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To cite this article: Sarah Hunter Murray & Lori Brotto (2021) I Want You to Want Me: A Qualitative Analysis of Heterosexual Men's Desire to Feel Desired in Intimate Relationships, Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy, 47:5, 419-434, DOI: [10.1080/0092623X.2021.1888830](https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2021.1888830)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2021.1888830>



Published online: 24 Feb 2021.



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I Want You to Want Me: A Qualitative Analysis of Heterosexual Men's Desire to Feel Desired in Intimate Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Current sexual scripts for heterosexual relationships in the Western world stipulate that men should be the ones to initiate sexual activity, push to the next level of physical intimacy, and to desire women (and not be desirable themselves). However, there is building evidence that sexual scripts and gender roles are not only limited, they may be evolving and shifting over time. The purpose of the current study was to explore the degree to which feeling desired is considered important to heterosexual men in intimate relationships as well as how heterosexual men feel desired by their partners. Three hundred men between the ages of 18 and 65 were recruited from the online platform Reddit. Using Thematic Analysis, we determined that the vast majority of men in this study felt that feeling desired was very important to their sexual experiences. Men in this study listed several ways they felt desired, many that fell outside of traditional gender roles such as romantic, non-sexual touch and having women initiate sexual activity. The findings add to a growing body of literature which suggests traditional sexual scripts for heterosexual men may be limiting and not accurate for all men's sexual experiences.

Sexual script theorists suggest that sexual behavior is a result of social constructions about appropriate sexual behaviors for men and women across the lifespan (Simon & Gagnon 1986, 2003). Sexual scripts act as framework that dictate how men and women should feel (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), understand (Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2013) and behave (Wiederman, 2005) in a particular sexual situation. Sexual scripts are theorized to develop at a very young age and continue to be reinforced throughout our teenage and adult years (Masters et al., 2013; Sakaluk et al., 2013; Wiederman, 2005). For example, as most cis-gender women (those assigned female at birth and identifying as women) are able to become pregnant, they tend to receive messages to act as “gatekeepers” to men's sexual advances. In contrast, because cis-gender men (those assigned male at birth and identifying as men) are unable to become pregnant, they are generally encouraged to be freer with their sexuality and initiate sexual activity (Wiederman, 2005). Current sexual scripts for heterosexual relationships in the Western world stipulate that men should be the ones to initiate sexual activity, push to the next level of physical intimacy, and to desire women (and not be desirable themselves; Sakaluk et al., 2013; Wiederman, 2005). However, while there is some evidence that sexual scripts may be evolving over time (e.g., Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Masters et al., 2013), to our knowledge, there is no empirical research to date that has asked men directly about their desire to feel desired, nor whether they consider this to be an important part of their sexual experiences.

Women's desire to feel desired

There is strong empirical support for the notion that feeling sexually desired is an important component of women's sexual desire (e.g., Brotto, 2010; Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009; Mark, Herbenick, Forenberry, Sanders & Reece, 2014; Murray, Milhausen, & Sutherland, 2014). In a qualitative exploration of factors that impact young (18-29 year old) women's sexual desire in long-term relationships, researchers concluded that feeling sexually desired was a key differentiating factor between women who experienced higher levels of desire from those who experienced decreased sexual desire (Murray et al., 2014). That is, women who self-identified as continuing to experience higher levels of desire over the course of their longer-term relationships were more likely to indicate that their male partner regularly expressed his desire for her in various verbal and non-verbal ways. Whereas, while women who self-identified as experiencing a decrease in sexual desire over the course of their relationship were just as likely to indicate that feeling desired was important to their sexual experiences, these women were more likely to indicate that their partner did not do things to make them feel desired as often as they would like (Murray et al., 2014).

Additionally, a prominent study on women's sexual arousal (now considered to overlap significantly with women's sexual desire; Brotto, 2010; Mitchell, Wellings, & Graham, 2014) similarly found that feeling desirable was a key component to women's increased sexual desire. In this study, researchers conducted nine focus groups with 80 women between the ages of 18-84, over half of whom were in a committed, monogamous relationship (Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004). The authors determined that women's sexual arousal was impacted by various factors including: feeling desired by a partner, feeling accepted by a partner, and a partners' style of approach and initiation (Graham et al., 2004). This finding was replicated in another qualitative study in mid-life women who articulated that their own sexual desire was enhanced if they perceived their partners desire for them (Brotto et al., 2009) and feeling desired has also been identified as a motivating factor for why women may seek out sexual activity with their partner (Mark et al., 2014).

Object of desire self-consciousness theory

Object of desire self-consciousness (ODSC) is the perception that one is romantically and sexually desirable to another person. As theorized by Bogaert and Brotto (2014), ODSC would elicit a set of cognitive schema in a situation where an individual is aware that they are the object of another's attention. Awareness of one's attractiveness is also thought to trigger a cascade of emotional, and likely arousal-related reactions, and the triggered schema and emotions would interact to elicit a desire for sex. Bogaert and Brotto (2014) hypothesized that ODSC was particularly critical to women's sexual functioning, more so than men's, given that men's feelings of desirability is less tied to their physical appearance, that men's sexual behavior is more proceptive (i.e., expressed as seeking out and initiating sexual activity) than receptive (i.e., accepting or allowing sexual advances), and because men's arousal is more likely to be triggered by sexual stimuli rather than ODSC feelings (Bogaert & Brotto, 2014).

