

# The Object of Sexual Desire: Examining the “What” in “What Do You Desire?”

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## ABSTRACT

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**Introduction.** Over the past two decades, sexual desire and desire discrepancy have become more frequently studied as have potential pharmaceutical interventions to treat low sexual desire. However, the complexities of sexual desire—including what exactly is desired—remain poorly understood.

**Aims.** To understand the object of men’s and women’s sexual desire, evaluate gender differences and similarities in the object of desire, and examine the impact of object of desire discrepancies on overall desire for partner in men and women in the context of long-term relationships.

**Methods.** A total of 406 individuals, 203 men and 203 women in a relationship with one another, completed an online survey on sexual desire.

**Main Outcome Measures.** Reports of the object of sexual desire in addition to measures of sexual desire for current partner were collected from both members of the couple.

**Results.** There were significant gender differences in the object of sexual desire. Men were significantly more likely to endorse desire for sexual release, orgasm, and pleasing their partner than were women. Women were significantly more likely to endorse desire for intimacy, emotional closeness, love, and feeling sexually desirable than men. Discrepancies within the couple with regard to object of desire were related to their level of sexual desire for partner, accounting for 17% of variance in men’s desire and 37% of variance in women’s desire.

**Conclusions.** This research provides insights into the conceptualization of sexual desire in long-term relationships and the multifaceted nature of sexual desire that may aid in more focused ways to maintain desire over long-term relationships. Future research on the utility of this perspective of sexual desire and implications for clinicians working with couples struggling with low sexual desire in their relationships is discussed. **Mark K, Herbenick D, Fortenberry D, Sanders S, and Reece M. The object of sexual desire: Examining the “what” in “what do you desire?”** *J Sex Med* \*\*,\*\*\*,\*\*\*-\*\*.

**Key Words.** Sexual Desire; Women’s Sexual Desire; Men’s Sexual Desire; Couple Relationships; Object of Desire; Sexual Functioning; Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD); Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder

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## Introduction

Sexual desire has been described as the most universal sexual response experienced by both men and women [1]. Desire is often defined as a motivational state [2,3] with a subjective awareness

to attain something that is currently unattained [3] where a combination of forces brings us toward and away from sexual behavior [4]. Sexual desire is so integral to understanding sexual functioning that a discussion about sexual functioning would be incomplete without reference to it [5,6]. Sexual

desire is associated with romantic love [7,8], relationship satisfaction [9–11], sexual satisfaction [10–13], and other important interpersonal phenomena [14,15]. When problematic, diagnoses of sexual interest/desire disorder in women and hypoactive sexual desire disorder in men (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM-V]) [16] are made with treatment options targeting arousal for men, but there is no FDA-approved pharmacological treatment currently available for women. Together, this has recently led researchers and the medical community to become more interested in further understanding the complexities of sexual desire, especially in women.

The experience of sexual desire is presumed to be distinct from, but related to, the physiological state of sexual arousal [17,18] and the behavioral act of sexual activity. The absence of sexual desire in a relationship often signals problems in the relationship, and sexual desire problems are frequently cited in sex and marital therapy [19,20]. Prevalence rates of low sexual desire are found to be around 16% or 17% in U.S. and British men [21,22] and from 26.7% to 52.4% in women [23]. The methods to assess sexual desire in terms of frequency of behavior are reliable, but they are not necessarily comprehensive [24]. There is value in understanding the complexities behind sexual desire in a healthy sample of couples for insight provided to individuals and couples suffering from low sexual desire.

Research has found that sexual desire may mean different things to different individuals. Graham et al. [18] found that women often referred to sexual desire and arousal interchangeably. Beigel [25] and Vandereycken [26] found that desire for sex might easily be mistaken for, or mislabeled as, a desire for love or intimacy. However, perhaps it is not that sexual desire is misunderstood but rather that different people experience desire in different ways and at different times. Sexual desire may not always be a desire for sex. Sexual desire may also represent a desire to impress a partner [27], feel closer to a partner, feel love, intimacy [27,28], or affection [28], all through the behavior of sex. There is evidence that sexual desire is more than a desire to engage in sexual activity where neither sex, intercourse, or orgasm are necessarily the goal of sexual desire [17,20]. Sexual motivation research suggests that a variety of sexual motives may underlie sexual behavior [29,30], and there are a variety of dispositional motives likely to influence sexual motivation [30]. Thus, the nature of sexual

desire, or in the case of the current article, the object of sexual desire, may differ from one person to another [31], and perhaps discrepancies in the object of sexual desire within a couple may impact overall sexual desire. Levine [19] suggested that sexual desire informs us of something we want—the longing for something that we do not currently have. This may be the key feature of sexual desire. Yet, the answer to “what” we desire when sexual desire is experienced is currently unclear in the literature.

