

# The relationship implications of rejecting a partner for sex kindly versus having sex reluctantly

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## Abstract

Romantic partners often have differing levels of sexual interest. In these situations, lower desire partners may engage in sex for *avoidance goals* (e.g., to avoid disappointing their partner), which are associated with negative relational outcomes. An alternative strategy to sustain relationship quality may be to *decline* a partner's sexual advances in positive ways. In two experimental studies and a dyadic daily experience study with a longitudinal follow-up, we examined the relationship outcomes of positive rejection compared to avoidance-motivated sex. Across studies, when people engaged in positive rejection, both they and their partner did not experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction compared to when they had sex for avoidance goals, although this was not true for sexual satisfaction. Chronic pursuit of sex for avoidance goals did, however, have detrimental consequences over time, whereas positive rejection helped sustain relationship satisfaction. Results suggest positive rejection behaviors may be a viable alternative to avoidance-motivated sex.

## Keywords

Avoidance goals, sexual decision-making romantic relationships, sexual motivation, sexual rejection

Romantic couples frequently experience situations in which one partner has lower desire than the other (see review by Impett, Muise, & Rosen, 2015). During times when people are not in the mood for sex, they may experience conflicting goals: While they do not

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want to disappoint their partner or risk conflict in their relationship, they may also want to find a way to reject their partner's sexual advances while preserving their intimate connection. Given that one of the most commonly cited disagreements between romantic partners is when and how frequently to engage in sex (Risch, Riley, & Lawler, 2003) and conflicts of interest about sex are one of the most difficult types of conflict to successfully resolve (Metts & Cupach, 1989), it is essential that couples find ways to navigate these situations, so that both partners' needs can be met.

Studies show that engaging in more frequent sex is linked with greater relationship satisfaction (e.g., Breznsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Muise, Schimmack, & Impett, 2016), especially when pursued for approach goals such as to please a partner or enhance intimacy (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013). Yet research has indicated that avoidance goals, such as to avoid conflict or hurting a partner's feelings, are linked with lower relationship and sexual satisfaction for both partners (Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013). Therefore, it is essential to understand if, when people have high avoidance goals for sex, there are particular ways that they can decline their partner's sexual advances that can buffer the rejected partner from feeling hurt, while also maintaining the couples' intimate connection.

### *Sexual goals and relationship well-being*

An important predictor of what differentiates satisfying relationships and sexual experiences from dissatisfying ones concerns people's goals for engaging in sex (see review by Impett et al., 2015). One common motivational framework applied to sexuality stems from work on approach and avoidance social motivation (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable & Impett, 2012). When people pursue sex for approach goals, they are focused on attaining positive outcomes such as pleasing their partner or enhancing relationship intimacy. In contrast, when people pursue sex for avoidance goals, they are focused on averting negative outcomes such as a partner's loss of interest or relationship conflict (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Impett et al., 2005).

Several daily experience studies of couples have shown that whereas approach goals are associated with increased positive emotions as well as enhanced sexual and relationship satisfaction for both partners, avoidance goals are associated with increased negative emotions and lower satisfaction (Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013). Avoidance goals tend to be associated with unfavorable outcomes due to a person's focus and expectation of negative outcomes (Strachman & Gable, 2006), and when pursuing sex for avoidance goals, people report lower sexual desire, which in part, accounts for lower levels of satisfaction with the experience and relationship (Muise et al., 2013). Furthermore, people who chronically pursue avoidance goals were less sexually satisfied, more likely to have broken up with their partner (Impett et al., 2005), and had partners who felt less sexually satisfied and less committed to the relationship 4 months later (Muise et al., 2013), suggesting that the chronic pursuit of avoidance sexual goals can be detrimental to the maintenance of relationships over time. While research indicates that in relationships, sex tends to be more strongly approach motivated than avoidance motivated (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008), it remains to be seen whether there are alternative behaviors or strategies people can

engage in when their avoidance goals are strong that may be associated with better relationship outcomes.

### *Sexual rejection and relationship well-being*

In situations in which partners have divergent sexual interests, one possibility is for the less interested partner to express their disinterest in having sex and decline their partner's advances. Only one study of which we are aware has examined sexual rejection in established romantic relationships. Byers and Heinlein (1989) found that sexual refusals were a relatively common response to sexual initiation attempts among married and cohabiting couples and that more frequent sexual refusals were related to lower relationship and sexual satisfaction. Complementing this work, research on interpersonal rejection and unrequited love supports the view that romantic rejection is highly distressing since the person being rejected experiences a threat to their self-worth, and the rejecter experiences guilt from having caused the partner pain (Baumeister & Dhavale, 2001). Anticipating or experiencing rejection from a romantic partner may also threaten connectedness (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002) and increase hostility and insecurity (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

Sexual rejection may pose significant threats to relationship quality given that sexuality is a particularly emotionally charged domain of relationships (Banmen & Vogel, 1985). As most relationships are sexually monogamous, partners rely solely on one another to meet their sexual needs (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004) which can make sexual conflicts particularly difficult to resolve. Indeed, research on marital interactions has shown that sexual conflicts can be more impactful for relationship quality and produce greater anxiety than other types of conflict topics (Rehman et al., 2011; Rehman, Lizdeck, Fallis, Sutherland, & Goodnight, 2017). Thus, situations of desire discrepancy may be particularly difficult for couples to manage given the sensitive nature of delivering as well as experiencing, sexual rejection.

Empirical work on sexual rejection has yet to investigate if there are optimal ways that people can express their disinterest in sex that protect relationship quality and hence reflect a viable alternative to engaging in sex for avoidance goals. Given the limited empirical work on sexual rejection in relationships, we drew upon research on relationship conflict resolution (e.g., Canary, 2003; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Heyman, 2001; Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983) to inform our work. A crucial message from this literature is that it is not conflict per se that hurts relationships but rather, the way that couples manage conflict that impacts whether relationships will falter or fail (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009), suggesting that certain ways of delivering sexual rejection might be better than others.

