Sexual Rejection in Romantic Relationships:
Development, Validation, and Application of the Sexual
Rejection Scale

by

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Abstract
The current research investigated, for the first time, the different ways people reject their partner for sex through the development and validation of the Sexual Rejection Scale (Studies 1 and 2). A four-factor model of sexual rejection emerged consisting of four primary sexual rejection behaviors, labelled hostile, reassuring, deflecting, and assertive. In line with past work on relationship conflict behaviors, these four behaviors differed in terms of valence and directness. Studies 3 and 4 investigated how different sexual rejection behaviors are linked with relationship and sexual satisfaction. Reassuring rejection behaviors were associated with greater satisfaction, whereas hostile behaviors predicted lower satisfaction. Results for assertive and deflecting behaviors were mixed, and interaction analyses further suggested that the consequences of direct and indirect behaviors are qualified by positive and negative valence. Implications are discussed for the use of distinct sexual rejection behaviors in navigating situations of desire discrepancy in romantic relationships.
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1 Introduction

Romantic relationships profoundly influence overall health and well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002), and past research indicates that sexual satisfaction is a key factor that shapes the quality of romantic relationships (see reviews by Impett, Muise, & Peragine, 2013; Muise, Kim, McNulty, & Impett, in press). In fact, people who are the most satisfied with their sex lives are also the most satisfied with their relationships, and this is true for both dating and married couples (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Sprecher, 2002). However, maintaining satisfying sexual relationships is not without challenges. While many romantic couples begin their relationships with high hopes that their initial intense feelings of sexual desire and passion will last, research has shown that—at least for most couples—these initial feelings of desire tend to decline precipitously over time (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Levine, 2003). As a result, many couples find themselves in situations in which partners experience discrepant levels of sexual desire (Impett & Peplau, 2003), and couples and therapists agree that conflicts of interest about sex are one of the most difficult types of conflict to successfully resolve (Sanford, 2003).

One potential key to understanding the successful resolution of romantic partners’ disagreements about whether to engage in sex concerns how people decline or reject their partner’s sexual advances. Research shows that when a person is rejected for sex by their romantic partner, they report feeling lower levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction (Byers & Heinlein, 1989). Research has yet to explore how sexual rejection unfolds in romantic relationships and whether there are specific ways in which people might reject their partner for sex that buffer against declines in satisfaction. The primary aim of the current research was to develop a measure of sexual rejection behaviors used by partners in ongoing romantic relationships and test how these
behaviors are associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction, both for the person who delivers the rejection as well as for the partner who is being rejected.

1.1 Sexuality and the Maintenance of Romantic Relationships

Romantic partners frequently encounter times in which their levels of sexual desire do not match, and research shows that these situations of sexual desire discrepancy are common in ongoing romantic relationships (Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999; Mark, 2015). For example, a recent daily experience study found that couples reported experiencing desire discrepancies on 69% of days over the course of 21 days (Day, Muise, Joel, & Impett, 2015). Byers and Lewis (1988) found that almost half of dating partners in their study reported they had disagreements about desired levels of sex in a 4-month period. Another study found that one of the most commonly cited disagreements between romantic partners is when and how frequently to engage in sex (Risch, Riley, & Lawler, 2003), and a survey of therapists showed that sexual disagreements were the 5th highest problem area (out of a list of 29) among couples (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981).

Situations of desire discrepancies have consistently been shown to be negatively associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction. For example, findings from a study involving 1,054 married couples demonstrated that experiencing desire discrepancies with a partner was associated with lower relationship well-being (Willoughby, Farero, & Busby, 2013). Other studies have shown that desire discrepancies are also associated with less positive communication, increased sexual distress, more marital conflict, and less overall relationship stability (Bridges & Horne, 2007; Harvey, Wenzel, & Sprecher, 2004; Mark & Murray, 2012; Mark, 2015), and that these negative sexual and relational outcomes may be more pronounced among couples involved in longer relationships (Willoughby & Vitas, 2012). Based on social exchange theory, Byers and Heinlein (1989) showed that increased sexual refusals are related to lower levels of relationship and
sexual satisfaction, whereas increased levels of accepted sexual initiations are positively related to relationship and sexual satisfaction (the causal direction of these associations, however, was not established).

To date, previous work on the maintenance of sexual desire and satisfaction over time has primarily examined how people’s decisions to engage in sex with their partner influence their feelings of desire and satisfaction. For example, work has shown that engaging in sex to promote positive outcomes for a partner (i.e., for approach goals) promotes sexual desire, both on a day-to-day basis in relationships and over the course of time (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005; Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008; Muise, Impett, Kogan, & Desmarais, 2013). Further work has shown that romantic partners who are high in a communal motivation to meet one another’s sexual needs experience higher sexual desire and relationship satisfaction as a result (Muise, et al., 2013; Muise & Impett, 2015), even during times when people’s own desire for sex is low (Day et al., 2015).

However, individuals do not always choose to engage in sex whenever their sexual desire is lower than that of their partner (nor should they), and this leaves many situations in which the partner with less interest in sex will decline or reject their partner’s sexual advances. An integral component of navigating situations of desire discrepancy may lie in how partners communicate their lack of desire in these situations, and research has yet to explore how people decline their partner’s sexual advances when they decide not to engage in sex with their partner. The study of sexual rejection behaviors is, therefore, an important research avenue for understanding how couples maintain sexual and relationship satisfaction. As an example, take Mary and Joe, a couple who have been together for two years and have recently begun to notice that they have differing levels of sexual desire. Mary’s sexual desire is often higher than Joe’s, and as a result,
there are many nights when Joe needs to tell Mary that he does not want to have sex. How should Joe behave during these scenarios so that both he and Mary are able to maintain stable levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction? Joe considers a variety of options, but is unsure which might lead to the best outcomes. Perhaps Joe should ignore Mary’s advances by pretending to sleep. Or maybe he should tell Mary in a straightforward and direct manner why he is not interested in having sex. Alternatively, what would happen if Joe reacts positively to Mary’s sexual advances and offers to cuddle instead? What happens to Joe and Mary’s feelings about their relationship if Joe reacts negatively and criticizes how Mary initiated sex? The success of Joe and Mary’s sex life, as well as their relationship in general, may be importantly influenced by the specific ways in which Joe delivers this sexual rejection.

1.2 Sexual Rejection in Relationships

Sexual rejection in relationships involves the communication to one’s partner the desire or need to not have sex, and it represents an important aspect of romantic couples’ sexual lives. A key reason why situations of desire discrepancy are associated with relationship discord may lie in the sensitive nature inherent to delivering sexual rejection to a romantic partner as well as experiencing sexual rejection from a romantic partner. Drawing on past research on social exclusion and social pain, studies show that experiencing rejection is not only an intensely painful experience and that it overlaps with the psychological mechanisms responsible for physical pain (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001; MacDonald & Leary, 2005), it also suggests that rejection from a romantic partner may hurt the most compared to the experience of rejection in other relationships (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). This has been argued to be due to the personal stakes of rejection being heightened in romantic relationships as it involves being hurt by the person whose acceptance one most desires (Murray, Holmes, &
Collins, 2006). Furthermore, sexual rejection may be particularly emotionally charged in the context of close relationships since most romantic relationships are sexually monogamous (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2003) and partners often cannot—or are not allowed to—meet their sexual needs outside of their relationship. Thus, the different ways in which people reject their partner for sex during situations of desire discrepancy could lead to vastly different outcomes in relationships, both for the person delivering and the partner receiving the rejection, and these situations may require careful navigation in relationships given their sensitive nature and prevalence. Investigating the ways in which individuals experience sexual rejection as well as reject their partners for sex may be crucial in guiding our understanding of how to combat declines in relationship and sexual satisfaction arising from situations of desire discrepancy (Bridges & Horne, 2007; Mark, 2015).

To date, very little research has empirically examined sexual rejection in relationships. One study sought to examine single individuals’ rejection strategies during unwanted flirtatious encounters, and identified five behavioral rejection strategies and four verbal rejection strategies (e.g. departure, ignoring, brief responses, politeness, insults) (Goodboy & Brann, 2010). However the results of this study did not look at how different strategies influence how people felt, and are more relevant to single adults instead of individuals in established relationships. Further, these strategies were more descriptive of rebuffing the romantic or sexual interest of an unknown individual as opposed to specifically rejecting a romantic partner’s sexual advances. Other work has examined women’s behavioral responses to sexually coercive attempts by their romantic partner. For example, one study found that women with a history of sexual victimization exhibited less anger in response to initial unwanted sexual advances compared with women with no history of sexual victimization, highlighting the potential importance of women’s expressions of anger in response to unwanted sexual advances (Jouriles, Simpson
Rowe, McDonald, & Kleinsasser, 2014). Byers and Heinlein (1989) also showed that increased sexual refusals are related to lower levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction, whereas increased levels of accepted sexual initiations are positively related to relationship and sexual satisfaction. This study also looked at women’s rejection strategies in the context of sexual coercion and found that sexual refusals tended to be communicated verbally. However, this limited work has focused almost exclusively on rejection in the context of sexual violence or sexual coercion. There is a dearth of research on how sexual rejection is communicated in non-distressed couples, as well as its impact on sexual and relationship satisfaction.

1.3 Past Research on Relationship Conflict Styles

In order to investigate the primary ways individuals reject their partner for sex and understand how particular sexual rejection behaviors may differentially impact satisfaction, it is informative to draw on past research on relationship conflict styles and behaviors to assess how people deal with situations of conflict with their romantic partners. Indeed, numerous studies show that exhibiting effective conflict resolution strategies is crucial for the maintenance of relationship satisfaction (Billings, 1979; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007; Patterson, Weiss, & Hops, 1976; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002). Furthermore, a review of the relationship conflict literature offers insights into the types of behaviors that may be relevant for understanding sexual rejection and the resolution of conflicts of sexual interest. A glimpse into past work thus offers a potential roadmap for what might be expected when investigating how individuals deliver sexual rejection and the varying outcomes associated with distinct sexual rejection behaviors.

A large body of research has investigated the communication and influence strategies intimate partners use in problem-solving or conflict interactions (see Heyman, 2001), and several typologies have been developed to capture a range of couples’ patterns of communication across
various relationship contexts (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009; Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Two features that are common to these typologies of relationship conflict behaviors are the extent to which they are positive versus negative in valence, as well as whether they are direct or indirect in nature.

