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Sexual Afterglow: How Long Does It Last and Does It Vary by the Relative Importance of Sex, Who Initiates It, or Who Rejects It?

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Abstract

Pioneering research suggested that sexual afterglow (lingering sexual satisfaction following an act of sex) lasts 2 but not 3 days and predicts subsequent relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, recent research highlights the importance of considering the differential impacts of sexual acceptance and rejection. We used 2-week, daily-diary data from 576 participants to demonstrate that sexual afterglow lasted at least 1 day on average, particularly following partner-initiated and mutually initiated sex, and did not depend on individual differences in the importance of sex or sexual rejection, though negative aftereffects of sexual rejection lasted 3 days. Furthermore, lingering sexual (dis)satisfaction often predicted subsequent relationship satisfaction. Mini-meta-analyses of the current data with all published data suggest sexual afterglow lasts at least 1 day and predicts relationship quality whereas sexual rejection did not reliably produce aftereffects. Conclusions focus future research on other factors that may contribute to differences in sexual afterglow and reactions to other discrete events.

Keywords

sex, sexual satisfaction, sexual afterglow, romantic relationships

Satisfying sex is crucial to pair bonding. Not only does sexual satisfaction benefit people's daily relationship satisfaction (Zhao et al., 2022), but those benefits manifest for months and even years (McNulty et al., 2016; H. G. Park et al., 2023). Yet, many couples do not engage in sex as frequently as they engage in other pair-bond-promoting behaviors (e.g., communication, support, affection). Instead, long-term couples engage in sex, on average, once or twice per week (Meltzer & McNulty, 2016; Muise et al., 2016). That is, most couples spend much of their relationships *not* engaging in sex. The fact that sex has long-term relational benefits despite occurring infrequently suggests discrete events can have lingering psychological effects that can critically impact well-being.

In an initial test of this possibility, Meltzer et al. (2017) argued that sexual satisfaction following sex lingers as "sexual afterglow" to serve as a proximal cognitive mechanism to promote pair bonding until the next sexual act. Using a daily-diary study of couples, they demonstrated that an act of sex was positively associated with sexual satisfaction for up to 2 (but not 3) days, regardless of any sex occurring on the intervening days. Speaking directly to the importance of this afterglow, stronger sexual afterglow predicted higher marital satisfaction 6 months later.

Nevertheless, a recent replication attempt questioned some of these findings. Dobson et al. (2020; Table 4) used a sample of 115 couples to document a sexual afterglow that lasted *5* days on average (when comparing sex days to no sex days) but varied as a function of who initiated the sex and whether sexual rejection occurred. Specifically, afterglow lasted only 1 day for *self-initiated* sex but 3 days for *partner-initiated* sex, suggesting the lingering benefits of sex may last longer when sex provides evidence of a partner's attraction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); being sexually rejected by one's partner, in contrast, was associated with

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decreases in sexual satisfaction that lasted 2 days but rejecting one's partner's sexual advance was associated with *increases* in sexual satisfaction that lasted 3 days. Such findings raise important questions about the role of sexual initiation and rejection for lingering sexual satisfaction specifically, as well as potential differences in lingering effects of gains versus losses generally, which are already known to have different immediate effects (see Kahneman & Tversky, 1984).

The goal of the current research was to deepen our understanding of sexual afterglow. Like Dobson et al., we examined the roles of (a) self- versus partner-initiated sex and (b) sexual rejection. But we also examined two additional issues. First, given that sex initiated by both partners may have different psychological implications than sex that is initiated by only one couple member, we also considered the impact of mutually initiated sex. Second, we considered whether sexual afterglow varies across factors associated with the importance of sex, expecting a weaker afterglow among those who more (versus less) prioritize sex (i.e., males, people high in attachment anxiety, sexual desire, or desired frequency of sex) because a weaker sexual afterglow may encourage more frequent sex. Partnered males, who generally prefer more frequent sex than partnered females (French et al., 2022; McNulty et al., 2019), may demonstrate a weaker afterglow that reinforces desire. Whereas Meltzer et al. (2017) found no sex differences in afterglow, Dobson et al. (2020) noted that male afterglow was weaker after partner-initiated sex but *stronger* after self-initiated sex. People high (versus low) in attachment anxiety, who often question their worthiness of love (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and seek greater partner reassurance (Davis et al., 2004), prioritize sex (for preliminary evidence, see Mark et al., 2018) and thus may similarly demonstrate a weaker afterglow. Although Dobson et al. (2020) found that afterglow following self-initiated sex did not vary across felt security, afterglow after (a) self-initiated sex was stronger among people low in trust and (b) partner-initiated sex was stronger among people low in trust or felt security. Finally, we directly tested whether individuals with higher (versus lower) sexual desire for their partner or who desire more (versus less) frequent sex experience a weaker afterglow.

Current Research

We used data from two daily-diary studies of partnered individuals and a pseudo-preregistered[1] analysis plan from which we partially deviated. To offer the most complete picture, we also conducted mini-meta-analyses across these data and the data documented by Dobson et al. (2020) and Meltzer et al. (2017)[2] to provide an average estimate of lingering sexual satisfaction, whether it depends on initiation[3] or rejection, and whether it predicts subsequent relationship satisfaction.[4] Given Meltzer et al. provided the most powerful initial test, we based our predictions on their findings, expecting that sexual satisfaction following sex (regardless of initiation) would linger 2 to 3 days. Given Dobson's work, we also predicted that (a) self-initiated sex would produce a weaker afterglow than partner-initiated sex but (b) partner- and mutually initiated sex would produce similar afterglows given both involve partner-communicated attraction. Also based on Dobson et al., we predicted that rejecting sex would be *positively* associated with lingering sexual satisfaction whereas being sexually rejected would be *negatively* associated with lingering sexual satisfaction. Following Meltzer et al., we predicted sexual afterglow or sexual-rejection aftereffects would predict subsequent relationship satisfaction. Finally, we predicted afterglow would be weaker among people who prioritize sex—males, those high in attachment anxiety, and those who report high sexual desire or desire more frequent sex.