Research on conflict resolution typically characterizes relationship behaviors according to whether they are positive or negative in valence. Positive conflict processes such as accommodation (i.e., constructive responses to a partner's destructive acts) and validation (i.e., communicating understanding and acceptance of a partner's experience) tend to predict positive relationship evaluations (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), greater relationship well-being (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox,

1998), and less relationship distress (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Kirby, Baucom, & Peterman, 2005). Indeed, perceived partner responsiveness—where individuals feel understood, accepted, and cared for by their partner (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004)—plays a central role in the quality and maintenance of relationships during conflict and relationship discussions (Melby, Ge, Conger, & Warner, 1995; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

In contrast, negative conflict behaviors such as hostility or criticism and greater reciprocity of negative communication between partners are associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010) and increased distress (Beach & Fincham, 1994). Couples who attempt to resolve problems and disagreements by belittling, attacking, or blaming their partners also experience greater relationship difficulties (Assad, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007), highlighting how negative conflict behaviors can prevent partners from feeling valued and respected (Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008). Drawing on this literature, sexual rejection that is delivered in negative ways—such as when people criticize their partner and express hostility—should be associated with lower satisfaction as it fails to provide partners with any assurance or validation. In contrast, sexual rejection that is delivered in positive ways—such as when people demonstrate responsiveness, communicate feelings of affection, and show caring concern for their partner—may be an optimal strategy for sustaining satisfaction and may indeed provide a viable alternative to engaging in sex when avoidance goals are strong.

### *Overview of hypotheses and current studies*

In the current research, we were interested in four behaviors—sex motivated by approach goals, sex motivated by avoidance goals, sexual rejection delivered in positive ways, and sexual rejection delivered in negative ways—and their links with the sexual and relationship satisfaction of both partners in romantic relationships. Based on past research, we expected that engaging in sex for approach goals should predict the most satisfying relationship outcomes, whereas engaging in negative behaviors when declining a partner for sex should predict the least satisfying relationship outcomes.

Central to the primary research question, however, it is unclear how the consequences of engaging in sex for avoidance goals would compare to rejecting a partner in positive ways. On the one hand, since avoidance sexual goals are associated with lower satisfaction (Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013), people might be better protected against experiencing negative relationship outcomes if their partner declines their advances in a way that shows understanding, validation, and caring for their needs (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). On the other hand, in light of research showing that couples typically report higher satisfaction on days when they engage in sex compared to days when they do not (Muise et al., 2013), it is possible that engaging in sex for any type of goal—including avoidance goals—might be better than declining or being declined for sex, even in reassuring and loving ways. We examine these possibilities in two experimental studies of individuals in romantic relationships (Studies 1A and 1B) and a daily experience study of romantic couples (Study 2).

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics.

Sample	Sample						Age (years)			Relationship length (years)	
	Initial N	Final N	% Female	% Caucasian	% Married/Engaged	% Heterosexual	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD
Study 1A	240	191	53	82	41	86	33	10	18–70	6	7
Study 1B	568	451	49	80	51	89	35	11	18–73	8	9
Study 2	210	196	51	77	54	86	33	8	21–61	8	5

Note. The initial *N* indicates the total number of participants recruited for the study. The final *N* indicates participants who were retained for final analyses.

## Study 1A

Study 1A was a within-subject experimental scenario study designed to provide an initial test of how approach goals, avoidance goals, positive sexual rejection, and negative sexual rejection impact sexual and relationship satisfaction.

## Method

### Participants

Two hundred and forty participants were recruited from the United States from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants had to be at least 18 years old and have a current partner with whom they were sexually active. A final sample of 191 individuals (53% women) remained after excluding participants who did not meet eligibility criteria or failed an attention check ( $n = 49$  or 20% of participants). A priori power analyses using G\*Power 3 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) indicated that this sample size was large enough to detect an estimated effect size of  $f^2 = .11$  (calculated from a pilot study) with 80% power. See Table 1 for participant demographic information.

### Procedure and measures

Participants completed an online survey with several hypothetical scenarios in which they imagined initiating sex with their partner. Each scenario represented an experimental condition with the order of the conditions counterbalanced across the sample. Among the scenarios, participants imagined their partner declining their sexual advances using positive rejection behaviors or negative rejection behaviors.<sup>1</sup> In two other scenarios, they imagined their partner accepting their sexual advances for either approach or avoidance sexual goals. A "sex-only" control condition was also included in which participants imagined their partner accepting their sexual advances but were not provided with any information regarding their partner's sexual goals. The purpose of this control condition was to provide a point of comparison for the effects of all other conditions. See Table 2 for full descriptions of all conditions of interest in this study.

**Table 2.** Description of experimental conditions for Study 1A.

Prompt: "Imagine you and your partner are home on a typical night and you are in the mood for sex. You initiate sex with your partner . . ."

Condition	Description
Positive rejection	" . . . but they reject your advance by trying to talk instead and offering other forms of physical contact (kissing, hugging, snuggling, cuddling). Your partner reassures you that they love you and are attracted to you and offers to make it up to you in the future."
Negative rejection	" . . . but they reject your advance by displaying frustration toward you. Your partner starts to criticize the way you initiated sex as well as other aspects of your relationship."
Approach sexual goals	" . . . and your partner accepts your advances because they want to show you how much they care for you, give you a sexually pleasurable experience, and keep you happy."
Avoidance sexual goals	" . . . and your partner accepts your advances because they don't want you to be upset and don't want you to lose interest or fall out of love with them."
Control (sex only)	" . . . and they accept your advances, resulting in sex."

After each scenario, participants were asked to report on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a lot*) how satisfied they would feel about their relationship (How satisfied with your relationship would you feel?) as well as their sex life (How satisfied with your sex life would you feel?).

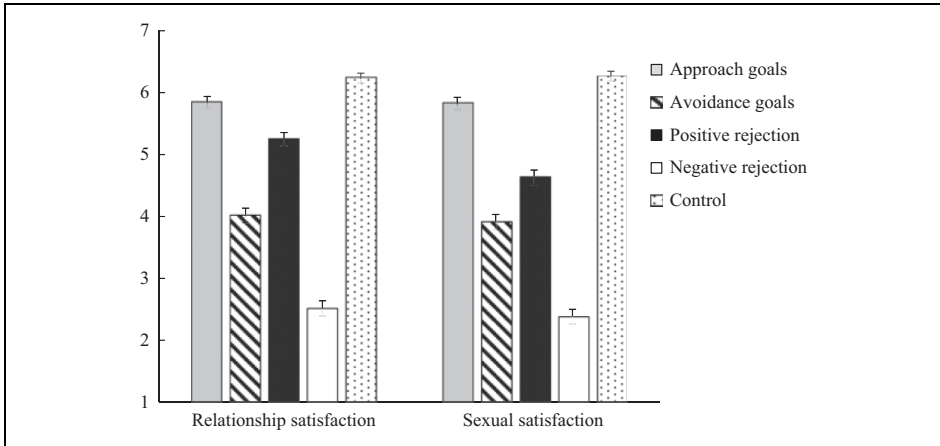
## Results

A one-way repeated-measures MANOVA was conducted as relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction were highly correlated (see Online Supplemental Materials for details). There was a significant within-subjects main effect across the five conditions, Pillai's trace = .650,  $F(8, 1,504) = 90.46, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .33$ . Univariate tests indicated that there was an effect of condition on relationship satisfaction,  $F(4, 1,738) = 229.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .55$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $F(4, 1,831) = 229.22, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .55$ . Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparison tests revealed that participants' relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction were significantly different across all conditions. See Table 3 for means and standard deviations (*SDs*) for Study 1A conditions and all pairwise comparisons. Participants reported the highest relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction in the control condition. Consistent with our hypotheses, and as shown in Figure 1, participants reported the next highest relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction when they imagined their partner engaging in sex for approach goals, but they reported the lowest relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction when they imagined their partner declining their sexual advances in negative ways. Central to our primary research question, participants reported significantly higher relationship satisfaction, as well as sexual satisfaction, when they imagined their romantic partner rejecting their sexual advances in positive ways than when they imagined their partner engaging in sex for avoidance goals.

