

## **Relational and Partner-Specific Factors Influencing Black Heterosexual Women's Initiation of Sexual Intercourse and Orgasm Frequency**

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### **Abstract:**

There is limited research on how Black women's perspectives of their relationship influence their sexual experiences (i.e., sex initiation and orgasm frequency) in early adulthood. This quantitative study examined the association between relationship and partner-specific factors (e.g., relationship satisfaction, love, egalitarianism, partner's age, physical violence) with the sexual experiences of 216 Black heterosexual women (ages 19–27) from Wave III of the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), the majority of the sample report being in long-standing, committed, loving, monogamous, and egalitarian relationships with older men. Most participants reported having an orgasm more than half the time when they have sexual intercourse (62%), and that they equally initiate sex with their partners (55%), with only 18% reporting that they initiate sex most of the time. Results indicated that relationship and partner-specific factors were significantly associated with initiating sexual intercourse and/or orgasm frequency. Egalitarianism was the only factor that was significantly associated with orgasm frequency and the three types of sex initiation. Physical violence and verbal threats were associated with equal initiation and partner initiation. There were no significant associations between any partner-specific factors and women initiating sex more often in their relationship. Implications for sex research and sexuality education are discussed.

**Keywords:** Black women | orgasm | relationships | sex initiation | intimate justice

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

In the United States, Black sexuality and relationships have often been viewed from the perspective of negativity and deficiency (Collins 2004; Sobo 1993). As a result, there is limited

research focused on relationship qualities and sexual experiences outside of a risk paradigm (Awosan and Opara 2016; Bethea and Allen 2013; Dogan et al. 2018), especially from the Black woman's perspective. In order to move the field of sexual health forward, it is crucial to focus on Black women's sexuality, healthy relationships, and the presence of pleasurable, satisfying, loving experiences— not merely the absence of sexually transmitted infections (Landers and Kapadia 2020). Understanding how relationship- and partner-specific factors influence the sexual experiences (i.e., orgasm frequency, sex initiation) of Black heterosexual women is essential to advancing Black sexology utilizing an intimate justice framework.

### **Initiating Sexual Intercourse**

Despite the research on the sexual behaviors of Black women, little is known about how often they initiate sexual intercourse in their relationships. Understanding how sexual activity is negotiated in romantic relationships may provide insight into Black women's sexual and relationship satisfaction and have implications for their future sexual functioning (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2011). According to sexual script theory (Simon and Gagnon 1987, 2011), patterns of sex initiation tend to follow traditional gender ideologies. Traditional gender ideologies create different sexual scripts for women compared to men, including their abilities to control and direct sexual interactions, and the expectation that they will be passive rather than active participants during sexual encounters (Hartley and Drew 2002; Holland et al. 2003; Morgan and Zurbriggen 2007) consistent with sexual norms of masculinity (Montemurro and Riehm-Murphy 2019). In turn women who initiate sex are often judged or shamed for their behaviors (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003). However, research has shown that people often rewrite scripts to fit their relationships. In modern day relationships women often resist being sexually passive and men appreciate when women initiate sex (Montemurro and Riehm-Murphy 2019).

Recent research has shown that women were just as likely to initiate sex as their male partners (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2011). In a qualitative study, Bowleg et al. (2004) found that approximately half of the Black women in the sample did not prescribe to traditional sex roles. Out of 14 Black women interviewed, three reported initiating sex most of the time, and five equally initiated sex with their partners (Bowleg et al. 2004). Another study, conducted with young Black heterosexual couples, found the male partner primarily initiated sex and controlled the pace of their sexual encounter (Seal et al. 2008).

While traditional heterosexual sex roles provide a foundation for early sexual encounters in relationships, there is evidence that sexual behavior is becoming more egalitarian over time, with both men and women initiating sex equally (Bowleg et al. 2004; Seal et al. 2008). Women who followed traditional gendered sexual scripts reported that sexual intercourse initiated by their partner was more pleasurable for them than when they initiated sex (O'Sullivan and Byers 1992; Seal et al. 2008). However, Vannier and O'Sullivan (2011) found that sexual enjoyment was not linked to who initiates sex, instead as relationship commitment and length of relationship increased, people were less likely to conform to traditional scripts. More research is needed to understand the link between relationship and partner-specific factors that influence Black women's decision to initiate sex. Understanding patterns of sex initiation, as well as barriers and predictors to their initiation, may influence their experiences of sexual pleasure and orgasms.

