Impact of Recreational Sex on Sexual Satisfaction and Leisure Satisfaction

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Abstract

Background: Recreational sexual activities, or sexual behaviors purely for enjoyment, are occurring among college students. Purpose: The purpose of this study was to determine whether recreational sexual behaviors impact sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction. Methods: Data were collected from a sample of undergraduate students at a Southeastern university using a self-report questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive procedures, principal components factor analysis, and multiple regression. Results: The study identified a set of recreational sex
variables that accounted for a statistically significant amount of variation in both sexual satisfaction (men and women) and leisure satisfaction (men) ($p < .05$). **Conclusions:** Understanding behaviors, such as recreational sex, may be of value in developing effective intervention programming aimed at reducing sexual risk-taking and promoting consistent use of condoms on college campuses. Findings are of value to college health professionals, sexuality educators, and of interest to the general public.

**Introduction**

Premarital sexual intercourse among college-age adults continues to be a public health concern, as risks for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies are not uniformly spread among the population. College is the time period when a great number of young adults define and develop their sexual self. To understand sexuality, it is important to explore relevant motives, personality dimensions, and behaviors. Specifically, the literature reveals a great deal about (1) love and intimacy and (2) the desire for procreation, but not much about (3) recreational sex. Analyzing heterosexual sexual activity as recreation is of value as there may be multiple meanings in sexual interaction related to the nature of the relationship and other external factors. An area of study previously neglected in the research literature is the impact of sex as recreation on both sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction. Understanding behaviors, such as recreational sex, may be of value in developing effective intervention programming aimed at reducing sexual risk-taking and promoting consistent use of condoms on college campuses.

**Recreational Sex**

Human sexuality is loaded with multiple meanings, such as love, lust, pleasure, reproduction, the need for protection and support, and a desire to maintain and fortify the bond between persons. When researchers Benagiano and Mori (2009) addressed the question “what is at the origin of human sexuality: procreation or recreation?” - their response was “both and much more.” Abramson and Pinkerton (2002) reviewed evidence from physiology, psychology, and cultural values, and concluded that perhaps reproduction today is simply a by-product of sexual pleasure. The authors noted that sexual pleasure facilitates interpersonal bonding, promoting interpersonal relationships, and reducing social tensions. As a dimension of a stable or growing relationship, sexual expression has been termed relational. Relational sexual expression has been described as a manifestation of a multifaceted relationship of sharing and communicating. Intimacy is more than physical; it has meaning intrinsic to the experience and is a full sharing of oneself with another (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000).

A traditional theme in Western culture has been that sexual activity is serious, or for greater ends such as reproduction or bonding in marriage. However, as the connection between sexual activity and childbearing has diminished, “recreational sex” (sex purely for enjoyment) seems to have greatly increased in acceptance. Contraceptives, that are both highly effective and readily available, have largely disconnected heterosexual intercourse from reproduction, and sexual activity has become less serious in its meaning and consequences. Sex as leisure or recreation suggests that sex is primarily for the experience itself, and not necessarily connected with some
Sexual activity, with its intense and varied potential for physical pleasure, is defined as recreation, a self-contained kind of activity” (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000, p.167). For a number of individuals, sexual activity is viewed as play and considered an intense form of social leisure. From this perspective, participation in sexual activity may take place without reference to its place in building relationships, creating a family, or cementing committed relationships. The foremost meaning of a sexual act is in the experience, rather than the consequences of the sexual act. Thus, recreational sex may take place within the context of a mutually monogamous committed relationship, but often occurs in casual relationships.

Many young people may have adopted an ethic of caution relative to recreational sexual behaviors, but the literature indicates relatively few have abstained (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000). Even high rates of STIs and unintended pregnancies have not seemed to deter participation in recreational sex within casual relationships. In fact, current research on hooking-up behavior reveals that a majority of college males and nearly half of college females reported having sexual experiences within the context of hooking-up (sexual encounters between strangers or brief acquaintances, which may or may not involve sexual intercourse, having no expectation of a future relationship beyond the current encounter) (Penhollow, Young, & Bailey, 2007). This is cause for concern, because sexual activity, especially in the context of hooking-up and with multiple partners, is not a risk-free behavior.