Research points to potential gender differences in beliefs about sexual desire [32] and patterns of sexual desire [29,33], which may have numerous implications for how sexual desire is conceptualized [34]. Regan and Berscheid [20] found that a higher proportion of women than men viewed sexual desire as a physiological state caused by external factors. Further, men’s sexual desire was driven by intraindividual and erotic environmental factors, where women’s sexual desire was driven by interpersonal and romantic environmental factors [33]. Some scholars have suggested women’s sexual desire as less strongly biologically supported than men’s sexual desire [19]; perhaps this allows for women’s sexual desire to be more heavily impacted by the interpersonal context than men’s sexual desire. Levine [19] has suggested that women use intimacy and closeness as a gateway to sex, where men use sex as a gateway to intimacy and closeness, and these motivations for sex are associated with differences in the nature of desire. These gender differences have been reflected in the recent differential changes to the DSM-V for men’s low sexual desire and women’s low sexual desire diagnoses [16,35–37]. However, this body of research has not addressed the large within-gender differences in the experience of desire or in the object of desire.

In her important piece on women’s sexual desire, Meana [31] notes, “what exactly is being desired is a central question” (p. 108). Meana [31] goes on to state that conceptualizing desire as goal driven may be missing an important aspect of sexual desire. Although her work was specific to women, this may also be the case for men. It may not be that sexual desire is fulfilled by sexual activity, but by the fulfillment of other needs [19,31]. There has, to our knowledge, been no empirical examination of the object of sexual desire in terms of *what* is desired on an individual or dyadic level and particularly the way couple dynamics of the object of sexual desire impacts overall desire within the relationship.

### Aims

Despite the differences in what sexual desire may mean to different individuals, little research has explored what, more specifically than sex itself, is desired when one experiences sexual desire. Understanding these constructs in the context of couple relationships offers benefits over collecting data from individuals [38]. It is unknown whether having mismatched objects of sexual desire within a relationship impacts level of sexual desire for that partner. Therefore, the current article examines exactly *what* people report they desire when they say they experience sexual desire. Additionally, we seek to understand how that functions within a dyad in relation to sexual desire for partner when the object of their sexual desire does not align with their partner. Specifically, the current study aims to answer the following four research questions in the context of a sample of couples:

- RQ<sub>1</sub>: What do men and women desire when they say they experience sexual desire?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>: Do men and women, overall, differ in terms of their object of sexual desire?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>: At the dyadic level, do men and women differ in terms of their object of sexual desire?
- RQ<sub>4</sub>: Are couple discrepancies in what each member of the couple desires predictive of overall sexual desire?

### Methods

#### Study Design and Data

Data were collected as part of a larger online study where individuals were recruited who were in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex for at least 3 years. Recruitment occurred through online advertisements, social networking websites of individual members of the research team and lab accounts (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), and email listservs. All recruitment mechanisms were used in a way that delivered a short description of the study and a link to the study information page. Interested individuals exposed to the recruitment email or advertisement and who chose to learn more about the study were directed to a web address that provided more information. Once individuals read more information about the study, they were given the option to proceed to a series of questions that assessed eligibility criteria (18 years of age or older, currently in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex for a minimum of 3 years, currently living with that partner, and not currently pregnant or with a child under the age of 12 months). Three

years was used as the cutoff for long-term relationships due to research suggesting passionate love shifts to companionate love by 2.5 years [39], and long-term attachment bonds are formed by the 3-year point in an intimate relationship [40]. If the potential participant met these requirements, they were asked to enter their partner's email address so their partner could receive information about the study and also be assessed for eligibility criteria if interested. Once the partner received the email, and if the partner indicated interest and met criteria to participate, both members of the couple were sent separate emails that contained a link to the consent form where the participants read the letter of information and electronically signed their name to provide informed consent. Providing the participant electronically consented to participate in the study, they were enrolled and immediately directed to the online survey, which took approximately 25 minutes to complete. Participants who completed the survey were entered into a draw to win one of six \$40 gift cards. Research protocol was approved by Indiana University's Institutional Review Board.

### Measures

#### Demographics and Background

A series of demographic questions including questions on age, education, race/ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation were asked of the participants. Additionally, relationship status, length of relationship, questions regarding pregnancy, and mental and general health questions were included.