Method

Participants

Participants in Studies 1 and 2 were 287 married individuals (181 female) and 318 partnered individuals (154 female), respectively. We recruited all participants via Prolific during the summer of 2020 to participate in a 12-day (Study 1) or 14-day (Study 2) daily-diary study. Across both studies, 29 participants did not provide daily ratings of sexual satisfaction; thus, our final sample consisted of 576 participants (317 female). We conducted sensitivity analyses based on our effective sample sizes (see Finkel et al., 2015), which indicated we were equipped with .80 power to detect (a) main-effects as small as $r = .14$ in Study 1, $r = .13$ in Study 2, and $r = .10$ in the pooled analyses and (b) cross-level interaction effects as small as $r = .19$ in the pooled analyses. Both sample sizes were limited by monetary resources such that recruitment was terminated once funding was depleted.

Participants in Studies 1 and 2 were 38.84 ($SD = 9.73$) and 33.55 ($SD = 6.28$) years of age, respectively, and married 9.17 ($SD = 8.98$) years or together 9.72 ($SD = 4.71$) years, respectively. Most ($\geqslant 93\%$) were in different-sex relationships.

Procedure

Both studies' procedures were nearly identical. Upon providing informed consent, participants completed baseline measures via Qualtrics that included demographic measures: biological sex (coded such that –1 = *Male* and 1 = *Female*); attachment insecurity, sexual desire, and desired sexual frequency; and other measures beyond the scope of the current analyses. Then, every evening for the subsequent 12 (Study 1) or 14 (Study 2) evenings, participants reported whether they had sex that day and their daily sexual and relationship satisfaction; they also answered questions beyond the scope of the current analyses. Participants

received monetary compensation, which we detail in the Supplemental Material.

Measures

Sex. Participants in both studies responded (yes/no) to the following item each evening: "Did you have any form of sex with your partner today?." We coded responses such that –1 = *No sex* and 1 = *Sex*. Although both studies were planned and conducted prior to our learning about the Dobson study, each study also contained an item that allowed us to capture the extent of sexual acceptance, and Study 1 contained an item that allowed us to capture the extent of sexual rejection. On days sex occurred, all participants in both studies indicated the extent of sexual acceptance by indicating "who initiated the sex" using a 9-point scale (1 = *100% me*; 5 = *It was 50/50*; 9 = *100% my partner*). On days sex did not occur, all participants in Study 1 (but not Study 2) indicated the extent of sexual rejection by indicating "whose choice was it to not have sex" using the same 9-point scale. In Study 1, we used participants' responses to the sexual-rejection *and* sexual-initiation items to create 5 dummy-coded variables, with no sex occurring on a given day that was mutually determined by both partners (i.e., 5 on the sexual-rejection item) as the reference group: (1) self-initiated sex (responses of 1–4 on the sexual-initiation item), (2) mutually initiated sex (responses of 5 on the sexual-initiation item), (3) partner-initiated sex (responses of 6–9 on the sexual-initiation item), (4) rejecting sex (responses of 1–4 on the sexual-rejection item), and (5) being sexually rejected (responses of 6–9 on the sexual-rejection item). In Study 2, we used participants' responses to the sexual-initiation item to create the first 3 dummy-coded variables described above, with no sex occurring that day as the reference group.

Daily Sexual Satisfaction. Regardless of whether daily sex occurred, participants reported their daily sexual satisfaction each evening by indicating the extent to which they were "satisfied with their sex life" that day, using a 7-point response scale (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *Extremely*; see Meltzer et al., 2017).

Daily Relationship Satisfaction. Participants reported their daily relationship satisfaction each evening using a revised version of the 3-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (revised items provided in Supplemental Material). Each item utilized a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *Extremely*), and we averaged responses each day to form a daily relationship-satisfaction index.

Attachment Insecurity. At baseline in both studies, participants completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson et al., 1992), which assessed attachment anxiety (9 items) and avoidance (8 items), the latter of which served as a covariate. Participants indicated their agreement with each statement using a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). After reverse scoring the appropriate items, we averaged items comprising each subscale to form indexes of attachment anxiety (αs $\geqslant$ .81) and avoidance (αs $\geqslant$ .83). Higher scores indicate higher insecurity.

Sexual Desire. At baseline in both studies, we assessed participants' sexual desire with the following item: "How strongly do you desire sex with your partner?," using a 7-point scale (1 = *Very weakly*; 7 = *Very strongly*).

Desired Sex Frequency. At baseline in both studies, we assessed participants' desired sexual frequency by asking "Approximately how many times would you like to have sex with your partner over the next 14 days?."

Covariates. Following Meltzer et al. (2017), we assessed several covariates that we controlled for in supplemental robustness analyses. In addition to participants' age, relationship length, and attachment insecurity, we assessed participants' (a) race-ethnicity (coded such that –1 = *White* and 1 = *Non-White*), (b) sexual frequency by asking participants to indicate "Approximately how many times do you have sex with your partner during a typical week?," (c) Big Five personality traits using the Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling et al., 2003), (d) self-esteem using the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (αs $\geqslant$ .91), and (e) depressive symptoms using the 20-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977; αs $\geqslant$ .92).

