



Development and validation of the responses to sexual rejection scale

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ABSTRACT

Communication during sexual rejection is an impactful yet understudied aspect of romantic relationships. The primary goal of this research was to develop and validate the Responses to Sexual Rejection Scale (RSRS), a novel measure capturing the ways individuals in romantic relationships respond to sexual rejection from their partner. Exploratory factor analysis in Study 1 identified four primary factors describing responses to sexual rejection: *understanding*, *resentful*, *insecure*, and *enticing*. In a separate sample, Study 2 confirmed the factor structure of the RSRS, demonstrated internal consistency and measurement invariance across gender, and provided evidence for construct validity with measures of sexual communal strength, aggression, attachment anxiety, and narcissism. Findings support the RSRS as a useful instrument to measure relationship communication patterns in response to sexual rejection.

1. Introduction

In romantic relationships, couples frequently encounter situations in which one partner declines—or rejects—the other's sexual advances, due to reasons such as differing levels of sexual desire (Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999; Day, Muise, Joel, & Impett, 2015). Married and cohabiting couples report that sexual rejection occurs about once a week (Byers & Heinlein, 1989), and research has shown that the specific ways partners communicate sexual rejection (e.g., by expressing reassurance vs. hostility) can shape the sexual and relationship satisfaction of both partners (Kim, Muise, & Impett, 2018). An equally important, yet relatively unexplored aspect of sexual rejection dynamics concerns how people *respond* to having their sexual advances rejected by a partner. The goals of the current research were to identify the specific ways that people respond to sexual rejection, as well as investigate individual differences in *who* is more likely to display particular responses to rejection.

1.1. Sexual rejection in the context of romantic relationships

Rejection by a romantic partner is one of life's most painful emotional experiences (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). The stakes of rejection in the sexual domain, or *sexual rejection*, can be even higher as most couples are monogamous (Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017) and partners rely almost exclusively on each

other to fulfill their sexual needs. As such, conflicts about sexual issues versus non-sexual issues can be particularly emotionally-charged and make partners feel interpersonally vulnerable (Rehman, Lizdek, Fallis, Sutherland, & Goodnight, 2017; Theiss & Estlein, 2014).

Given the high stakes of rejection in the sexual domain, it is crucial to understand how people react to having their sexual advances declined by a partner. Currently, there exists little research and no instruments to assess how individuals in romantic relationships react to sexual rejection specifically. Thus, the purpose of this research was to take an exploratory, data-driven, bottom-up approach to develop a measure of individuals' distinct responses to sexual rejection in the context of established romantic relationships. Intended potential uses of this measure are for researchers, couples, and therapists trying to resolve or manage desire discrepancies, conflicts of sexual interest, and other sexual problems.

While research on this topic is limited, some work on sexual communication (e.g., initiation and rejection) describes key behavioral features such as whether the communication is verbal or non-verbal (Byers & Heinlein, 1989; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2011). Other work has focused more on the emotional features of individuals' responses during negative relationship events. For example, when people express “hurt feelings” in response to devaluation or rejection, they have stronger goals to pursue connection and restore acceptance from the rejecting partner (Lemay, Overall, & Clark, 2012). In contrast, when they respond to rejection with anger, they have stronger goals to induce

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change in the rejecting partner's behavior, goals associated with greater partner blame and criticism. An investigation of how romantic partners in established relationships respond to sexual rejection clearly requires an understanding of both behavioral and emotional elements.

1.2. Responses to sexual rejection and individual difference factors

Previous research additionally suggests key individual difference factors relevant to the study of how people respond to sexual rejection. While the limited work directly examining responses to sexual rejection has been towards strangers or casual sex partners, these studies have focused primarily on gender differences. For example, women expect to experience more negative (e.g., loneliness, anger) and less positive (e.g., happiness, warmth) emotions than men in response to sexual rejection by a hypothetical attractive stranger (de Graaf & Sandfort, 2004). Explained from a sexual script perspective, if men are stereotyped as always wanting to have sex, then women may feel surprised if their sexual advances are declined and interpret rejection as a reflection of their own shortcomings (de Graaf & Sandfort, 2004; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996). Other studies have shown women report more anger, rejection, embarrassment, and frustration than men when describing past events in which they were rejected by a casual sex partner (Wright, Norton, & Matussek, 2010).