#### Sexual Desire

Sexual desire for partner was assessed using the *Dyadic Subscale of the Sexual Desire Inventory (SDI-D)* [41]. The SDI-D is an eight-item measure that assesses an individual's interest in dyadic sexual activity over the past month, where higher scores are indicative of higher dyadic sexual desire. Participants were asked to answer the questions on the SDI-D related to their current partner (the partner they live with who was also participating in the study with them). The SDI-D has shown strong evidence of reliability ( $r = 0.86$ ), validity, and test-retest reliability ( $r = 0.76$ ) over a 1-month period [34]. Some representative items from the SDI-D include "When you have sexual thoughts, *how strong* is your desire to engage in sexual behavior with a partner?" or "When you are in romantic situations, *how strong* is your sexual desire?" scored from 0 (*no desire*) to 8 (*strong desire*). For the

current sample, the internal consistency of the SDI-D was strong for both men ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ) and women ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

### Object of Sexual Desire

In order to assess what participants desire when they say they experience sexual desire, participants were asked to indicate, using a list of 16 items, what they desired. Specifically, participants were introduced to the list of items indicating "The following questions seek to understand your object of sexual desire. Object of sexual desire refers to your sexual desire for each of the following." These 16 items were created based on a content analysis of the sexual motivation and desire literature. Two independent coders compiled a list of objects of desire from the desire, arousal, and sexual motivation literature. This list was reduced to 16 individual items. With the aim of omitting any items that did not receive 100% agreement, three experts in the field discussed the list; there were no items omitted, and 100% agreement was reached on all 16 items. Participants could choose from five response options (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *moderately*, 4 = *quite a bit*, 5 = *extremely*) in response to the question "In the past month, to what extent did you desire the following?" Higher scores were indicative of greater endorsement of the item, with each item scored individually. Some of the items included were "I desire touch," "I desire orgasm," "I desire intimacy," "I desire self-confidence," "I desire to feel sexually desirable," and "I desire excitement." The participants were also provided with an option to select "I desire something else" where they specified what they desire and "I'm unsure of what I desire." The full list is reflected in Table 3. Discrepancy in object of sexual desire was assessed using a couple difference score by subtracting the woman's object of sexual desire score on each of the 16 items from the men's score for each item. If women scored higher than their partner, it resulted in a negative value, and if men scored higher than their partner, it resulted in a positive value.

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic and sexual behavioral data of the participants. The first research question of interest was analyzed comparing the means of each of the items of the object of sexual desire. The comparisons between men and women, to answer the second research question of interest, were made using a series of independent sample *t*-tests.

Bonferroni adjustments were made that resulted in a critical *P* value of 0.003 to reduce the risk of inflating type I error rate. The third research question of interest, to examine the couple-level differences between men and women within each relationship, were analyzed using a series of paired sample *t*-tests after the data were restructured to a dyadic structure (see Kenny and colleagues [38] for an overview). To answer the fourth research question, bivariate correlations between all variables of interest (the discrepancy scores for each object of sexual desire with the sexual desire expressed for partner) were calculated to indicate which variables should be included in the multivariate regression model; all discrepancy variables significant at the bivariate level were included in the multivariate model. Neither age ( $r_{men} = 0.00$ ,  $P = 0.96$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.03$ ,  $P = 0.64$ ) nor relationship length ( $r_{men} = 0.12$ ,  $P = 0.08$ ;  $r_{women} = 0.00$ ,  $P = 0.99$ ) were significantly related to the outcome variable, sexual desire, and were therefore not included as covariates in the model. These regression models were run separately for men and women due to the differences between men and women found at the bivariate level.

## Results

### Participant Characteristics

The initial sample size was drawn online from 412 individuals, and this was reduced to 406 (203 couples) after screening for missing data ( $n = 3$ ), as well as removing participants whose partner did not also complete the survey ( $n = 3$ ). All participants were partnered (69% married, 100% living together) with an other-gender partner ( $M = 9.27$  years; Median = 6.92 years;  $SD = 6.95$ ), and both members of the couple completed the survey, independently of one another. The mean age of men was 33.25 years of age (Median = 31 years;  $SD = 9.17$ ), and the mean age of women was 31.93 years of age (Median = 29 years;  $SD = 8.70$ ). See Table 1 for detailed participant characteristics.

Regarding sexual activity during the previous 30 days, 88.7% of the sample reported having engaged in vaginal intercourse, 68.2% reported having given oral sex, and 62.1% reported having received oral sex from their partner. See Table 2 for detailed sexual behavior characteristics.