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, data exclusions, and all measures. After analyzing the data from Study 1 that aimed to replicate Meltzer et al. (2017) and consider the importance of sex, we preregistered hypotheses and analyses for (a) Study 2, (b) a pooled analysis that integrated the data from both studies, (c) all analyses that considered initiation and rejection, and (d) mini-meta-analyses that averaged across all current and published data. We used SPSS 27 and the Metafor package in *R* (Viechtbauer, 2010). Our preregistered analysis plan and all study materials, data, and analytic code are available at: https://osf.io/5qu6b/. See Supplemental Material for more details regarding the evolution of our approach, including our analytic strategy and deviations from our pseudo preregistration.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

We first explored the descriptive statistics and correlations among our variables. Results appear in Table 1; some are

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for and Correlations Among Variables*

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	*M*	*SD*	*N*
(1) Sex	-	.49***	.31***	−.11*	.03	.34***	.47***	2.65	2.55	303
(2) Sexual satisfaction	.42***	-	.73***	.03	−.18**	.29***	.21***	4.83	1.57	303
(3) Relationship satisfaction	.26***	.69***	-	−.01	−.38***	.35***	.16**	5.72	1.11	303
(4) Biological sex	−.06	−.05	−.12	-	−.06	−.27***	−.12*	−0.01	1.00	303
(5) Attachment anxiety	−.13*	−.26***	−.32***	.12	-	−.10	.02	2.83	1.20	303
(6) Sexual desire	.35***	.44***	.48***	−.28***	−.14*	-	.48***	5.48	1.54	302
(7) Desired sex frequency	.44***	.15*	.17**	−.18**	−.04	.47***	-	6.35	4.50	303
M	2.28	4.57	5.63	0.25	3.14	5.28	5.04			
SD	2.23	1.65	1.10	0.97	1.22	1.73	3.89			
N	273	273	273	273	272	272	271			

Note. Sex, Sexual satisfaction, and Relationship satisfaction were assessed daily but, in this table, we totaled the number of days participants engaged in sex and averaged their daily sexual and relationship satisfaction. Biological sex was coded such that −1 = *Male* and 1 = *Female*. Values for Study 1 appear below the diagonal and at the bottom of the table; values for Study 2 appear above the diagonal and on the right side of the table.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

worth highlighting. First, participants in Studies 1 and 2 provided 2766 and 3596 daily observations of sexual satisfaction, respectively, and engaged in sex with their partner on 623 and 802 days, respectively, or approximately every 5 days. This frequency replicates prior research, though there was considerable variability (0–12 days in Study 1; 0–13 days in Study 2). When sex occurred in Studies 1 and 2, 152 and 289 instances were self-initiated, respectively; 202 and 249 were partner-initiated; and 268 and 264 were mutually initiated (initiation was not reported for 1 instance of sex in Study 1). On days that no sex occurred in Study 1, participants rejected sex 430 times and experienced rejection 238 times; most no sex days ($n = 1477$) were mutually determined. Second, participants' sexual desire, daily reports of sex, and daily sexual and relationship satisfaction were positively correlated. Third, consistent with other research (French et al., 2022; McNulty et al., 2019; Petersen & Hyde, 2011), males reported higher sexual desire and desired sexual frequency than did females.

Length of Sexual Afterglow

Given that repeated assessments were nested within individuals, we estimated mixed models to examine the length of sexual afterglow following a given act of sex. To maximize power, we pooled across studies to conduct fixed-effect integrative data analyses (IDAs; Curran & Hussong, 2009) that (a) controlled study and (b) tested for study moderation. When effects differed across studies, we reported study-specific effects; when effects did not differ across studies, pooled effects appear in the main text and study-specific effects appear in Supplemental Material.

The first two-level model examined the same-day association between sex and sexual satisfaction by estimating the following equation:

$$Y_{ti}(\mathrm{T_n\ Sexual\ Satisfaction}) = \pi_{0i}(\mathrm{Intercept}) + \pi_{1i}(\mathrm{Day}) + \pi_{2i}(\mathrm{T_n Sex}) + e_{ti}, \quad (1)$$

where we controlled for diary day (centered). Following recommendations for daily-diary data (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013), all models specified a first-order autoregressive (AR1) error structure.

We originally preregistered a data-driven approach to determine our variance–covariance matrix, whereby we would identify the best-fitting models (see Matuschek et al., 2017). We failed to consider, however, that different random-effect structures for different models would produce markedly different *df*s, making it difficult to compare effect sizes across models, including in the mini-meta-analysis, because our preregistered effect-size estimates rely heavily on *df*s. Indeed, our preregistered strategy suggested different random effects that yielded highly similar fixed-effect estimates but widely different *df*s and thus effect sizes. We therefore deviated from our preregistration, which we posted on OSF before conducting the deviated analyses, that specified we would use the most complex variance–covariance matrix that would fit the data across all models; this resulted in random effects for the intercept, diary day, and sex on the same day as the DV with a VC covariance matrix.[5]

We estimated this model without and with covariates (all standardized except race-ethnicity). Results appear in the first rows of Table 2. Not surprisingly, sex on a given day was positively associated with sexual satisfaction that same day, though these associations were stronger in Study 1 than in Study 2 (uncontrolled: $p = .005$; controlled: $p = .009$).

Our remaining models examined the critical lagged associations between sex and lingering sexual satisfaction, until the effects were no longer significant at $p < .05$, both without and with covariates. To examine the 1-day sexual