Another response identified is verbal persistence and attempts to influence a reluctant partner to engage in sex. Past research suggests that men do not always believe women's refusals, and may thus respond with sexual persistence, as sexual scripts dictate women should not openly acknowledge their sexual interest (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996). In one study, men were more likely than women to sexually persist after being refused for sex, especially if they reported higher anger, confusion, and dominance, but women also demonstrated sexual persistence at times when they reported higher feelings of rejection and hostility (Wright et al., 2010). Overall, the few studies on reactions to sexual refusal suggest that people primarily respond to these scenarios with negative emotions and sometimes persist in initiating sex after being declined, and that these patterns may be influenced by gender.

Other relevant individual difference factors included narcissism, as individuals who are higher in narcissism tend to respond to rejection with blame and negative evaluations of the rejecter (Kelly, 2001). Narcissists are also more likely to display aggression when their sexual desires are rejected, as well as increased sexual desire and sexually coercive tactics (Blinkhorn, Lyons, & Almond, 2015; Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003). Further, individuals high in trait aggression tend to be hypervigilant to cues of hostility and interpret neutral situations in hostile ways, which in turn makes them more likely to respond in angry or hostile ways (Wilkowski & Robinson, 2007).

In addition, relationship-oriented personality traits may also be important to consider in the context of sexual rejection. For example, individuals who are more responsive to their partner's sexual needs (i.e., higher in sexual communal strength) tend to respond more positively (e.g., acceptance) and less negatively (e.g., resentment) when they imagine being sexually rejected by their partner (Muise, Kim, Impett, & Rosen, 2017). Meanwhile, individuals higher in attachment anxiety, characterized by preoccupations about abandonment and high needs for assurance from a romantic partner (Shaver, Schachner, &

Mikulincer, 2005), tend to experience more hurt feelings and less anger when receiving criticism or experiencing conflict (Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014). Given the dearth of research on individual differences in responses to rejection—especially in the sexual domain—we test how several personality and relationship-oriented traits (e.g., narcissism, aggression, sexual communal strength, attachment style) are associated with specific reactions to sexual rejection.

1.3. The present research

We conducted two studies to identify how individuals react when a romantic partner declines their sexual advances and investigated individual differences in these responses. In Study 1, we developed and validated the Responses to Sexual Rejection Scale (RSRS) to assess specific responses to sexual rejection. In Study 2, we investigated associations between each type of sexual rejection response with personality factors, relationship-oriented traits, and gender. Although these studies were exploratory in nature, conceptual and empirical evidence from the broader rejection literature suggest a few expected trends in responses to sexual rejection. First, incorporating research on responses to hypothetical sexual rejection scenarios (de Graaf & Sandfort, 2004), we expected to see emotional and behavioral responses to sexual rejection both positive and negative in valence. Second, given that feelings of hurt and anger are common affective reactions to interpersonal rejection (e.g., Lemay et al., 2012; Overall et al., 2014), we expected to see responses to sexual rejection grounded in these two types of emotions. Third, we also expected to see responses to sexual rejection that would involve elements of sexual persistence (e.g., Bushman et al., 2003). Finally, we expected to find gender differences in mean levels of responses to sexual rejection based on previous research on sexual rejection from strangers and casual sex partners (de Graaf & Sandfort, 2004; Wright et al., 2010).

2. Study 1

2.1. Pilot study

Using a bottom-up approach, we first conducted a pilot study to identify the different ways that people respond to sexual rejection from a romantic partner. We recruited a sample of 226 sexually active participants in romantic relationships from Mechanical Turk (see Table 1 for participant demographics in all studies). Participants responded to the following open-ended question: "How does your partner tend to react when they want to have sex but you let them know that you do not?" From these responses, we generated an extensive list of different responses to sexual rejection. We used thematic analysis to classify participants' open-ended responses into distinct themes based on key words or similar content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Items were generated using an inductive approach (Hinkin, 1998), grouping common thematic elements among participants' responses to produce an initial set of 40 items (see supplemental materials for additional information on the pilot study).

2.2. Method

Study 1 consisted of a new sample of 504 sexually active

Table 1 Participant demographics.

Sample	Sample						Age (years)			Relationship Length (yrs)	
	Initial N	Final N	% Female	% Caucasian	% Married	% Heterosexual	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD
Pilot study	232	226	46	74	34	87	34	12	18–73	6	8
Study 1	504	414	52	81	48	91	35	10	18–69	6	7
Study 2	496	411	55	79	43	90	33	11	18–67	7	8

participants in relationships recruited on Mechanical Turk. We conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the 40 response behaviors. A final sample of 414 participants remained after excluding those who did not meet eligibility criteria and failed attention checks (see supplemental materials). Participants rated the items on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very frequently*) preceded by the prompt: “Please rate how frequently you tend to react when you want to have sex but your partner lets you know that they do not?” We conducted EFA in SPSS, fitting maximum likelihood models with promax (i.e., oblique) rotation. Further, we used various criteria (i.e., parallel analysis, scree plot and nested-model comparisons) to guide our decision-making regarding factor retention (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999).