The object of sexual desire category that received the most endorsement for men was pleasing their partner ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ), followed closely by pleasure ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ). The object of sexual desire category that received the

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of sample (N = 406)

	Men n = 203 n (%)	Women n = 203 n (%)	Total N = 406 n (%)
Gender			
Male	203 (100)	—	203 (50)
Female	—	203 (100)	203 (50)
Education			
Some high school	1 (0.5)	1 (0.5)	2 (0.5)
High school graduate or GED	11 (5.4)	3 (1.5)	14 (3.4)
Some college/2-year degree	50 (24.6)	38 (18.7)	88 (21.7)
College graduate	81 (39.9)	90 (44.3)	171 (42.1)
Graduate school	60 (29.6)	70 (34.5)	130 (32.0)
Race			
American Indian/Alaska Native	3 (1.5)	1 (0.5)	4 (1.0)
Asian/Asian-American	4 (2.0)	8 (3.9)	12 (3.0)
Black/African American	3 (1.5)	2 (1.0)	5 (1.2)
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	3 (1.5)	4 (2.0)	7 (1.7)
White/Caucasian	178 (87.7)	183 (90.1)	361 (88.9)
Multiracial	10 (4.9)	4 (2.0)	14 (3.4)
Sexual orientation			
Heterosexual/straight	200 (98.5)	183 (90.1)	383 (94.3)
Bisexual	3 (1.5)	14 (6.9)	17 (4.2)
Homosexual/gay/lesbian	0 (0)	4 (2.0)	4 (1.0)
Questioning/uncertain	0 (0)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.2)
General physical health			
Excellent	45 (22.2)	37 (18.2)	82 (20.2)
Very good	75 (36.9)	107 (52.7)	182 (44.8)
Good	68 (33.5)	52 (25.6)	120 (29.6)
Fair	15 (7.4)	6 (3.0)	21 (5.2)
Poor	0 (0)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.2)
General mental health			
Excellent	62 (30.5)	46 (22.7)	108 (26.6)
Very good	88 (43.3)	82 (40.4)	170 (41.9)
Good	39 (19.2)	63 (31.0)	102 (25.1)
Fair	13 (6.4)	12 (5.9)	25 (6.2)
Poor	1 (0.5)	0 (0)	1 (0.2)

Not all categories add up to 100% due to missing data

— = No data

most endorsement for women was intimacy ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), followed closely by feeling sexually desirable ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ). There were a number of statistically significant differences between men and women on the objects of sexual desire. As previously stated, Bonferroni adjustments were made that resulted in a critical  $P$  value of 0.003 to reduce the risk of inflating type I error rate. Women scored significantly higher than men on desiring intimacy ( $t[403] = -6.82$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), emotional closeness ( $t[403] = -6.40$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), love ( $t[403] = -3.30$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), and feeling sexually desirable ( $t[403] = -3.63$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Men scored significantly higher than women on sexual release ( $t[403] = 7.36$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), orgasm ( $t[403] = 6.70$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), and pleasing their partner ( $t[403] = 3.82$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ); see Table 3 for mean object of desire scores and  $t$ -test comparisons between men and women.

To assess significant differences between men and women within each couple on the object of sexual desire items, 16 paired sample  $t$ -tests were

conducted. To avoid inflating the type I error rate, Bonferroni adjustments were made that resulted in a critical  $P$  value of 0.003. Within dyads, men and women differed significantly from one another in terms of sexual desire for intimacy  $t(201) = -7.04$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , sexual release  $t(201) = 6.79$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , emotional closeness  $t(201) = -7.60$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , orgasm  $t(201) = 6.87$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , love  $t(201) = -3.32$ ,  $P < 0.01$ , pleasing a partner  $t(201) = 3.84$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , and feeling sexually desirable  $t(201) = -3.83$ ,  $P < 0.001$ . In these couple differences, women scored significantly higher than their male partners on desiring intimacy ( $M = -0.57$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), emotional closeness ( $M = -0.60$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), love ( $M = -0.27$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), and feeling sexually desirable ( $M = -0.33$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ). Men scored significantly higher than their female partners on desiring sexual release ( $M = 0.65$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), orgasm ( $M = 0.59$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ), and pleasing a partner ( $M = 0.27$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ). These findings were consistent with the broad gender comparisons of the second research question.