**Table 3.** Study 1A pairwise comparisons.

Comparisons		Condition A	Condition B	Condition A M (SD)	Condition B M (SD)	t	df	p	d [95% CI]	$\eta^2$
Relationship satisfaction										
	Positive rejection		Avoidance sex goals	5.25 (1.51)	4.03 (1.63)	7.75	189	<.001	0.56 [0.41, 0.71]	.24
	Positive rejection		Approach sex goals	5.25 (1.51)	5.85 (1.35)	-4.60	189	<.001	-0.33 [-0.18, -0.48]	.10
	Positive rejection		Negative rejection	5.25 (1.51)	2.51 (1.67)	17.04	189	<.001	1.24 [1.04, 1.42]	.61
	Approach sex goals		Negative rejection	5.85 (1.35)	2.51 (1.67)	19.63	190	<.001	1.42 [1.21, 1.62]	.67
	Avoidance sex goals		Negative rejection	4.03 (1.63)	2.51 (1.67)	12.43	190	<.001	0.9 [0.73, 1.06]	.45
	Avoidance sex goals		Approach sex goals	4.03 (1.63)	5.85 (1.35)	-12.57	190	<.001	-0.91 [-0.74, -1.07]	.45
	Control		Approach sex goals	6.23 (1.12)	5.85 (1.35)	4.46	190	<.001	0.32 [0.18, 0.47]	.09
	Control		Avoidance sex goals	6.23 (1.12)	4.03 (1.63)	16.20	190	<.001	1.17 [0.99, 1.35]	.58
	Control		Positive rejection	6.23 (1.12)	5.25 (1.51)	8.91	189	<.001	0.65 [0.49, 0.81]	.30
	Control		Negative rejection	6.23 (1.12)	2.51 (1.67)	23.20	190	<.001	1.68 [1.46, 1.89]	.74
Sexual satisfaction										
	Positive rejection		Avoidance sex goals	4.65 (1.63)	3.93 (1.68)	4.60	190	<.001	0.33 [0.18, 0.48]	.10
	Positive rejection		Approach sex goals	4.65 (1.63)	5.83 (1.40)	-7.94	189	<.001	-0.58 [-0.73, -0.42]	.25
	Positive rejection		Negative rejection	4.65 (1.63)	2.37 (1.61)	15.49	190	<.001	1.12 [0.93, 1.29]	.56
	Approach sex goals		Negative rejection	5.83 (1.40)	2.37 (1.61)	19.99	189	<.001	1.45 [1.24, 1.65]	.68
	Avoidance sex goals		Negative rejection	3.93 (1.68)	2.37 (1.61)	11.07	190	<.001	0.8 [0.63, 0.96]	.39
	Avoidance sex goals		Approach sex goals	3.93 (1.68)	5.83 (1.40)	-12.73	189	<.001	-0.92 [-1.09, -0.75]	.46
	Control		Approach sex goals	6.27 (1.10)	5.83 (1.40)	5.09	189	<.001	0.37 [0.22, 0.52]	.12
	Control		Avoidance sex goals	6.27 (1.10)	3.93 (1.68)	16.63	190	<.001	1.2 [1.01, 1.38]	.59
	Control		Positive rejection	6.27 (1.10)	4.65 (1.63)	12.55	190	<.001	0.91 [0.74, 1.07]	.45
	Control		Negative rejection	6.27 (1.10)	2.37 (1.61)	24.02	190	<.001	1.74 [1.5, 1.95]	.75

Note. After each scenario, participants were asked to report on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = a lot) how satisfied they would feel about their relationship (How satisfied with your relationship would you feel?) as well as their sex life (How satisfied with your sex life would you feel?). All conditions are significantly different from one another ( $ps < .001$ ). CI = confidence interval.



**Figure 1.** Participants' relationship and sexual satisfaction in response to scenarios in Study 1A. All conditions are significantly different from one another ( $p_s < .001$ ).

Given the extensive literature on gender differences in sexuality in relationships (see review by Peplau, 2003), we tested whether gender moderated the key comparison between the positive rejection and avoidance-motivated sex conditions. There was a significant interaction between gender and condition for relationship satisfaction,  $F(4, 85) = 11.93, p < .001$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $F(4, 65) = 8.43, p < .001$ . Although both men and women reported lower relationship satisfaction when they imagined their partner engaging in sex with them for avoidance goals than when their partner engaged in positive rejection, the effects were stronger for women,  $t(100) = 8.51, p < .001$ , compared to men,  $t(88) = 2.54, p < .05$ . Furthermore, women reported lower sexual satisfaction in the avoidance-motivated sex condition compared to the positive rejection condition,  $t(100) = 6.23, p < .001$ , although men did not,  $t(88) = .53, p = .60$ . We also examined the influence of sexual frequency and relationship length and found that all the effects held when controlling for these variables.

## Study 1B

In Study 1B, we sought to replicate the key findings of the previous study using a between-subject design to minimize the potential influence of demand characteristics and enhance confidence in the findings. We recruited 568 individuals from MTurk using the same procedure and eligibility criteria as Study 1A. Individuals who had previously participated in Study 1A or failed attention checks were excluded, leaving a final sample of 451 individuals (49% women). A priori power analyses using G\*Power 3 determined this sample size was large enough to detect an estimated effect size of  $f^2 = .11$  with 80% power. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Study 1B was similar in design to Study 1A except for one key difference. As our central research question concerned directly comparing the effects of perceiving one's partner engage in sex for avoidance goals versus rejecting them using positive



behaviors, we included only three conditions (the negative rejection condition and sex-only condition were not included as we were confident that they would be associated with the highest and lowest levels of satisfaction, respectively). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions: positive rejection ( $n = 154$ ), avoidance sexual goals ( $n = 145$ ), or approach sexual goals ( $n = 152$ ), which acted as our control condition.