1.3.1 Positive Versus Negative Conflict Behaviors

Not surprisingly, existing research on relationship conflict has consistently shown that engaging in positive behaviors is associated with better relationship outcomes than engaging in negative behaviors. For example, individuals’ abilities to engage in accommodative behavior (i.e. inhibiting destructive impulses and instead responding constructively when a partner engages in destructive acts) have been found to be associated with positive relationship evaluations (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & et al, 1991), greater relationship well-being (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998), greater trust and commitment over time (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), and increased feelings of acceptance and intimacy (Overall & Sibley, 2008). Treatments aimed at establishing greater reciprocity of positive communications (reciprocity counseling) have also been found to be effective in alleviating marital distress (Azrin, Naster, & Jones, 1973; Ledermann, Bodenmann, Rudaz, & Bradbury, 2010; Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007).

In contrast, engaging in negative conflict behaviors (e.g. hostility, criticism, or demanding) and reciprocating partners’ negative affect during communication are associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). Within the marital therapy literature, studies have found that distressed couples are more likely to exhibit greater reciprocity of negative communication exchanges and less
reciprocity of positive exchanges (Beach & Fincham, 2013, Azrin et al., 1973; Billings, 1979; Markman et al., 2010). An explanation for this pattern of findings is that negative communication undermines problem solving by evoking destructive affective and behavioral reactions from the partner, which then filter through to future interactions and erode relationship quality (Overall et al., 2009).

1.3.2 Direct Versus Indirect Conflict Behaviors

Research suggests that the extent to which relationship behaviors are communicated in a direct manner versus more indirectly can be highly important in determining their effectiveness at resolving problems (Falbo & Peplau, 1980; McNulty & Russell, 2010). Previous work on direct and indirect relationship behaviors in romantic relationships has chiefly been concerned with people’s attempts to influence or regulate their partners in some way such as by trying to get them to change undesired behaviors characteristics (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006). As a result, the effects of direct and indirect behaviors typically relate to the degree of successful behavior change within the partner receiving the communication. However, research has revealed mixed results regarding direct and indirect behaviors, often finding that their impact on relationship outcomes depends on whether one is interested in examining immediate versus long-term outcomes. Research shows that direct and straightforward communication seems to produce ill feelings in the relationship as it is likely to make the source of conflict clear to a partner; yet direct behaviors might yield the most positive long-term benefits because they spur partners to openly confront the problem and thus have the potential to prompt change (Lewis, DeVellis, & Sleath, 2002; Lewis et al., 2006). In contrast, indirect communication patterns may be more warmly received and amount to less distress in the short-term, but may be linked with few positive long-term benefits because they are ambiguous with regard to the severity of the
problem and how the issue can be addressed (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995).

Research further suggests that the influence of positive or negative behaviors on relationship outcomes can be qualified by the degree of direct or indirectness. Research by Overall and colleagues (2010) suggests that positive conflict responses towards a partner can be bad if they are indirect. In their research, they found that indirect, constructive acts of loyalty (such as letting the partner have his or her way) tend to go unnoticed by one’s partner and—due to their indirect nature—leave individuals feeling ignored and unappreciated despite being positive in valence. In turn, McNulty and Russell (2010) also showed in a series of longitudinal studies that direct communication strategies, even if negative, can lead to more successful problem resolution over time for severe issues in romantic relationships, as direct behaviors provide a clear understanding of the nature and severity of the problem. Further, past work on the benefits of capitalization—the process of informing another person of the occurrence of personal positive events—has shown that people experience greater positive affect when others were perceived to respond actively and constructively (but not passively or destructively) to capitalization attempts (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Though capitalization behaviors may apply less to the domain of relationship conflict, they still demonstrate how positive and direct behaviors interact in relationships.

Taken together, research supports the notion that positive behaviors may need to be direct (or active) and not indirect in order for their benefits to be realized, and that negative behaviors may not always harm relationships if they are direct in nature. These findings demonstrate that the consequences of using positive, negative, direct, and indirect behaviors during relationship conflict may be quite nuanced.
1.4 Integrating the Positive-Negative and Direct-Indirect Distinctions

One particular model of relationship problem-solving behaviors that nicely ties together both distinctions—the extent to which behaviors are both positive versus negative and the extent to which they are direct versus indirect—is the exit-voice-loyalty-neglect (EVLN) model of responses to relationship dissatisfaction (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983). The EVLN is a typology describing four characteristic reactions to relationship conflict: (a) exit: actively destroying the relationship; (b) voice: actively and constructively attempting to improve conditions; (c) loyalty: passively but optimistically waiting for conditions to improve; and (d) neglect: passively allowing one's relationship to deteriorate. To assess the comprehensiveness of this model, Rusbult and Zembrodt (1983) carried out a multidimensional scaling analysis of couple problem-solving responses and found that the four responses differ from one another along two dimensions: constructiveness/destructiveness and activity/passivity. Exit behaviors are destructive and active (e.g. leaving a conflict discussion or physically abusing one’s partner), while voice behaviors are constructive and active (e.g. discussing problems, compromising, or seeking solutions). In turn loyal behaviors are constructive and passive (e.g. waiting for things to improve in the relationship), while neglect behaviors are destructive and passive (e.g. ignoring the partner or letting things deteriorate in the relationship). The constructive/destructive and active/passive dimensions of the EVLN model are conceptually similar and correspond to the positive-negative, direct-indirect dimensions commonly found in other models of conflict behavior. In fact, researchers have often used these terms interchangeably (e.g., constructive = positive; active = direct, etc.) (Kammrath & Dweck, 2006; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010).
1.5 Developing a Model of Sexual Rejection

Although previous models of relationship conflict can inform our understanding of sexual rejection in romantic relationships, there are several reasons why a new measure of sexual rejection behaviors may be necessary in order to capture how individuals communicate low desire or lack of interest in sex in situations of conflicting sexual interest. First, past models of relationship conflict behaviors have focused on couples’ patterns of communication when discussing known problem areas in their relationship during interactions in the laboratory (e.g. Gaines et al., 1997; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman et al., 2003; Weiss, Hops, & Patterson, 1973), and have focused much less on how romantic partners may react to situations of conflicting interests as they unfold in the moment. Second, previous work suggests that conflict behaviors can vary according to the nature of the conflict and that certain situations may affect the choice of a conflict management style (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). It is possible that with respect to sexual conflicts in relationships, individuals may employ different communication patterns than they would in situations of general relationship conflict given the emotionally charged nature of sexual rejection and its high potential to negatively impact important predictors of relationship quality such as self-esteem (Murray et al., 2006) and the extent to which people feel relationally valued by their romantic partner (Leary et al., 2001). Third and finally, research on sexuality in close relationships has demonstrated the importance of developing domain-specific measures of sexuality-related psychological processes, and has shown that adapting relationship measures specifically to the domain of sexuality enhances the ability of these measures to predict sexual and relational outcomes (e.g. Lawrance & Byers, 1998; Muise, Impett, Kogan, & Desmarais, 2013; McNulty & Widman, 2013). Thus, a new measure of sexual rejection may be necessary in order to appropriately capture this unique type of behavior.
As reviewed above, a wealth of research exists on conflict behaviors, communication patterns, and partner regulation strategies in romantic relationships, and it is not yet known how well previous models of relationship communication behavior may inform the study of sexual rejection. However, based on findings that relationship communication and conflict behaviors often adhere to a categorization characterized along the dimensions of valence and directness, it is reasonable to expect that sexual rejection behaviors may take on a similar structure. If this is the case, it would be of great theoretical and practical interest to also assess how valence and directness shape sexual rejection behaviors and subsequently influence relationship outcomes. In line with past research, it is reasonable to expect that sexual rejection delivered with positive valence may be associated with higher relationship quality while sexual rejection delivered with negative valence may be associated with lower relationship quality. Expectations regarding the relationship and sexual consequences of sexual rejection delivered directly or indirectly, however, are less clear. Given previous research highlighting when negative behaviors can be good and positive behaviors can be bad (McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2010), the influence of sexual rejection behaviors that are direct or indirect in nature may be contingent on the positive or negative valence they carry. Specifically, sexual rejection that is delivered in a negative yet direct manner may not be as unfavorable compared to a negative rejection that is delivered indirect. In addition, sexual rejection that is delivered in positive yet indirect ways may yield worse outcomes for relationships than rejection that is communicated in a positive but direct manner.

In sum, a review of past work on relationship conflict behaviors and their effects on relationship functioning reveals it is relevant to the study of sexual rejection. As previous models of relationship communication strategies are often classified along positive-negative and direct-indirect dimensions, sexual rejection behaviors may also take on a similar structure. In addition,
drawing from findings on relationship communication strategies may be helpful in exploring how specific types of sexual rejection behaviors may be associated with better or worse relationship outcomes.

1.6 Goals of the Current Research
The goals of the current research were two-fold. First, I sought to explore and understand sexual rejection behaviors in romantic relationships through the creation and validation of the Sexual Rejection Scale (SRS) – a novel measure to identify the unique ways people reject their romantic partner for sex. Existing research has yet to empirically identify the different ways individuals reject their partner for sex. The second goal was to use the SRS to investigate how different sexual rejection behaviors are associated with relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction.

In Studies 1 and 2, I created and validated the SRS using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, and provided initial evidence for the convergent and discriminant validity of this new measure with existing measures of personality and more general relationship conflict styles. In Study 3, I examined how perceptions of a partner’s rejection behaviors were associated with relationship and sexual satisfaction. Finally, in Study 4, I implemented an experimental design to assess the causal effects of perceiving one’s partner engage in different sexual rejection behaviors.

2 Pilot Studies 1 and 2: Generating Items for the SRS
I conducted two pilot studies to generate an initial set of scale items and to ensure that I had a sufficient number of items to identify the factor structure of the Sexual Rejection Scale (SRS). In both pilot studies, I used a bottom-up, data-driven approach to identify sexual rejection behaviors. To do so, I surveyed a total of 456 individuals in romantic relationships who were at
least 18 years old and sexually active from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Sample characteristics for these two pilot studies, as well as all other studies in the paper, are shown in Table 1.

2.1 Pilot Studies 1 and 2

Two pilot studies were conducted with the goal of capturing a broad range of both positive sexual rejection behaviors (Study 1) and negative sexual rejection behaviors (Study 2). In Pilot Study 1, 226 participants responded to open-ended questions regarding how they rejected their partner for sex in ways that let their partner know that they were still loved, as well as how their partner rejected them for sex in ways that let them know they were still loved. In Pilot Study 2, 230 participants responded to open-ended questions regarding how they rejected their partner for sex in ways that made their partner feel negative emotions, as well as how their partner rejected them for sex in ways that made them feel negative emotions. I generated a comprehensive list of sexual rejection behaviors from all open-ended responses in the two pilot studies, incorporating all unique responses collected from participants. Specifically, an inductive approach to item generation was used (Hinkin, 1998) in which participants’ open-ended responses were classified into a number of distinct items based on key words or themes through content analysis. Thus, common thematic elements among participants’ responses were grouped together, and from these categorized responses, I generated a list of 44 total scale items encapsulating all the different ways people reject their partner for sex (see Appendix A).