**Table 2** Sexual behavior characteristics of sample

	Men n = 203	Women n = 203	Total N = 406
<b>Masturbation alone</b>			
Done in past 30 days	171 (84.2)	124 (61.1)	295 (72.7)
Done in past 90 days	10 (4.9)	26 (12.8)	36 (8.9)
Done in past year	3 (1.5)	12 (5.9)	15 (3.7)
Done more than a year ago	6 (3.0)	15 (7.4)	21 (5.2)
Never done this since current partner	8 (3.9)	22 (10.8)	30 (7.4)
<b>Masturbation with partner</b>			
Done in past 30 days	70 (34.5)	78 (38.4)	148 (36.5)
Done in past 90 days	23 (11.3)	33 (16.3)	56 (13.8)
Done in past year	30 (14.8)	25 (12.3)	55 (13.5)
Done more than a year ago	31 (15.3)	20 (9.9)	51 (12.6)
Never done this with current partner	45 (22.2)	42 (20.7)	87 (21.4)
<b>Received oral sex from partner</b>			
Done in past 30 days	136 (67.0)	116 (57.1)	252 (62.1)
Done in past 90 days	37 (18.2)	43 (21.2)	80 (19.7)
Done in past year	13 (6.4)	15 (7.4)	28 (6.9)
Done more than a year ago	9 (4.4)	20 (9.9)	29 (7.1)
Never done this with current partner	7 (3.4)	8 (3.9)	15 (3.7)
<b>Gave oral sex to partner</b>			
Done in past 30 days	131 (64.5)	146 (71.9)	277 (68.2)
Done in past 90 days	33 (16.3)	23 (11.3)	56 (13.8)
Done in past year	17 (8.4)	18 (8.9)	35 (8.6)
Done more than a year ago	16 (7.9)	10 (4.9)	26 (6.4)
Never done this with current partner	5 (2.5)	5 (2.5)	10 (2.5)
<b>Vaginal intercourse</b>			
Done in past 30 days	181 (89.2)	179 (88.2)	360 (88.7)
Done in past 90 days	16 (7.9)	19 (9.4)	35 (8.6)
Done in past year	6 (3.0)	5 (2.5)	11 (2.7)
Done more than a year ago	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Never done this with current partner	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
<b>Anal intercourse</b>			
Done in past 30 days	13 (6.4)	16 (7.9)	29 (7.1)
Done in past 90 days	22 (10.8)	22 (10.8)	44 (10.8)
Done in past year	14 (6.9)	11 (5.4)	25 (6.2)
Done more than a year ago	36 (17.7)	45 (22.2)	81 (20.0)
Never done this with current partner	114 (56.2)	107 (52.7)	221 (54.4)

Not all categories add up to 100% due to missing data

**Table 3** Means, standard deviations, and *t*-test scores on object of desire measure

	Men M (SD)	Women M (SD)	<i>t</i>
Intimacy	3.81 (0.85)	4.37 (0.80)	-6.82**
Sexual release	4.31 (0.76)	3.65 (1.02)	7.36**
Emotional closeness	3.72 (0.92)	4.31 (0.95)	-6.40**
Physical closeness	4.15 (0.83)	4.19 (1.01)	-0.39
Touch	4.29 (0.74)	4.30 (0.89)	-0.14
Orgasm	4.40 (0.73)	3.82 (1.00)	6.70**
Trying to get pregnant	1.48 (1.10)	1.58 (1.20)	-0.85
Love	4.18 (0.84)	4.44 (0.76)	-3.30**
Pleasure	4.42 (0.66)	4.20 (0.85)	2.85
Self-confidence	3.60 (1.14)	3.79 (1.23)	-1.55
Power	2.46 (1.27)	2.34 (1.22)	0.94
Pleasing my partner	4.56 (0.67)	4.28 (0.80)	3.82**
To feel sexually desirable	4.00 (0.96)	4.32 (0.85)	-3.63**
Excitement	4.00 (0.82)	3.72 (1.09)	2.93
Something else	1.81 (1.30)	2.69 (1.80)	-2.84
Not sure	1.46 (0.76)	1.75 (1.08)	-2.70

\**P* < 0.003; \*\**P* < 0.001

SD = standard deviation

Discrepancy scores on the object of sexual desire items ranged from -4 to 4, and means, standard deviations, and range of discrepancy scores are presented in Table 4. Bivariate correlations indicated that some of the couple discrepancy scores on the measure of the object of desire were significantly related to general sexual desire for partner among men and/or women.<sup>1</sup> Men's and women's overall level of sexual desire was signifi-

<sup>1</sup>Example interpretation of the correlation coefficient: When the woman scores higher on sexual release than her male partner, this results in a negative discrepancy score. The negative correlation between the discrepancy score and general sexual desire for partner, among women, suggests that as the discrepancy score increases, desire for partner decreases. If men score higher on sexual release than women, this results in a positive discrepancy score. For men, the correlation between discrepancy score on sexual release and general sexual desire for partner is positive. This suggests that as the discrepancy score increases, desire for partner increases.