In a direct comparison of men and women on ODSC relevance, Bogaert, Visser, and Pozzebon (2015) compared the contents of sexual fantasies between 98 men and 100 women. The fantasies were rated by how much they depicted ODSC themes. Women consistently showed higher ODSC themes in their sexual fantasies, lending support for Bogaert and Brotto's (2014) speculation that women's ODSC is higher than men's. However, given that the study recruited only young university students, it remains unknown whether ODSC may be relevant to (older) men in relationships. In this study we will explore specifically whether ODSC themes arise in men's stories of their own sexual desire.

Research on sexual scripts

Some research has been conducted on how men and women feel about current sexual scripts and the degree to which they may be abided by in heterosexual partnerships. For example, in one study of heterosexual men's and women's endorsements of sexual scripts, Masters et al. (2013) interviewed 26 men (age 18-25) about their knowledge of sexual scripts and the degree to which they described actively participating in those scripts. The authors' analysis concluded that 16 of the 26 men interviewed (61.5%) described their sexual interactions in a way that conformed to traditional gender roles (Masters et al., 2013). That is, these men described desiring sex without being desired, having high sexual desire, initiating sexual activity, and feeling pressure to be sexually skilled (Masters et al. 2013).

However, while the majority of men in the study described abiding by these norms, the remaining 10 male participants (38.5%) did not actively endorse these traditional male sexual scripts. The researchers indicated that while those 10 men described themselves as departing from the norm, they also displayed some unease and uncertainty about not meeting cultural expectations (Masters et al. 2013).

Researchers of another study on sexual scripts similarly found that not all men and women choose to abide by traditional sexual scripts. Dworkin and O'Sullivan (2005) interviewed 32 college-aged men about their engagement in, and preference for, various patterns of sexual initiation. Their findings, similar to the previously described study, also suggested that male-dominated sexual initiation was the most common pattern of initiation. However, the authors noted that the majority of the men reporting this script (72.2%) indicated a preference for a more egalitarian pattern (i.e., equal amounts of initiation between the male and female partner). Men who wanted a more egalitarian pattern of sexual initiation indicated that they found initiating regularly was too demanding, and they rejected the idea of a dichotomous male/female script. Further, some men reported that they wanted to be seen as an object of desire, in contrast to previous findings which have found men prefer to see their partner as an object of desire (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). This latter finding highlights, again, the possibility that ODSC may be a relevant theme to men's sexual desire, just as it has been described for women.

Men's desire to feel desired

In a qualitative study of 30 heterosexual men (age 30-65), researchers explored various factors that may be related to men's experiences of sexual desire in longer-term relationships (Murray, Milhausen, Graham & Kuzynski, 2016). Over the course of in-depth interviews, researchers asked men about what factors increased and decreased their level of sexual interest. The authors noted that the desire to feel desired was one of three themes that men described as being most integral to their sexual experiences.

The men in Murray et al.'s (2016) study said that while they felt there was a social belief that women want to feel desired while men "do the wanting," they believed that feeling desired was a universal need for both men and women. Specifically, men indicated that receiving compliments about their appearance, their awareness of their female partner's equal interest in a sexual encounter, and their female partner initiating sexual activities were the biggest facilitators of their own sexual desire (Murray et al., 2016). Despite the importance that men in this study put on feeling desired, the authors stated that men acknowledged feeling desired was a rare occurrence, and something they felt their female partner was not aware was important to them.

The current study

Research suggests that feeling desired is a key component of women's sexuality (Graham et al., 2004; Murray et al., 2014). However, there is a dearth of research on men's sexual desire (Brotto,

2010). As a result, we know little about what influences men's sexual desire in general, nor the potential role of feeling desired on men's sexual experiences in particular. While previous qualitative explorations of men's sexual desire suggest that feeling desired may be important to some men (e.g., Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Murray et al., 2016), these findings were incidental, rather than being an intended focus of either study. Further, both previously described studies used in-depth interviews with smaller numbers of men making it difficult to know the generalizability of the findings. The current study sought to directly explore heterosexual men's desire to be desired using a larger sample of men in order to determine how men feel desired in their intimate relationships.

Method

Participants

Men between the ages of 18 and 65 who identified as heterosexual and in intimate relationships of at least 6 months were eligible to participate. The study used 18 as a cut off point as we were interested in the sexual experiences of adult men. The upper limit for men's age was 65 years old. It has been well documented that sexual desire decreases as individuals age (Levine, 2002) and men may experience a more sudden drop of testosterone after 65 years old (Morales, 2003). As well, the cutoff of 65 years of age has been used in previous studies of men's sexual desire (e.g., Helgason et al., 1996; Traeen, Martinussen, Oberg, & Kavli, 2007) allowing for a comparison of the present with previous research.

The sample for this study was recruited from the on-line website Reddit, an American social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website from January through March of 2018. In an attempt to capture a diverse group of men, various Subreddit groups (forums within Reddit dedicated to a specific topic) were targeted. Specifically we targeted Subreddit groups that were dedicated to discussing topics related to men's issues, sex, and romantic relationships. Based on this criteria, r/men, r/marriage, r/askmenover30, r/sexover30, r/MensLib were used as recruitment bases for this study.

Procedures

Prior to recruiting on the Subreddits listed above, a moderator for each Subreddit was asked whether they would allow a post intended for academic recruitment. Only the Subreddits with moderators who approved the link were used to recruit for the present study. The post indicated that an academic study about men's sexual desire was being conducted and researchers were looking to recruit heterosexual men in relationships to answer questions about their sexual desire. Participants were provided a list of study criteria, and were then told that we anticipated the time to complete the questions would be approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Those interested could click on a link for more information.