3 Study 1: Identifying the Factor Structure of the SRS

After developing this initial list of 44 items, I conducted Study 1 and performed an exploratory factor analysis to determine the initial factor structure of the Sexual Rejection Scale. For Study 1, I recruited a sample of 504 participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk using the same recruitment criteria as in Pilot Study 1, sampling approximately 10 participants per scale item to
maximize my ability to attain accurate estimates (Costello & Osborne, 2005). A final sample of 414 remained after excluding participants who failed attention checks embedded in the survey and those who had large amounts of missing data. Participants indicated how frequently they engaged in each of the 44 sexual rejection behaviors with the following prompt: “In romantic relationships, there are many different ways people may reject their partner for sex. Please indicate how frequently you engage in the following behaviors when you reject your partner for sex.” Participants then rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = very frequently).

A scree plot analysis (Cattell, 1966; Fabrigar et al., 1999) indicated that there were four unique factors, as shown by the last substantial drop in the magnitude of the eigenvalues. An exploratory factor analysis using promax rotation specifying four factors indicated that the specific items loaded onto the four unique factors, clarifying the conceptual make-up of each factor. These four factors were labeled hostile, reassuring, deflecting, and assertive according to the type of behavior they characterized. Items loading on the hostile factor were characterized by acting negatively when rejecting one’s partner and in ways that inflicted hurt towards one’s partner. In contrast, items loading on the reassuring factor were characterized by emphasizing positive regard for one’s partner, reappraising negative emotions, demonstrating care, and affirming one’s love for a partner. Items loading on the deflecting factor were characterized by enacting passive and non-verbal behaviors, eluding a partner’s affection, and rejecting one’s partner without having to communicate in a direct or explicit manner. Finally, items loading on the assertive factor were characterized as being direct and straightforward about the reason why one is rejecting one’s partner without necessarily trying to prevent the partner from feeling negative emotions. The four factors identified appeared to be conceptually consistent with previous
models of relationship conflict in that they could be primarily distinguished along the dimensions of positivity-negativity and directness-indirectness.

To finalize the scale items before conducting scale validation studies and to ensure that there were a sufficient number of items to reliably capture each of the four factors, I set a selection criteria for items to have factor loadings greater than .40, and excluded any items that had high cross-loadings (those greater than .30). These criteria are in accordance with heuristic guidelines for appropriately selecting items representative of a construct under examination (Ford, MacCallum, & Tait, 1986). In addition, I removed items that were too similar to other items within their own subscale (i.e. redundant) or not thematically consistent within their factor (i.e. had low face validity). Among the remaining items, each of the four factors included a minimum of three items, a number which has been shown to provide adequate internal consistency reliabilities (Cook et al., 1981). Furthermore, a maximum of five items were retained for each factor since it has been shown to be difficult to improve on the internal consistency reliabilities by adding items to a scale already containing five appropriate items (Hinkin, 1998). After reducing my scale based on these criteria, I added and modified items to ensure that I had a sufficient and similar number of items in each factor and that all items were clearly worded (Simms & Watson, 2007). In addition, I rephrased retained items to ensure that none were ‘double-barrelled’ (i.e., encompassed two different constructs). Final items for each subscale were selected based on a combination of those with the highest factor loadings, highest means (i.e. how frequently the item was reported), and the degree to which they were thematically consistent with each subscale. This resulted in a 20-item Sexual Rejection Scale (SRS), which includes four subscales measuring hostile, reassuring, deflecting, and assertive sexual rejection behaviors, with each subscale consisting of five items. A complete list of the SRS items with their factor loadings, means, and standard deviations is presented in Table 2.
4 Study 2: Confirming the Four-Factor Structure of the SRS

Study 2 had two main goals. The first goal was to confirm the four-factor structure of the SRS in an independent sample with confirmatory factor analysis. The second goal was identify how each of the four main sexual rejection categories relate to personality variables (e.g. attachment, aggression, prosociality, sexual assertiveness), as well as to compare the identified subscales of the SRS to the exit-voice-loyalty-neglect model (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983). This model was chosen as its constructs appeared to align closest to the four factors included in the SRS measure. Both classifications are governed by four main behavior types, and though the EVLN model uses the terms ‘constructive/destructive’ and ‘active-passive’ to characterize its behaviors, these descriptions coincide with the positive-negative and direct-indirect categorization of sexual rejection behaviors in the SRS. Thus, I assessed convergence of each subscale of the SRS with corresponding subscales of the EVLN model (e.g. hostile with exit/neglect) using partial correlations.

To test for convergent validity, I examined associations between each SRS subscale and measures of affiliative tendencies towards others, including prosocial sexual motivations (Muise et al., 2013) and romantic attachment (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), as well as trait levels of aggression (Webster et al., 2014) and sexual assertiveness (Hurlbert, 1991). Lastly, I tested the SRS for measurement invariance of gender to determine that the four-factor solution applies equally to both women and men. Past work on sexual communication behaviors and sexual conflict strategies has demonstrated gender differences in the ways that men and women communicate in different during sexual interactions (Edgar & Fitzpatrick, 2009; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Hurlbert, 1991; Morokoff et al., 1997; Vannier & Oapos;Sullivan, 2011). Thus, it was important to determine whether there was configural invariance of the SRS with
respect to gender (i.e. whether the loadings for each item of the scale on its respective factor were equivalent across the men and women in our sample).

4.1.1 Reassuring Rejection Behaviors

Reassuring sexual rejection behaviors are characterized by emphasizing positive regard and affirming one’s love and attraction for a partner when rejecting their sexual advances. One important individual difference that may be especially relevant to these behaviors is sexual communal strength (Muise et al., 2013; Muise & Impett, 2015), which represents the motivation to meet a partner’s sexual needs. At times, when it is necessary to communicate to their partner that they are not interested in having sex, individuals high in sexual communal strength may be more likely to engage in reassuring rejection behaviors, perhaps as a way to demonstrate responsiveness to a partner’s needs by affirming one’s sexual attraction and love towards one’s partner. As noted previously, research by Overall and colleagues (2013) has shown that the romantic partners of individuals who use softening communication behaviors to communicate the ways in which they would like their partner to change are able to buffer their partners against responding to such influence attempts destructively. Reassuring rejection behaviors appear similar in construct to such softening behaviors, as both involve validating a partner’s needs and conveying that one’s partner is still loved. Thus, reassuring sexual rejection behaviors may operate in a similar manner, such that during situations of conflicting sexual interests, individuals may use similar softening, reassuring behaviors with the intent of buffering their partners against feelings of rejection. Thus, I predicted that individuals who engaged in reassuring sexual rejection behaviors would have higher levels of sexual communal strength. With respect to the EVLN model, I expected reassuring sexual rejection to be related to loyal behaviors as well as voice behaviors, given that reassuring behaviors are best characterized as being high in positive valence and constructiveness, and less so by whether they are active or passive. Reassuring
behaviors could be indirect or passive in the sense that they do not explicitly address the reason for the sexual rejection, but could also be considered active or direct in that they consist of effortful action to improve conditions (e.g. to buffer a partner against negative feelings).

4.1.2 Hostile Rejection Behaviors

Given that the hostile factor is characterized by hurtful behaviors, anger, and negative criticism of one’s partner when engaging in sexual rejection, hostile behaviors can be described as being emotionally aggressive in nature and driven by negative affect. As aggression consists of behaviors enacted to inflict harm or pain on another person (Richardson & Green, 2006; Slotter et al., 2012), it was expected that individuals who regularly engage in hostile sexual rejection behaviors may score high on trait levels of aggression. Measuring aggression and its link to specific sexual rejection behaviors may be particularly worthwhile as studies not only indicate that aggression is most likely to manifest during episodes of conflict, but that sex is one of the most common conflict topics in studies on aggression in relationships (Dembo et al., 1987; Knight, Prentsky, & Cerce, 1994). As hostile behaviors appear to be negative or destructive in nature, I additionally expected that frequent use of hostile sexual rejection behaviors will be correlated with exit and neglect behaviors in the EVLN model (Rusbult et al., 1986).

4.1.3 Assertive Rejection Behaviors

Assertive behaviors are characterized by direct and straightforward communication of one’s desire to not engage in sex, without any particular emphasis on buffering a partner from feeling negative emotions (as with reassuring behaviors). Individuals who regularly engage in assertive behaviors may be self-assured and high in sexual assertiveness, a trait which reflects comfort in expressing one’s sexual needs to a partner (Hurlbert, 1991). Sexual assertiveness has also been defined as the ability to directly communicate one’s sexual interests by playing a sexually active
role in initiating wanted sexual events and refusing unwanted sexual activity (Morokoff et al., 1997). Accordingly, I expected that assertive sexual rejection behaviors would be related to sexual assertiveness. It is not immediately apparent whether assertive sexual rejection behaviors are positive or negative in valence. Thus, with respect to the EVLN model, I expected one of two possible sets of results to emerge. First, I thought that assertive sexual rejection behaviors may either be positively associated with voice (active–constructive attempts to improve the situation) and exit (active-destructive responses such as leaving the situation), given that both of these are active behaviors. I alternatively hypothesized that assertive sexual rejection behaviors may not be significantly associated with either voice or exit which would perhaps suggest that no positive or negative valence is attached to assertive behaviors.

4.1.4 Deflecting Rejection Behaviors

A key feature of deflecting sexual rejection behaviors is passivity, and this rejection style also encompasses a strong element of conflict avoidance. A relevant construct with which to test convergent validity of the deflecting style is attachment orientation; specifically, individuals who typically engage in deflecting behaviors may have higher levels of attachment avoidance. Past research indicates that avoidantly attached individuals experience greater discomfort with intimacy and closeness than securely-attached individuals (Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013), and are more likely to engage in sex for to avoid conflict in their romantic relationships (Impett, Gordon, & Strachman, 2008). Avoidance attachment avoidance has also been linked with a lower likelihood of responding to a partner’s needs for intimacy (Butzer & Campbell, 2008). Thus, rather than attempting to address a partner’s sexual needs (as with reassuring behaviors), it is possible that individuals high in attachment avoidance may try to avoid directly engaging in intimacy-related discussions and may seek to avoid situations of conflict altogether by using
deflecting sexual rejection behaviors. I thus expected that deflecting sexual rejection behaviors would be positively associated with attachment avoidance.