2.3. Results

Examination of the scree plot as well as parallel analysis suggested five factors (see supplemental materials). Thus, we used the step-up approach (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2008) to evaluate factor solutions in order, beginning with the first solution until the solutions were no longer sensible. This examination showed that extracting more than four factors did not increase the conceptual clarity of the factor structure; subsequent factors were either conceptually indistinguishable from already-extracted factors or poorly defined (e.g., no strong loadings). Thus, a four-factor solution was retained, which accounted for 57.8% of the total variance.

Factor loadings and the final RSRS items are displayed in Table 2. The first factor was labeled *understanding*, characterized by responsiveness and reaffirming positive regard for a partner. The second factor was labeled *resentful*, characterized by expressing anger and trying to make a partner feel bad. The third factor was labeled *insecure*, characterized by responding with hurt feelings or sadness. The fourth and final factor was labeled *enticing*, characterized by re-initiating sex and attempting to change a partner's mind.

Four items per factor were retained to reliably capture each of the four factors (Hinkin, 1998). Items with factor loadings lower than 0.40 or items with cross-loadings > 0.40 were excluded (Hatcher, 1994). We checked for redundancy to ensure items were clearly worded (Simms & Watson, 2007). Items for the final scale were selected based on factor loadings, thematic consistency, and conceptual clarity with each subscale (see supplement for additional details). This resulted in the 16-item RSRS, with four items per subscale. See Table 3 for correlations among subscales.

3. Study 2

We next conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm the factor structure of the RSRS in an independent sample. We tested the factor-structure for measurement invariance by gender to assess the equivalence of factor structure, factor loadings, and item intercepts (Brown, 2006) across men and women.¹ We tested associations with relevant individual personality traits (narcissism and aggression) and relationship-oriented traits (sexual communal strength and attachment anxiety) to establish convergent validity for the four RSRS factors.

Given our conceptualizations of each of the four response types, as well as our review of key individual difference factors outlined earlier, we expected *understanding* responses would be associated with sexual communal strength, a construct reflecting the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs (Muisse, Impett, Kogan, & Desmarais, 2013). Further, we expected *resentful* responses to be linked with trait aggression, as these responses entail demonstrations of hostility and anger. We expected *insecure* responses to be linked with attachment anxiety, as individuals high in anxiety are more likely to exhibit

emotional reactions of hurt and fear during distressing relationship events (Feeney, 2005; Overall et al., 2014). Finally, we expected *enticing* responses to be linked with narcissism given prior work suggesting that narcissists' self-serving interpretations, low empathy, and sense of entitlement can contribute to pursuing contact after sexual refusal (Blinkhorn et al., 2015; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). Finally, in light of prior findings on gender differences in responses to sexual rejection, we expected women to exhibit higher levels of insecure responses compared to men, and for men to exhibit higher levels of enticing responses compared to women.

3.1. Method

We recruited 496 individuals over the age of 18 who were in romantic relationships and sexually active using Mechanical Turk. A final sample of 411 participants remained after screening the data for failed attention checks and study eligibility criteria. Participants completed an online survey which included the 16-item RSRS. Each RSRS subscale had high internal reliability: understanding ($\alpha = 0.80$; $M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.06$), resentful ($\alpha = 0.83$; $M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.76$), insecure ($\alpha = 0.85$; $M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.99$), and enticing ($\alpha = 0.86$; $M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.03$). Participants also completed measures of sexual communal strength, aggression, attachment, and narcissism to establish convergent validity with the four factors.

3.1.1. Measures

3.1.1.1. Sexual communal strength. *Sexual communal strength* (Muisse et al., 2013) assessed the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs (e.g., “How far would you be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?”; 5 items; $\alpha = 0.75$; $M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.74$), measured as 0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*.

3.1.1.2. Aggression. Trait *aggression* was assessed using the Brief Aggression Questionnaire (e.g., “I have trouble controlling my temper,” 12 items; $\alpha = 0.85$; $M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.76$; Webster et al., 2014), measured as 1 = *extremely uncharacteristic of me* to 5 = *extremely characteristic of me*.