### **Orgasm**

Results of the 2018 National Survey on Sexual Health and Behavior showed that 68% of Black women experienced an orgasm during their most recent sexual experience (Townes and Herbenick 2020). Although this percentage is high an orgasm gap between Black men and women exists. Society teaches Black men to openly desire and seek pleasure, while Black women may struggle with achieving orgasm due to societal sexual repression (Staff 2019). If a woman experiences orgasms with her partner frequently and consistently, it may indicate egalitarian sex roles within their relationship, that she has knowledge of her body, and is comfortable communicating her needs to her partner and prioritizing her pleasure (Pearson 2018). While orgasm frequency provides limited information related to women's sexual pleasure, infrequent orgasms is one of the top two frequently reported sexual concerns for women seeking sex therapy (Meston and Buss 2007; Meston et al. 2004). Therefore, it is important to investigate what relationship and partner-specific factors are associated with Black women's orgasm frequency in early adulthood.

### **Relationship Factors**

Several factors may affect Black women's sexual experiences including love, relationship satisfaction, and egalitarianism. Black couples tend to be more egalitarian and have greater levels of gender role flexibility in their relationship compared to White couples (Boyd-Franklin 2013; Fasula et al. 2014; Willie and Reddick 2010). Overall, couples in more egalitarian relationships are more likely to report higher relationship stability and satisfaction (Marks et al. 2008). Egalitarian relationships are associated with positive outcomes (e.g., emotional satisfaction) for Black couples, but only when both partners want an egalitarian relationship (Marks et al. 2008). Relationships satisfaction and emotional connection have been shown to be significant predictors of enjoyable sexual experiences among Black women and men (Dogan et al. 2018; Fahs and Plante 2017; Hargons et al. 2018). Aspects of enjoyable sexual experiences include non-sexual physical pleasure, emotional connection with their partner, and orgasms (Hargons et al. 2018; Ware et al. 2020).

Societal norms insist young women should engage in sexual intercourse in the context of committed monogamous relationships and have sex because they love that person, with little attention to pleasure (Crawford and Popp 2003; Mehta et al. 2011; Sobo 1993; Tanenbaum 2000; Wilkins 2012). As a result of sexual double standards, young women often report love and romance as central meanings to their definitions of sex and relationships, with an absence of pleasure and desire (Fasula et al. 2014; Tolman 1994). When women report feelings of sexual desire, these feelings are often linked to love, intimacy, and relationships, demonstrating an association between physical experiences and relationship dynamics (Ozer et al. 2003; Seal et al. 2008; Tolman 2002). The amount of love Black women has for their partner may affect their sexual experiences such as orgasm frequency and willingness to initiate sexual intercourse; however, perceptions of their partner's love for them may not have the same effect. Couples who reported having sex for more physical reasons instead of emotional intimacy were more likely to report traditional male-initiation patterns (Seal et al. 2008). Further investigation of the influence of relationship factors such as love, relationship satisfaction, and egalitarianism on who initiates sex in their relationship and pleasure (e.g., orgasm) is needed.

### **Partner-Specific Factors**

Romantic scripts tend to include desire for emotional intimacy and expectations that partners will be faithful, loving, and supportive (Shelton-Wheeler 2013), however, several partner-specific factors can influence Black women's relationships and sexual experiences including partner concurrency, religiosity, age differences, partner's finances, and intimate partner violence. Some Black women accept their male partner having another partner for social (i.e., gender and cultural norms, sex ratio imbalance) and interpersonal reasons (i.e., comfort, connection, attachment) (Adimora et al. 2002; Lima et al. 2018; Morris et al. 2009), even if they prefer to be in a monogamous relationship. Black women are the most religious group of people in the United States; therefore, their partner's religiosity may impact their spiritual intimacy (shared thoughts and feelings about religion) (Bagarozzi 2014) as well as sexual intimacy and outcomes. Older partners also tend to have more power in relationships (Seal et al. 2008). Large age differences in Black heterosexual couples are associated with male-initiated sex versus female-initiated sex (Seal et al. 2008). Other partner-specific factors, such as making a large financial investment with a partner and physical violence and threats, can create power imbalances in relationships. In one qualitative study, Black women defined power as being able to make decisions including having money, feeling respected by their partner and having or withholding sex (Harvey and Bird 2004). In another qualitative study, this one investigating power and Black men, power was defined by money, sex, and who has the most resources in the relationship. Although most men did not mention violence, one participant described the threat of physical violence as a source of power to make his partner scared of him and "keep her in check" (Senn et al. 2009). Intimate partner violence is a public health issue that can be associated with negative sexual and reproductive health implications for women (Black et al. 2011). Black women continue to have higher rates of intimate partner violence than their White counterparts (National Organization for Women 2020) however, there is limited research on how violence and other potential sources of power affect Black women's sexual experiences beyond condom use and negotiation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Intimate justice is a theoretical framework that links experiences of inequity with how individuals imagine and report the quality of their sexual relationships and experiences (McClelland 2010). Intimate justice encourages researchers to question how social conditions and characteristics such as racial and gender stereotypes, stigma, and personal and relational characteristics impact what individuals feel they deserve and what they expect in their intimate lives (McClelland 2010). Intimate justice requires an examination of factors that may create barriers to sexual wellbeing and pleasurable sexual experiences such as issues of power.