Table 2. *Examining the Length of Sexual Afterglow When Sex Occurs*

	Uncontrolled models				Controlled models			
Variable	π	$CI_{95\%}$	*df*	*r*	π	$CI_{95\%}$	*df*	*r*
T_n sex (same day)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Study 1	0.70***	[0.62: 0.79]	410.93	.62	0.66***	[0.57: 0.76]	392.90	.58
Study 2	0.54***	[0.46: 0.61]	368.13	.58	0.50***	[0.42: 0.58]	351.36	.55
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	0.18***	[0.14: 0.21]	4843.50	.14	0.17***	[0.13: 0.20]	4228.73	.13
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	0.07***	[0.03: 0.10]	4251.88	.05	0.04*	[0.00: 0.08]	3686.04	.04
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	0.06**	[0.02: 0.10]	3786.76	.05	0.03	[–0.01: 0.08]	3274.97	.03
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	0.04*	[0.00: 0.09]	3334.16	.03	0.01	[–0.04: 0.06]	2883.33	.01
T_{n-5} sex (120-hour)	0.06*	[0.01: 0.11]	2882.40	.05	0.03	[–0.02: 0.08]	2475.54	.03
T_{n-6} sex (144-hour)	0.08**	[0.02 0.13]	2482.21	.06	0.04	[–0.01: 0.10]	2139.59	.03
T_{n-7} sex (168-hour)	0.09**	[0.04: 0.15]	2052.25	.07	0.06*	[0.00: 0.13]	1781.14	.05
T_{n-8} sex (192-hour)	0.06	[–0.01: 0.12]	1608.06	.04	0.01	[–0.06: 0.08]	1415.71	.01

Note. When associations differed across the study ($p < .05$), we reported study-specific associations; otherwise, we reported pooled associations from our integrative data analyses. As a reminder, our lagged models examined the associations between sex on a given day and sexual satisfaction on subsequent days, until the effects were no longer significant at $p < .05$. We approximated effect-size *r* using the same formula as Dobson et al. (2020): $\sqrt{(F(df_{num}/df_{den}))/(1 + (F(df_{num}/df_{den})))}$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

afterglow effect, for example, we estimated the following equation:

$$Y_{ti}(\mathrm{T_n\ Sexual\ Satisfaction}) = \pi_{0i}(\mathrm{Intercept}) + \pi_{1i}(\mathrm{Day}) + \pi_{2i}(\mathrm{T_nSex}) + \pi_{2i}(\mathrm{T_{n-1}Sex}) + e_{ti}, \quad (2)$$

where T_{n-1} Sex estimates the 1-day sexual afterglow, controlling for any intervening sex. Results appear in the remainder of Table 2. In the uncontrolled analyses, sex up to 7 days prior was positively associated with daily sexual satisfaction; in the controlled analyses, only the same-, 1-, 2-, and 7-day associations remained significant whereas other lengths seemed attributable to third variables.

Considering the Role of Sexual Initiation and Sexual Rejection. Following our preregistration, we estimated another series of mixed models to examine whether lingering sexual satisfaction depends on sexual initiation or sexual rejection. Given that sexual rejection was assessed in only Study 1, we reported study-specific effects. The first model re-estimated equation (1) but replaced T_n Sex with our dummy-coded variables (5 dummy-coded variables in Study 1, 3 dummy-coded variables in Study 2). We used the same variance–covariance matrix identified above, where the dummy codes occurring on the same day as the DV were allowed to vary. Crucially, given that estimates that do not differ from one another should be pooled (Schmidt & Hunter, 2015), we used a TEST subcommand to pool across any initiation or rejection effects that did not differ. Our remaining models examined the lagged associations, until the effects were no longer significant at $p < .05$, both without and with covariates.

Results for sexual initiation in Studies 1 and 2 appear in Tables 3 and 4, respectively; results for Study 1 control for any sexual-rejection effects. Across studies, the uncontrolled and controlled same-day associations did not differ across initiation (all *p*s $\geq$ .223) and emerged as significant when pooling across initiation (all *p*s $<$ .001). More importantly, the uncontrolled and controlled 1-day associations in Study 1 and the uncontrolled 1-day association in Study 2 did not differ across initiation (all *p*s $\geq$ .086) and emerged as significant when pooled (all *p*s $<$ .001); in the controlled model in Study 2, 1-day sexual afterglow was weaker for self-initiated sex than partner-initiated sex ($p = .045$), though no other comparisons emerged as significant. Although the uncontrolled and controlled 2-day associations in both studies did not differ across initiation (all *p*s $\geq$ .187), they emerged as nonsignificant when pooled in both models in Study 1 and the controlled model in Study 2 (all *p*s $\geq$ .090); the pooled association emerged as significant in the uncontrolled model in Study 2 ($p = .024$). Some differences emerged in subsequent days, though their sporadic nature suggests they should be interpreted with caution.

Results for sexual rejection appear in Table 3. Both rejecting sex and being sexually rejected were *negatively* associated with sexual satisfaction that same day—this association was stronger when being rejected compared to rejecting sex in the uncontrolled model ($p = .039$) but not in the controlled model ($p = .102$); when pooled in the controlled model, the negative association was significant ($p < .001$). The subsequent uncontrolled and controlled models revealed the 1-, 2-, and 3-day associations also did not differ across rejection (*p*s $\geq$ .123) and were significant when pooled (*p*s $\leq$ .040). The 4-day associations were largely not significant.

Predicting Relationship Satisfaction. Although not preregistered, an astute reviewer wondered whether sexual afterglow and/or sexual-rejection aftereffects predicted

Table 3. *Study 1: Considering Whether the Length of Sexual Afterglow Depends on the Role of Initiation and/or Rejection*