3.1.1.3. Attachment anxiety. The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire Short-Form (Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011) was used to measure *attachment anxiety* (e.g., “I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them,” 6 items; $\alpha = 0.85$; $M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.44$), measured as 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.²

3.1.1.4. Narcissism. The Dark Triad Dirty Dozen Scale (Jonason & Webster, 2010) was used to measure narcissism (e.g., “I tend to want others to admire me.”; 4 items, $\alpha = 0.84$; $M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.97$), measured as 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.¹

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Confirmatory factor analysis

We performed CFA using the lavaan package in R to confirm the four-factor structure of the RSRS. We evaluated model fit using a number of standard fit criteria, including a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) ≥ 0.90 , Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) close to 0.06, and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) ≤ 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The four-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2(98) = 325.575$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.933, RMSEA = 0.075 CI_{90%} [0.066, 0.084], SRMR = 0.064).

¹ Invariance by relationship status was also analyzed using the same approach as for gender (see supplemental materials for full details).

² See supplemental materials for results pertaining to additionally measured constructs of attachment avoidance, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

Table 2
Final RSRS, item loadings, and descriptive statistics.

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	Mean (1–5 scale)	SD
<i>Understanding</i>						
1. I let my partner know I still love them.	0.915	0.044	0.043	−0.052	3.33	1.40
2. I let my partner know I am still attracted to them.	0.817	0.126	−0.064	0.103	3.16	1.44
3. I am understanding and accepting.	0.620	−0.089	−0.077	−0.100	3.39	1.24
4. I try not to express negative emotions.	0.420	−0.145	0.107	0.107	3.19	1.32
<i>Resentful</i>						
5. I express anger at my partner.	0.037	0.882	−0.016	−0.027	1.61	0.95
6. I ignore my partner.	−0.058	0.682	0.086	−0.005	1.57	0.90
7. I accuse my partner of being selfish.	0.015	0.636	−0.004	0.079	1.51	0.92
8. I act cold towards my partner.	−0.068	0.558	0.249	−0.017	1.65	0.94
<i>Insecure</i>						
9. I am upset or sad	0.042	−0.040	0.844	0.066	2.25	1.15
10. I am offended/hurt.	0.040	0.052	0.811	−0.038	2.15	1.15
11. I take it as an indication that my partner doesn't find me attractive.	−0.030	0.043	0.779	−0.059	1.97	1.23
12. I think something is wrong in the relationship.	−0.027	0.007	0.763	0.025	2.07	1.18
<i>Enticing</i>						
13. I attempt to change my partner's mind (e.g. try to tempt or seduce them).	0.007	−0.055	0.046	0.865	2.45	1.23
14. I continue trying to convince my partner to have sex.	−0.117	0.102	−0.085	0.839	2.05	1.14
15. I try initiating sex with my partner again.	0.018	0.036	−0.030	0.801	2.28	1.21
16. I ask if there is anything I can do to get my partner in the mood.	0.159	−0.074	0.080	0.615	2.44	1.28

Note: Bolded numbers indicate factor loadings for each subscale's items.

Table 3
Intercorrelations between RSRS subscales in Study 1.

	Understanding	Resentful	Insecure	Enticing
Understanding	1	−0.14**	−0.04	0.32***
Resentful	−	1	0.65***	0.35***
Insecure	−	−	1	0.30***
Enticing	−	−	−	1

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.

3.2.2. Convergent validity

We next examined partial correlations between each sexual rejection response and the individual difference measures, shown in Table 4. By controlling for all other RSRS subscales in each test, we were able to examine how each response is uniquely associated with each individual difference measure. Consistent with hypotheses, individuals higher in sexual communal strength exhibited greater understanding responses. Trait aggression uniquely predicted greater resentful responses. Attachment anxiety predicted both insecure and resentful responses, but the correlation was stronger for insecure responses. Finally, both trait narcissism and sexual communal strength were positively correlated with enticing responses.

3.2.3. Measurement invariance and gender differences

We used the semTools package in R to test measurement invariance across gender to determine whether the four-factor SRS measurement model applies equally to both women and men. A CFI decrease of ≤ 0.01 from less constrained to more constrained models would

Table 4
Partial correlations between RSRS subscales and personality measures.

Measure	Understanding	Resentful	Insecure	Enticing
Sexual communal strength	0.08*	−0.17*	0.00	0.22***
Aggression	0.00	0.31***	0.01	0.00
Attachment anxiety	0.04	0.37***	0.60***	−0.02
Narcissism	−0.04	0.22**	0.04	0.16**

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.

indicate evidence of measurement invariance between nested models (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). We found evidence for three levels of measurement invariance across participant gender—configural (construct), metric (factor loading), and scalar (item intercept) (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002)—indicating that men's and women's means on the RSRS subscales can be compared (see Table 5). As shown in Table 6, men and women did not differ in their levels of understanding or resentful responses. In line with our predictions, women reported higher levels of insecure responses than men, whereas men reported higher levels of enticing responses than women.