With respect to the EVLN model, it is not immediately clear whether deflecting sexual rejection behaviors would be constructive or destructive (or in other words, characterized by more positive or negative affect). Since deflecting sexual rejection behaviors are largely characterized by indirectness or passivity, two sets of results were possible. First, I expected that deflecting sexual rejection behaviors may be related to neglect and loyal behaviors, which are characterized by passive responses such as refusing to discuss problems (neglect) or patiently waiting for things to improve (loyalty). However, it was also possible for deflecting sexual rejection behaviors to neither converge with neglect nor loyal behaviors, which could also indicate that they are not associated with any particular valence but distinguished strictly by indirectness.

Lastly, in Study 2 I sought to test associations between sexual rejection behaviors and own relationship and sexual satisfaction. Based on findings of previous work, I predicted that reassuring rejection behaviors would be positively related to one’s own relationship and sexual satisfaction. In turn, I predicted that hostile rejection behaviors would be negatively related to relationship and sexual satisfaction. For assertive and deflecting behaviors, I had no clear predictions based on research showing that direct and indirect relationship communication behaviors can be good or bad for partners depending on their immediate or long-term effects for generating desired relationship outcomes (Overall et al., 2009).

### 4.2 Study 2 Method

#### 4.2.1 Participants and Procedure

I recruited a sample of 496 individuals over the age of 18 who were currently in romantic relationships and sexually active from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Individuals completed an
online survey which included the 20-item SRS along with measures of relationship quality, relevant personality traits, and relationship conflict behavior styles. A final sample of 411 individuals remained after screening the data for failed attention checks and large amounts of incomplete data. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 67 years old ($M = 33.22, SD = 10.57$), and most (79.3%) were Caucasian (6.8% Asian, 8.8% Black, 6.8% Latin, 2.2% South Asian, 2.7% Native, 0.7% Middle Eastern, 1.9% other). The vast majority (89.8%) of couples were seriously committed to their partner (44.8% married or engaged, 21.7% common law, 23.4% seriously dating) and had been in their relationships for an average of 6.5 years ($Range = 3$ months to 46.75 years; $SD = 7.51$ years). Participants were also predominantly (89.8%) heterosexual (6.1% bisexual, 2.2% gay or lesbian, 1.9% other).

4.2.2 Sexual Rejection Measures

Participants completed the 20-item SRS reporting the frequency with which they engaged in each behavior on a 5-point scale ($1 = never$ to $5 = very frequently$). Each sexual rejection behavior was computed as the average of their respective SRS subscale items: hostile (5 items, $\alpha = .86; M = 1.60, SD = 0.74$), reassuring (5 items, $\alpha = .85; M = 3.19, SD = 1.06$), deflecting (5 items, $\alpha = .83; M = 1.81, SD = 0.79$), and assertive (5 items, $\alpha = .88; M = 2.93, SD = 1.08$).

Participants also completed various personality measures to evaluate convergent validity. Trait *aggression* was assessed using the Brief Aggression Questionnaire (e.g. “I have trouble controlling my temper,” 12 items; $\alpha = .85; M = 2.43, SD = 0.76$; Webster, Dewall, & Pond, 2014). *Sexual communal strength* assessed the motivation to meet a partner’s sexual needs (e.g., “How far would you be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?” 5 items; $\alpha = .75; M = 2.87, SD = .74$; Muise et al., 2013). The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire—Short-Form (ECR-S) was used to measure *attachment anxiety* (e.g., “I worry that romantic
partners won't care about me as much as I care about them,” 6 items; $\alpha = .85; M = 3.33, SD = 1.44$) and attachment avoidance (e.g., “I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back,” 6 items; $\alpha = .86; M = 2.40, SD = 1.15$) which assess fears of rejection and intimacy in romantic relationships, respectively (Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011). Sexual assertiveness was assessed using the Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness (e.g., “I communicate my sexual desires to my partner,” 25 items; $\alpha = .90; M = 3.62, SD = .63$; Hurlbert, 1991). To measure relationship problem-solving behaviors, participants completed a 28-item scale in order to measure self-reported tendencies to engage in exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect behaviors (exit: $\alpha = .95; M = 2.68, SD = 1.98$; voice: $\alpha = .85; M = 6.38, SD = 1.62$; loyalty: $\alpha = .75; M = 5.50, SD = 1.33$; neglect: $\alpha = .85; M = 3.43, SD = 1.63$; Rusbult et al., 1986). Each of the seven items designed to measure each category was measured a 9-point Likert-type scale (1 = never do this to 9 = always do this). Lastly, participants’ relationship satisfaction was measured with the satisfaction subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) on a 9-point scale (1 = do not agree at all to 9 = agree completely) (e.g., “My relationship is close to ideal,” 5 items; $a = .95; M = 6.92, SD = 1.90$). Sexual satisfaction was measured using the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1998) consisting of five items ($\alpha = 0.95; M = 5.67, SD = 1.45$).

4.3 Study 2 Results

4.3.1 Confirming the Four-Factor Structure

To confirm the four-factor structure of the SRS, I conducted confirmatory factor analysis using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) in R. I specified a four-factor model and allowed all four factors to correlate. I evaluated model fit using a number of standard fit criteria, with acceptable fit indicated by a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) greater than or equal to .90, Root Mean Square
Error of Approximation (RMSEA) less than or equal to .08 (Kline, 2005), and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) greater less than or equal to .08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). I deemphasized the $\chi^2$ fit statistic given its sensitivity to variations in sample size (i.e., biased towards detecting differences in large samples; Kline, 2005), but report these results for a complete assessment of model fit evaluation criteria.

As shown in Figure 1, the confirmatory model for the SRS had acceptable fit ($\chi^2(164) = 403.366, p < .001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .06 CI$_{90\%}$ = [.05, .07], SRMR = .07), with all items loading highly onto their respective factors. Standardized loadings ranged from .47 to .90. I also found that the four-factor model was best, fitting significantly better (all $\Delta\chi^2$s were $p < .001$) than models that specified three factors, two factors, or one factor, which all had poorer fit (all $\chi^2$s with $p$s $> .05$, CFI$s \leq .77$, and RMSEAs $\geq .09$). Lastly, I found, after constraining factors to be equal across comparison groups, that the same four factors emerged across women ($N = 224$) and men ($N = 187$; $\chi^2(328) = 578.39, p < .001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .06 CI$_{90\%}$ = [.05, .07]), SRMR = .076, demonstrating configural invariance of the SRS with respect to gender. These results indicated that the same constructs of the SRS were being measured and were interpreted in a conceptually similar manner by women and men. In addition, although women were found to engage in hostile, reassuring, deflecting, and assertive behaviors more frequently than men, they also reported engaging in sexual rejection more frequently than men in general. After controlling for rejection frequency, no gender differences were found with respect to frequency of engaging in any of four behaviors.

Intercorrelations among all four of the sexual rejection subscales are shown in Figure 1. The hostile and deflecting factors were highly positively correlated with each other, as were the reassuring and assertive factors. However, these correlations do not necessarily signify that the pairs of behaviors are conceptually similar in nature; they may simply represent the finding that
these pairs of behaviors tend to occur together in terms of frequency (e.g. individuals who engage in hostile rejection behaviors tend to simultaneously engage in deflecting rejection behaviors). Another possibility is that these pairs are in fact conceptually similar. It is possible that hostile and deflecting behaviors may share an element of destructiveness as both behavior types appear to involve attempts to let the situation or relationship deteriorate. In turn, reassuring and assertive types could potentially be interpreted as sharing an element of constructiveness, as both behavior types could be construed to involve attempts to improve the situation or relationship. This explanation would align with the EVLN model (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983) in which response types are characterized along the dimension of constructiveness/destructiveness. In addition, given that the hostile factor was not highly negatively correlated with the reassuring factor and the deflecting factor was not highly negatively correlated with the assertive factor, this would suggest that hostile and reassuring behaviors, as well as assertive and deflecting behaviors, are not conceptually opposites from each other (i.e. being low on hostile behaviors does not necessarily mean one is engaging in reassuring behaviors, nor does being low in assertive behaviors necessarily mean that one is engaging in deflecting behaviors).

4.3.2 Convergent Validity of the SRS

I next sought to examine how each type of sexual rejection behavior is associated with individual differences in personality and relationship conflict style. Partial correlations between each sexual rejection type with measures of personality and conflict style are shown in Table 3. Consistent with my hypotheses, I found that reassuring sexual rejection behaviors were positively associated with sexual communal strength as well as with both voice and loyalty, while hostile sexual rejection behaviors were positively associated with trait levels of aggression, as well as exit and neglect responses to relationship conflict. Assertive behaviors were positively associated with sexual assertiveness, and consistent with one of my two hypotheses, were associated with neither
voice nor exit. However, assertive behaviors were negatively associated with loyalty and neglect, both of which are passive behavior types. Deflecting behaviors were positively associated with attachment avoidance and neglect, but contrary to hypotheses, were not associated with loyalty. As the four sexual rejection behaviors of the SRS differ in degrees of indirectness-directness and positive-negative valence, they carry similarities to the typology of problem-solving behaviors in the EVLN model which differ along the dimensions of constructiveness/destructiveness and activity/passivity. However, as previously mentioned, it is reasonable to expect that sexual rejection behaviors might be distinct from problem-solving behaviors in that they represent the manner in which individuals communicate their low(er) desire to their partner when situations of discrepant desires arise. Importantly, sexual rejection reflects communication behaviors that are not contingent on the presence of any relationship conflict or problem, whereas exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect represent behaviors are specifically characterized as responses to relationship dissatisfaction. Studies show that communication behaviors can vary according to the context of the situation such that individuals’ behaviors vary depending on the presence of established relationship conflict. Thus, sexual rejection behaviors are not necessarily reactive in nature, and can be seen distinct from EVLN behaviors in this respect as well.

To assess associations with relationship and satisfaction, I conducted multiple regression analyses in which I simultaneously entered all four sexual rejection behaviors as predictors in the models. Table 4 shows associations between sexual rejection behaviors and relationship and sexual outcomes. Consistent with predictions, reassuring rejection behaviors were positively associated with both relationship and sexual satisfaction, whereas hostile rejection behaviors were negatively associated with both relationship and sexual satisfaction. Interestingly, deflecting rejection behaviors were negatively associated with both relationship and sexual
satisfaction. There were no significant associations between assertive rejection behaviors and either relationship or sexual satisfaction.