	Self-initiated			Partner-initiated			Mutually initiated			Rejecting sex			Being rejected		
Variable	π	*SE*	*r*	π	*SE*	*r*	π	*SE*	*r*	π	*SE*	*r*	π	*SE*	*r*
Uncontrolled Models															
T_n sex (same day)	1.18***	0.10	.78	1.12***	0.12	.65	1.12***	0.10	.70	–0.35***	0.08	.38	–0.67***	0.14	.44
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	0.30**	0.10	.06	0.38***	0.09	.09	0.20*	0.08	.05	–0.26***	0.07	.08	–0.20*	0.09	.05
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	0.18	0.11	.04	0.02	0.09	.00	0.13	0.08	.04	–0.08	0.08	.02	–0.22*	0.09	.05
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	–0.29*	0.12	.06	0.07	0.10	.02	0.22*	0.09	.06	–0.15†	0.08	.04	–0.22*	0.10	.05
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	0.18	0.10	.04	0.08	0.10	.02	–0.12	0.09	.03	–0.06	0.09	.02	0.02	0.11	.00
Controlled Models															
T_n sex (same day)	1.09***	0.11	.73	1.11***	0.14	.64	1.06***	0.11	.68	–0.40***	0.09	.43	–0.71***	0.17	.44
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	0.31**	0.11	.07	0.36***	0.10	.08	0.21*	0.09	.06	–0.20*	0.08	.06	–0.19†	0.11	.04
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	0.11	0.12	.02	0.01	0.11	.00	0.10	0.09	.03	–0.08	0.08	.02	–0.27*	0.11	.06
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	–0.43***	0.13	.09	0.08	0.11	.02	0.19†	0.10	.05	–0.08	0.09	.02	–0.24*	0.12	.06
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	0.11	0.14	.02	0.03	0.12	.01	–0.25*	0.10	.07	–0.05	0.09	.01	–0.03	0.12	.01

Note. We approximated effect-size *r* using the same formula as Dobson et al. (2020): $\sqrt{(F(df_{num}/df_{den}))/(1 + (F(df_{num}/df_{den})))}$. Notably, in contrast to concerns by Dobson et al. that confounding no sex/no rejection days with sexual-rejection days may inflate estimates of sexual rejection, additional models that excluded the 2 dummy codes involving sexual rejection revealed statistically equivalent results; see Supplemental Material.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 4. *Study 2: Considering Whether the Length of Sexual Afterglow Depends on the Role of Initiation*

	Self-initiated			Partner-initiated			Mutually initiated		
Variable	π	*SE*	*r*	π	*SE*	*r*	π	*SE*	*r*
Uncontrolled Models									
T_n sex (same day)	0.98***	0.09	.68	0.90***	0.08	.73	1.01***	0.08	.74
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	0.27***	0.07	.07	0.39***	0.07	.10	0.37***	0.07	.10
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	0.09	0.08	.03	0.14†	0.08	.04	0.12	0.08	.03
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	0.17*	0.08	.04	0.04	0.08	.01	0.11	0.09	.03
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	0.02	0.09	.01	0.13	0.09	.03	0.12	0.09	.03
Controlled Models									
T_n sex (same day)	0.96***	0.09	.66	0.84***	0.08	.72	0.98***	0.09	.72
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	0.22**	0.07	.06	0.41***	0.08	.11	0.35***	0.07	.09
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	0.06	0.08	.02	0.12	0.08	.03	0.07	0.08	.02
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	0.12	0.08	.03	0.02	0.09	.00	0.03	0.09	.01
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	–0.04	0.09	.01	0.07	0.10	.02	0.09	0.09	.02

Note. We approximated effect-size *r* using the same formula as Dobson et al. (2020): $\sqrt{(F(df_{numerator}/df_{denominator}))/(1 + (F(df_{numerator}/df_{denominator})))}$.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

subsequent relationship satisfaction. We did not have a long-term follow-up assessment of relationship satisfaction like Meltzer et al. (2017) did, but we did assess daily relationship satisfaction and thus could test whether lingering sexual (dis)satisfaction stemming from (a) sex when it occurred 2 days prior (regardless of initiation), (b) sex when it was self-, partner-, or mutually initiated 1 day prior, (c) rejecting sex 1 day prior, and (d) being sexually rejected 3 days prior (i.e., only those aftereffects that previously emerged as significant) predicted relationship satisfaction *the following day*, controlling for that day's relationship satisfaction and covariates. To be most conservative, we only estimated the controlled models. Results appear in Table 5. Although lingering sexual (dis)satisfaction did not significantly predict the following day's relationship satisfaction in Study 2, it was associated with increased relationship (dis)satisfaction the following day in Study 1 and in the pooled analysis.

Considering the Relative Importance of Sex. Following our preregistration, we next tested whether sexual afterglow depends on factors associated with the importance of sex (biological sex, attachment anxiety, sexual desire, and desired sexual frequency) by estimating a series of models (i.e., one per moderator pooled across studies but, again, controlling for study and testing whether key effects differed across studies) that additionally included the moderator (all standardized except biological sex) and its interaction with prior sex, without and with covariates. We accounted for our multiple exploratory

Table 5. *Examining the Association Between Sexual Satisfaction on a Given Day and Relationship Satisfaction the Following Day, Controlling for Sexual Afterglow and/or Sexual-Rejection Aftereffects, Relationship Satisfaction on That Day, and All Covariates*

	Pooled			Study 1			Study 2		
Variable	π	*SE*	*r*	π	*SE*	*r*	π	*SE*	*r*
Sexual satisfaction$_{Tn-2}$	0.08**	0.03	.11	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sexual satisfaction$_{Tn-1}$	-	-	-	0.09*	0.04	.13	0.04	0.03	.03
Sexual satisfaction$_{Tn-3}$	-	-	-	0.09*	0.04	.10	-	-	-

Note. We approximated effect-size *r* using the same formula as Dobson et al. (2020): $\sqrt{(F(df_{num}/df_{den}))/(1 + (F(df_{num}/df_{den})))}$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 6. *Exploring Whether Factors Associated With the Importance of Sex Moderate Sexual Afterglow*