Full details of the study and results are available in the Online Supplemental Materials. Replicating the results from Study 1A, participants who imagined their romantic partner reject their sexual advances in positive ways reported greater relationship satisfaction ( $M = 5.21$ , standard error ( $SE$ ) = .11) than participants who imagined their partner engaging in sex with them for avoidance goals ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $t(284) = 5.05$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, participants who imagined their romantic partner reject their sexual advances in positive ways reported greater sexual satisfaction ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SE = .12$ ) than participants who imagined their partner engage in sex with them for avoidance goals ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SE = .13$ ),  $t(288) = 2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ .

## Brief discussion of Studies 1A and 1B

Overall, Studies 1A and 1B showed that people reported higher satisfaction when imagining their partner engaged in sex with them for approach goals and lower satisfaction when imagining their partner rejected them in negative ways. Most critically, people reported higher satisfaction when imagining their partner rejected them in a positive way compared to imagining when their partner engaged in sex to avoid negative relationship outcomes. While promising, these studies were limited in ecological validity, so we do not know if positive rejection behaviors are associated with higher satisfaction in couples' daily lives. The scenarios also contained information about a partner's sexual goals (which may not be as readily discernible in daily life) and only allowed us to examine the relationship implications for the partner who was imagining having their sexual advances accepted or rejected, limitations which we address in Study 2.

## Study 2

Study 2 was a 4-week dyadic daily experience study designed to allow us to contrast the daily relationship consequences of the pursuit of avoidance sexual goals and positive sexual rejection for *both* relationship partners. As our primary research question centered on the use of positive rejection behaviors and how they specifically compare to avoidance goals, our analyses did not focus on testing the effects of approach goals or negative rejection behaviors (although we controlled for these variables in our models). We additionally tested whether the effects would be moderated by gender, sexual frequency, and relationship length. For example, positive rejection may be especially important if a couple engages in sex less frequently, making the stakes of rejection even higher. Finally, we conducted lagged and longitudinal analyses to rule out alternative explanations and examine the longer term effects of avoidance goals and positive rejection.

## Method

### Participants

Participants consisted of 98 Canadian couples recruited on Kijiji.ca. In order to be eligible, participants had to be at least 18 years old, and all couples had to be living together and in a relationship for at least 2 years. Table 1 provides participant demographics.

### Procedure

Participants were contacted via e-mail to confirm their eligibility and underwent a phone screening by a trained research assistant who verified the relationship and explained study procedures. Participants were instructed to complete their surveys every evening and that their responses would be ineligible if completed the next day. Participants were told to complete the surveys separately, to not discuss their surveys with their partner, and that if they missed a day, they should leave that particular survey blank.

Each participant was initially sent a background survey in which they provided demographic information. Then, starting the day after completing the background survey, participants completed 27 daily surveys delivered electronically at the same time each day. Each daily survey was automatically time-stamped. Only daily surveys completed before the next morning were treated as valid. In total, participants completed 4,693 daily surveys, an average of 23.9 (of 27) days per person. Each participant received up to US\$65 in gift cards for completing all daily surveys and the follow-up.

### Measures

In the background survey, participants reported basic demographic information (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, relationship length), as well as self-reported sexual frequency (“On average, how frequently do you and your partner have sex?” from 1 = *less than once a month* to 5 = *multiple times per week*). Participants completed at background the satisfaction subscale of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) with items such as “How satisfied are you with your relationship?” ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Participants also completed the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSEX; Lawrance & Byers, 1995) by rating their sex life on five 7-point dimensions: *good–bad*, *pleasant–unpleasant*, *positive–negative*, *satisfying–unsatisfying*, and *valuable–worthless* ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

Then, each day for 27 days, participants completed a survey in which they reported whether they or their partner had higher sexual desire, rated on a 21-point scale (1 = *I had much higher desire* to 21 = *my partner had much higher desire*). Full details of this measure can be found in the Online Supplementary Materials. Participants were also asked whether or not sex had occurred with the following question: “In the last 24 hr, my partner and I engaged in sexual activity.” If they answered yes to this question—which occurred on 1,021 days, participants reported their approach and avoidance sexual goals (Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013). Avoidance sexual goals were measured with three items: “I wanted to avoid conflict with my partner,” “I did not want my partner to

be upset,” and “I did not want my partner to feel undesired” ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $\alpha = .84$ ). Approach sexual goals were measured with two items: “I wanted my partner to experience sexual pleasure” and “I wanted to promote intimacy in my relationship” ( $M = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ,  $\alpha = .61$ ), reported on a seven-point scale (1 = *not at all important* to 7 = *extremely important*).

On days when participants did not engage in sex and reported having lower desire than their partner—which occurred on 715 days, they indicated the degree to which they engaged in sexual rejection (“Today, to what extent did you do something to indicate to your partner that you were not in the mood for sex?” from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a lot*). If participants reported a 2 or higher, they responded to 10 items, developed in two pilot studies (Kim, Muise, Sakaluk, & Impett, 2016) about the degree to which they engaged in positive and negative sexual rejection behaviors, rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a lot*).

The five positive sexual rejection behaviors were as follows: “I reassured my partner that I am attracted to them,” “I reassured my partner that I love them,” “I offered alternate forms of physical contact,” “I offered to make it up my partner in the future,” and “I tried to talk with my partner instead” ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ;  $\alpha = .81$ ). The five negative sexual rejection behaviors were as follows: “I displayed frustration toward my partner,” “I was short or curt with my partner,” “I criticized aspects of our relationship,” “I criticized the way my partner initiated sex,” and “I gave my partner the silent treatment” ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = .92$ ;  $\alpha = .92$ ). Participants also completed a 1-item daily measure of relationship satisfaction: “Today, with regard to my relationship, I felt satisfied.” Daily sexual satisfaction was measured using the GMSEX (Lawrance & Byers, 1995) with items assessing how they felt about their sex life that day (e.g., “good–bad,” “pleasant–unpleasant”;  $\alpha = .98$ ).

Finally, after completing the last daily diary survey, participants completed a follow-up survey, which again consisted of the same measures of relationship satisfaction (PRQC;  $\alpha = .97$ ) and sexual satisfaction (GMSEX;  $\alpha = .97$ ) included at background.