Sexual Satisfaction and Leisure Satisfaction

Sexual satisfaction is characterized as a multidimensional experience involving thoughts, feelings, personal and socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs, combined with biological factors (Gil, 2007). The National Commission on Adolescent Health states a major developmental task of young adulthood is to achieve a healthy sense of sexuality, which includes positive feelings toward sexuality (sexual satisfaction) and encouraging mature, consensual relationships, while at the same time developing healthy sexual decision-making (Auslander, Rosenthal, Fortenberry, Biro, Bernstein, & Zimet, 2007). Research reveals the strongest predictors of sexual satisfaction include overall relationship satisfaction (Penhollow, Young, & Denny, 2009; Sprecher, 2002), non-sexual aspects of the relationship (including respect for partner, emotional intimacy, and recreational companionship), marital quality (Young, Denny, Luquis, & Young, 1998), partner initiation, communication (Bridges, Lease, & Ellison, 2004), body image, fitness (Penhollow & Young, 2008), sexual self-confidence, and frequency of orgasm (Penhollow et al., 2009).

According to the research literature, many identified predictors of sexual satisfaction appear to be relational in nature. For example, relationship satisfaction, recreational companionship, respect for one’s partner, emotional intimacy, and partner communication all indicate dimensions of a relationship. These predictors are forms of sexual expression that are demonstrations of affection and intimacy, and not simply physical pleasure. Other documented predictors of sexual satisfaction seem to be more recreational in nature, such as sexual self-confidence, frequency of orgasm, body image, and fitness. Thus, variables pertaining to sex as recreation may have a positive impact on sexual satisfaction.

Leisure satisfaction is defined as the positive feeling of contentment one perceives as a result of meeting personal needs through leisure activities and choices (Beard & Ragheb, 1980;
Seigenthaler, 1997). Physiological benefits from leisure activities among college students have been shown to significantly reduce academic stress (anxiety, change, conflict, and frustration) as well as reactions to stressors (behavioral and cognitive). Satisfaction with leisure pursuits has also demonstrated a notable educational benefit (Misra & McKean, 2000). Studies concerned with satisfaction of college students are of value as certain forms of leisure may foster the identity development process as well as provide an opportunity to better understand the perspectives of diverse segments of the college student population. Variables measuring the impact of recreational sex on sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction have not been directly addressed in the research literature.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether recreational sexual behaviors impact sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction. Although relationships among both sexual and leisure satisfaction domains have been studied in a variety of settings, there remains a paucity of scientific research on recreational sexual behaviors and the relationship with these measures of satisfaction. A satisfying sex life has been shown to be an important component in overall happiness and quality of life. Likewise, high levels of leisure satisfaction are linked with health, happiness, and individual productivity. Consequently, if sexual activity is considered an intense form of social leisure, recreational sex may positively impact leisure satisfaction. In the present study we addressed the role of recreational sexual behaviors and the degree to which they accounted for variation in sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction among a sample of college students.

We hypothesized that: (1) recreational sexual behavior would have a positive impact on sexual satisfaction for both female and male participants; (2) recreational sexual behavior would have a positive impact on leisure satisfaction for both female and male participants.

**Method**

**Participants**

Data were collected from a convenience sample of undergraduate students enrolled in health education courses at a large Southeastern university. All students in these classes were given the opportunity to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary and all respondents remained anonymous. Because the sample is from only one university, some demographic information concerning the general university population may be relevant. The university is a public four-year university, located in the Southeastern United States, with a total enrollment of approximately 17,000. Undergraduates comprise 76% of the enrollment total. Slightly more males (50.4%) than females (49.6%) are enrolled. Caucasian students comprise just over 80% of the enrollment, followed by African Americans (5.7%), with international students, Asian/Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and Hispanics also represented.

In the present study, data analysis was restricted to undergraduate students who indicated they were single, heterosexual, and less than 25 years of age. This resulted in a sample with a greater
percentage of females (65%) and Caucasian students (88%) than the university’s general population.

Testing Instrument

The testing instrument employed for use in this study was a self-report questionnaire. This instrument was developed to explore attitudes and behaviors relative to sex as recreation and indices of satisfaction. The majority of the survey items and scales were adopted from items used and tested in previous research. Following are selective measurements included in the questionnaire.

Attitudes Relative to Sex as Recreation

The questionnaire included 18 items designed to measure attitudes toward sex as recreation. These items comprised four subscales: knowledge/skill (five items – sample item - “I consider others more knowledgeable about sex than I am,”), priority (three items – sample item - “I always try to make time for sexual activities,”), recreational/hedonistic sexual behaviors (six items – sample item - “I like to have new, exciting sexual experiences and sensations,”), and condom use/safer sex (four items – sample item - “A person can have fun and still play safe”). Potential responses for each item ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). (Hurlbert, Apt, Gasar, Wilson, & Murphy, 1994; Wryobeck & Wiederman, 1999).