**Table 4** Means, standard deviations, and range of discrepancy scores

	M (SD)	Range (min to max)
Intimacy	-0.57 (1.15)	7 (-3 to 4)
Sexual release	0.65 (1.36)	7 (-3 to 4)
Emotional closeness	-0.60 (1.13)	6 (-3 to 3)
Physical closeness	-0.04 (1.11)	6 (-3 to 3)
Touch	-0.01 (1.24)	7 (-3 to 4)
Orgasm	0.59 (1.22)	6 (-2 to 4)
Trying to get pregnant	-0.09 (0.81)	8 (-4 to 4)
Love	-0.27 (1.15)	6 (-3 to 3)
Pleasure	0.21 (1.02)	6 (-2 to 4)
Self-confidence	-0.20 (1.55)	8 (-4 to 4)
Power	0.08 (1.53)	8 (-4 to 4)
Pleasing my partner	0.27 (1.01)	6 (-3 to 3)
To feel sexually desirable	-0.33 (1.23)	7 (-4 to 3)
Excitement	0.27 (1.39)	8 (-4 to 4)
Something else	0.20 (1.57)	6 (-3 to 3)
Not sure	-0.34 (1.31)	7 (-4 to 3)

Negative mean scores represent higher endorsement by the female partner; positive mean scores represent higher endorsement by the male partner  
SD = standard deviation

cantly correlated with couple discrepancy scores on sexual release ( $r_{men} = 0.28, P < 0.001$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.46, P < 0.001$ ), physical closeness ( $r_{men} = 0.23, P < 0.003$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.44, P < 0.001$ ), touch ( $r_{men} = 0.28, P < 0.001$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.49, P < 0.001$ ), orgasm ( $r_{men} = 0.23, P < 0.003$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.34, P < 0.001$ ), pleasure ( $r_{men} = 0.35, P < 0.001$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.38, P < 0.001$ ), pleasing a partner ( $r_{men} = 0.23, P < 0.003$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.29, P < 0.001$ ), feeling sexually desirable ( $r_{men} = 0.37, P < 0.001$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.23, P < 0.003$ ), and excitement ( $r_{men} = 0.31, P < 0.003$ ;  $r_{women} = -0.33, P < 0.001$ ), and these were all significantly correlated with both men and women's overall level of sexual desire. Couple discrepancy scores on intimacy ( $r = -0.31, P < 0.001$ ) and discrepancy scores if the individual was unsure of what they desired ( $r = 0.31, P < 0.001$ ) were significantly correlated with women's sexual desire. Couple discrepancy scores on self-confidence ( $r = 0.23, P < 0.003$ ) were significantly correlated with men's sexual desire. Multicollinearity was not an issue between the predictor variables (all  $r < 0.64$ ). All discrepancy scores that were significantly related to general sexual desire at the bivariate level (using a Bonferroni adjusted critical  $P$  value of 0.003) were entered into the multivariate predictive model. See Table 5 for correlation coefficients between discrepancies in object of sexual desire items and men and women's level of sexual desire for their partner.

The nine discrepancy scores that were significantly related to the outcome at the bivariate level

were entered into the men's model: sexual release, physical closeness, touch, orgasm, pleasure, self-confidence, pleasing my partner, feeling sexually desirable, and excitement. The men's model was significant,  $F(9) = 5.44, P < 0.001$  with 17% of the variance in overall sexual desire accounted for by the couple discrepancy scores. A discrepancy with partner in desiring to feel sexually desirable ( $\beta = 0.20, P < 0.05$ ) was the only significant predictor of men's overall sexual desire for their partner, indicating that when men have higher desire to feel sexually desirable than their partner, the desire for their partner (as measured by the SDI-D) increased. Likewise, when women have higher desire to feel sexually desirable than their partner, men's desire for their partner decreased (see Table 6). The pattern of results for women remained the same when the model was run with an additional block to control for the absolute value of desire (as measured by the SDI).