## Results

### *Analytic plan*

Study 2 estimates are reported in Table 4. We analyzed the data using a two-level cross-classified multivariate multilevel model in which daily reports were crossed with the individual and dyad level (Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). Analyses were conducted using mixed models in SPSS. The primary goal of the analyses was to compare the effects of positive rejection behaviors to the effect of avoidance sexual goals on daily relationship and sexual satisfaction. Because avoidance sexual goals were only reported on days when participants engaged in sex and positive rejection behaviors on days when they did not engage in sex, we analyzed the data with multivariate multilevel modeling, which enabled us to simultaneously predict the association between positive rejection behaviors and satisfaction on nonsex days and between avoidance sexual goals and satisfaction on sex days. This analytic approach involved merging participants’ daily scores of positive rejection behaviors on

**Table 4.** Study 2 estimates.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI	Effect size <i>r</i>
<b>Relationship satisfaction</b>					
Positive rejection actor effect	.42	.04	9.81***	[.33, .50]	.40
Positive rejection partner effect	.24	.05	4.64***	[.13, .35]	.16
Avoidance sex goals actor effect	-.11	.03	-3.80***	[-.17, -.05]	.13
Avoidance sex goals partner effect	-.10	.04	-2.79**	[-.17, -.03]	.08
<b>Sexual satisfaction</b>					
Positive rejection actor effect	.33	.05	6.86***	[.24, .43]	.21
Positive rejection partner effect	.21	.06	3.70***	[.10, .32]	.12
Avoidance sex goals actor effect	-.18	.03	-5.71***	[-.24, -.12]	.17
Avoidance sex goals partner effect	-.08	.04	-2.19*	[-.16, -.01]	.06

Note. Approximate effect sizes were calculated using the formula  $r = \sqrt{t^2/(t^2 + df)}$ ; see Overall & Hammond, 2013; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2007). CI = confidence interval.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

nonsex days with their daily scores of avoidance sexual goals on sex days to create a new, combined predictor variable in the dataset. For each of the two outcome variables—relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, we further distinguished between whether satisfaction was reported on sex days or nonsex days. As such, the models consisted of two dependent variables: (1) relationship (or sexual) satisfaction on sex days and (2) relationship (or sexual) satisfaction on nonsex days. By restructuring the data in this way, we were able to simultaneously examine in one model the effect of avoidance sexual goals on sex days controlling for approach sexual goals as well as the effect of positive rejection on nonsex days controlling for negative rejection.

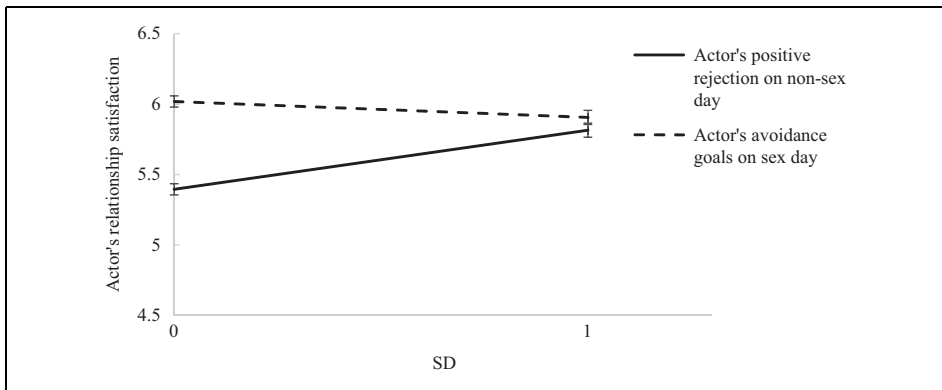
We tested separate models for relationship and sexual satisfaction. A no-intercept model was specified in order to test separate random intercepts for sex days and nonsex days, meaning that the intercepts indicate participants' average levels of satisfaction on sex days and nonsex days. All predictor variables were grand mean-centered; therefore, the main effects for sexual goals and rejection behaviors represent how higher levels of participants' positive rejection on nonsex days or avoidance sexual goals on sex days relative to the average person predicted their own as well as their partner's relationship and sexual satisfaction. In other words, the main effect for positive rejection represents how higher levels of positive rejection (relative to the average level of positive rejection on nonsex days across participants) predicted both partners' relationship and sexual satisfaction; similarly, the main effect for avoidance sexual goals represents how higher levels of participants' avoidance goals (relative to the average level of avoidance goals on sex days across participants) predicted satisfaction.

We then used these results to compare satisfaction levels at 1 *SD* above the grand mean on avoidance goals and positive rejection behaviors. Descriptive statistics showed that participants deviated up to 1 *SD* above mean levels of positive rejection on 30% of days. Similarly, participants deviated up to 1 *SD* above mean levels of avoidance sexual goals on 30% of days.

**Table 5.** Comparisons of point estimates of actor effects.

Actor's relationship satisfaction				Actor's sexual satisfaction			
Avoidance goals				Avoidance goals			
0				+1			
Positive rejection	0	Av > Pos (6.02 > 5.40)	Av > Pos (5.90 > 5.40)	Positive rejection	0	Av > Pos (5.83 > 4.59)	Av > Pos (5.65 > 4.59)
	+1	Av > Pos (6.02 > 5.82)	Av ≉ Pos (5.90 ≉ 5.82)		+1	Av > Pos (5.83 > 4.92)	Av > Pos (5.65 > 4.92)

Note. Comparisons of point estimates of actor effects at 0 and +1 standard deviation from mean levels of avoidance goals and positive rejection, following Cumming and Finch's (2005) guidelines. "Av > Pos" indicates higher levels of satisfaction when engaging in avoidance sexual goals ( $p < .05$ ). "Av ≉ Pos" indicates no significant difference. "Pos > Av" indicates higher levels of satisfaction when engaging in positive rejection behaviors ( $p < .05$ ). Mean estimates are provided in brackets.

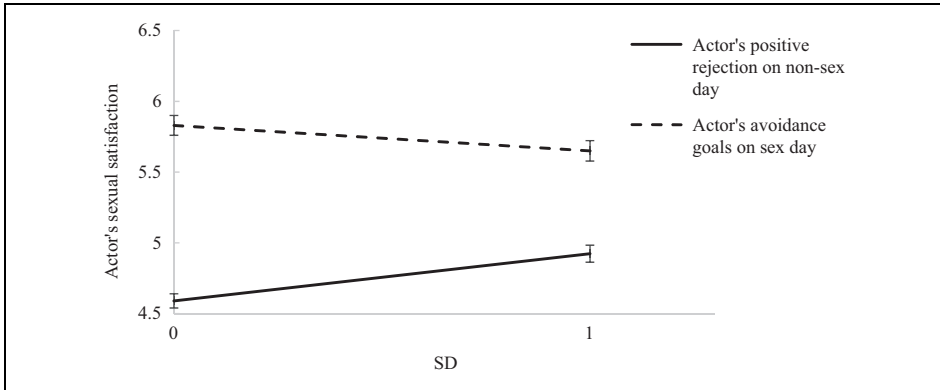


**Figure 2.** Actor effects of avoidance sexual goals and positive behaviors at various degrees predicting relationship satisfaction.