Nussbaum (2011) describes ten central capabilities (personal abilities within the politic, social, and personal environment) that people must be able to exercise freely. Two of these, bodily integrity and capability of emotion, are directly relevant to an intimate justice framework. Body integrity means Black women must have the capacity to move freely without fear of violence, have opportunities for sexual pleasure (orgasms and beyond), and be able to exercise choice in reproduction. Capability of emotion means Black women need to be able to have attachments to other people and experience reciprocal love. This study aims to explore these two capabilities, from an intimate justice perspective, in heterosexual Black women by exploring the mechanisms through which their relationships and partners influence their sexual experiences.

## **Purpose**

There is a need for research that provides a more nuanced understanding of Black women's sexual experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the association between relationship (e.g., love, relationship satisfaction, and egalitarianism) and partner-specific (e.g., age, partner's religion, partner concurrency) factors and sexual experiences (i.e., orgasm frequency and sex initiation). We specifically examined the following research questions:

1. What is the association between relationship factors and orgasm frequency?
2. What is the association between partner-specific factors and orgasm frequency?
3. What is the association between relationship factors and initiating sexual intercourse with a partner?
4. What is the association between partner-specific factors and initiating sexual intercourse with a partner?

## **Method**

### **Sample**

In this study, restricted Wave III data from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) data were analyzed. Add Health is a nationally representative longitudinal study of seventh- to 12th-grade students who were first interviewed during the 1994–1995 school year (Wave I). The Add Health sample of 20,745 students was taken from a random sample of high schools in the United States that was stratified by region, urbanicity, size, type, racial composition, and grade span. Wave III was collected between 2001 and 2002 via an in-home survey. The variables in this study come from the relationship section of the survey. In order to receive these questions, respondents had to be in a relationship for three months or longer. Participants who were missing data were excluded from this study for a final sample of  $N = 216$ . The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina Greensboro approved this secondary data analysis.

## **Measures**

### **Predictor Variables**

#### **Relationship Factors**

**Relationship Satisfaction** Participants were asked: "How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner?" Response options were on a 5-point Likert scale of (1) very satisfied to (5) very dissatisfied. Response options were reverse coded to higher scores mean more satisfaction.

**Love Partner** Participants were asked: "How much do you love your partner?" Response options were (0) a lot, (1) somewhat, (2) a little, and (3) not at all. Response options were reverse coded, so higher scores indicate more love.

**Partner's Perceived Amount of Love** Participants were asked: "How much do you think your

partner loves you?” Response options were (0) a lot, (1) somewhat, (2) a little, and (3) not at all. Response options were reverse coded, so higher scores indicate a perception of more love.

Egalitarianism Participants were asked: “Considering what you put into the relationship compared to what you get out of it and what your partner puts into it compared to what they get out of it, who has the better deal in the relationship?” Response options were (1) I am getting a much better deal, (2) I am getting a somewhat better deal, (3) we are both getting an equally good or equal bad deal, (4) my partner is getting the better deal, and (5) my partner is getting a much better deal. Response options were combined into (1) I am getting a better deal, (2) we have an equal deal, and (3) my partner is getting a better deal. Three dichotomous variables were created, mirroring these three responses.

### Partner-Specific Factors

Partner’s Religion Religious importance was not measured among partners, so a measure of church attendance was used. Response options were (0) never, (1) less than once a year, (2) once or twice a year, (3) several times a year, (4) once a month, (5) two or three times a month, (6) nearly every week, (7) once a week, and (8) several times a week. These response options were combined into (0) never, (1) less than once a year, (2) yearly, (3) monthly, and (4) weekly.

Partner Has Concurrent Partners Participants were asked if they perceived that their partner had other partners. Response options were yes, no, and I don’t know. A dichotomized variable was created, and those who said “I don’t know” were combined with the yes category.

Financial Investment Participants were asked if they had ever made a purchase of over \$500 with a partner. Response options were yes or no.

Age Difference Participants were asked to report their partner’s current age. The participants’ age was subtracted from their partner’s age (in years). A dichotomous variable for having an older partner was created due to the power imbalances that may occur within relationships from having an older partner (Bauermeister et al. 2010; Seal et al. 2008). In this study we coded older partners as two years or more. As a sensitivity test we reran select models changing the cutoff to 3+ years older to match previous literature on older partners; these results did not significantly change results.

Time Known Before Having Vaginal Sex with Partner Participants were asked how long did you know the partner before you had vaginal sex with them. Response options ranged from (1) one day or less to (7) a year or more.

Partner Violence Physical violence was measured through two questions. Participants were asked to report how often their partner has ever slapped, kicked, or hit them. Participants were also asked to report how often their partner threatened them with violence, pushed or shoved them, or thrown something at them that could hurt them. Response options for both questions were never, once, twice, 3–5 times, 6–10 times, 11–20 times, and more than 20 times. Since the majority of participants reported no partner violence and less than 1% that reported experiencing violence or threats more than 20 times, two dichotomous variables were created. For each question, those

who reported any physical violence or threats were indicated as (1), and those who never experienced physical violence were indicated as (0).