	Uncontrolled				Controlled			
Moderator	b	$CI_{95\%}$	*r*	*p*	b	$CI_{95\%}$	*r*	*p*
Biological sex								
T_n sex (same day)	0.00	[–0.06: 0.06]	.00	.957	0.00	[–0.06: 0.07]	.01	.889
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	0.01	[–0.02: 0.05]	.01	.547	0.01	[–0.03: 0.05]	.01	.627
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	–0.04*	[–0.08: –0.00]	.03	.034	–0.03	[–0.07: 0.01]	.02	.176
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	0.03	[–0.01: 0.07]	.02	.140	0.03	[–0.01: 0.07]	.02	.184
Attachment anxiety								
T_n sex (same day)	0.00	[–0.06: 0.06]	.00	.958	–0.00	[–0.07: 0.06]	.00	.954
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	0.00	[–0.03: 0.04]	.00	.891	0.01	[–0.03: 0.05]	.01	.658
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	–0.02	[–0.06: 0.02]	.01	.437	–0.01	[–0.05: 0.03]	.01	.636
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	0.01	[–0.04: 0.05]	.00	.777	–0.00	[–0.05: 0.05]	.00	.998
Sexual desire								
T_n sex (same day)	–0.06	[–0.12: 0.01]	.08	.102	–0.05	[–0.12: 0.03]	.06	.205
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	–0.04	[–0.08: 0.01]	.02	.086	–0.03	[–0.08: 0.02]	.02	.184
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	0.06*	[0.01: 0.10]	.04	.018	0.03	[–0.02: 0.09]	.02	.192
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	–0.03	[–0.08: 0.02]	.02	.257	–0.04	[–0.10: 0.01]	.03	.143
Desired sex frequency								
T_n sex (same day)	–	–	–	–	–0.05	[–0.11: 0.01]	.08	.123
Study 1	0.09	[–0.01: 0.19]	.08	.090	–	–	–	–
Study 2	–0.06	[–0.13: 0.02]	.07	.140	–	–	–	–
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	–0.02	[–0.06: 0.02]	.02	.273	–0.02	[–0.05: 0.02]	.01	.436
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	0.01	[–0.03: 0.05]	.01	.592	–0.00	[–0.05: 0.04]	.00	.818
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	–0.01	[–0.05: 0.03]	.01	.748	–0.01	[–0.06: 0.03]	.01	.567

Note. In models considering Attachment Anxiety, we controlled for Attachment Avoidance (standardized). For the sake of brevity, we do not report estimates for the Intercept, lower-order associations, as well as Day or other covariates. We approximated effect-size *r* using the same formula as Dobson et al. (2020): $\sqrt{(F(df_{numerator}/df_{denominator}))/(1 + (F(df_{numerator}/df_{denominator})))}$.
*$p < .05$.

analyses that increase Type I error by interpreting each moderation estimate using a Bonferroni correction that adjusted for our four moderators (i.e., $\alpha = .0125$). Given little robust evidence that sexual afterglow lasts beyond 3 days, these analyses explored only through the 3-day sexual afterglow. Results appear in Table 6. As can be seen, no consistent moderation emerged across models.

Mini-Meta-Analyses

Finally, we conducted a series of mini-meta-analyses. Following our preregistration, the first of these estimated the average size of sexual afterglow ignoring initiation, as documented in the current pooled analysis, Dobson et al. (2020), and Meltzer et al. (2017). Given concerns regarding the three-level models used in Meltzer et al. (2017; see Dobson et al., 2020), we re-estimated all afterglow effects in that study using two-level crossed models (those models are provided in Supplemental Material). These mini-meta-analyses used restricted maximum likelihood estimation and effect-size *r*s, whose valence matched the direction of their association. Results appear in Table 7. There was a large, robust same-day association, medium-sized 1-day association, and small-sized 2-day association that did not reach significance. Thus, the average sexual afterglow appears to last at least 1 day but not quite 2.

Also following our preregistration, we conducted mini-meta-analyses of afterglow following self- and partner-

Table 7. *Mini-Meta-Analyses of the Length of Sexual Afterglow Following Sex When it Occurred*

	Uncontrolled models					Controlled models				
Variable	Meltzer et al. (2017)	Dobson et al. (2020)	Current IDA	*r*	$CI_{95\%}$	Meltzer et al. (2017)	Dobson et al. (2020)	Current IDA	*r*	$CI_{95\%}$
T_n sex (same day)	.86	.59	.60	**.69*****	**[.51: .86]**	.86	.59	.57	**.67*****	**[.49: .86]**
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	.18	.12	.14	**.15*****	**[.10: .21]**	.17	.12	.13	**.14*****	**[.09: .20]**
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	.05	.08	.05	**.06**	**[–.00: .11]**	.04	.08	.04	**.05**	**[–.01: .10]**
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	.02	.08	.05	**.05**	**[–.01: .10]**	.00	.08	.03	**.03**	**[–.03: .09]**
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	.04	.06	.03	**.04**	**[–.02: .10]**	.04	.06	.01	**.03**	**[–.03: .09]**
T_{n-5} sex (120-hour)	.01	.09	.05	**.04**	**[–.01: .10]**	.00	.09	.03	**.03**	**[–.02: .09]**

Note. $N_{\text{Meltzer et al. (2017)}}$ = 416 newlywed spouses (comprising 214 couples). $N_{\text{Dobson et al. (2020)}}$ = 230 cohabiting partners (comprising 115 couples). $N_{\text{Current IDA}}$ = 576 partnered individuals. All of these estimates are effect-size *r*; none of these estimates account for sexual initiation or rejection (see Dobson et al., 2020). The effect sizes from Meltzer et al. (2017) were re-estimated using two-level models (see Dobson et al., 2020); those models are provided in Supplemental Material. The controlled models in Meltzer et al. (2017) and the current fixed-effects IDA controlled for diary day, sample, age, education, race-ethnicity, big five, depression, self-esteem, attachment insecurity, premarital relationship length, and sexual frequency. The controlled models in Dobson et al. (2020) controlled for diary day, gender, and relationship length. Bolded estimates are the results of the mini-meta-analyses.
***$p < .001$.