### Actor effects

The results for Study 2 are displayed in Table 5. Beginning with actor effects—which reflect the satisfaction of the person who engages in sex for avoidance goals or positive rejection behaviors, we found that on days when participants were more positive in their communication of sexual disinterest than the average person in the sample, they reported higher relationship satisfaction,  $B = .42, t(499) = 9.81, p < .001$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $B = .33, t(1,005) = 6.86, p < .001$ . Conversely and as expected, on days when participants reported stronger avoidance sexual goals than the average person, they reported lower relationship satisfaction,  $B = -.11, t(865) = -3.80, p < .001$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $B = -.18, t(1,175) = -5.71, p < .001$ . These effects are depicted in Figures 2 and 3.

To compare satisfaction levels when people engaged in positive rejection behaviors on nonsex days to satisfaction when people pursued avoidance sexual goals on sex days, we estimated the standard errors of the estimated marginal means for each point estimate



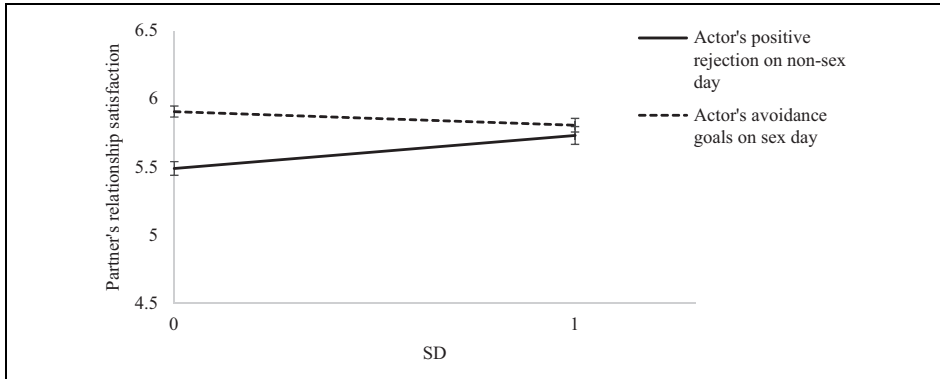
**Figure 3.** Actor effects of avoidance sexual goals and positive rejection behaviors at various degrees predicting sexual satisfaction.

up to one *SD* above the mean for both predictor variables. As the nature of our data does not allow us to directly assess the significance of the differences between point estimates (since both predictor variables are not measured on the same day), we followed an inference technique by Cumming and Finch (2005) to make these comparisons. The difference in the estimated marginal means is significant at  $p \leq .05$  if the *SE* bars of the two points do not overlap, and if the gap between the ends of the corresponding *SE* bars is at least the size of the average *SE*. In doing so, we could test whether participants' own (or their partner's) levels of relationship or sexual satisfaction were significantly different when they engaged in positive rejection behaviors at varying degrees compared to when they engaged in sex with their partner for avoidance goals at varying degrees.

Table 5 depicts all comparisons between point estimates of positive behaviors and avoidance sexual goals (at mean levels and 1 *SD* above the mean) on relationship satisfaction and whether they are statistically significant at  $p \leq .05$ . These results revealed that participants reported higher relationship satisfaction when they engaged in sex for avoidance goals at mean levels compared to when they engaged in positive rejection behaviors at mean levels. However, when people engaged in positive rejection at 1 *SD* above the mean of the sample, there were no significant differences in relationship satisfaction compared to having sex for avoidance goals at 1 *SD*. As shown in Table 5, we found that actors' sexual satisfaction was always higher when engaging in sex for avoidance goals compared to engaging in positive rejection.

### Partner effects

Turning to partner effects—which reflect the satisfaction of the person who gets rejected in positive ways versus has their partner engage in sex with them for avoidance goals, we found that on days when participants were more positively rejected by their partner than the average person, their partners reported higher relationship satisfaction,  $B = .24$ ,  $t(819) = 4.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $B = .21$ ,  $t(905) = 3.70$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversely and as expected, on days when participants pursued sex for avoidance goals



**Figure 4.** Partner effects of avoidance sexual goals and positive behaviors at various degrees predicting relationship satisfaction.

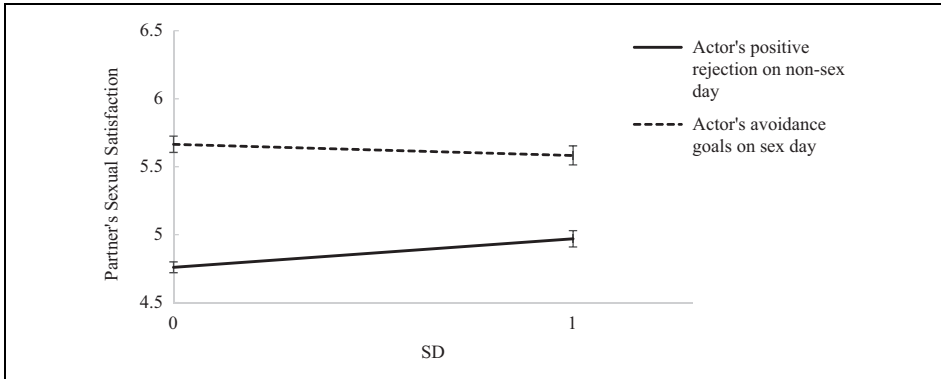
more than the average person, their partners reported lower relationship satisfaction,  $B = -.10$ ,  $t(1,255) = -2.80$ ,  $p < .01$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $B = -.09$ ,  $t(1,233) = -2.19$ ,  $p < .05$ . These effects are depicted in Figures 4 and 5.

When comparing positive rejection behaviors to avoidance sexual goals, as shown in Table 6, we found that people reported higher relationship satisfaction when their partners engaged in sex for avoidance goals at mean levels compared to when they engaged in positive rejection behaviors at mean levels. However, when people engaged in positive rejection at 1 *SD* above the mean, there were no significant differences in their partners' relationship satisfaction compared to having sex for avoidance goals at 1 *SD*. People's sexual satisfaction was always higher when their partner engaged in sex regardless of the strength of their avoidance goals compared to when their partner rejected them, regardless of how positively they communicated their sexual disinterest.

In sum, the main findings of Study 2 show that higher than average levels of positive rejection on nonsex days were associated with similar levels of relationship satisfaction as higher than average avoidance goals on sex days, for both actors and partners. With respect to sexual satisfaction, however, positive rejection behaviors were always associated with lower daily sexual satisfaction than avoidance goals for both actors and partners.