They were then presented with a consent form on Qualtrics which provided information about the study, including that it was approved by an REB at a mid-sized Canadian University and if they elected to participate in the study they would be asked to provide some brief demographic information (i.e., age, gender identity, relationship structure, ethnicity, whether or not there were children in the home) followed by several open ended questions about their sexual desire.

The demographics questionnaire served also as a screening questionnaire to ensure that only men who met the eligibility criteria completed the questions. If participants provided an answer that did not meet the study criteria (i.e., < 18 years) they were brought to a page reminding them of the study criteria, indicating they were not able to participate at this time, and thanking them for their interest.

Participants who met the study criteria were then asked to answer 21 open-ended questions about their sexual desire. The questions comprising the larger study on men's sexual desire were intentionally broad and far-reaching, touching on numerous aspects of men's sexual experiences from pornography use to sexual rejection to sexual desirability. For the purpose of this study, only the questions that examined sexual desirability specifically were included.

In order to mitigate any potential inappropriate or inauthentic responses, participants were provided with information about the confidentiality of participating in the study (i.e., that their response would not be linked to their names) and told that they could leave any questions blank and/or end the survey at anytime if the questions made them uncomfortable. At the end of the survey, participants were notified that they could choose to enter their email for a chance to win a random draw for one of two \$100 Amazon gift cards. Participants were eligible for the gift card even if they did not complete all the questions provided they gave an email address to be entered into the draw.

Measures

Given the goals of the current study aimed at understanding men's desire to feel desired, only the following three questions from the larger study (i.e., those which asked about men's desire to feel desired directly), were analyzed: (1) Feeling desired refers to being sexually wanted by our partner. How important is it to have your female partner desire you? (2) How do you feel sexually desired by your partner (i.e., what is she doing that makes you feel desired)? And (3) What, if anything, do you wish your female partner was doing more of that would help you feel desired?

Analysis

The questions were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps to thematic analysis. The first author took the lead role in analyzing the data which included: (1) familiarized herself with the data by looking over all the participant answers, (2) generating initial codes, and (3) identifying initial themes which were all documented in a designated study journal. Then, a second round of coding was conducted in which the first author (4) compared and reviewed themes and, after four more iterations of coding, (5) defined and named themes. Subsequently, the second author reviewed the themes and provided insights, questions, and feedback. At this stage of the analysis, the first and second author identified and discussed different interpretations of the data, made some adjustments, and came to a shared understanding of the final themes. Once agreement for each theme had been reached, together we (6) produced the final report.

Results

Participant demographics

A total of 484 individuals clicked on the study link. However, 184 of these individuals did not participate in the study. Just over half ($n = 96$; 52.2%) completed the demographics questionnaire and met the study criteria, but choose not to respond to any of the study questions. Another 37 people (20.1%) simply did not finish completing the demographic questionnaire. Additionally some participants clicked on the link but were unable to participate in the study, as they did not meet the outlined criteria. Specifically, 22 (12.0%) identified as bisexual, 13 (7.1%) identified as single, 5 (2.7%) identified as having an "other" sexual orientation, 5 (2.7%) were in relationships of less than 6 months duration, 3 (1.6%) identified as female, 2 (1.1%) were under 18, and one person (0.5%) identified as gay.

A total of 300 men clicked on the link, met inclusion criteria, and elected to participate in the study. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 65. Sixteen percent of participants were under 30 years old (4.0% were 18-24 and 12.0% were 25-29 years old respectively). Approximately half the participants were in their thirties; with 27% of the sample aged 30-34 years old and 20.3% of participants aged 35-39 years old. Finally, a sizable minority of participants were over 40, with 17.3% of participants aged 40-44, 9.0% aged 45-49, 5.0% aged 50-54, 3.0% aged 55-59, and 4.0% aged 60-65 years old.

Most participants indicated they were married (60.4%) or seriously dating one person (20.73%) with the rest of the sample either being engaged (5.34%), common-law (4.49%), casually dating (2.99%) or seriously dating one person and casually dating others (2.78%). Relationship length ranged considerably with the shortest relationship reported being 7 months and the longest relationship length being 45 years, 7 months; the average relationship duration was 12 years, 4 months. A small majority of participants reported that they had at least one child at home (55%) while the remaining 45% of the sample indicated they did not have kids.

There was little variation in ethnicity in this study. The vast majority of participants identified as Caucasian (87.7%), with a small minority of participants identifying as Latin American (3.0%), Chinese (1.3%), Filipino (1.3%), Japanese (1.3%), South East Asian (1.0%), Arab/West Asian (1.0%), Korean (0.3%), or "Other" (2.3%).

The importance of feeling sexually desired

The first study question was: "Feeling desired refers to being sexually wanted by our partner. How important is it to have your female partner desire you?" Two hundred and forty-two participants responded to this question. Three of the responses were illegible and were excluded from further analysis (that is, participants responded with one letter or a random set of letters that did not form any words). The following findings are based on an analysis of the 239 legible responses.

No men in this study said that feeling sexually desired was *not* important. However, a small minority of participants ($n = 13$ men; 5.4%) indicated that feeling sexually desired was not particularly important to them. For example, some men responded that feeling desired was only "moderately" or "somewhat important" to their sexual experiences, while others provided answers such as "it's desirable but not critical" or "on a scale of 1- 10 with 10 being most important I'd say 7 or 8."