Confirmatory principal components factor analysis was used to confirm that each of the subscales measured a single construct. See Table 1. Items for each subscale were summed to yield a total score for that subscale. Negatively worded items (e.g. I do not like to experiment with new sexual behaviors) were reverse scored.

Sexual Satisfaction

An 11-item scale was included to evaluate sexual satisfaction. Examples of items measuring sexual satisfaction include: “I am satisfied with my sexual partner(s),” “I have satisfying orgasms,” “My partner makes me feel sexually desirable.” Potential responses for each item ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). This scale was used by Young and colleagues (1998), making slight modifications from a previous scale developed by Derogatis and Melisaratos (1979). Confirmatory factor analysis was used to confirm the scale measured a single construct. See Table 1. The responses for all 11 items were summed to yield a total score for sexual satisfaction.

Leisure Satisfaction

A 24-item short version of the Leisure Satisfaction Scale (LSS) (Beard & Ragheb, 1980; Trottier, Brown, Hobson, & Miller, 2002) was included as part of the questionnaire to evaluate leisure satisfaction. Beard and Ragheb (1980) reported a Cronbach’s alpha measure for the LSS of .93, and Trottier et al. (2002) reported an alpha reliability coefficient of .87, indicating high internal consistency for the scale. Examples of items from the LSS include: “My leisure activities help me relax,” “I use many different skills and abilities in my leisure activities,” “My leisure
activities provide opportunities to try new things,” “My leisure activities help me to relieve stress,” Potential responses for each item ranged from almost never true (1) to almost always true (5). The responses for all 24 items were summed to yield a total score for leisure satisfaction.

**Attitudes Relative to Partnered and Other Sexual Behaviors**

The questionnaire included 13 items designed to measure attitudes toward specific sexual behaviors and related activities. These items were generated by the researchers specifically for this study. Attitudes relative to partnered and other sexual behaviors comprised two subscales. The first subscale (5 items) was labeled “partnered sexual behaviors” and included items concerned with participation in manual genital stimulation, oral sex, and sexual intercourse. The second subscale (8 items) was labeled “other sexual behaviors” and included items concerned with participation in erotic games, masturbation, anal intercourse, threesomes, reading erotic material, going to strip clubs, viewing erotic videos, and online pornography. Each item was a statement indicating the described activity “is fun.” Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a scale which ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4).

An exploratory principal components factor analysis was employed for use with this scale. Grouping these items in the form of scales, demonstrating that each scale measures a single construct and using multi-item scales to measure constructs makes a stronger case for the validity of the instrument, as compared to using single items in the analysis. See Table 2. Items for each subscale were summed to yield a total score for that subscale.

**Procedures**

A cross-sectional research design was employed to collect data from a sample of undergraduate students enrolled in health education courses. Participants voluntarily completed a questionnaire during normally scheduled class times and recorded their responses on electronically scored answer sheets. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted prior to the implementation of the study.

**Data Analysis**

All statistical procedures were performed using Statistical Analysis Systems (SAS). Data were analyzed using descriptive analysis (frequency counts). Principal components factor analysis was performed on all subscales included in the testing instrument. Separate factor analyses were conducted for each subscale under investigation. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the extent to which attitudes and behaviors relative to sex as recreation are associated with sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction. Ordinal level data (Likert scales) were evaluated using parametric statistics, as parametric techniques are usually robust to the violations of their assumptions; meaning they are likely to provide the correct results even if the assumptions under which they were derived are not fully met. All data were analyzed by gender with a level of significance set at $p < .05$.

**Results**
**Frequency Counts**

The total sample consisted of $N = 459$ participants, with $n = 297$ females (65%) and $n = 162$ males (35%). The majority of the participants were White (88%), Blacks accounted for 9%, and the remaining 3% included Asian, American Indian/Pacific Islander, and other ethnicities.

**Factor Analysis**

Confirmatory principal components factor analyses using varimax rotation were conducted for both attitudes relative to sex as recreation and sexual satisfaction. Factor analysis confirmed four subscales measuring attitudes relative to sex as recreation: (a) knowledge/skill, (b) priority, (c) recreational/hedonistic sexual behaviors, and (d) condom use/safer sex. Factor loading subscales for items measuring attitudes relative to sex as recreation ranged from .58 to .92. Factor analysis confirmed an 11-item sexual satisfaction scale. Factor loadings for these variables ranged from .69 to .87, indicating that the magnitudes for every item under investigation were strong (> .60). Results for the confirmatory factor analyses are presented in Table 1.