### Gender, sexual frequency, and relationship length

We also examined possible moderations by gender, sexual frequency, and relationship length. Gender did not moderate any of the effects. Sexual frequency did moderate the association between a person's avoidance sexual goals and a partner's relationship satisfaction,  $B = .07$ ,  $t(1,057) = 1.90$ ,  $p = .06$ , although this effect was marginal. Simple effects at 1 *SD* above and below the mean showed that for couples who engaged in sex less frequently, higher levels of a person's avoidance sexual goals were associated with lower relationship satisfaction for their partners,  $B = -.20$ ,  $t(913) = -3.07$ ,  $p < .01$ , but the same was not true for couples who engaged in sex more frequently,  $B = -.05$ ,



**Figure 5.** Partner effects of avoidance sexual goals and positive behaviors at various degrees predicting sexual satisfaction.

**Table 6.** Comparisons of point estimates of partner effects.

Partner's relationship satisfaction				Partner's sexual satisfaction			
		Avoidance goals				Avoidance goals	
		0	+1			0	+1
Positive rejection	0	Av > Pos (5.91 > 5.59)	Av > Pos (5.81 > 5.49)	Positive rejection	0	Av > Pos (5.67 > 4.76)	Av > Pos (5.58 > 4.76)
	+1	Av > Pos (5.91 > 5.73)	Av ≉ Pos (5.81 ≉ 5.73)		+1	Av > Pos (5.67 > 4.97)	Av > Pos (5.58 > 4.97)

Note. Comparisons of point estimates of partner effects at 0 and +1 standard deviation from mean levels of avoidance goals and positive rejection, following Cumming and Finch's (2005) guidelines. "Av > Pos" indicates higher levels of satisfaction when engaging in avoidance sexual goals ( $p < .05$ ). "Av ≉ Pos" indicates no significant difference. "Pos > Av" indicates higher levels of satisfaction when engaging in positive rejection behaviors ( $p < .05$ ). Mean estimates are indicated in brackets.

$t(1,368) = -1.19, p = .24$ . We did not find a significant moderation by sexual frequency for partners' sexual satisfaction nor did we find significant moderations for any actor effects on relationship and sexual satisfaction.

Relationship length significantly moderated the association between a person's avoidance sexual goals and a partner's relationship,  $B = -.12, t(949) = -3.101, p < .01$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $B = -.17, t(823) = -4.03, p < .001$ . Specifically, high levels of avoidance sexual goals were negatively associated with partners' relationship satisfaction in longer relationships,  $B = -.24, t(899) = -4.10, p < .001$ , but not in shorter relationships,  $B = .01, t(1,267) = .20, p = .84$ . Avoidance sexual goals were also negatively associated with partners' sexual satisfaction in longer relationships,  $B = -.27, t(795) = -4.54, p < .001$ , but not in shorter relationships,  $B = .07, t(1,181) = 1.25, p = .21$ . In addition, relationship length moderated the association between positive



rejection and a person's own sexual satisfaction,  $B = .16$ ,  $t(1,106) = 3.28$ ,  $p < .01$ . Specifically, high levels of positive rejection were more strongly associated with sexual satisfaction for people in longer relationships,  $B = .48$ ,  $t(1,199) = 7.27$ ,  $p < .001$ , compared to people in shorter relationships,  $B = .16$ ,  $t(931) = 2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ . We did not find significant moderations by relationship length for actors' relationship satisfaction.

### *Lagged-day and longitudinal analyses*

We also sought to rule out several alternative explanations for our findings. As partners could be more likely to endorse avoidance goals on days when they feel lower satisfaction, or engage in positive rejection on days when they feel greater satisfaction, we conducted analyses in which we controlled for sexual and relationship satisfaction on the previous day to determine whether rejection and goals predict changes in these outcomes from the previous day. When controlling for the previous day's satisfaction, all of our effects predicting relationship and sexual satisfaction remained significant with two exceptions. The partner effects of avoidance goals predicting relationship,  $B = -.04$ ,  $t(795) = -1.17$ ,  $p = .24$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $B = -.05$ ,  $t(931) = -1.30$ ,  $p = .20$ , were no longer significant. These results suggest that positive rejection and avoidance sexual goals are associated with changes in both relationship and sexual satisfaction from the previous day, although the associations between a partner's avoidance goals and same-day satisfaction may be partially driven by the previous day's satisfaction.

To further assess directionality and look at over time effects, we conducted longitudinal analyses to test whether sexual goals and positive rejection (each aggregated over the course of the diary) predicted satisfaction at the end of the study controlling for satisfaction at baseline. These results revealed that partners of individuals who chronically pursued avoidance sexual goals over the course of the study reported marginally lower relationship satisfaction,  $B = -.15$ ,  $t(31) = -1.72$ ,  $p = .10$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $B = -.25$ ,  $t(29) = -1.83$ ,  $p = .08$ , at follow-up. Furthermore, partners of individuals who engaged in higher levels of positive rejection over the study reported marginally greater relationship satisfaction,  $B = .14$ ,  $t(31) = 1.90$ ,  $p = .07$ , but not sexual satisfaction, at follow-up. Neither positive rejection nor avoidance sexual goals significantly predicted changes in one's own relationship or sexual satisfaction at follow-up. Thus, over time, engaging in avoidance sex may have detrimental consequences and engaging in positive rejection behaviors may help sustain satisfaction, particularly for partners.

## **General discussion**

Results from two experiments and a daily experience study showed that rejecting a partner for sex in positive ways may represent a viable alternative to engaging in sex for avoidance goals to maintain satisfaction. In Studies 1A and 1B, people were more satisfied with their relationship and sex life when they imagined their partner rejecting their sexual advances in positive, reassuring ways compared to imagining their partner engaging in sex for avoidance goals. In Study 2, the overall pattern of results demonstrated that individuals and their partners experienced no differences in relationship

satisfaction on days in which they indicated their sexual disinterest in positive ways at higher than average levels compared to days in which they had sex for avoidance goals at higher than average levels. We did not find a similar pattern of results for sexual satisfaction in Study 2. In particular, engaging in sex for avoidance goals (or when one's partner pursued sex for avoidance goals) was always associated with greater daily sexual satisfaction than rejecting (or being rejected) in a positive manner. In short, the current set of studies provides initial insight into alternative behaviors people can pursue in situations of conflicting sexual interest when their avoidance goals for sex are high. Specifically, declining a partner's sexual advances may not be detrimental to the relationship provided it is done in positive ways and may reflect a more effective way couples can sustain relationship satisfaction, especially over the longer term, compared to engaging in sex to avoid negative outcomes.