### Outcome Variables

Sex Initiation by Partner Participants were asked: “In all the types of sexual relations that you and your partner have which of you typically initiates sex?” Response options were (1) I always do, (2) I usually do, (3) we initiate equally often, (4) partner usually does, and (5) partner always does. The response options were collapsed into three groups: (1) I initiate, (2) equally initiate, and (3) my partner initiates.

Orgasm Participants were asked: “When you and your partner have sexual relations, how often do you have an orgasm, that is, climax or come?” Response options were (0) never/hardly, (1) less than half the time, (2) about half the time, (3) more than half the time, and (4) most of the time/every time. This variable was dichotomized into those that have an orgasm more than half the time as (1) and all other response options as (0), similar to previous research (Pearson 2018; Scroggs et al. 2019).

### Covariates

Age Participants’ current age was calculated using the date of the in-home survey administration and their birth date.

Religious Importance Participants were asked: “How important is religion to you?” Response options were (0) not important, (1) somewhat important, (2) very important, and (3) more important than anything else.

Relationship Length Participants were asked: “How old were you when your relationship began with your current partner?” To calculate their relationship length in years, their age when the relationship began was subtracted from their current age.

### Analyses

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were conducted. Per the Add Health Guidelines (Chen 2014), grand sample weights for Wave III were used and survey subpopulation analyses. In order to address Research Questions 1 and 2, two weighted logistic regressions were conducted examining the association between relationship factors and partner-specific factors with orgasm frequency. In order to address Research Questions 3 and 4, three weighted logistic regressions were conducted to examine the association between relationship factors and partner-specific factors with initiating sex. Separate models were used to examine the three dichotomous outcomes of participant initiates sex, equal sex initiation, and partner initiates sex. In the models examining sex initiation, the participant having a better deal was the referent group with equal deal, and partner has the better deal included in the model.

In all analyses examining relationship factors, participant’s age, religious importance, and the length of the relationship were included in the models as control variables. These three variables were not included in the models examining partner-specific factors due to cell sizes that

were either zero or close to zero which resulted in extremely wide confidence intervals. STATA version 16 was used for all analyses.

## Results

### Sample Characteristics

Table 1 details the demographics of the sample along with their relationship characteristics and partner-specific factors. Participants were Black women with an average age of 22.9 years (range 19–27). The majority of the sample report being in long-standing, committed, loving, monogamous, and egalitarian relationships with older men. The average length of the relationship reported by participants was 4.03 years (ranging from >1 to 11 years). Most of the women (40%) reported having known their partners for over a year before engaging in vaginal sex. Other participants reported waiting 6 months (20.4%), 1–5 months (21.7%), 2–4 weeks (7.4%), 1–2 weeks (2.0%), 2–7 days (1.8%), and one day or less (2.1%) before having sex with their partner. Age differences between participants and their partners ranged from partners being 2 years younger to 27 years older than participants. On average, partners were three years older than participants. More than half of the participants (69%) reported having made a significant financial investment with their partner.

Religion was important to most of the sample (78.0%), but their partner's church attendance was variable. Approximately 23% of participants believed that their partner had other partners. The majority of women reported having an orgasm more than half the time they have sex (62%), and that they equally initiated sex with their partners. Only 18% reported initiating sex most of the time. Finally, 19% reported that their partner had either hit, slapped, or kicked them at least once, and 24% reported their partner had threatened them with violence and/or pushed, shoved, or threw something at them at least once.

### Orgasm Frequency

Research questions 1 and 2 concerned associations between relationship factors (Question 1) and partner-specific factors (Question 2) with the frequency of Black women's orgasms. Table 2 details the significant associations found between relationship factors and orgasm frequency. Participants who reported more love for their partner, (OR = 9.30,  $p = .01$ ), held higher perceptions that their partner loved them (OR = 115.58,  $p = .005$ ), endorsed relationship egalitarianism (OR = 5.81,  $p = .005$ ), and had higher relationship satisfaction (OR = 32.79,  $p = .01$ ) were significantly more likely to report having an orgasm more than half the time they engaged in sex with their partner. Large odds ratios for partner's perceived love and relationship satisfaction are a result of a ceiling effect, with few people being in the null category. Thus, people who are satisfied with their relationship or do not think their partner loves them have very low odds of having an orgasm more than half the time. The perception that the partner had a better deal was not significantly associated with orgasm frequency. Among the control variables, religious importance was significant. As religious importance increased, the odds of reporting having an orgasm more than half the time significantly decreased (OR = .32,  $p = .01$ ). However, relationship length and participant age were not significantly associated with orgasm frequency.