Table 8. *Mini-Meta-Analyses of the Length of Sexual Afterglow Following Self-Initiated Sex and Partner-Initiated Sex*

	Self-initiated sex					Partner-initiated sex				
Variable	Dobson et al. (2020)	Current study 1	Current study 2	*r*	$CI_{95\%}$	Dobson et al. (2020)	Current study 1	Current study 2	*r*	$CI_{95\%}$
Uncontrolled										
T_n sex (same day)	.37	.78	.68	**.61*****	**[.38: .85]**	.30	.65	.73	**.56*****	**[.31: .82]**
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	.03	.06	.07	**.05**	**[–.01: .12]**	.03	.09	.10	**.08***	**[.01: .15]**
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	.03	.04	.03	**.03**	**[–.04: .10]**	.04	.00	.04	**.03**	**[–.04: .10]**
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	.03	.06	.04	**.04**	**[–.03: .11]**	.04	.02	.01	**.02**	**[–.05: .09]**
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	.03	.04	.01	**.03**	**[–.04: .10]**	.03	.02	.03	**.03**	**[–.04: .10]**
Controlled										
T_n sex (same day)	.37	.73	.66	**.59*****	**[.38: .80]**	.30	.64	.72	**.56*****	**[.31: .81]**
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	.04	.07	.06	**.06**	**[–.01: .13]**	.03	.08	.11	**.08***	**[.01: .15]**
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	.01	.02	.02	**.02**	**[–.05: .09]**	.05	.00	.03	**.03**	**[–.04: .09]**
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	.02	.09	.03	**.05**	**[–.02: .12]**	.04	.02	.00	**.02**	**[–.05: .09]**
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	.03	.02	.01	**.02**	**[–.05: .09]**	.02	.01	.02	**.02**	**[–.05: .09]**

Note. $N_{\text{Dobson et al. (2020)}}$ = 230 cohabiting partners (comprising 115 couples). $N_{\text{Current Study 1}}$ = 273 partnered individuals. $N_{\text{Current Study 2}}$ = 303 partnered individuals. All of these estimates are effect-size *r*s; Dobson et al. (2020) and the Current Study 1 account for sexual rejection (see Dobson et al., 2020). Bolded estimates are the results of the mini-meta-analyses.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

initiated sex as well as sexual-rejection aftereffects. Results appear in Tables 8 and 9. A medium-sized same-day association emerged for self-initiated sex whereas a small-sized 1-day association emerged for partner-initiated sex; as a reminder, however, these two effects did not differ in our primary analyses. No associations involving rejection emerged as significant.

Finally, although not preregistered, we conducted a mini-meta-analysis of the effects of lingering sexual (dis)satisfaction for subsequent relationship satisfaction. Given that Meltzer et al. (2017) did not consider initiation, we meta-analyzed the current finding from our pooled analysis (effect-size $r = .11$) with that of Meltzer et al.'s (2017) trajectory model, after first re-estimating the latter association using a two-level cross model (effect-size $r = .13$). That mini-meta-analysis revealed a small-sized association, effect-size $r = .12$, $CI_{95\%}$ [.06: .18], $p < .001$.

Discussion

Although pioneering research suggested sexual satisfaction following an act of sex lingers for 2 days but no longer (Meltzer et al., 2017), a recent replication (Dobson et al., 2020) suggested the length of afterglow depends on initiation and may be inflated by failing to consider sexual rejection. The current data revealed that sexual afterglow lasted as long as 7 days when analyses ignored initiation and covariates, but only 2 days (and no longer) when analyses

Table 9. *Mini-Meta-Analyses of the Length of Sexual Afterglow Following Rejecting Sex and Being Rejected*

	Rejecting Sex				Being Rejected			
Variable	Dobson et al. (2020)	Current Study 1	*r*	$CI_{95\%}$	Dobson et al. (2020)	Current Study 1	*r*	$CI_{95\%}$
Uncontrolled								
T_n sex (same day)	.08	–.38	**–.15**	**[–.60: .30]**	–.04	–.44	**–.24**	**[–.63: .15]**
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	.05	–.08	**–.02**	**[–.15: .11]**	–.07	–.05	**–.06**	**[–.15: .03]**
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	.04	–.02	**.01**	**[–.08: .09]**	–.05	–.05	**–.05**	**[–.14: .04]**
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	.03	–.04	**–.01**	**[–.10: .08]**	–.03	–.05	**–.04**	**[–.13: .05]**
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	.03	–.02	**.00**	**[–.08: .09]**	–.03	.00	**–.02**	**[–.10: .07]**
Controlled								
T_n sex (same day)	.08	–.43	**–.18**	**[–.68: .32]**	–.04	–.44	**–.24**	**[–.63: .15]**
T_{n-1} sex (24-hour)	.05	–.06	**–.01**	**[–.12: .10]**	–.06	–.04	**–.05**	**[–.14: .04]**
T_{n-2} sex (48-hour)	.04	–.02	**.01**	**[–.08: .09]**	–.05	–.06	**–.06**	**[–.14: .03]**
T_{n-3} sex (72-hour)	.04	–.02	**.01**	**[–.08: .09]**	–.03	–.06	**–.05**	**[–.13: .04]**
T_{n-4} sex (96-hour)	.03	–.01	**.01**	**[–.08: .10]**	–.03	–.01	**–.02**	**[–.11: .07]**

Note. $N_{\text{Dobson et al. (2020)}}$ = 230 cohabiting partners (comprising 115 couples). $N_{\text{Current Study 1}}$ = 273 partnered individuals. All of these estimates are effect-size *r*s. We included negative effect-size *r*s for the negative associations and positive effect-size *r*s for the positive associations. Bolded estimates are the results of the mini-meta-analyses.