Across studies, we did not find robust evidence that gender, sexual frequency, or relationship length moderated our effects. However, findings from Study 2 suggest that avoidance sexual goals may have a particularly negative impact on a partner's relationship satisfaction when sexual frequency is low, but that couples may be buffered from the negative consequences of avoidance goals when sex occurs more frequently. Similarly, for relationship length, the findings suggest that avoidance sexual goals may be particularly detrimental for partner's satisfaction in longer relationships, perhaps again due to sexual frequency declining over time. Furthermore, it may be particularly important for people's own sexual satisfaction to deliver rejection in positive ways in longer relationships. Perhaps communicating one's need to not have sex in constructive ways may be more impactful in longer term relationships given that sexual desire tends to decline over time (Impett, Muise, & Peragine, 2014).

We found a slightly different pattern of results across studies. In Study 2, positive rejection was not associated with greater benefits for the partner compared to avoidance goals, as was the case in Studies 1A and 1B. As the experimental studies involved hypothetical scenarios, we specifically informed participants about their partner's sexual goals; however, in daily life, it is far more difficult to ascertain a partner's true motivations for pursuing sex. Indeed, previous research has shown that one person's sexual goals and the partner's perceptions of their sexual goals are only weakly correlated (Impett et al., 2005). Furthermore, it is possible that people (women in particular, given the results of Study 1A) were not able to accurately predict how sexually satisfied they would feel in the scenario study given that they were merely imagining, and not actually engaging in sex, thus producing lower levels of sexual satisfaction in the avoidance goals condition than might truly occur. Indeed, the act of physically engaging in sex with a partner may help explain why, in the daily diary study, partners experienced higher sexual satisfaction on days when they engaged in sex, even when avoidance goals were present. This notion is consistent with research suggesting that sexual satisfaction is closely tied to physical pleasure and emotional intimacy (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). Thus, the findings from the current studies suggest that the negative impact of avoidance sexual goals may be more pronounced for couples when those goals are more transparent.

In line with previous work (Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013), we found that people were less satisfied when they or their partner pursued sex for avoidance goals,

suggesting that in and of itself, engaging in sex may not be good for relationships if one's reasons for doing so are focused on avoiding negative relationship outcomes. Optimistically, however, this research suggests that a relationship-promoting alternative may exist when people are reassuring and express love and caring concern when declining their partner's sexual advances. Results from the longitudinal analyses further highlight the importance of positive rejection. Whereas the chronic pursuit of avoidance goals was associated with declines in a partner's relationship and sexual satisfaction over time, chronic positive rejection behaviors did not have a similar effect and actually protected a partner's relationship (but again not sexual) satisfaction over time, although all of these longitudinal effects were only marginally significant.

Positive sexual rejection behaviors may play a key role in helping couples navigate situations of conflicting sexual desire, as they may help buffer partners from the negative effects of rejection (Byers & Heinlein, 1989). As sexual rejection can pose a threat to the felt security and validation that partners expect from one another, the reassurance inherent in positive rejection behaviors may serve to preserve a partner's self-esteem, an important future direction. Further, engaging in positive rejection behaviors may be beneficial for the self as doing so allows people to attend to their own sexual needs to, at times, not engage in sex. This notion is consistent with prior work on sexual communal strength in relationships and the importance of being both responsive to a partner's sexual needs while also attending to one's own needs and not focusing on a partner's needs to an unhealthy extreme (Muise, Bergeron, Impett, & Rosen, 2017). Given the prevalence of situations of desire discrepancy (Herbenick, Margo, & Mark, 2014) and the difficulty of resolving sexual conflicts (Sanford, 2003), the effective use of positive rejection behaviors may be key to maintaining relationship quality during these conflicts. However, relationships are likely to thrive when partners are able to strike a balance between asserting their own needs to not engage in sex by declining a partner in positive ways, while also maintaining a regular intimate sexual connection (Muise & Impett, 2016).

In our daily experience study, we found a different pattern of associations for relationship and sexual satisfaction. In particular, both partners reported greater sexual satisfaction on days when sex occurred for avoidance goals compared to nonsex days when positive rejection behaviors were high. These findings, however, are not surprising since sexual satisfaction may be more contingent on having one's sexual needs physically met and less so on how one feels about the relationship more generally. Indeed, researchers often discuss the nature of sexual satisfaction in relation to sexual activity and orgasm (Edwards & Booth, 1994; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). Further, research supports the notion that sexual satisfaction is a relatively stable construct (Fallis, Rehman, Woody, & Purdon, 2016), and studies find that specific relationship processes such as sexual beliefs predict different outcomes for relationship and sexual satisfaction (Maxwell et al., 2017). Thus, the benefits of engaging in positive rejection behaviors versus engaging in sex for avoidance goals may be less pronounced when examining their impact on sexual satisfaction as rejection behaviors preclude the occurrence of sex.

An important limitation of this work is that because we did not measure perceptions of a partner's rejection behaviors or sexual goals in Study 2, we were not able to determine

how accurate individuals were at perceiving their partner's rejection behaviors or sexual goals. Indeed, research shows that people project their own responsiveness as well as other interpersonal traits onto their perceptions of their partners (Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), suggesting that people in satisfying relationships may overestimate their partner's positive rejection behaviors and underestimate their partner's avoidance goals. Related to this, we do not know the mechanisms behind the observed partner effects in this study, and whether the findings are due to people's ability to effectively communicate their behaviors and goals, to accurately detect their partner's behaviors and goals, or both, all important directions for future work.

## Conclusion

The current set of studies suggest that although engaging in positive rejection may not necessarily predict better relationship outcomes than engaging in sex for avoidance goals, positive rejection is a viable alternative behavior to engaging in avoidance-motivated sex that can help romantic partners sustain the quality of their relationship. When people are not in the mood for sex and find that the main reason they are inclined to "say yes" is to avoid hurting their partner's feelings or the relationship conflict that might ensue, engaging in positive rejection behaviors that convey love and reassurance may be critical to sustain relationship quality. If individuals are positive and reassuring, both they and their partners end up no less satisfied than if they were to engage in sex for avoidance goals, and while avoidance goals detracted from a partner's satisfaction over time, reassuring goals promoted satisfaction, suggesting that the use of positive rejection behaviors is a key way that couples can maintain the quality of their relationship.

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## Supplemental material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

## Note

1. Study 1 consisted of additional conditions not shown in Table 2, as they are not relevant to our research question and hypotheses. Reported results remained unchanged when including these conditions. Details of these conditions can be found in the supplemental materials.

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