An exploratory principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation was performed for items measuring attitudes relative to partnered and other sexual behaviors. Items from this scale included behaviors requiring a partner and behaviors that do not require a partner. The exploratory factor analysis identified two behavioral constructs which were categorized as partnered sexual behaviors and other sexual behaviors. The partnered sexual behaviors subscale consisted of five items: sexual intercourse, giving oral sex, receiving oral sex, and manual stimulation of genitals (of partner and by partner). The second factor (other sexual behaviors) consisted of eight items, six of which did not require a partner: watching erotic videos, reading erotic material, playing erotic games, viewing online pornography, going to strip clubs, masturbation, anal intercourse, and threesomes. Factor loading subscales for items measuring attitudes relative to partnered and other sexual behaviors ranged from .62 to .86, indicating that the magnitudes for each variable under investigation were strong (> .60). The exploratory factor analysis is presented in Table 2.

**Multiple Regression**

Separate multiple regressions were performed for males and females using sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction as dependent variables. The predictor variables were the six factors identified through factor analysis.

Results of the multiple regression on sexual satisfaction were significant for females: [F (6, 258) = 57.35, $p < .0001$]. The regression produced a $R^2 = .5715$, indicating that 57% of the total variability in sexual satisfaction was accounted for by the model. Statistically significant contributors to the model when added last consisted of partnered sexual behaviors ($p < .0001$), other sexual behaviors ($p < .02$), and recreational/hedonistic sexual behaviors ($p < .05$). Results of the multiple regression were also significant for males: [F (6, 139) = 13.32, $p < .0001$]. The regression produced a $R^2 = .3650$, which indicated 37% of the variance in sexual satisfaction was explained by the model. For males, significant contributors to the model when added last were k
knowledge/skill ($p < .0001$) and partnered sexual behaviors ($p < .005$). Results of the multiple regression analyses for sexual satisfaction are presented in Table 3.

The results of the study revealed hypothesis 1 (recreational sexual behavior would have a positive impact on sexual satisfaction for both female and male participants) was supported. Findings show strong evidence that participation in recreational sexual behaviors enhanced overall sexual satisfaction for both female and male participants.

Multiple regression analyses were also performed with leisure satisfaction serving as the dependent variable for both sexes. The predictor variables were the same six factors used in the previous analyses plus sexual satisfaction. Results of the multiple regression were not significant for females: $[F (7, 247) = .47, p = .8571]$. The regression produced a $R^2 = .0131$, which indicated only 1% of the total variance in leisure satisfaction was accounted for by the model. For males, the multiple regression was significant: $[F (7, 127) = 2.46, p < .03]$. The regression results revealed a $R^2 = .1196$, suggesting the model accounted for 12% of the variance in leisure satisfaction. The only significant contributor to the model when added last was partnered sexual behaviors ($p < .009$). Results of the multiple regression analyses for leisure satisfaction are presented in Table 4.

Findings of the current study demonstrate that participation in recreational sexual behaviors did not significantly enhance overall leisure satisfaction for female participants. Though the predictor variables accounted for only 12% of the variation in leisure satisfaction for males, this was statistically significant. Thus, hypothesis 2 (recreational sexual behavior would have a positive impact on leisure satisfaction for both female and male participants) was partially supported.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to determine whether recreational sexual behaviors impact both sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction. Research measuring the impact of recreational sex on sexual satisfaction and leisure satisfaction among college students has not been directly addressed in the scientific literature. The present investigation extends the previous research by assessing the extent to which attitudes toward sex as recreation and behaviors (those requiring a partner and those not requiring a partner) served as independent correlates of recreational sexual activity.

For both females and males, the regression analyses confirmed a set of predictor variables accounting for a statistically significant proportion of the variance in sexual satisfaction. For females, partnered sexual behaviors (sexual intercourse, oral sex, and manual stimulation of genitals), other sexual behaviors (watching erotic videos, playing erotic games, viewing online pornography, going to strip clubs, masturbation, reading erotic material, anal intercourse, and participating in threesomes), as well as recreational/hedonistic sexual behaviors (living for the moment when it comes to sex, having sex for fun, enjoying new exciting sexual experiences/sensations, enjoying wild uninhibited sexual encounters, viewing sex as a recreational activity, and experimenting with new sexual behaviors) significantly explained the variability in sexual satisfaction. Previous research has demonstrated that at least a minority of
college students access the Internet on a regular basis for the purpose of seeking out sexual stimuli (Scherer, 1997; Wryobeck & Wiederman, 1999). Results of the present study suggest recreational sexual behaviors had a positive impact on sexual satisfaction for female participants.