4. Discussion

In two studies, we developed the RSRS to identify—for the first time—the unique ways people respond to sexual rejection in romantic relationships. We assessed convergent validity with relevant personality and relationship variables, and demonstrated measurement invariance across gender. Consistent with predictions, we found associations between the four distinct response types and relevant individual difference factors, including sexual communal strength, aggression, attachment anxiety, and narcissism. While the correlation between sexual communal strength and understanding was low, this may be due to high sexual communal strength being more about the willingness to have sex. Indeed, research shows that high sexual communal understanding, or being responsive to a partner's need not to have sex (Muise et al., 2017) is a distinct construct which we expect would be more strongly linked to understanding responses.

Further, consistent with previous work on sexual scripts (e.g., O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996), women endorsed greater insecure responses to sexual rejection than men, whereas men endorsed greater enticing responses than women. Previous research has focused predominantly on affective reactions to sexual refusals with strangers or hypothetical casual sex partners (de Graaf & Sandfort, 2004; Wright et al., 2010).

Table 5
Fit statistics for measurement invariance by gender.

	$\chi^2(df)$	CFI	RMSEA	ΔCFI
Configural	439.37 (196)	0.929	0.078	−
Metric	460.07 (208)	0.926	0.077	0.003
Scalar	477.13 (220)	0.925	0.075	0.001

Table 6
Gender differences in RSRS subscale means.

	Men <i>M (SE)</i>	Women <i>M (SE)</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	η_p^2
Understanding	3.33 (0.08)	3.22 (0.71)	409	1.19	0.00
Resentful	1.62 (0.79)	1.61 (0.82)	409	0.23	0.00
Insecure	1.93 (0.89)	2.17 (1.13)	409	4.28*	0.01
Enticing	2.54 (1.04)	2.13 (1.01)	409	15.09***	0.04

* $p < .05$.

*** $p < .001$.

Extending this literature, we found key responses to sexual rejection in relationships to be additionally characterized by specific behaviors (*enticing*) and prosocial motivations (*understanding*).

While beyond the scope of the current paper, future research should explore several important aspects related to the RSRS. For example, research should explore how responses to rejection may be linked with the specific ways partners deliver sexual rejection (e.g., verbal and non-verbal ways), as well as how this may shape relationship and sexual outcomes. In conjunction with previous research describing the distinct ways people initiate (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2011) and reject a partner for sex (Byers & Heinlein, 1989; Kim et al., 2018), exploring these processes in dyadic samples—as sexual rejection dynamics are inherently dyadic in nature—would help illuminate how couples can engage in more effective sexual communication patterns during situations in which partners experience discrepancies in sexual desire. A limitation of the current research is that we did not assess how the RSRS may generalize or apply to non-sexual forms of rejection in relationships. Future work would be well-served to investigate potential differences in the structure and effects of rejection dynamics between sexual and non-sexual relationship domains given research highlighting how communication towards sexual and non-sexual relationship issues differs due to the sensitive nature of the sexual domain (Rehman et al., 2017).

The findings also have important implications for research on sexual communication, as well as for therapists working with couples seeking to manage the distress associated with desire discrepancies (Davies et al., 1999). With future work investigating the predominant ways individuals respond to sexual rejection and their links with relationship outcomes, couple therapists and educators may be able to help romantic partners engage in more effective communication patterns during sexual rejection, leading to better downstream consequences for relationship and sexual quality. Prior work on how couples manage more general relationship conflict has shown that the strategies that protect against emotional distress in the short-term are distinct from the ones that enable couples to resolve conflict over time (Overall & McNulty, 2017). Similarly, the effects of understanding, resentful, insecure, and enticing responses may be different in the moment when people respond to rejection versus over the course of time in relationships. For example, expressing understanding of a partner's sexual rejection may enable the partner to remain satisfied in the moment, but chronic expressions of understanding may weaken their impact and ultimately be less effective at targeting desired partner change concerning sexual rejection behaviors. In addition, results showed that enticing responses were associated with sexual communal strength and narcissism. This link perhaps suggests that enticing behaviors can at times reflect an expression of desire for a partner and may be in the interest of communal need fulfillment, but in other contexts may come from a place of entitlement and precipitate adverse relationship outcomes. Such questions speak to the importance of assessing the perceived motivations behind the RSRS responses and serve as an interesting avenue for future work.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.02.039>.

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