4.4 Study 2 Brief Discussion

The confirmatory factor analysis showed that a four-factor model showed good fit across multiple fit indices. By comparing each of the four subscales of the SRS with select personality measures and relationship problem-solving behaviors, I found evidence that the subscales can be categorized and understood in terms of positive vs. negative valence, and directness vs. indirectness. Specifically, reassuring sexual rejection behaviors appear high in positive valence given their respective associations with EVLN relationship behaviors, whereas hostile rejection behaviors appear to be conceptually high in negative valence. Multiple regression analyses showed that reassuring sexual rejection behaviors significantly predicted higher levels of one’s own relationship and sexual satisfaction, whereas the reverse was true for hostile sexual rejection behaviors (i.e. predicted lower relationship and sexual satisfaction).

Further, assertive behaviors appear to be characterized by directness, whereas deflecting sexual rejection behaviors appear to be characterized by indirectness. However, the results suggest that deflecting behaviors may carry more negative valence than positive valence due to their strong association with hostile behaviors, their positive association with ‘passive-destructive’ neglect behaviors, their nonsignificant relationship with passive-constructive loyal behaviors, as well as their negative association with ‘active-constructive’ voice behaviors. Indeed, deflecting sexual rejection behaviors significantly predicted lower relationship satisfaction. Given that deflecting behaviors were also positively related to attachment avoidance, this might suggest that they are more negative (or destructive) in nature as research suggests that avoidantly attached individuals tend to express negative emotions in indirect ways and that this typically takes the form of
nonspecific hostility (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Mikilincer & Shaver, 2005). In contrast, assertive behaviors did not appear to be characterized as carrying any positive or negative valence, evidenced by a lack of association with either voice or exit as well as negative correlations with loyalty and neglect. These findings suggest that assertive behaviors are distinguished chiefly by directness and not characterized by positive or negative valence. Consistent with this notion, assertive behaviors were not significantly associated with either relationship or sexual satisfaction. Studies have shown, however, that sexual assertiveness is linked with positive relationship outcomes such as higher sexual self-esteem, sexual self-efficacy, and greater sexual satisfaction in relationships (Haavio-Mannila; Menard & Offman, 2009). Thus, if assertive sexual rejection behaviors are similar in construct to sexual assertiveness, it is plausible that they may be more constructive or positive in valence as opposed to destructive or negative in valence.

To summarize, results from the convergent validity analysis suggest that reassuring sexual rejection behaviors are positive in valence (and non-discriminating in terms of directness or indirectness), hostile behaviors are negative in valence (and non-discriminating in terms of directness or indirectness), assertive behaviors are direct and neither negative nor positive, and that deflecting behaviors are largely indirect but may carry some negative valence. This categorization of sexual rejection behaviors is consistent with past models of relationship conflict behaviors and strategies in the sense that it adheres to a structure distinguished by dimensions of valence (positive-negative) as well as directness (direct-indirect). The SRS subscales converged with the exit-voice-loyalty-neglect model in the expected directions. However, it is important to note that a distinguishing feature of the SRS from the EVLN model concerns how the four main categories of sexual rejection behaviors map onto the two primary dimensions of valence and directness. Whereas exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect are conceptualized in terms of a combination of the two primary dimensions (e.g. voice = positive-direct, neglect = negative-
indirect), these combinations to not apply to the four main sexual rejection behavior types. Rather, reassuring behaviors represent positivity, hostile behaviors represent negativity, assertive behaviors represent directness, and deflecting behaviors represent indirectness.

5 Study 3: Establishing Links of the SRS with Relationship and Sexual Outcomes

While Studies 1 and 2 identified four distinct ways people reject their partners for sex through the creation and validation of the SRS, Study 3 sought to investigate how each of the four sexual rejection behaviors are related to relationship and sexual satisfaction. Of primary interest was how individuals’ perceptions of their partner’s tendencies to engage in these behaviors might be uniquely associated with their relationship and sexual satisfaction. A key research question concerns whether certain ways of rejecting one’s partner for sex can potentially buffer a partner against the negative outcomes associated with situations of desire discrepancy (Mark & Murray, 2012; Willoughby et al., 2013). The primary purpose of Study 3 was to test the associations between people’s perceptions of their partner’s sexual rejection behaviors and their own levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction. However, as shown in Table 4, I also examined how relationship and sexual satisfaction are related to one’s own tendency to engage in each of the four behaviors.

Past research has consistently demonstrated that positive behaviors, such as accommodating a partner’s negative behavior, focusing on more salubrious partner features, and validating a partner's views are associated with better relationship outcomes (Overall et al., 2009; Rusbult et al., 1998; Rusbult et al., 1991). Given that reassuring sexual rejection behaviors appear to closely align with positive, accommodative behaviors, I hypothesized that perceived partner reassuring
behaviors would be associated with greater levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction.

Research also indicates that destructive, or negatively-valenced behaviors are associated with poorer relationship outcomes. For example, hostility, criticism, defensiveness, and withdrawal have been linked to lower commitment and problem resolution (Heavey, et al., 1993; Orina, Wood, & Simpson, 2002; Rusbult et al., 1986) as well as reduced relationship satisfaction over time (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In line with previous research, I hypothesized that perceived partner hostile behaviors would be associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction.

Previous work has revealed mixed results for the consequences of direct and indirect relationship behaviors, showing that they appear to be linked with relationship outcomes in nuanced ways. As previously discussed, research suggests that the influence of direct and indirect behaviors differ in terms of their immediate and long-term effects on relationships, and may be contingent on the degree to which they carry positive or negative valence. Research has found that negative behaviors can have good outcomes if direct and positive behaviors can have bad outcomes if indirect (McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2010). However, it is important to note that the outcomes in these existing studies have concerned reports of a partner’s behavior change and not changes in relationship or sexual satisfaction. Given the findings, I did not have clear hypotheses about how perceived partner assertive and deflecting behaviors may be uniquely associated with levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction. However, I found it possible that the influence of perceived partner assertive and deflecting behaviors on relationship quality outcomes could emerge from interactions with reassuring and hostile (i.e. positive and negative valenced) behaviors. Research by McNulty and Russell (2010)
shows that negative-direct behaviors, despite being negative, may not have detrimental effects on the relationship due to the directness inherent in the behavior; that is, the benefits of directness may emerge in particular when combined with negative behaviors. Thus, I expected hostile behaviors to interact with assertive behaviors to predict relationship outcomes. Specifically, I predicted that hostile behaviors would be negatively associated with relationship (and sexual satisfaction) when assertive behaviors were absent, but would have no such associations when high levels of assertive behaviors were present.

A similar yet distinct set of predictions was made for deflecting behaviors. Although research has documented positive associations between positive behaviors and relationship outcomes, Overall and colleagues (2010) have shown that positive-indirect behaviors can sometimes lead to negative outcomes for relationship, specifically due the indirectness inherent in these behaviors. These studies have found that in the short term, positive-indirect behaviors are perceived to protect relationship quality as they are seen as being warm and accommodating, suggesting that the benefits are due to the positive valence inherent in these behaviors. However, in the long run, positive-indirect behaviors have been shown to be less successful for relationships as the indirect effects of these behaviors emerge, such as couples failing to address important relationship issues. Taken together, this work suggests that indirect behaviors have largely negative outcomes for relationships if positive aspects are not present. Accordingly, I expected that deflecting behaviors would interact with reassuring behaviors, such that the association between deflecting behaviors and relationship (and sexual) satisfaction would be moderated by reassuring rejection behaviors. Specifically, I expected deflecting behaviors would negatively predict relationship and sexual satisfaction, particularly when there were low levels of reassuring behaviors. As these interaction analyses were guided by past research findings, I did not have specific predictions for whether assertive behaviors would interact with reassuring behaviors or if deflecting behaviors
would interact with hostile behaviors. Lastly, I also examined the general associations between experiencing sexual rejection on relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, expecting that satisfaction would be negatively associated with frequency of sexual rejection from a partner.

5.1 Study 3 Method

I recruited a sample of 333 individuals over the age of 18 who were currently in romantic relationships and sexually active from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. A final sample of 315 individuals remained after screening the data for failed attention checks and large amounts of incomplete data. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 71 years old ($M = 34.60$, $SD = 10.52$), and most (83.5%) were Caucasian (3.5% Asian, 7% Black, 5.7% Latin, 1.3% South Asian, 0.3% Native, 1.2% other). The vast majority (89.9%) of couples were seriously committed to their partner (48.6% married or engaged, 19% common law, 22.3 seriously dating) and had been in their relationships an average of 7.32 years (Range = 1 month to 42.75 years; $SD = 7.84$ years). Participants were also predominantly (87%) heterosexual (7.9% bisexual, 3.2% gay or lesbian, 1.9% other).

5.1.1 Procedure and Measures

Participants completed an online questionnaire containing a variety of questions regarding their relationship and sex life. Participants completed an adapted version of the 20-item Sexual Rejection Scale, which captured participants' perceptions of how frequently their partner engaged in each of the different sexual rejection behaviors. The four subscales of each of the sexual rejection scales demonstrated adequate internal reliability (alphas ranged from 0.79 - 0.87; see Table 5). Participants also reported on their relationship satisfaction using a subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) consisting of five items ($\alpha = 0.95$), as well as their sexual satisfaction using the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1998)
consisting of five items ($\alpha = 0.95$). Participants also answered the question, “On average how often does your partner reject your sexual advances?” ($1 = never$, $2 = less\ than\ once\ a\ month$, $3 = once\ a\ month$, $4 = 2\-3\ times\ a\ month$, $5 = once\ a\ week$, $6 = 2\-3\ times\ a\ week$, $7 = daily$).

### 5.2 Study 3 Results

First, I tested the effects of sexual rejection on one’s own relationship and sexual satisfaction. As expected, participants who reported being sexually rejected by their partner more frequently had significantly lower levels of both relationship satisfaction ($r = -.27, p < .001$) and sexual satisfaction ($r = -.33, p < .001$).

Next, I tested the key predictions about whether people’s perceptions of their partner’s sexual rejection behaviors predicted their sexual and relationship satisfaction. To do so, I conducted multiple regression analyses in which I simultaneously entered all four perceived sexual rejection behaviors as predictors in all models. Table 5 displays all associations between perceived sexual rejection behaviors and outcomes. The results showed that the four predictors explained 32.6% of the variance in relationship satisfaction ($R^2 = .326, F(4,310) = 37.46, p < .001$) and 19.7% of the variance in sexual satisfaction. Perceived partner reassuring behaviors were associated with greater relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .29, t(314) = 5.11, p < .001$) and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = .25, t(314) = 4.05, p < .001$), whereas hostile behaviors were associated with lower relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.31, t(314) = -4.16, p < .001$) and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -.20, t(314) = -2.45, p < .05$). No significant main effects were found for perceived assertive behaviors on relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .022, t(314) = .40, ns$) although the main effect on sexual satisfaction approached significance ($\beta = .12, t(314) = 1.88, p = .06$). No significant main effects were found for perceived deflecting behaviors on relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.12, t(314) = -1.57, ns$) or sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -.03, t(314) = -.40, ns$).
5.2.1 Interaction Effects

To determine whether perceived partner deflecting behaviors were qualified by levels of perceived reassuring behaviors and whether perceived partner assertive behaviors were qualified by perceived hostile behaviors, I tested for interactions between these pairs of behaviors. In addition, I conducted a series of simple slopes analysis using the method of Aiken and West (1991). Figures 2 and 3 displays the two-way interactions between perceived partner assertive and hostile behaviors, as well as between perceived partner deflecting and reassuring behaviors.