For males, knowledge/skill (knowing more sexual techniques, superior sexual performance, special sexual skills, being better at sex than most people, and more sexual knowledge), as well as partnered sexual behaviors (sexual intercourse, oral sex, and manual stimulation of genitals) significantly accounted for the variability in sexual satisfaction. Results of the present study revealed that men who perceived they had more sexual knowledge, skill, and/or performance (a component of recreational sex) reported greater overall sexual satisfaction. These results indirectly support Wryobeck and Wiederman (1999) whose research demonstrated among college men, sexual knowledge/skill was uniquely predictive of sexual esteem, which may play a role in sexual satisfaction. Consistent with the results of females, males who reported partnered sexual behaviors “as fun” also reported greater sexual satisfaction. These results suggest recreational sexual behaviors (knowledge/skill) had a positive impact on sexual satisfaction for male participants.

The current findings did not account for a great deal of variation in leisure satisfaction. For females, the set of predictors did not statistically account for variability in leisure satisfaction, accounting for less than 2% of the variance. At least among the current sample, increasing recreational or other forms of sexual behavior does not appear to be the answer for enhancing leisure satisfaction for females.

For males, the regression analysis confirmed a set of predictor variables statistically accounting for only 12% of the proportion of the variance in leisure satisfaction. The only variable to statistically contribute to the model was partnered sexual behaviors (sexual intercourse, oral sex, and manual stimulation of genitals). These results demonstrate that males who reported partnered sexual behaviors “as fun” also reported greater leisure satisfaction. It should be noted that partnered sexual behavior is not, in and of itself, evidence of recreational sexual attitudes or behaviors; however, this variable may be a dimension of recreational sex.

Major findings of the study were that partnered sexual behaviors, or relational factors, had a significant impact on sexual satisfaction for both males and females, which is supported by earlier research (Bridges et al., 2004; Penhollow et al., 2009; Sprecher, 2002; Young et al., 1998). Additionally, recreational sex had a positive impact on sexual satisfaction for females (recreational/hedonistic sexual behaviors) and for males (knowledge/skill). For heterosexual individuals, contraception has largely compartmentalized sexual behavior. Perhaps this freedom of sexual expression has impacted the way young adults view and/or enjoy sexual activities.

It should be noted that, like other forms of recreation, sex has performance elements as well. One can become more skillful and demonstrate that skill through a sequence of encounters, settings, and relationships (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000). In the present study, knowledge/skill, a dimension of recreational sex, was identified as the strongest predictive factor for sexual satisfaction among male participants.

**Limitations**
Interpretation of these results should take the limitations of the study into account. Participants consisted of a convenience sample of undergraduate college students enrolled in health education classes at one university; but an analysis of the demographics of the larger university suggest the sample is relatively representative. Additionally, the study instrument consisted of a self-report questionnaire. There is a possibility of response bias due to false or socially desirable responses. A cross-sectional research design was employed, indicating that correlates of behavior were assessed rather than antecedents of behavior. Moreover, the construct of recreational sex could be relevant to a variety of sexual situations, including a mutually monogamous relationship, and does not preclude the desire to have a relationship-building experience. Finally, the current study involves a college sample, comprised largely of Non-Hispanic Whites. Thus, these results might not apply to non-college populations, or other racial/ethnic groups.

Future researchers should consider addressing some of the limitations identified in the study. First, the construct of recreational sex, or the individual factors which constitute recreational sex, requires further examination. Additionally, researchers should consider including other racial/ethnic groups, as well as participants with different sexual orientations (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgendered (GLBT) couples). Do the relationships between these sexuality variables remain the same when age, sexual orientation, and cultural influences are taken into account? Since recreational sex is not a risk-free practice, it is important that awareness messages and educational programs clearly demonstrate the risks involved when participating in sexual risk-taking behavior. Researchers have suggested that sexual health intervention programs be targeted toward individuals with sexual risk-taking personality characteristics (Gaither & Sellbom, 2003; Wryoebeck & Wiederman, 1999). Thus, interventions should emphasize novelty, variety, and fun within the realm of safer sexual activities.

**Conclusion**

Sex in its own right, or for purely enjoyment purposes, continues to be a normative developmental behavior on college campuses. There is a need to further explore and expand the complexities associated with recreational sex and sexual experimentation, since these activities place young people at risk for STIs and unintended pregnancy. Overall results provide insight concerning recreational sexual behaviors and may be of value to college student personnel, college level health and sexuality educators, and should be of interest to the general public and observers of pop culture.

**References**