The 10 discrepancy scores that were significantly related to the outcome variable at the bivariate level were entered into the women's model: intimacy, sexual release, physical closeness, touch, orgasm, pleasure, pleasing partner, feeling sexually desirable, excitement, and not sure. The women's model was significant,  $F(10) = 7.39, P < 0.001$  with 37% of the variance in overall sexual desire accounted for by the couple discrepancy scores. A discrepancy with partner on desiring sexual release ( $\beta = -0.40, P < 0.001$ ), touch ( $\beta = -0.37, P < 0.05$ ), and excitement ( $\beta = -0.22,$

**Table 5** Correlations between each discrepancy score and men and women's desire

	Men's overall sexual desire SDI-D	Women's overall sexual desire SDI-D
Couple discrepancy scores		
Intimacy	0.17	-0.31**
Sexual release	0.28**	-0.46**
Emotional closeness	0.14	-0.20
Physical closeness	0.23*	-0.44**
Touch	0.28**	-0.49**
Orgasm	0.23*	-0.34**
Trying to get pregnant	-0.04	0.04
Love	0.17	-0.10
Pleasure	0.35**	-0.38**
Self-confidence	0.23*	-0.18
Power	0.16	-0.04
Pleasing my partner	0.23*	-0.29**
To feel sexually desirable	0.37**	-0.23*
Excitement	0.31**	-0.33**
Something else	0.03	-0.68
Not sure	-0.12	0.31**

\* $P < 0.003$ ; \*\* $P < 0.001$ 

SDI-D = Dyadic Subscale of the Sexual Desire Inventory

**Table 6** Multiple regression analysis for overall sexual desire in men and women

Variables	Men			Women		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Model						
Intimacy	—	—	—	0.60	1.09	0.06
Sexual release	0.82	0.67	0.11	-3.81	1.03	-0.40**
Physical closeness	-0.02	0.92	-0.00	-0.03	1.37	-0.00
Touch	0.36	0.91	0.05	-3.71	1.42	-0.37*
Orgasm	-0.32	0.74	-0.04	0.76	1.04	0.07
Pleasure	1.25	0.95	0.13	1.87	1.54	0.15
Self-confidence	0.37	0.45	0.06	—	—	—
Pleasing partner	0.15	0.75	0.02	-0.75	1.14	-0.06
Feeling sexually desirable	1.57	0.66	0.20*	0.59	0.97	0.06
Excitement	0.70	0.57	0.10	-2.02	0.86	-0.22*
Not sure	—	—	—	1.46	0.77	0.16

\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.001$ 

SE = standard error

$P < 0.05$ ) was a significant predictor of women's overall sexual desire for their partner. These findings indicate that when women have higher desire than their partner for sexual release, touch, and excitement, overall desire for their partner (as measured by the SDI-D) increased. Likewise, when men have higher desire than their partner for sexual release, touch, and excitement, women's desire for their partner decreased (see Table 6). The pattern of results also remained the same for men when the model was run with an additional block to control for the absolute value of desire (as measured by the SDI).

## Discussion

The current study found significant gender differences regarding participants' reported object of sexual desire, and some of the variance of overall sexual desire was accounted for by couple discrepancies in object of sexual desire. Specifically, the highest endorsement for men was a desire to please their partner, followed closely by a desire for pleasure. For women, the highest endorsement was a desire for intimacy, followed closely by a desire to feel sexually desirable. Women scored significantly higher than men on their desire for intimacy, emotional closeness, love, and feeling sexually desirable. Men scored significantly higher than women on their desire for sexual release, orgasm, and desire to please their partner. When these differences in object of sexual desire were assessed within each couple, the same pattern of results emerged. McClelland [42] found that men emphasize physical responses such as orgasm as a benchmark for determining sexual satisfaction, but women did not report orgasm as a marker for

satisfaction, which may help to explain why women do not tend to endorse the purely physical objects of desire as much as men. These findings are also consistent with literature to support that relationship factors are important to women's sexual desire. Sexual fantasy research has indicated that women's fantasies have a higher romantic-emotional content than men's fantasies [43–45]. These findings are also consistent with Brotto and colleagues' [17] and Graham and colleagues' [18] works that have demonstrated women report being aroused by feeling desired and accepted. Additionally, Regan and Berscheid [20] found that women are more aroused by intimacy than men. They also found that men's sexual desire is driven by intraindividual and erotic environmental factors, whereas women's sexual desire is more driven by interpersonal and romantic environmental factors [34], and the current results support that line of findings.