The vast majority of men in this study ($n = 226$, 94.6%), however, indicated that feeling desired was important. Participants used various adjectives to capture the degree to which feeling desired mattered to their sexual experiences. The most common response from men ($n = 139$; 58.16%) was that feeling sexually desired was "very important," followed by 47 men (19.67%) indicating it was "extremely" important, and 20 participants (8.4%) indicated feeling desired was simply "important."

Another 20 participants (8.44%) used stronger adjectives to indicate the importance of them feeling desired by a partner. These participants indicated that feeling sexually desired was by far the most important part of their sexual interactions with their partner. Some example responses in this category came from men who indicated feeling sexually desired was "critical," "paramount," or even "essential." One participant shared that: "[feeling desired] is, by far, the most important factor in sexual satisfaction for me" and another said feeling desired was "about as important as eating and sleeping." A few men also suggested that they could not physically engage in sexual activity if they did not feel sexually desired by their partner. For example, one participant said: "I literally cannot maintain an erection if I have reason to believe that my partner isn't excited to have sex with me. It's an emotionally devastating experience."

How men feel sexually desired

The second research question was: "How do you feel sexually desired by your partner (i.e., what is she doing that makes you feel desired)?" Two hundred and thirty seven men responded to this question. Six of the answers were illegible leaving a total of 231 responses included in the analysis (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. How men feel sexually desired: themes and frequencies.

Themes & subthemes	<i>n</i> (%)
Unable to answer	28 (12.1%)
Verbal expressions of desire	83 (40.9%)
Receiving compliments	35 (17.2%)
Sexual (or “dirty”) talk	61 (30.0%)
Flirting	29 (14.3%)
“That look”	24 (11.8%)
Other sexually suggestive behavior	24 (11.8%)
Romantic or non-sexual touch	69 (34.0%)
Sexual initiation	56 (27.6%)
Being an enthusiastic partner during sex	39 (19.2%)

Note: *n* = 231; participants able to provide more than one answer.

A notable minority of participants in this study ($n = 28$; 12.1%) indicated that they were unable to answer the question. These men said that they did not feel, or no longer felt, desired in their relationship and thus could not respond. For example, one participant said: “I don’t feel desired. She doesn’t do anything that makes me feel like she desires me sexually,” and another responded: “Lately I have been feeling less desired so I have a hard time answering this question.”

The responses from the remaining 203 men who provided examples of how they felt desired in their relationships were analyzed. Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) steps to Thematic Analysis we created 5 key themes (and 4 subthemes) to describe men’s experiences. Specifically, men described feeling sexually desired through (1) verbal expressions of desire, (2) flirting, (3) romantic, non-sexual, touch, (4) sexual initiation, and (5) enthusiastic sexual participation. While a large minority of men gave one example of how they felt desired in their relationships, over half of the men in this study ($n = 113$; 55.7%) provided two or more ways their female partner helped him feel wanted.

Verbal expressions of desire

Many men in this study ($n = 83$; 40.9%) indicated that they felt desired when their female partner expressed her feelings of attraction toward him verbally. It was common for men to respond simply by saying: “she expresses it verbally” or by “telling me she wants me.” Within this theme men identified two specific ways their female partner communicated her sexual desire that made them feel wanted. Specifically men described a) receiving compliments and b) engaging in sexy or “dirty” talk.

Receiving compliments. Some men ($n = 35$, 17.2%) specifically described feeling desired when their female partner offered them compliments. These compliments were most often centered on men’s physical appearance, physique, or what he was wearing. For example, when asked how his wife made a participant feel desired, he said: “she checks me out or compliments my clothing when she feels it accentuates my assets” and another described how [his] “wife makes an effort to tell me I’m handsome and sexy... and gives me over-the-top puppy-eyes when I dress well.”

Compliments about men’s physical appearance were often described as being romantic in nature and increasing not only men’s desire but, as one participant described, his self-esteem. He said:

I feel kind of silly writing this, but she’ll call me her “beautiful man.” “Hello, my beautiful man,” she’ll say as I stand shirtless in the living-room, or when she walks in while I’m getting dressed. No one has ever called me that, but she says it so effortlessly and it makes me feel wonderful about myself.

Another man echoed that as he gets older, receiving compliments from his wife that she still likes his body felt good. He said: “I show my age and am not as fit as I was some years ago. She

enjoys laying beside me and tracing her fingers around my body while telling me how lucky she is to have me.”

Sexual (or “dirty”) talk. Sixty-one men in this study (30.0%) described liking when their female partner talked openly about wanting sex, engaged in “dirty talk” or sent “sexts” throughout the day. For example, one participant indicated he feels desired when his partner sent “flirty text messages” and another said he likes when his partner “sends me suggestive texts or pictures.” A third man said: “I love it when she makes comments to me during the day about how she needs me.”

Other men noted that they felt desired when their female partners engaged in an open discourse about what she likes sexually in a person. Some men described that simply the sexual nature of the conversation was arousing and made them feel wanted. For example, one participant said: “If she were to say that she needed me, that she wanted me inside her, that she would grab me and look at me like “now stud”! Another participant described feeling closer to his female partner when she shared her desires or sexual ideas: “I love when she talks about sex with me as she never does. When she opens up and tells me her wants and desires. As form of including me. Letting me know those intimate details, makes me feel desired.”

Flirting

The description of a female partner flirting was reported both explicitly, and sometimes more implicitly, by a number of men in this study. For example, 29 men (14.3%) explicitly used the word “flirting” or “flirtatious” to describe their partner’s actions and behaviors that made him feel wanted. One participant said: “sometimes it’s a small gesture, not sexual, more flirty.” Within this theme men specifically described feeling desired when their partner a) gave him “that look,” and b) engaged in sexually suggestive behavior.