There were also significant associations between partner-specific factors and orgasm frequency (see Table 2). Participants who had a partner who attended church more frequently

(OR = 1.55,  $p = .006$ ) and those who reported knowing their partner longer before having vaginal sex (OR = 1.39,  $p = .01$ ) were significantly more likely to have an orgasm more than half the time. Partner's age, partner concurrency, physical threats and violence, and financial investments were not significantly associated with orgasm frequency.

**Table 1.** Weighted relational and partner-specific factors, and sexual outcomes (N=217)

Variable	Proportion or mean $\pm$ SD
Age	22.9 $\pm$ .15 [19–27]
<i>Religious importance</i>	
Not important	.0566
Fairly unimportant	.1647
Fairly important	.6451
Very important	.1337
<b>Relational factors</b>	
<i>Satisfied in relationship</i>	
Yes	.8918
No	.1082
<i>Love partner</i>	
Not at all	.0089
A little	.0335
Somewhat	.0655
A lot	.8921
<i>Partner's perceived love</i>	
Not at all	.0051
A little	.0237
Somewhat	.0707
A lot	.9004

<i>Relationship egalitarianism</i>	
Participant has better deal	.1817
Equal deal	.6800
Partner has better deal	.1384
Length of relationship in years	± .56 [ $< 1$ year to 11 years]
<i>Time known before vaginal intercourse</i>	
One day or less	.0210
2-7 days	.0179
1-2 weeks	.0203
2-4 weeks	.0738
1-5 months	.1977
6-11 months	.2398
A year or more	.4296
<b>Partner-specific factors</b>	
<i>Partner church attendance</i>	
Never	.1875
Less than once a year	.1457
Yearly	.2872
Monthly	.1733
Weekly	.2063
<i>Partner concurrency</i>	
No	.7487
Yes	.2337
Doesn't know	.0176
<i>Financial investment &gt; \$500</i>	

Yes	.6939
No	.3061
<i>Partner age</i>	
Younger	.0134
Same age ( $\pm$ 1 year)	.3830
Older	.6036
<i>Partner violence (slap, kick hit)</i>	
No	.8136
Yes	.1864
<i>Partner violence (push, shove, threaten)</i>	
No	.7593
Yes	.2407
<b>Outcome Variables</b>	
<i>Orgasm frequency</i>	
Less than half the time	.2240
Half the time	.1594
More than half the time	.6196
<i>Type of sex initiation</i>	
Participant	.1766
Equal initiation	.5540
Partner	.2694

There were also significant associations between partner-specific factors and orgasm frequency (see Table 2). Participants who had a partner who attended church more frequently (OR = 1.55,  $p = .006$ ) and those who reported knowing their partner longer before having vaginal sex (OR = 1.39,  $p = .01$ ) were significantly more likely to have an orgasm more than half the time. Partner's age, partner concurrency, physical threats and violence, and financial investments were not significantly associated with orgasm frequency.

**Table 2.** Weighted logistic Regression of Factors Predicting Orgasm Frequency

	OR	95% CI	<i>P</i> value
<i>Relationship factors (N = 174)</i>			
Love for partner	9.30	3.38-24.43	.01*
Partner's perceived love	115.58	4.83-27.66	.005*
Egalitarianism	5.81	3.32-10.07	.005*
Partner has a better deal	4.44	.83-23.8	.06
Relationship satisfaction	32.79	6.11-175.91	.01*
Length of relationship	.87	.67-1.12	.13
Religious importance	.32	.19-1.91	.01*
Age	1.09	.58-2.03	.61
<i>Partner-specific factors (N=162)</i>			
Older partner	4.06	.02-78.26	.18
Partner has other partners	.84	.48-1.45	.29
Partner violence (push, shove, threaten)	.51	.03-8.08	.40
Partner violence (slap, kick, hit)	6.17	.66-57.40	.07
Financial investment > \$500	2.60	.21-31.19	.25
Partner Religious Attendance	1.55	1.33-1.80	.006**
Time known before vaginal sex	1.39	1.17-1.63	.01*

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

### Sex Initiation

Questions 3 and 4 concerned associations between relationship factors and partner-specific factors with sex initiation. Table 3 shows the patterns of associations across all three models. In the models that examined relationship factors, there were more significant associations with partners initiating sex and the fewest significant associations with participant initiating sex. Egalitarianism was the only variable associated with all three outcomes. The covariates (length of relationship, religious importance, and age) were not associated with sex initiation. Specific

findings are detailed below by model.

### Participant Initiates Sex

The only significant association in this model was egalitarianism. Having an egalitarian relationship significantly decreased the likelihood that the participant reported initiating sex most often, compared to participants who reported having a better deal (OR = .05,  $p = .008$ ).

### Equal Initiation

Egalitarianism was the only significant variable associated with equal initiation of sex. Perceiving an egalitarian relationship (OR = 5.23,  $p = .01$ ) increased the likelihood of equal initiation of sex as compared to the perception of the participant having a better deal.

