedly, the present research could be a fresh starting point to extend past research on the role of sexual desire on romantic relationship quality by clarifying what type of sexual passion is fueled by one's sexual desire. Some past romantic relationship studies have shown that there is an association between women's sexual desire and their reported relationship quality, but not for men's, and that greater relationship quality increases women's sexual desire (Dewitte & Mayer, 2018). Such findings have led to the formulation of the gender-based hypothesis that female sexual desire is more closely related to relationship quality than male sexual desire (Basson, 2000). However, recent research has rather suggested that male sexual desire may also be strongly affected by relationship quality (Murray et al., 2017; Nimbi et al., 2020). The findings of the present study provide one possible explanation for these mixed findings. Past research has typically measured sexual desire without investigating what type of sexual passion was associated with it. Since, both HSP and OSP have been found to be associated with solitary and dyadic sexual desire (Philippe et al., 2017, 2019), the use of one-dimensional sexual desire measures, which can be tainted by masculine cultural scripts (e.g., sexual desire should be strong in men; Murray et al., 2017), may obscure its relationship with relationship functioning in men. The present findings clearly showed that HSP, an expression of sexuality that is not characterized by controlled cultural scripts (Philippe et al., 2019), was as importantly associated with relationship functioning in men as it was in women. OSP, which is more strongly associated with social sexual contingencies (Philippe et al., 2019), was found to be negatively associated with relationship functioning in both men and women. There were also clear partner effects of HSP on relationship functioning for both men and women, but none from OSP. Thus, when sexual passion is harmoniously organized in people's lives, it seems to sustain relationship functioning in both men and women, but to harm it when it is obsessive. Thus, disregarding sexual passion by just investigating sexual desire may obfuscate the results by combining both the respective positive and negative correlations of HSP and OSP with relationship functioning. This issue can be avoided by the use of sexual passion as a mediator variable. For example, Philippe and colleagues (2019) showed that sexual desire was indirectly but positively related to couple adjustment through HSP, but that the same sexual desire was unrelated to couple adjustment through OSP. Future research could clarify the effect of sexual desire in men and women on relationship quality and functioning as mediated by the type of sexual passion one holds.

Thus, overall, our results weakly conform to the idea that females' perceptions are more conditioned by relationship and partner-related dynamics than males (Basson, 2000). However, men's HSP did buffer the effect of women's OSP on their perceptions of relationship functioning, while women's HSP did not buffer the effect of men's OSP on their perception of relationship functioning. Given that these moderations were exploratory and that the study lacked power to test the statistical difference between the

two interactions, this result should be interpreted with caution. However, this finding may suggest that women could be more influenced by men's HSP consequences or may be more attuned to perceive these consequences than men are. Although we did not examine mediators of the associations among sexual passion and relationship functioning in the present study, potential mediators could be greater self-disclosure and communication (Rehman et al., 2011), greater partners' need satisfaction (La Guardia et al., 2000), and greater display of engagement, all afforded by HSP and weakened by OSP. Future research is needed to examine the adequacy of those mediators in explaining the associations between men's HSP and women's perceived relationship functioning and the potentially better capacity of women to perceive these cues or to be affected by these cues.

A number of limitations need to be underscored regarding the present research. First, all results were cross-sectional, making it impossible to determine the direction of the effect. In consequence, the present research is only suggestive of associations among the examined constructs and it is not possible to know whether sexual passion leads to relational outcomes or whether relational outcomes influence sexual passion. Future research is needed to investigate the dyadic effect of sexual passion on relational outcomes within longitudinal designs. In addition, the current sample only included heterosexual dyads (necessary to examine distinguishable dyads by gender), which were mostly composed of educated adults (undergraduate and graduate students) in the end of their early adulthood. There is therefore no evidence that the present findings would hold similarly with community-dwelling couples who have been partnered for a longer time or with homosexual dyads. In addition, younger adults might be more likely to have higher levels of sexual desire and sexual passion, which could have increased the strength of certain associations. Therefore, studies replicating the present results with different sample characteristics are needed before the present findings can be generalized with confidence to the entire population. Another limitation related to the sample is its size. We have shown that with the current sample size, the study was powered to detect medium effect sizes. However, smaller effect sizes, potentially partner effects or gender differences in those partner effects, may remain undetected given the sample size of the present study. Therefore, null results should be interpreted with caution, especially those of the moderations of one partner's sexual passion on the other partner's sexual passion. Another limitation is that only self-reported outcomes were assessed. This methodology remains limited by potential biases and social desirability issues. The use of more objective measures of relationship functioning (e.g., observed conflict resolution strategies, relationship dissolution) are needed to rule out this limitation. Finally, as mentioned above, no mediators that could potentially explain the associations among sexual passion and relational outcomes were assessed in the present study. This represents a fruitful future research avenue to investigate.

In sum, the present research shows that sexual passion has important implications for one's own perceived romantic relationship functioning, but also for the other partner's perceived relationship outcomes. Each partner's type of sexual passion also seems to be of importance and, in certain cases, HSP might mitigate the negative effect of OSP. The concept of sexual passion might be useful in explaining the role sexuality plays in romantic relationships and existing gender differences.

## Ethics approval

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Quebec at Montreal.

## Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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## Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data and materials used in the research are available. Both can be obtained by emailing: Frederick L. Philippe at philippe.frederick@uqam.ca.

## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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