That look. Twenty-four men (11.8%) described that they felt desired when their female partner gave him “meaningful glances” that seemed to indicate she was thinking about him in a sexual way. As one participant said: “there’s this look my partner gets in her eyes sometimes when I know she’s feeling rowdy,” and another similarly responded: “sometimes she will look at me in a way that I can tell she is interested sexually.”

Notably some men described “the look” as not necessarily overtly sexual in nature, yet it could still make him feel desirable. As one man said: “sometimes it is enough if she looks at me in a certain way, maybe even in not-sexual contexts” and another said: “the look on her face and mannerisms. The genuine look that she lights up when seeing me.”

Other sexually suggestive behavior. Twenty-four participants (11.8%) described feeling sexually desired when their partner engaged in sexually suggestive behavior. Some of these men simply said they liked when their partner was “sexually suggestive” or gave him “suggestive comments, innuendos” or, somehow “hint[s] that she wants sex.”

Other men gave more specific examples of suggestive sexual behavior. Some of these behaviors included playful touches (e.g., “when my wife grabs my arms or smacks me on the butt as I walk by”) or deliberately wearing clothes that reveal the body in a flirtatious way (e.g., “I feel desired when my partner solicits my sexual desire by doing things she knows I find sexually desirable ... - dressing up in lingerie or other sexy attire”). Other men described more partner specific examples that were unique to the relationship. For example, one participant described: “the way her hips wiggle when we’re lying in bed that makes it clear she’s thinking about sex.”

Romantic or non-sexual touch

One of the most common responses that men gave when describing what their partner did to make them feel sexually desired was when she physically touched him ($n = 69$, 34.0%). While later themes are concerned with more sexual touch, many men also described liking more romantic, sensual physical touch to make him feel wanted. For example, one participant described examples of physical touch from a quick brush up or squeeze, even if it didn't lead to sex. He said:

She makes physical contact. She will touch me when she walks past. Sometimes a simple squeezing of my foot when I'm on the recliner or brushing my forearm or shoulder. When I'm leaving she will cup my butt in her hands. If I'm standing or sitting near her she will lean in or snuggle. I love it.

Another participant echoed the importance of touch even if it didn't necessarily imply something overtly sexual. He said: "touch is a big one for me. Little gestures of intimacy, a squeeze here, a peck there, a linger ... When she shows a want to touch me."

A smaller number of men also described feeling desired when their female partner did specific romantic gestures like kissing him ($n = 27$, 13.3%), when she initiated cuddling ($n = 13$, 6.4%) or offered other bids of affection ($n = 10$, 5.0%). For example: "she will hug me for no reason, hold hands, cuddle, kiss me, etc. These all make me feel desired on a level more than a friendship" and other responded: "wanting physical intimacy. Including but not limited to sexual activity. As simple as holding hands or touching when falling asleep."

Sexual initiation

The previous three themes addressed romantic and flirtatious gestures from female partners that helped men in this study feel sexually desired. But men in this study also frequently described more directly sexual ways that their female partner did to make them feel desired. Specifically 56 men (27.6%) described feeling desired when their female partner initiated sexual activity. For example, one participant described: "I feel desired when she initiates sex, either verbally or through touch." Another similarly described: "initiating sex (as compared to being willing but not initiating) is very important for making me feel wanted." Men in this study used various language to describe how sex was initiated from "pulling me closer" to "constantly sexually harassing me" to "cute aggression."

Initiating sex was something that many men indicated they liked as it put their female partner in a more dominant sexual position and allowed them to be more passive. As one participant described: "My partner acts on her sexual desires instead of passively waiting for me to act on mine all the time." Another participant similarly described liking when his partner, rather than he, is the aggressor during sex. He said he likes: "when she initiates, when she shows signs and evidence of being turned on, when she's "aggressive" instead of passive."

Being an enthusiastic partner during sex

A notable number of men ($n = 39$, 19.2%) responded that they felt desired during sexual activity when they perceived their partner to be an enthusiastic and excited participant *during* sex. It was common for participants to say things like: "be an active participant during sex," or "engaging sexually as opposed to casually." It seemed that men were specifically talking about wanting a female partner to put in effort during sex, rather than being more passive. Some men responded by saying things like "makes an effort during sex." Men were clear that this was an experience that happened during sex. As one participant said: "She shows her desire by being willing and open for the most part in the heat of the moment."

Another participant talked about feeling wanted when he and his partner lose themselves in each other; an experience he described as not sexual in nature:

By giving herself to me. This is not sexual. This is when we get together and blot out all of the other real world distractions and focus on us. Sharing our feelings towards each other without distraction. Let the chemistry work.

In contrast, when men felt their female partner was not fully engaged in the interaction, it negatively impacted their desire.: “I can go in full of desire, but am very prone to taking any cue she is not enjoying what is happening or only there for maintenance sex for me as a hard brake on my desire in that moment.”

One man articulated his awareness of social norms that stipulate that women should not be “too” into sex. He indicated that when he found his partner showing her enthusiasm and desire, he felt especially good, as he experienced this interest as being overcome with lust for him that it overrode these social messages. He said:

When we are actually having sex, I feel desired when she expresses sexual desire. Almost every woman I have ever been with, even my very “woke” and feminist current girlfriend, seems to have internalized at least on some level the idea that women shouldn’t be too sexually aggressive, desire sex too openly. When my girlfriend is sexually aggressive or makes clear that she really wants to have sex with me, I know she must really, really want me if it was enough to overcome her social conditioning.