### Partner Initiates Sex

All relationship variables had a significant association with the perception that the participant's partner initiates sex more often. Participants who reported greater love for their partner were significantly less likely to report that their partner initiates sex (OR = .23,  $p = .001$ ). Greater perception of partner's love increased the likelihood of reporting their partner initiates sex most of the time (OR = 11.25,  $p = .006$ ). Participants who reported egalitarian relationships (OR = 5.21,  $p = .003$ ) or that their partner had the better deal in the relationship (OR = 1.93,  $p = .03$ ), were more likely to report that their partner initiates sex compared to participants who believed that they have the better deal. Finally, as participants' relationship satisfaction decreased, the likelihood of the partner initiating sex most of the time increased (OR = .09,  $p = .035$ ).

A slightly different pattern emerged for models that examined partner-specific factors and sex initiation. Overall, there were significant associations with partners initiating sex and equal initiation but no significant associations with the participant initiating sex. Also, partner's age, partner concurrency, financial investments, and partner's religious attendance were not predictors of any type of sex initiation. Significant variables are detailed below by model.

### Equal Initiation

Both violence variables were significantly associated with equal initiation of sex. Participants who reported a history of partner violence that involved hitting, slapping and/or kicking were less likely to report that they equally initiate sex in their relationship (OR = .28,  $p = .047$ ). Participants who reported that their partner has verbally threatened, pushed, shoved, and/or thrown something at them were significantly more likely to report equal initiation of sex with their partner (OR = 5.16,  $p = .017$ ).

### Partner Initiates Sex

Both violence variables were significantly associated with partner initiation of sex. Participants who reported a history of partner violence that involved hitting, slapping and/or kicking were less likely to report that their partner initiates sex in their relationship (OR = .16,  $p = .04$ ).

Participants who reported that their partner had verbally threatened pushed, shoved, and/or thrown something at them were significantly more likely to report their partner initiating sex (OR = 7.39,  $p = .01$ ). In addition, participants who reported knowing their partner for a longer time before having sex were less likely to report their partner initiating sex (OR = .85,  $p = .009$ ).

**Table 3.** Weighted logistic regression predicting sex initiation

	Participant initiates sex			Equally Initiates sex			Partner initiates sex		
	OR	95% CI	p Value	OR	95% CI	p Value	OR	95% CI	p Value
<i>Relationship factors (N = 174)</i>									
Love for partner	.82	.30–2.25	.57	–	–	–	.23	.19–.27	.001**
Partner's perceived love	.47	.77–2.97	.28	–	–	–	11.25	4.96–25.53	.006**
Relationship satisfaction	.45	.01–38.86	.61	–	–	–	.09	.01–66	.035*
Egalitarianism	.05	.009–4.52	.008**	5.23	2.06–13.25	.01*	5.21	3.63–7.54	.003**
Partner has better deal	.09	.001–.08	.22	2.18	.65–7.27	.13	1.93	1.15–3.25	.03*
Length of relationship	.81	.51–1.27	.22	1.02	.75–1.40	.81	1.01	.88–1.16	.75
Religious importance	2.21	.06–75.9	.55	1.03	.56–1.86	.90	1.09	.24–5.05	.82
Age	1.13	.87–1.46	.23	1.07	.57–1.98	.76	.96	.74–1.23	.53
<i>Partner-specific factors (N = 162)</i>									
Older partner	1.31	.14–11.94	.72	1.13	.36–3.56	.76	.76	.07–8.00	.74
Partner has other partners	1.45	.52–3.97	.33	1.04	.54–1.95	.86	.79	.33–1.90	.45
Partner violence (push, shove, threaten)	.19	.004–9.03	.26	0.28	.09–.97	.047*	7.39	2.53–7.92	.01*
Partner violence (slap, kick, hit)	1.08	.03–9.02	.95	5.16	1.73–15.33	.017*	.16	.04–.82	.04*
Financial investment > \$500	.64	.03–41.68	.83	1.38	.05–34.37	.77	.84	.16–4.48	.75
Partner religious attendance	.90	.39–1.82	.46	.93	.32–2.69	.85	1.12	.79–.92	.81
Time known before sex with partner	.84	.08–3.0	.53	1.27	.05–2.16	.25	.85	.02–46.52	.009**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . Due to sparse and empty cells for partner, partner's perceived love, and relationship satisfaction in the equal initiation analyses these variables were Omitted

## Discussion

This study aimed to fill the gap in the literature related to Black women's relationships, love, and sexuality by investigating if relationship- and partner-specific factors influenced their sexual experiences. Most women reported having orgasms more than half the time and equal initiation of sexual encounters, indicating higher levels of sexual agency and pleasure than traditional sexual scripts would indicate. In our sample, young Black women reported being in loving, long-term, egalitarian relationships, which has been underrepresented in the literature on Black women's sexuality and relationships. Issues that are more salient to Black women (i.e., higher rates of domestic violence, egalitarianism, and religiosity) were significantly associated with their orgasm frequencies and/or initiating sex.