For relationship satisfaction, consistent with predictions, there was a significant interaction between perceived partner assertive rejection and hostile rejection, $b = .34$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(314) = 3.24$, $p = .001$ (Figure 2), but not between assertive rejection and reassuring rejection ($b = .00$, $SE = .07$, $t(314) = .02$, $ns$). Simple slopes analysis revealed that, consistent with predictions, hostile behaviors were significantly associated with less relationship satisfaction when assertive behaviors were low ($b = -.91$, $SE = .17$, $t(314) = -5.31$, $p < .001$) but not when assertive behaviors were high ($b = -.22$, $SE = .19$, $t(314) = -1.17$, $ns$).

For deflecting behaviors, and also consistent with predictions, there was a significant interaction between deflecting rejection and reassuring rejection for relationship satisfaction, $b = .32$, $SE = .08$, $t(314) = 3.83$, $p < .001$ (Figure 3), but not between deflecting rejection and hostile rejection ($b = .07$, $SE = .11$, $t(314) = .62$, $ns$). As expected, deflecting behaviors did not predict relationship satisfaction when reassuring behaviors were high ($b = .20$, $SE = .17$, $t(314) = 1.15$, $ns$), but were associated with lower relationship satisfaction when reassuring sexual rejection behaviors were low ($b = -.44$, $SE = .15$, $t(314) = -2.99$, $p < .01$). Interestingly, there were no interaction effects for sexual satisfaction.
5.3 Study 3 Brief Discussion

To summarize, the results were largely consistent with my hypotheses and past research. Experiencing sexual rejection from one’s partner more frequently was negatively associated with both relationship and sexual satisfaction. These findings are also consistent with the literature on the negative relationship outcomes associated with sexual desire discrepancies (Mark, 2015; Mark & Murray, 2012; Willoughby & Vitas, 2012).

The main focus of Study 3 concerned how perceived partner sexual rejection behaviors would be associated with relationship and sexual satisfaction. The results showed that when individuals perceived that their partner sexually rejected them in reassuring ways, they felt more satisfied with their relationship and sex life, supporting the notion that reassuring behaviors can mitigate the poor relationship outcomes associated with situations of sexual rejection (Willoughby et al., 2013). In contrast, when individuals perceived that their partner sexually rejected them in hostile ways, they reported lower relationship and sexual satisfaction, consistent with past research showing that negative communication behaviors are overwhelmingly costly for relationships (Beach & Fincham, 2013; Billings, 1979). These results also held true for own reassuring rejection behaviors and own hostile rejection behaviors.

In contrast to the effects observed for reassuring and hostile rejection behaviors, individuals’ relationship and sexual satisfaction were not affected when they perceived their partners to engage in either assertive or deflecting rejection. These findings support my predictions as the effects of positively and negative behaviors tend to be stronger and more consistent in the literature than the effects of direct and indirect behaviors. However, I found interaction effects for relationship satisfaction between perceived partner assertive rejection behaviors and perceived partner hostile behaviors, as well as between perceived partner deflecting rejection
behaviors and perceived partner reassuring behaviors. Assertive behaviors predicted greater relationship satisfaction when hostile sexual rejection behaviors were high, suggesting that engaging in assertive sexual rejection can potentially mitigate the detrimental effects of engaging in hostile behaviors. Put another way, these results suggest that if a person feels that their partner rejects them for sex in a hostile way, it is better for the partner to be direct rather than indirect when delivering this rejection. Indeed, research has demonstrated the potential benefits of negative-direct behaviors and how they can lead to favorable outcomes for a relationship despite carrying negative valence; this is due to the direct nature of the communication which ensures it is received by the partner in a clear and unambiguous manner (McNulty & Russell, 2010).

In addition, deflecting behaviors predicted lower relationship satisfaction when reassuring behaviors were low, but did not predict relationship satisfaction when reassuring behaviors were high. These results are consistent with work on positive-indirect behaviors, which tend to predict beneficial outcomes for relationships when their positive aspects are more salient, and tend to predict poorer relationship outcomes when the indirect aspects surface (Overall et al., 2009). Thus, deflecting behaviors may not have any detrimental effects on relationship satisfaction in the presence of reassuring behaviors, but they are associated with less relationship satisfaction when reassuring behaviors are not present. Alternatively, it is possible to construe this finding as reflecting the robust positive effects of reassuring rejection behaviors on relationship satisfaction; that is, sexually rejecting a partner in reassuring ways may negate any detrimental consequences of deflecting behaviors, but when they are absent the indirectness of deflecting behaviors can yield negative outcomes. These findings support research demonstrating that directness of behavior is integral in effectively resolving problems (Canary, 2003) such that direct problem-solving behaviors yield better outcomes than indirect ones (Overall et al., 2009).
In sum, the results suggest that there are certain circumstances under which assertive behaviors can mitigate the negative effects of hostile behaviors on relationship satisfaction. In contrast, there appear to be circumstances under which deflecting behaviors can lower relationship quality in the absence of reassuring behaviors.

6 Study 4: Further Probing for Partner Effects of SRS Subscales

Study 3 provided evidence that perceived partner sexual rejection behaviors are differentially associated with relationship and sexual satisfaction. However, it did not establish the direction of causality, as it is possible for perceived partner sexual rejection behaviors to influence relationship satisfaction as well as for individuals’ levels of satisfaction to affect their perceptions of their partner’s tendencies to reject them in specific ways in sexual situations. Thus, Study 4 sought to further investigate how distinct sexual rejection behaviors might directly impact the partner receiving the rejection. To do this, I implemented a within-subjects experimental design in which individuals read hypothetical sexual rejection scenarios involving their partner and reported on their levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction. I manipulated the four sexual rejection behavior types by creating four different rejection scenarios each describing distinct types of perceived partner sexual rejection behaviors. I also included a control condition depicting a scenario in which individuals were not rejected, but instead their partner accepted their sexual advances and the couple engaged in sex. I expected that this control scenario would result in the greatest levels of reported relationship and sexual satisfaction relative to the other four rejection scenarios. This control condition was used as it would then be possible to examine if each of the four different types of rejection would result in significantly lower relationship and sexual satisfaction compared to actually engaging in sex, and to what degree.
Based on the results of Study 3, I predicted that reassuring rejection would result in the least drop-off in relationship and sexual satisfaction compared to having one’s partner accept one’s sexual advances. Similarly, I expected that hostile rejection would result in the greatest drop-off in relationship and sexual satisfaction compared to actually engaging in sex. I expected the drop-offs in satisfaction from assertive rejection and deflecting rejection to lie somewhere in between those of reassuring rejection and hostile rejection. However, based on my previous findings that assertive behaviors can have positive effects on satisfaction and deflecting behaviors can have negative effects on satisfaction under certain circumstances, I expected the drop-offs in satisfaction relative to actually having sex to be greater for deflecting behaviors than assertive behaviors.

6.1 Study 4 Method

6.1.1 Participants and Procedure

Participants consisted of 256 men and women recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk using the same eligibility criteria as in previous studies. A final sample of 225 individuals (112 men and 113 women) remained after screening the data for participants who did not meet eligibility criteria or failed an attention check. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 68 ($M = 31.32, SD = 9.48$), and most (76.9%) were Caucasian (8% Asian, 6.2% Black, 5.3% Latin, 1.8% South Asian, 3.6% Native, 0.4% other). The vast majority (89.7%) of couples were seriously committed to their partner (45.7% married or engaged, 20% common law, 24% seriously dating) and had been in their relationships an average of 6.54 years ($Range = 1$ months to 41.08 years; $SD = 6.41$ years). Participants were also predominantly (87%) heterosexual (8.4% bisexual, 2.7% gay or lesbian, 2.2% other).
Participants completed a short online survey in which they read a series of five hypothetical scenarios, four of which described different methods of sexual rejection that corresponded to the four types of rejection captured by the SRS. Participants were asked to imagine the scenarios actually happening in their relationship and think about how they would feel. The five conditions included reassuring, hostile, assertive and deflecting rejection, along with a control condition describing a situation in which sexual rejection did not occur (i.e. the participant’s partner agreed to have sex with them). Each scenario was preceded by the prompt, “Imagine you and your partner are home on a typical night, and you are in the mood for sex. You initiate sex with your partner but they reject your advance by . . .” Following this prompt, each experimental condition contained a short description consisting of a blend of the behavioral items in the respective subscale of the SRS (see Appendix B). For example, the condition read: “…you initiate sex with your partner but they reject your advance by trying to talk instead and offering other forms of physical contact (kissing, hugging, snuggling, cuddling). Your partner reassures you that they love you and are attracted to you, and offers to make it up to you in the future.” After reading each scenario, participants were asked to report on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = a lot) how satisfied they would feel about their relationship (1 item) as well as their sex life (1 item) after their partner acted in this way. The order of the experimental conditions was counterbalanced.

6.2 Study 4 Results

I conducted a one-way repeated measures ANOVA to compare the effect of each of the different sexual rejection scenarios on participants’ expected relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. There was a significant effect of condition, Wilks’ Lambda = 0.187, $F(4,220) = 238.89, p < .001$. Post hoc tests revealed that all pairwise comparisons between conditions were
significant, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 6 for all means and standard errors). To summarize, having sex (control condition) led to the highest amount of reported relationship satisfaction, followed by reassuring rejection, then assertive rejection, then deflecting rejection (Figure 4). Partners’ hostile behaviors led to the lowest amount of reported relationship satisfaction. The order of the effects was identical when assessing sexual satisfaction as the dependent variable (see Figure 5).