In the men's multivariate model, couple discrepancies in the desire to feel sexually desirable was the only significant predictor of men's sexual desire, and the model accounted for 17% of the variance in men's SDI-D scores. In the context of the current sample, men who wanted to feel sexually desirable more than their female partners had higher SDI-D scores, indicating greater sexual desire for their partner. Research has shown that men experience more intense and a greater frequency of sexual desire compared with women [1], and this may, in part, explain why when men desire to feel sexually desirable, their general sexual desire level is positively impacted. Interestingly, men are typically socially constructed to be the desire-ers and not the desire-ees [46], but these findings demonstrate that although men may

rarely have the opportunity to be desired, perhaps they want to feel wanted too, and this need has a positive impact on their level of sexual desire. Additionally, cognitive dimensions have been demonstrated important in predicting men's sexual desire [47], and perhaps the cognitive nature of discrepancies in the desire to feel sexually desirable is part of the reason this was the only significant predictor for men.

For women, couple discrepancies in the desire for sexual release, desire for touch, and desire for excitement were significant predictors of women's sexual desire, and the model accounted for 37% of variance in SDI-D scores. In the context of the current sample, women who wanted sexual release, touch, or excitement more than their male partners had higher SDI-D scores, indicating greater sexual desire for their partner. A review of gender differences in desire found that men consistently indicate that they have greater sexual interest than women [32], and women have been shown to also perceive this [20,33]. Perhaps these discrepancies in object of sexual desire impact women's sexual desire more than men's as a function of this gender difference. The most salient predictor was discrepancy in desire for sexual release, followed closely by discrepancy in desire for touch. Women who want sexual release and touch more than their partner appear to have higher sexual desire for their partner than other women. Interestingly, research in the area of sexual satisfaction has found that gender norms emphasize women's emotional capacities and often downplay women's investment in physical pleasure [42,48,49], but the current findings indicate that those women who want these physical aspects (e.g., touch and sexual release) more than their partners indicate higher sexual desire for their partner. Additionally, women whose partners report a desire for release, touch, and excitement more than them express a lower level of overall desire for their partner. In this sample, having a male partner with purely physical objects of desire (at a higher rate than one's self) negatively impacts women's sexual desire for their partner.

This comparison between partner's object of desire may be one component to understanding desire, but research suggests that hormonal state, socialized sexual attitudes, and variables that are stimuli-specific may also impact men and women differently [50]. Experiencing differences from a partner does not necessarily mean that level of sexual desire will be impacted negatively. Additionally, research has indicated 237 expressed

reasons for having sex that ranged from wanting to experience physical pleasure to wanting to please a partner to trying to get rid of a headache [51]. It has also been suggested that being sexually compliant with a partner is often used as a relationship maintenance strategy [52,53]. So perhaps discrepancies in object of sexual desire are not as important to experiencing sexual desire for that partner as motivation to be sexually compliant for the sake of the relationship.

The study findings may not be generalizable beyond the sample: a primarily white, heterosexual sample in long-term committed relationships. It would be beneficial to assess the object of sexual desire in a more ethnically diverse sample, in the nonheterosexual context, as well as in individuals who are single or perhaps in more casual short-term relationships. Additionally, this study examined the object of sexual desire on a broad level, and future research should examine the object of sexual desire on an event level to understand more about the context of the object of sexual desire as it relates to sexual behavior, sexual desire, or satisfaction on an event level.

## Conclusions

These findings support that desire is expressed in a multitude of ways [36], and understanding *what* is desired when one experiences sexual desire may be an important aspect of sexual desire to consider when conceptualizing the construct and findings ways to treat low sexual desire or diagnoses of hypoactive sexual desire disorder or arousal/desire disorder. These findings are useful for clinicians working with individuals or couples with sexual desire difficulties. If there are multiple reasons for sexual desire, as the findings of the current study suggest, perhaps couples are labeling their sexual desire as a desire for specific needs to be met, and this information may aid in more focused treatment. Additionally, discrepancies in the object of one's sexual desire impacted sexual desire in both men and women. Interestingly, discrepancies had a positive impact on sexual desire for partner when men scored higher than their partner on their desire to be sexually desired and when women scored higher than their partner on desire for sexual release, touch, and excitement. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of sexual desire and indicate that differences in what one desires out of sex may not be negative in a relationship. With this, clinicians working with couples with sexual desire difficulties can empha-

size that sexual desire does not have to look the same in every relationship, and variations within the relationship can be positively linked to overall sexual desire for partner. These findings can be used within the context of guidelines for treatment in men and women [15,54]. It would be useful for future research to uncover whether these patterns of sexual desire and the object of sexual desire are found in couples struggling with sexual desire problems in their relationships, as this study focused on couples not experiencing problems in that area.

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