What would make men feel more desired

The third question pertaining to men’s desire to feel desired was “what, if anything, do you wish your female partner was doing more of that would help you feel desired?” Two hundred and thirty-seven men responded to this question. Six of those responses were illegible and 4 participants indicated they “weren’t sure” how to answer the question. The remaining 227 responses were included in the analysis (see Table 2).

While the results of question 1 indicated that the majority of men in this study felt that being sexually desired was important to them, only 28 participants (12.1%) indicated their female partner made them feel sexually desired as much as they might like. Some of these men responded: “I couldn’t ask for more” or simply: “Nothing. My current partner makes me feel desired all the time, whether we are in public or privately.” A few of these men’s responses suggested that their female partner had a very high sexual drive and they couldn’t imagine feeling any more desire from her. For example, one participant said: “I seriously can’t think of anything. If she expressed any greater desire for me, my nervous system might fry. I certainly don’t need her to do anything more to make me feel desired, on any level.” And another described being satisfied with his female partner’s demonstrations of desire for him, and noted it was his own lower sexual interest that was the issue, not her actions. He said: “Nothing. She does an amazing amount. I just have an extremely low sex drive.”

In contrast, 210 men (88%) indicated there were things they wanted their female partner to do more of to help them feel desired. These responses were coded to create four themes. Specifically, men said they wished their female partner would: 1) be more dominant, 2) be more romantic, 3) flirt more, and 4) show more sexual interest.

Table 2. What would make men feel more desired: themes & frequencies.

Themes & subthemes	<i>n</i> (%) Participants
Nothing	28 (12.1%)
Be more dominant	111 (48.9%)
Sexual initiation	40 (16.9%)
Clearly communicate sexual feelings	34 (15.0%)
Be more romantic	41 (18.1%)
Flirt more	42 (18.5%)
Show more sexual interest	32 (14.1%)

Note: *n* = 227; participants able to provide more than one answer.

Be more dominant

Almost half the men who responded to question three ($n=111$; 48.9%) responded that they wished their female partner would be more assertive and dominant during sexual interactions. Twenty-nine of these men (12.8%) simply said they wanted their female partner to be “more dominant” while others used different terminology that suggested they wanted a more dominant approach. For example one participant said he wanted his partner to “be more forward and bawdy.”

With regards to how men felt their female partner demonstrated more sexual dominance, men indicated that they wanted their female partner to a) initiate sexual activity, and b) be more direct about her sexual thoughts and feelings.

Sexual initiation. By far the most common example of what women could do to make men feel sexually desired was to initiate sex ($n=40$, 16.9%). Within this theme men frequently described feeling tired of always having to read the signs, navigate their partner’s sexual interest, or put the effort into getting their wife or girlfriend in the mood. Men in this study said they would feel more desired if their partner initiated from time to time. For example, one participant said: “initiating... often times I feel like I’m the one pursuing. That gets tiring.” Another similarly identified that the more traditional sexual scripts where men pursue and women “gate-keep” were present in his relationship; something he wishes were not always the case: “I usually initiate. When she’s feeling it but I don’t initiate, she’ll give me a sign that she wants me to initiate rather than take initiative herself... I’d enjoy her taking more initiative.”

Sexual initiation from a female partner was not only something that men said helped them feel desired, but something that alleviated their experience of sexual rejection. As one participant described, being the one to initiate most sexual activity means running the chance of rejection. He said: “Initiate more often. She generally waits for me to start things, so I have to take the chance of being turned down a lot.” Another participant gave a similar response: “initiating, she rarely does and it can be very trying to attempt to initiate and be rejected by then be expected to keep trying the next day or the day after until she is in the mood.”

Clearly communicate sexual feelings. Thirty-four participants (15.0%) indicated they wanted their female partner to be clearer about her sexual needs and desires in a verbally. It appeared that a number of men felt their female partner was too subtle or indirect about her sexual interest and described that they would feel more desired if she was clearer about her sexual needs. For example, one participant said: “more verbal communication would be nice, sometimes I feel like I play a guessing game about whether she is interested or not.”

Another participant described believing that his wife had an interest in having sex with him, but that her signs were often subtle and did not make him feel wanted. He said that if she were to be more open and explicit about her wants he would feel more desired: “she says that she gets turned on or thinks about sex, but doesn’t act on it. I wish she’d act on it or at least TELL me when that happens. I also wish she’d be more assertive about what she wants when we’re having sex.” And another participant similarly described that he would feel desired if his female partner was more direct with her sexual needs rather than passive sexually. He described: “telling me what she would like for us to be doing, being more decisive and less passive, making an active commitment to exploring what she would be interested in sexually.”

Within this theme 11 men (4.8%) also mentioned that they would feel sexually desired if they were to receive verbal compliments about their body or their sexual performance during sexual activity. For example, one participant said: “compliment my body, be a bit more vocal in the bedroom” and another echoed that he would feel desired if his partner: “Talk[ed] about how I look and tell me what she enjoys about my body or what I do in bed.”

Be more romantic

A notable number of men in this study ($n=41$; 18.1%) described that they would feel more desired if their female partner would put more effort into the romantic parts of their relationship. Most notably thirty-six men (15.9%) stated that they would enjoy if their female partner initiated more romantic, or non-sexual, touch. These descriptions included touch that was more romantic, affectionate or, in some cases, was explicitly described as being non-sexual in nature. It was common for men to answer that they would feel desired if their partner initiated: “touching in normal situations” while others said things like: “more general affection. I wish she would be the first to hug, kiss.”