### 6.3 Study 4 Brief Discussion

Study 4 expanded on the findings of Study 3 by providing evidence for the causal direction of perceiving one’s partner engage in different rejection behaviors on relationship and sexual satisfaction. The results were consistent with the findings of Study 3, providing further evidence that reassuring rejection behaviors, relative to other rejection behaviors, are associated with the greatest sexual and relationship satisfaction (and demonstrate the smallest drop in satisfaction compared to actually having one’s sexual advance accepted). Meanwhile, experiencing hostile rejection led participants to report the lowest levels (or greatest drop-offs) in relationship and sexual satisfaction. The effects of assertive and deflecting rejection behaviors were found to be in between those of reassuring and hostile rejection behaviors, consistent with the findings in Study 3 that no main effects on relationship or sexual satisfaction were found with either of these behaviors. In sum, the results of this study suggest that the way in which people feel that their sexual advances are rejected can have vastly different effects on their feelings of relationship and sexual satisfaction. The findings are consistent with research by Byers and Heinlein (1989) demonstrating that sexual refusals are related to lower levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction compared to accepted sexual initiations. However, the results of this study extend that work by showing that rejecting a partner in reassuring ways may represent the best form of sexual rejection as it leads to the lowest declines in satisfaction—relative to actually engaging in
sex—while perceiving that a partner rejects the self in a hostile manner leads to the largest drops in satisfaction. Further, the results of this study also supported the hypothesis that assertive sexual rejection behaviors are linked with higher levels of partner satisfaction than deflecting behaviors.

7 General Discussion

The current research consisted of a total of four studies (as well as two pilot studies) using a diverse range of methods including cross-sectional and experimental methods, as well as advanced statistical modeling to provide a highly comprehensive account of sexual rejection behaviors in romantic relationships. After developing an initial set of items in two pilot studies, I used exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis techniques to identify the primary ways people reject their partner for sex to develop a novel measure: the Sexual Rejection Scale (SRS). This new measure showed measurement invariance across gender, demonstrated good model fit (see Study 2), and retained high internal consistency within all four studies. Additionally, the current research tested how different rejection behaviors can affect key outcomes for romantic couples including relationship and sexual satisfaction.

The four primary types of sexual rejection behaviors were labelled reassuring, hostile, assertive, and deflecting, and were classified according to dimensions of valence (positive and negative) as well as directness (direct and indirect). Convergent and discriminant validity provided evidence that reassuring behaviors are characterized by positive valence, hostile behaviors are characterized by negative valence, assertive behaviors are direct in nature, and deflecting behaviors are indirect in nature. These findings are broadly consistent with existing models of communication during relationship conflict which have also identified behaviors that vary in both valence and directness (e.g. Overall et al., 2009; Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996).
The results were also largely consistent with research describing how positive, negative, direct, and indirect behaviors are associated with relationship outcomes. Based on the overall findings, the effects of different sexual rejection behaviors appear to be driven predominantly by valence. In other words, what seems to matter most when rejecting a partner for sex is the degree to which one exhibits positive behaviors (e.g., validation, softening, accommodation) or negative behaviors (e.g., criticism, anger, guilt-induction). I summarize and interpret findings of the current research below regarding each type of sexual rejection, and discuss how the results shape our understanding of the four types of rejection behaviors and their influence on relationship and sexual outcomes.

7.1.1 Reassuring Behaviors

Consistent with hypotheses, reassuring behaviors were used frequently by individuals high in sexual communal strength—that is, those with a strong prosocial motivation to meet their partner’s sexual needs—and were also correlated with voice and loyalty behaviors, which are constructive responses to relationship dissatisfaction. These findings providing support that reassuring behaviors are positive in valence. In Studies 3 and 4, and line with my predictions, reassuring behaviors were associated with the greatest levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction compared to other rejection behaviors, and these effects replicated across studies. Results from Studies 3 showed that people who perceive that their partner rejects them in reassuring ways feel better about their relationship and sex life than people who perceive other types of sexual rejection behaviors. In Study 4, reassuring rejection by a partner was the best possible way to be rejected by a partner for sex, short of having the partner actually accept one’s sexual advances. Taken together, the results suggest that reassuring behaviors are overwhelmingly positive and may represent the best way to reject a partner for sex. Reassuring sexual rejection behaviors may have buffering effects for a partner in that they protect against the
negative declines in satisfaction frequently reported during situations of desire discrepancy (Herbenick, Mullinax, & Mark, 2014). This possibility is consistent with research showing that positive behaviors such as softening or accommodation during conflict discussions with romantic partners high in attachment insecurity produce less anger and more successful conflict resolution (Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013; Simpson & Overall, 2014). Although the scope of the current research did not include identifying the reasons why reassuring sexual rejection has such positive effects, it is possible that reassuring behaviors may protect relationships during situations of sexual rejection by preserving sexual self-esteem and maintaining feelings of partner valuation (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006). Indeed, research shows that sexual self-esteem is a unique predictor of positive sexual communication and the ability to express one’s sexual needs constructively (Oattes & Offman, 2007).

7.1.2 Hostile Behaviors

In contrast to reassuring behaviors, hostile sexual rejection behaviors were associated with poorer relationship outcomes as expected. Hostile behaviors converged with trait aggression, as well as exit and neglect behaviors, which are all known to be destructive in nature, supporting the notion that hostile behaviors are negative in valence. In Studies 3 and 4, hostile behaviors were consistently associated with the lowest levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction, supporting my predictions. Results from Study 3 showed that people who perceive that their partner sexually rejects them in hostile ways (e.g. criticizing the way sex was initiated) are least satisfied with their relationship and sex life. Study 4 demonstrated that when people perceive their romantic partner engage in hostile sexual rejection, they report the lowest levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction compared to all other types of perceived partner sexual rejection behaviors.
7.1.3 **Assertive Behaviors**

Results for assertive sexual rejection behaviors were somewhat mixed across Studies 3 and 4, yet these results did not come as a surprise as no clear hypotheses regarding assertive behaviors were proposed. Past research has shown that the effects of direct and indirect behaviors can be highly contingent on the degree of positive or negative valence that accompanies the behavior (McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009). Consistent with this work, in Study 3, perceptions of a partner’s assertive rejection behaviors were not significantly associated with either relationship or sexual satisfaction. However, subsequent follow-up analyses of the data revealed a significant interaction between assertive rejection and hostile rejection, such that if individuals perceived their partners to engage in high levels of hostile rejection behaviors, they experienced greater relationship satisfaction if they also perceived their partners to be highly assertive when delivering the rejection. These results suggest that engaging in assertive behaviors might mitigate some of the negative effect of hostile behaviors on relationship satisfaction, and are in line with McNulty and Russell’s (2010) findings that negative behaviors can be effective at resolving serious relationship issues over time, providing they are direct.

Study 4 provided evidence that perceived partner assertive behaviors are associated with better relationship outcomes compared to deflecting and hostile behaviors, but not reassuring behaviors. These findings are also consistent with past work demonstrating that relationship communication behaviors are more effective when they are direct rather than indirect (Cupach, Metts, McKinney, & Sprecher, 1991). For example, two studies showed that direct verbal tactics are more effective than indirect ones for avoiding unwanted sex (Christopher & Frandsen, 1990; Murnen et al., 1989).
7.1.4 Deflecting Behaviors

Just as assertive sexual rejection was not associated with relationship outcomes, I also found that deflecting sexual rejection behaviors did not uniquely predict relationship outcomes in Study 3. However, follow-up analyses of the data in Study 3 testing interactions between sexual rejection behaviors revealed that the effects of deflecting behaviors appeared to emerge only when taking into account the presence of positive and negative behaviors. Specifically, deflecting rejection interacted with reassuring rejection such that deflecting behaviors predicted lower relationship satisfaction when reassuring behaviors were low. This finding suggests that indirect rejection behaviors can potentially lead to worse relationship outcomes when positively-valenced communication behaviors are absent. Thus, in the domain of sexual rejection, indirectness may play a partially destructive role while directness may play more of a constructive role under certain circumstances. Supporting this notion, Study 4 demonstrated that being rejected by a partner in deflecting ways, as opposed to other types of rejection, led to the biggest decreases in relationship and sexual satisfaction except for being declined by a partner in a hostile manner. These findings suggest that people dislike being sexually rejected by a partner via deflecting behaviors to a greater degree than being rejected in an assertive manner, once again showing support for the advantages of direct communication over indirect communication (Christopher & Frandsen, 1990; Murnen, Perot, & Byrne, 1989).

The measured outcome variables across all studies were relationship and sexual satisfaction. However, the results revealed that reassuring, hostile, assertive, and deflecting sexual rejection behaviors did not always significantly predict sexual satisfaction to the same degree that they predicted relationship satisfaction (although the direction of effects were largely similar). It is possible that sexual satisfaction may be less malleable than general relationship satisfaction to the effects of different rejection behaviors because sexual satisfaction may be more directly tied
to the occurrence of whether sex occurred or whether physical sexual needs were met. In situations of sexual rejection, a partner’s sexual needs are less likely to be met, and it is possible that although being rejected in reassuring ways may leave people feeling close and connected to their partner, their feelings of sexual satisfaction in their relationship may be less affected. Thus, sexual rejection in and of itself may negatively affect sexual satisfaction above and beyond the way the rejection was specifically carried out, which is why the hypothesized effects were more robust for relationship satisfaction. Past work on sexual desire discrepancies in relationships, as shown in Study 3, supports this notion (Mark & Murray, 2012), and individuals who reported being sexually rejected by their partners more frequently experiencing significantly lower levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction.

### 7.2 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations exist in the present research. Most of the findings in the studies presented were correlational in nature, so no definitive conclusions can be made regarding the causal effects of each type of sexual rejection behavior. While my theoretical model and previous research on conflict suggest that certain sexual rejection behaviors (e.g. reassuring) can cause greater levels of relationship or sexual satisfaction, it is also possible that being highly satisfied with one’s relationship or sex life may cause an individual or their partner to engage in certain rejection behaviors. Although Study 4 used an experimental paradigm to address this issue, the measured outcomes involved participants’ reports of expected levels of satisfaction (i.e. how they thought they would feel if rejected by their partner in specific ways). It is not fully known whether people would indeed react in the same manner if they were actually sexually rejected by their romantic partner. Future research could supplement findings on sexual rejection by bringing couples into a lab to discuss and agree upon how sexual rejection unfolds in their relationship.
and how it directly affects their relationship and sexual satisfaction. In addition, the use of methodologies such as daily experience studies with lagged-day analyses may provide greater insights into the direction of the associations between sexual rejection behaviors and relationship and sexual quality.