Based on sexual scripts theory, there are several scripts and stereotypes that Black women have to navigate during their lifespan. Overall, this study did not find that all Black women were adhering to traditional sexual scripts, as they reported fairly balanced initiation with their partners and equal relationships. These findings may be contributed to two things: 1) changes in sexual scripts, with it becoming more acceptable for women to initiate sex and/or 2) that there are certain personality traits and relationship characteristics that lead to equal initiation (Gonzalez-Rivas and Peterson 2020). In fact, egalitarianism was the only factor that was significant in all four models. This highlights the positive effects of relationship egalitarianism in Black heterosexual sexual relationships. Sexual script theory suggests that egalitarianism may be

more important for sexual pleasure for women than men because of their internalized gendered sexual scripts and sexual double standards (Marston and King 2006; Simon and Gagnon 1987; Tolman 2002). Equity theory suggests that when women are in egalitarian relationships, sexual dissatisfaction is minimized (Hatfield and Sprecher 1995; Sprecher 2002) because both parties are expected to feel sexual pleasure equally (Galinsky and Sonenstein 2013). Other studies using Add Health data have also found that relationship equity (egalitarianism) has been linked to sexual satisfaction (Galinsky and Sonenstein 2013).

It may be easier for Black women to develop intimacy and emotional connection in egalitarian relationships because they feel like their partner cares about their wants and needs and that they are valued. Emotional connection is a part of the intimacy that Black heterosexual women report as being a pleasurable part of sex (Dogan et al. 2018; Hargons et al. 2018). According to the theory of orgasm (Mah and Binik 2001), people who are in committed relationships feel less anxious about having sexual intercourse and are more motivated to invest in each other and learn to please one another to make the experience pleasurable for both parties. Black women who reported that they knew their partner for a longer amount of time before engaging in vaginal sex were more likely to report having an orgasm more than half the time. More long-term relationships may permit greater freedom for both men and women to initiate sex as they wish (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2010). In this study, women who reported knowing their partners a longer amount of time before vaginal sex were less likely to report their partner initiated sex most of the time. Traditional sexual scripts tend to hold more weight at the beginning of heterosexual relationships; however, as the relationship progresses, women care less about breaking social norms (Seal et al. 2008; Vannier and O'Sullivan 2011). The longer time that someone waits to have sex, the increased likelihood of building an intimate connection with their partner (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003) and learning about their partner's body, including their turn-ons and turn-offs to create more pleasurable experiences. Black women are entitled to "thick desire" (Fine and McClelland 2006) beyond orgasms, including sexual satisfaction, intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional closeness. Black women may be able to achieve thick desire within egalitarian relationships where their partner cares about their sexual needs and experiences. The language to promote thick desire including intimacy, pleasure, love, orgasm, and satisfaction may be absent in the socialization messages (e.g., sexual messages from media, peers, and/or parents) that Black people received throughout various generations (Dogan et al. 2018); however, this study shows the importance of researching these factors as it has implications for their sexual experiences.

Significant characteristics such as intimacy, love, relationship length, and similar morals and values may serve as a proxy measure of trust. In this study, women who are in primarily long-standing, loving, satisfying, and egalitarian relationships are having orgasms more than half the time in their relationship. Given all the societal taboos against Black women experiencing pleasure, this study shows that Black women are having orgasms frequently, and in some cases, they are having orgasms more than their White counterparts (Townes and Herbenick 2020). The development of trust starts in middle adolescence and early adulthood and remains a relevant part of sexual development throughout the lifespan (Carpenter 2010; Fortenberry 2014). Trust contributes both directly and indirectly to the sexual health of Black women (Fortenberry 2019). Trust can contribute to experiences of emotional safety, intimacy, relational and sexual satisfaction, and pleasure, which all contribute to Black women's sexual well-being and relationship stability (Fortenberry 2019).

There were mixed results between religiosity and orgasm frequency. Black women who

reported higher levels of religious importance reported less orgasm frequency than women who indicated religious was less important to them. Religious teachings often shun women for engaging in premarital sex, condemn masturbation, and promote respectability politics (Harris-Perry 2011; Higginbotham 1993; Lomax 2018). Religious women may not feel comfortable asking for what they want during sex in fear of being labeled a Jezebel (a sexual stereotype of a promiscuous Black woman) (Stephens and Phillips 2003). Because masturbation is discouraged in many religious doctrines, religious women (and women in general) are not encouraged to explore their bodies and learn their likes and dislikes. These sexual scripts decrease the likelihood of women having an orgasm and being able to communicate the ways they achieve orgasm to their partner. Surprisingly, Black women who reported that their partners had more frequent religious attendance were more likely to report greater orgasm frequency. Because religiosity is important in Black culture (Lomax 2018), having a partner that is more religious may increase their emotional connection and spiritual intimacy (i.e., shared thoughts and feelings regarding religion; see Bagarozzi 2014) as they bond over shared beliefs and values which increases their sexual pleasure, including orgasm.