Some men offered specific examples of ways that they would feel desired by their female partners’ romantic touch. For example, one participant said: “I wish she would be more physical in our day to day interactions, reaching for light touches when we pass by each other, scooching closer on the couch, reaching over and resting her hand on me when we’re driving, things like that” and another said: “I wish she would coo and melt into me more when holding hands, hugging, or when I massage her back.” A third described wanting “an increase in non-sexual intimacy, small things like touching passing by, snuggling, and verbal affirmation of enjoyment.”

Notably, some participants highlighted that they wanted more romantic touch, rather than the more direct sexual touch he indicated his partner currently gave. For example, one participant said he would love if his girlfriend initiated: “intimate contact for the sake of intimacy rather than sex,” and another participant commented that he would like his partner to: “pay more attention to the rest of my body, I’m not a walking penis.”

Flirt more

Between the overt demonstrations of sexual interest described in theme one, and the romantic touch and affection described in theme two, 42 men (18.5%) in this study also described a desire for more flirtation and teasing from their female partner. For example one participant said: “more sexual teasing and cuddles” and another said “I wish there was some more teasing.” Some men also described a desire for “sexting.”

The descriptions of feeling desired due to flirting seemed to hone in on developing sexual tension in their relationships. Men described flirting and teasing and something their wife or girlfriend could do that was suggestive and sexy but not necessarily something that would lead to something sexual. For example, one participant responded: “I would prefer more sexy talk and open to sexual things that may or may not result in sex. Sex may be the end goal - but there is much enjoyment in the journey.” Another participant identified liking when his partner touched him in a somewhat suggestive way at a time where sex wasn’t necessarily an option to let him know that she still thought of him in a sexual way. He said: “Touching me (briefly) in a sexual way-- but at non sexual times. To let me know that there’s always something there.”

Show more sexual interest

Finally, 32 men (14.1%) indicated they would feel more desired if their female partner did anything at all to demonstrate a greater interest in engaging in sexual activity with him. One participant expressed a great longing in his response, saying: “Anything. Anything at all. Snuggling. Random displays of affection. Being enthusiastic (even a little) in bedroom activities rather than leaving all of the work to me when we infrequently have sex.” Another participant similarly described feeling frustrated that there was an imbalance in terms of who does the desiring in his relationship. He said: “I wish she would make any effort at all. While she has no desire she knows that I want her. I wish she would do anything to make me feel wanted.”

Discussion

The current study sought to explore how heterosexual men feel sexually desired in their intimate relationships. Our findings suggest that feeling sexually desired by one's female partner is a key component of heterosexual men's sexual experiences. That is, almost every man in this study indicated that feeling sexually desired was important, while no man in this study said that feeling sexually desired was not important.

Men in this study also appeared to be fairly aware of their desire to be desired, offering several examples of ways their female partner could make him feel that way. Specifically men in this study were most likely to say they felt desired when their female partner: (1) expressed their desire for him verbally, (2) touched him in romantic or non sexual ways, (3) initiated sex, (4) was an enthusiastic partner during sexual activity, and (5) flirted with him. While a small minority of participants in this study said were satisfied with how desired they felt in their relationships, the vast majority of participants indicated there were things they wanted their partner to do more of to help him feel sexually desirable. This included wanting their female partner to: (1) take a more dominant role with sex through initiating and communicating her feelings, (2) flirt more often, (3) be more romantic, and (4) show more sexual interest in general.

The ways in which men in this study described how they felt desired did not always align with what might be expected according to stereotypical narratives about men's sexuality being surface level and mainly physical in nature (Murray, 2018). For example, non-sexual, romantic touch (i.e., touch that did not necessarily imply an invitation to progress toward sexual activity) was one of the most highly endorsed ways that men in this study described feeling desired, even over and above having a female partner initiate sexual activity. While romantic encounters have been documented as being important to women's sexual arousal (Graham, et al., 2004) and women's sexual desire (Murray et al., 2014), the findings from the current study suggest that romantic interactions, and romantic touch in particular, may also be important to men's sexual experiences. This finding may be particularly useful for clinicians to consider when working with men and their intimate partners. That is, men are often perceived as "only wanting sex." As a result, men's intimate partners may interpret hugs and back rubs as being sexual in nature or suggestive of wanted sexual activity. However, by confronting this myth about men's sexuality, and creating space to acknowledge the importance of romantic touch in addition to sexual touch for men, clinicians could help their clients better understand one another and cultivate more moments for physical connection outside of the bedroom.

The findings are important to consider in the context of traditional heterosexual sexual scripts. Traditional gender norms suggest that men should be dominant during sexual encounters, including initiating sexual activity and "doing" the desiring, while women are expected to be receptive to men's sexual advances (Masters et al., 2013). However, when men in this study were asked what would help them feel desired, the most common response was that men wanted their female partner to be less passive, and more dominant, during sexual activity. Specifically men highlighted that they liked when their female partner initiated sexual activity and clearly communicated her sexual feelings to him. This finding supports a growing body of literature that suggests some men (and women) are reporting a desire to break free of narrow sexual scripts which place men as the pursuer and women as the pursued and/or gatekeeper of mixed-sex sexual encounters (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Masters et al., 2013). It would be helpful to know more about the men who are breaking from the norm with regards to sexual scripts. Future research that included men representing a broader range of demographics than were captured in the current study (for example those representing a greater diversity in ethnicity, cultural background, education level, socio-economic status, country of origin and so forth) could help us understand if there are subsets of men who are more, or less, likely to want to experience new dynamics and those who are more satisfied with traditional roles.