The current studies are also limited in that they did not contain reports from both members of a couple. The associations found between partner sexual rejection behaviors and relationship outcomes were based solely on individuals’ reports of their own behaviors and perceived partner sexual rejection behaviors. An important next step in the current line of research is to examine associations between sexual rejection behaviors and relationship outcomes measures within a dyadic sample. By obtaining reports from both partners of romantic dyads, research will be able to capture how an individual’s tendency to engage in distinct sexual rejection behaviors relates to their partner’s levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction. In a follow-up study that I recently conducted, I sampled first-time parents, a group of couples who are highly likely to undergo substantial changes in their sex lives (Haugen, Schmutzer, & Wenzel, 2004). Unlike the participants in the current studies, couples who have recently become first time parents may be experiencing more difficulties in their sex lives as this is a time where partners experience large discrepancies in their desire (e.g., Barrett et al., 1999). As a result, rejecting a partner for sex may be more common, and sexual rejection behaviors may play an especially important role in predicting relationship and sexual satisfaction in a sample of new parents. The results of this study will further enhance our knowledge of how sexual rejection unfolds in long-term relationships, and may provide important information demonstrating how sexual rejection behaviors predict uniquely different relationship outcomes for desire-discrepant couples.

Of the four different sexual rejection behaviors, findings on deflecting behaviors present unique limitations, as the effects I found were largely contingent on the perception of a partner’s
deflecting behaviors. As deflecting behaviors are characterized by their indirect nature, it is possible that at times, deflecting behaviors may largely go unnoticed and could amount to partners feeling like they have not been rejected for sex. For this reason, the current studies are not able to address the effect of deflecting behaviors when they are not perceived. Future research should examine how perceptual accuracy might moderate the effects of deflecting behaviors. For example, individuals who engage in indirect behaviors that go unnoticed by their partners may experience improved relationship and sexual outcomes as these behaviors might be effective at reducing situations of explicit sexual rejection. The use of deflection rejection strategies, however, may turn out to be a double-edged sword in that people may feel especially slighted if they accurately perceive that their partner is trying to reject them for sex in indirect ways.

Further, the current set of studies defined sexual rejection in a particular way that can be best described as reactive in nature. More specifically, this work operationalized sexual rejection as the behaviors individuals exhibit when declining their partner’s sexual advances. However, this definition presumes that sex has to be initiated for sexual rejection to occur. A more liberal interpretation might construe sexual rejection as any communication designed to let a partner know that one is not in the mood for sex. In this case, preventative forms of sexual rejection may exist whereby an individual communicates their low desire to a partner in anticipation of sexual advances being made, and future work is needed to parse apart the distinct effects of reactive and preventative forms of sexual rejection.

The findings of this work have broad implications for research on sexuality in relationships, as well as for therapists, couples, and the general public. It contributes greatly to both research focused on resolving or managing desire discrepancies and other sexual conflicts in romantic
relationships. In addition, the Sexual Rejection Scale may be potentially useful in clinical settings to help identify patterns of sexual communication behaviors among distressed couples struggling with desire discrepancies given the prevalence of this feature in many relationships (Herbenick et al., 2014).

8 Conclusion

The present research investigates an important yet understudied aspect of romantic relationships—how partners engage in sexual rejection. This research has far-reaching implications for couples, therapists, and families as it reveals important information regarding how couples can navigate a challenging area of relationship conflict with greater success, and advances the research on the management of conflict in romantic relationships by extending it into the sexual domain.
Table 1

Sample Characteristics (All Studies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Initial N</th>
<th>Final N</th>
<th>% Female</th>
<th>% Caucasian</th>
<th>% Married</th>
<th>% Heterosexual</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Relationship Length (yrs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Study 1a</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Study 1b</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 4</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The initial N indicates the total number of participants recruited for the study. The final N indicates participants who were retained for final analyses (i.e., who passed all attention check questions.*
**Table 2**

*Sexual Rejection Scale Items and Descriptives (Study 1)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Rejection Scale Items</th>
<th>Factor Loadings</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Hostile Rejection Behaviors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I display frustration towards my partner.</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am short or curt with my partner.</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I criticize aspects of our relationship.</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I give my partner the silent treatment.</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I criticize the way my partner initiated sex.</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Reassuring Rejection Behaviors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I reassure my partner that I am attracted to them.</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I offer alternate forms of physical contact (kissing/hugging/snuggling/cuddling).</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I reassure my partner that I love them.</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to talk with my partner instead.</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I offer to make it up my partner in the future.</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Deflecting Rejection Behaviors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I pretend not to notice that my partner is interested in sex.</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t reciprocate my partner’s affection.</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I physically turn away from my partner.</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lie in a position that’s hard to snuggle with.</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I pretend not to notice that my partner is interested in sex.</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Assertive Rejection Behaviors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am clear and direct about why I don’t want to have sex.</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tell my partner honestly the reason why I don’t want to have sex.</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say ‘no’ in a direct manner.</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am straightforward about why I am rejecting my partner.</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am open about the reason, even if it hurts my partner’s feelings</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Bolded factor loadings indicate items retained in each subscale, unbolded items indicate cross-loadings with other factors.
Table 3

*Partial Correlations between Sexual Rejection Scale Subscales with Personality and Conflict Style Measures (Study 2)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Hostile</th>
<th>Reassuring</th>
<th>Deflecting</th>
<th>Assertive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personality traits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual communal strength</td>
<td>-.18***</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>-.18***</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual assertiveness</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.20***</td>
<td>.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conflict style</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>-.17***</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.15***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>-.017</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001.
Table 4

*Main Effects of Own Sexual Rejection Behaviors on Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction (Study 2)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Relationship satisfaction</th>
<th>Sexual satisfaction</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha (α)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reassuring</td>
<td>.18***</td>
<td>.20***</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile</td>
<td>-.10†</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deflecting</td>
<td>-.38***</td>
<td>-.36***</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* †p ≤ .10, *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001. All four sexual rejection behaviors were simultaneously entered as predictors in a multiple regression equation. All values are standardized β coefficients and their corresponding 95% confidence intervals.
Table 5

**Main Effects of Perceived Partner Sexual Rejection Behaviors on Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction (Study 2)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Relationship satisfaction</th>
<th>Sexual satisfaction</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha (α)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Reassuring</td>
<td>.29***</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Hostile</td>
<td>-.30***</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Assertive</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Deflecting</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001. All four sexual rejection behaviors were simultaneously entered as predictors in a multiple regression equation. All values are standardized β coefficients and their corresponding 95% confidence intervals.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Relationship Satisfaction</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Mean Sexual Satisfaction</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reassuring</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deflecting</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Sexual Rejection Scale confirmatory model. Item numbers in this figure correspond with scale items (as ordered) in Table 2. Factor loadings represent standardized estimates.
Figure 2. Two-way interactions between perceived partner hostile and perceived partner assertive sexual rejection behaviors.

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. 
Figure 3. Two-way interactions between perceived partner deflecting and perceived partner reassuring sexual rejection behaviors.

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. 
Figure 4. Relationship satisfaction in response to hypothetical sexual rejection scenarios. All error bars represent standard errors.
Figure 5. Sexual satisfaction in response to hypothetical sexual rejection scenarios. All error bars represent standard errors.
References


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http://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2011.606877


Appendix A

Items Included in Exploratory Factor Analysis (Study 1)

1. My partner pretends to be busy with something else.
2. My partner lies in a position that’s hard to snuggle with.
3. My partner offers an alternate sexual activity (e.g. oral sex).
4. My partner is short or curt.
5. My partner redirects my attention to something else besides sex (e.g. changes the subject).
6. My partner acts playful with me.
7. My partner pretends to sleep.
8. My partner reassures me that they are attracted to me.
9. My partner tells me that I am to blame for why they don’t want to have sex (e.g. something I did earlier that day).
10. My partner tries their best to gently let me down.
11. My partner tells me honestly the reason why they don’t want to have sex.
12. My partner says that we will have sex at a later time (i.e. a ‘raincheck’).
13. My partner makes me feel bad about my physical appearance.
14. My partner starts an argument.
15. My partner proposes an alternate non-sexual activity (e.g. movie, dinner).
16. My partner refrains from blaming me.
17. My partner makes me think that I have put them out of the mood.
18. My partner reassures me that they love me.
19. My partner yells at me.
20. My partner tells me they don’t like me.
21. My partner offers to make it up me in the future.
22. My partner criticizes the way I initiated sex.
23. My partner offers an alternate form of physical contact (kissing/hugging/snuggling/cuddling).
24. My partner tries to talk with me instead.
25. My partner tries not to tempt me (e.g. wear sexy clothes, get naked, flirt).
26. My partner tells me they don’t find me attractive.
27. My partner gives me the silent treatment.
28. My say ‘no’ in a direct manner.
29. My partner is clear and direct as to why they don’t want to have sex.
30. My partner doesn’t reciprocate my affection.
31. My partner doesn’t explain the reason why they don’t want to have sex.
32. My partner criticizes the sex or our sexual life.
33. My partner makes up an excuse about why they don’t want to have sex that isn’t necessarily true.
34. My partner acts cold towards me.
35. My partner physically turns away from me.
36. My partner pretends not to notice that I am interested in sex.
37. My partner reminds me of times when I rejected their advances.
38. My partner physically pushes me away.
39. My partner displays frustration toward me.
40. My partner apologizes to me.
41. My partner tries to get me to pleasure myself.
42. My partner ignores me.
43. My partner criticizes aspects of our relationship.
44. My partner says they’re not interested or not in the mood for sex.
Appendix B

**Hypothetical Sexual Rejection Scenarios (Study 4)**

*After each scenario, participants report how satisfied they would feel with a) their relationship and b) their sex life on a 1-7 scale*

Condition 1 (Hostile):

“Imagine you and your partner are home on a typical night, and you are in the mood for sex. You initiate sex with your partner but they reject your advance by displaying frustration towards you. Your partner starts to criticize the way you initiated sex as well as other aspects of your relationship.

Condition 2 (Reassuring):

“Imagine you and your partner are home on a typical night, and you are in the mood for sex. You initiate sex with your partner but they reject your advance by trying to talk instead and offering other forms of physical contact (kissing, hugging, snuggling, cuddling). Your partner reassures you that they love you and are attracted to you, and offers to make it up to you in the future.

Condition 3 (Deflecting):

“Imagine you and your partner are home on a typical night, and you are in the mood for sex. You initiate sex with your partner but they reject your advance by physically turning away from you or lying in a position that's hard to snuggle with. Your partner does not reciprocate your affection and seems to be pretending not to notice that you are interested in sex or pretending to sleep.

Condition 4 (Assertive):

“Imagine you and your partner are home on a typical night, and you are in the mood for sex. You initiate sex with your partner but they reject your advance by saying no in a direct manner and telling you honestly the reason why they don't want to have sex, even if it hurts your feelings. Your partner is clear and straightforward about why they are rejecting you.

Control Condition (Sex Occurs):

“Imagine you and your partner are home on a typical night, and you are in the mood for sex. You initiate sex with your partner and they accept your advances, resulting in sex.