Between 20 and 24% of participants experienced physical violence or verbal threats. Black women who reported that their partner had threatened them were more likely to equally initiate sex. Men who believe in gendered power dynamics and traditional scripts may use physical violence to exert power and control (Willie et al. 2018). In this study the relationship between physical violence and sex initiation is complex. Black women who reported being hit, slapped or kicked were more likely to report equal sex initiation and less likely to report their partner initiates sex most of the time. Black women who reported experiencing being pushed, shoved, threatened and/or having something thrown at them were less likely to report equal sex initiation and more likely to report their partner initiated sex. Black women who have experienced violence that is less associated with physical harm may be less afraid of their partners, but also less inclined to initiate sex because of threats and minor physical altercations. Women in relationships with unequal power dynamics may equally initiate sex to demonstrate their love and commitment for their partner and decrease the escalation of future violence. If women do not accept their partner's advances to initiate sex it could lead to physical violence (Willie et al. 2018). Given the low frequency of the violent behaviors and the data indicating high levels of love and stability in the relationships, we need to be prudent when interpreting this complex finding. Further qualitative research is needed to understand the complexities in relationship dynamics between power, violence, and sex initiation.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study advances the research on Black heterosexual women's sexuality, it is not without limitations. First, we were not able to match the participant's answers to their partner's (i.e., partner's perceived love versus partner's reported love). There may be discrepancies between participant's reports of their partner's love and their partner's actual feelings of love. Secondly, there were less variability in the types of relationships resulting in ceiling effects on several relationship variables. Third, there are several measurement challenges. There were not identical measures of religiosity for participants (religious importance) and their partners (religious attendance). Religious attendance is not a quality measure of religiosity when compared to religious importance, which captures the spiritual process more than the behavior (attendance) (Newlin et al. 2002). Given the research on racial homophily, it is important to

know the race of the partners in future research as well as controlling for the participant's number of lifetime partners to account for their socialization and previous relational and sexual experiences. The measure of partner concurrency is limited. Participants were only asked about their perceptions of their partner having other partners in Wave III, but not if they also had other partners. Research has shown that Black women sometimes have other partners as well (Bowleg et al. 2004). This measure supports traditional gendered stereotypes does not take into account diverse relationships such as couples who practice consensual non-monogamy. Consensual non-monogamy reflects various relational configurations (i.e., polyamory, swinging, open relationships, etc.) where partners mutually accept multiple romantic, emotional, and/or sexual involvement (Barker and Langdrige 2010). With the increase in the prevalence of various forms of consensual non-monogamy (Levine et al. 2018), more research on relationship dynamics and partner factors among Black people is needed. Additionally, several variables in this study were dichotomized because there were small numbers of participants in each response category. For example, there are distinct differences between someone who has been hit once versus someone who experiences physical violence weekly. Future research should more thoroughly investigate the experiences of domestic violence and the influence on sexual interactions. Orgasm frequency may not be the best measure of sexual pleasure or satisfaction. The absence of an orgasm does not mean that participants are not having pleasurable sex (Fahs 2014), and the presence of an orgasm does not mean the sex was not bad. Over 70% of women report that they fake orgasms because it is perceived to be the end goal of a sexual encounter or to please their partner (Fahs 2014; Jackson and Scott 2007). Thus, participants may have overestimated the number of times that they orgasm to appear "normal" (Fahs and Plante 2017). Asking participants to rate their level of sexual satisfaction may be a better measure. Finally, due the small sample size and ceiling effect on some variables future studies should have larger sample sizes to test the effect of these variables.

## **Conclusion**

"Justice requires that no one's intimate capacities be unduly constrained and that all live within contexts that support and enable equally the exercise of their intimate capacities, social contexts that provide equal opportunity to develop and exercise those capacities. Justice requires that racial-group membership must never determine whether or not one has to create intimate and caring relationships amid disproportionate violence, nor should the exercise of intimate capacities themselves expose one to interpersonal and institutional violence, as has been the case for black women throughout American history" (Threadcraft 2016, page 24).

Aligning with Rose's (2004) acknowledgment that research should reframe the narrative of Black love, relationships, and sexuality, this study aimed to reframe the narrative by exploring how relationship factors and partner-specific factors affect sexual experiences of Black women. The results of this study show that Black women tend to follow less traditional sexual scripts by equally initiating sex with their partner and reporting more egalitarianism in their relationship. Black women deserve to have pleasurable sex, healthy equitable relationships, and initiate sex without being stereotyped or facing violence. More research is needed on Black couples to provide implications for sex counseling and therapy.

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