The findings are also interesting to consider in relation to Bogaert and Brotto's (2014) Object of Desire Self Conscious Theory (ODSC). Although Bogaert and Brotto's findings suggested that ODSC was more common in women than men, evidence from the current study suggest that feeling sexually desired is very important for men as well. It may be that the qualitative approach in the current study allowed for nuances in men's desire to be expressed in a way that more traditional quantitative approaches could not. It's also possible that, given the data for this study were collected shortly after the #MeToo movement (which has dramatically shifted the social discourse on men and masculinity) men may have been more open about the vulnerable and softer parts of their sexuality than they would have been before this social and cultural shift. The current findings suggest that future research should continue to explore ODSC as a major factor in men's sexual desire, and consider establishing validated measures to tap into this construct. In particular, the present findings were not able to decipher who are the men for whom ODSC is more relevant, and could ODSC be a major target for therapeutic work on low sexual desire.

Additionally, the findings from this study point to the importance of considering psychological and relational dynamics (rather than just physical and biological factors) when studying men's sexual desire and sexuality. While men's desire to feel desired by their female partner is a novel finding in the sex research, there is previous research to suggest that men's female partners can influence men's sexual experiences. For example, when a female partner experiences an increase in sexual desire, it has been documented to have a positive impact on their male partner's sexual desire and sexual satisfaction (Pascoal et al., 2018) as well as his perception of sexual quality (Muin et al., 2017). Additionally, Carvalho and Nobre (2011), study of biopsychosocial determinants of men's sexual desire, found that cognitive factors (e.g., sexual beliefs and sexual thoughts) outweigh biomedical factors (e.g., medical problems and age) in predicting men's sexual desire. Taken together it appears that relational and psychological components of men's sexual desire require increased attention and exploration in future research and we would advocate that researchers focus more on exploring men's sexual desire in general, and ask questions that address these bio-psycho-social factors specifically.

Finally, based on the findings from this study, we recommend that therapists, counselors, and other mental health clinicians consider whether dominant discourses and sexual scripts about men's sexual desire being proceptive (versus receptive) are present in their clients sexual experiences. Specifically, some men and their partners may benefit from challenging these traditional sexual scripts as being a one-size-fits-all for men and creating more space for women to be more sexually dominant, and men to be more receptive, during their sexual interactions. This could be particularly valuable for men who present with concerns of low or diminished desire and those who feel their sexual desire is not as dominant or proceptive as they believe it "should" be.

Strengths and limitation

The current study extends our understanding of heterosexual men's sexual experiences by asking men in intimate relationships about the importance of feeling sexually desired. The findings not only suggest that feeling desired is important to men, but it also extends on our understanding of men's sexuality in general by suggesting men's sexuality may, at times, be passive and responsive, not solely sexually dominant and powerful, as social discourse may suggest.

There are, however, some noteworthy limitations. First, men in this study were required to identify as heterosexual. Although understanding the experiences of gay and bisexual men's sexual desire is a vital area of study, our research aims were primarily focused on how men and women navigate gendered sexual scripts in the context of their intimate relationships (Masters et al., 2013). However, we cannot extend our findings to the experiences of gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, nor trans men. It is noteworthy that 28 men (15.2%) clicked on the study link but couldn't participate as a result of having a non-heterosexual orientation; most commonly, bisexual.

Further research that includes men of other sexual orientations would be of value to determine what ways men of differing sexual orientations may experience similar, or perhaps greatly different, ways of feeling sexually desirable.

Additionally, the study was recruited from an online website (Reddit) which tends to be most highly frequented by younger, Caucasian, men. The sample of this study, consequently, is highly represented by this demographic. As such the study findings are limited and may not be extrapolated to older men, nor men from different ethnicities.

We also acknowledge that the second and third study questions (i.e., “how do you feel sexually desired by your partner?” and “what if anything do you wish your female partner was doing more of that would help you feel desired?”) may have implied that participants did in fact feel desired by their partner/their partner was doing things to make them feel desired. While it is promising that some participants were able to respond that they did not feel desired by their partner, it’s possible that for others the wording may have made it difficult to answer the questions appropriately or accurately.

Finally, because the data were collected online, which allowed participants to have anonymity and, hopefully, the freedom to respond to questions without fear of reproach, there was also no ability for the authors to follow up, clarify, or ask participants to expand on their answers as can be done with in-depth interviews. We also only collected information from men about their perceptions without corroborating their answers with the perspective of their female partner. Additional research that includes both partners about their understanding of initiation, desirability, and expressions of desire would be of value to understand the complexities of this dynamic in relationships.

Conclusion

To date, little research has been conducted on the nuances of men’s sexual experiences, nor the role that feeling desired may play in men’s sexual relationships. The findings from this study suggest that feeling desired appears to be a key component of heterosexual men’s sexual experiences. Yet, due to traditional gender norms, it may be that women who are in relationships with men may are not always be aware of how important feeling desired, and being less sexually assertive during sexual activity, is to some men. Creating more space, socially as well as in the research, to better understand men’s sexual experiences may help men and women in intimate relationships better communicate and understand what they both require and desire to experience sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to extend their gratitude to Dr. Robin Milhausen at the University of Guelph. Without her support and involvement this project would not have been possible.

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