accounted for these confounds. Nevertheless, in contrast to Dobson et al.'s suggestion that partner-initiated sex produced longer sexual afterglow, the 1- and 2-day associations in this study did not vary by sexual initiation, except that there was some evidence that the 1-day association for self-initiated sex was weaker than partner-initiated (but not mutually initiated) sex. Likewise, whereas Dobson et al. found that engaging in sexual rejection was associated with greater sexual satisfaction, the current data revealed *both* types of rejection were negatively associated with sexual satisfaction up to 3 days later. Nevertheless, countering Dobson et al.'s conclusion, such rejection aftereffects in Study 1 did not statistically alter the length of afterglow,[6] although it remains possible that a more powerful examination would have revealed significant differences between models that did and did not adjust for sexual-rejection aftereffects. Furthermore, conceptually replicating—at least in part—the findings of Meltzer et al., sexual afterglow and sexual-rejection aftereffects predicted relationship satisfaction the next day. Finally, in contrast to predictions, sexual afterglow did not depend on markers of sex prioritization (i.e., biological sex, attachment anxiety, sexual desire, and desired sexual frequency).

The results of the mini-meta-analyses suggested somewhat more conservative conclusions, perhaps appropriately given it was sometimes based on only two samples (though see Goh et al., 2016). Ignoring sexual initiation, afterglow most reliably lasts 1 day before trailing off, with small-sized effects for days 2 through 5 that did not reach significance. Unexpectedly, the mini-meta-analyses also suggested rejection does not reliably produce aftereffects. It is worth noting, however, that these null effects were based on only two samples that produced widely varying effect sizes (e.g., the uncontrolled effect-size *r* of being sexually rejected was –.44 in the current data but –.04 in Dobson et al.). Thus, rather than concluding sexual rejection from a long-term relationship partner is not associated with daily sexual satisfaction, it is perhaps more appropriate to conclude that sexual-rejection aftereffects depend on the context in which such rejection occurs (Kim et al., 2018; Y. Park et al., 2021). As one example, Study 1 was based on a sample of partnered individuals whereas Dobson et al. was based on a sample of couples, and existing work suggests these different types of samples can yield different results (Y. Park et al., 2021).

These results have important implications for our understanding of sexual afterglow. Whereas individual analyses and studies suggest varying average afterglow effects, the most reliable afterglow effect appears to last for only 1 day whereas other lengths may be sample specific. Indeed, our original preregistered models indicated significant random effects of afterglow for the 1- and 2-day afterglow estimates, suggesting that sexual afterglow the first several days after sex varies widely across people. In other words, although most people, on average, experience a 1-day afterglow, the significant variance in the size of that effect highlights that some people may experience a 2-day afterglow whereas others may not. And, critically, it was such between-person variance that predicted relationship satisfaction 6 months later in Meltzer et al.'s (2017) study and the following day in this study.

Accordingly, future research may benefit most from accounting for this between-person variance in sexual afterglow and aftereffects of sexual rejection. Meltzer et al. (2017) found no evidence that 2-day afterglow varied across participant sex or age, and we found no robust evidence in our data that afterglow varied across the prioritization of sex. Of course, to the extent that such moderation effects are small, we may have been underpowered to detect them. Furthermore, although Dobson et al. (2020) offered some evidence that sexual initiation may moderate the length of sexual afterglow, only the controlled 1-day afterglow effect

in our Study 2 suggested it may be stronger for partner-initiated sex.

Future research may also benefit from considering the lingering effects of other discrete events. Researchers commonly study the immediate implications of events, and such immediate effects are important. But so are any potential lingering effects. People engage in various activities (e.g., watching a comedy, eating a delicious meal, playing a sport) to experience positive effects. Although such experiences may immediately enhance well-being, they may also provide lingering benefits. And the fact that the benefits of sex last at least 1 day suggests discrete events can have lasting benefits. For instance, the discrete experience of having sex with one's partner, presumably at home, may continue to affect couple members outside the home. Indeed, in an exception to the tendency to ignore such effects, Inzlicht et al. (2011) demonstrated lingering effects of stereotype threat that spillover into other aspects of life.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not highlight several limitations of this work. Perhaps most importantly, our measure of sexual rejection in Study 1 presumed that one or both couple members actively made a choice to not have sex, which may not have always been the case, and Study 2 did not include a measure of sexual rejection. Given this, and given that the mini-meta-analysis failed to confirm the effects of sexual rejection, future research would benefit from more directly and precisely examining the role of sexual rejection and its aftereffects. Second, we assessed sex each evening and thus it is not clear exactly *when* sex occurred that prior day. Future research may benefit from using ecological momentary assessments to better pinpoint the precise length (in hours) of sexual afterglow. Finally, given that our sample was comprised of mostly White, heterosexual participants, we lack generalizability; future research should use more diverse samples.

Despite these limitations, this work adds to our understanding of the lingering effects of dyadic sexual experiences and how such effects shape relationship functioning. Moreover, they may help future research to focus on the lingering implications of other discrete events.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Notes

1. We call this a "pseudo" preregistration because we analyzed data from Study 1 before preregistering a plan for Study 2 analyses, our integrative data analysis of both studies, and tests of initiation/rejection effects.
2. Goh et al. (2016) make the convincing point that "even with a small number of studies, meta-analytic procedures allow one to summarize them, which not only clarifies the picture but leverages the statistical power provided by a meta-analysis" (p. 535).
3. We used only self- and partner-initiated sex given Dobson et al. (2020) did not assess mutually initiated sex.
4. We used only effects reported in the current data and Meltzer et al. (2017) given Dobson et al. (2020) did not report associations between lingering (dis)satisfaction and subsequent relationship satisfaction.
5. None of the inferential effects differed across the two preregistered strategies, with the exception that the 7-day afterglow effect was significant in the controlled model for the new (but not original) strategy. Effects from the preregistered models appear in Supplemental Material.
6. See Supplemental Material for results from Study 1 that did not include sexual-rejection aftereffects.

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