

ROSE COLORED GLASSES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL NOSTALGIA AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION

Rachel J. L. Miller, University of Minnesota-Duluth
Dr. Ashley E. Thompson, PhD, Mentor

Sexual satisfaction contributes significantly to the quality of one's life and offers a variety of mental/physical health benefits. Consequently, researchers have conducted numerous studies examining ways to improve one's sexual satisfaction. Despite extensive literature, only one study has investigated how sexual nostalgia (defined as "the sentimental longing for or wistful reflection on past sexual memories with one's current sexual partner") impacts sexual satisfaction (Bjorback et al., 2021), whose results revealed that adults engaging in sexual nostalgia to a greater extent reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction than those nostalgizing to a lesser extent, suggesting that sexual nostalgia may serve as a useful technique for enhancing sexual satisfaction. That said, the causal link has yet to be examined. The current study adopted an experimental design to examine the causal relationship between sexual nostalgia and satisfaction. A total of 140 participants (89 men, 51 women) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (sexual nostalgia, general nostalgia, or a control) and completed a battery of questionnaires (including the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale; Štulhofer et al., 2010). Preliminary results revealed that there was not a significant effect of the nostalgia condition on self-reported sexual satisfaction ($F[2,137] = 1.45, p = 0.24$), likely because of the short duration of the research design. In the future, researchers should examine the impact of sexual nostalgia using a longitudinal format by assessing satisfaction weeks or months later. Nevertheless, these findings have implications for clinicians working with couples experiencing low sexual desire and/or unmet sexual needs.

Introduction

Sexual nostalgia, the reflection of past, positive sexual experiences, is a form of sexual fantasy involving sexual memories (Muisse et al., 2020). Sexual nostalgia is a neglected topic of research within the field of sexuality. Thus, research assessing the prevalence of sexual nostalgia and its impact on sexual relationships is important. Additionally, it is important to address the processes of sexual enhancement and its application towards the self and others and romantic relationships, as well as expand the limited knowledge in literature regarding outcomes of sexual nostalgia on sexual enhancement.

Sexual Satisfaction

In 1995, Lawrance and Byers defined sexual satisfaction as the following: "an affective response arising from one's subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one's sexual relationship" (p.4). Research has revealed that benefits of sexual satisfaction include mental, physical, emotional, and overall health (Davison et al., 2009; Brody, 2010; Flynn et al., 2016; Mollaioli et al., 2021). Sexual satisfaction has also been linked to romantic relationship outcomes (Byers, 2005; Schwartz & Young, 2009). More specifically, research implies that individuals who are more sexually satisfied have higher rates of marriage success and greater relationship stability and satisfaction than individuals sexually satisfied to a lesser extent (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Yeh et al., 2006). Researchers have used various methods in regard to the enhancement of sexual satisfaction, which have included methods from areas such as novelty/variety (Morton & Gorzalka, 2014), communication/disclosure (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Brown & Weigel, 2018), mindfulness-based practices (Leavitt et al., 2019), and more. However, a notable area of research that has been neglected as a potential method of sexual enhancement is nostalgia; specifically, sexual nostalgia.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia is the wistful longing of past positive experiences (Batcho, 1995) and has been linked to reducing negative feelings, such as loneliness, boredom, and disconnectedness from others, as well as increasing existential meaning to one's life, social connectedness, and a sense of comfort both physiologically and psychologically (Batcho, 1995; Rosenberg, 1979; Zhou et al., 2008; Routledge et al., 2011; Wildschut et al., 2010). A study by Wildschut et al. (2010) was conducted to determine if nostalgia occurred in response to loneliness and also the role of attachment-avoidance on frequency of nostalgia, nostalgia as a method to counteract loneliness, and the effects of manipulated social connectedness on nostalgia via the moderating role of attachment-avoidance. Participants completed several scales and surveys, which led the investigators to discover that individuals low in attachment-avoidance focused on their social groups and bonds to counteract feelings of disconnectedness and distress compared to individuals higher in attachment-avoidance.

ance (Birnbaum, 2007; Wildschut et al., 2010).

Furthermore, individuals low in attachment avoidance were more likely to provide emotional support to others compared to individuals high in attachment-avoidance; these individuals, generally, did not rely on others for emotional support in times of distress or social disconnection.

Nostalgia Within Romantic Relationships

Continuing, researchers have recently applied the concept of nostalgia as a resource for romantic relationships. Again, research has shown various benefits of engaging in nostalgia while in romantic relationships such as increased relationship-promoting behaviors and enhanced relationship satisfaction (Abeyta et al., 2015; Mallory et al., 2018). A series of seven studies conducted by Abeyta et al. (2015) examined nostalgia as a function of social motivation and suggested that nostalgia mobilizes social goals while fostering the efforts individuals make to connect with others due to the inspiration of social goal pursuits. Participants were instructed to reflect on past nostalgic memories or general memories. Researchers then measured the attitudes towards relationship goals along with everyday aspirations via Ryan et al.'s (1996) Aspirations Index. Areas in the scale included the following: wealth, fame, image/appearance, personal growth, community involvement, and health. As a result, the researchers discovered that nostalgia enhanced relational aspirations suggest that nostalgia is a key promoter for social growth and goal aspirations towards relationship goals and overcoming obstacles.

An additional study conducted by Mallory et al. (2018) examined if reflecting on past experiences in a romantic relationship enhanced positive relationship satisfaction. Researchers discovered that relationship nostalgia affected satisfaction by leading towards "emotional homeostasis" (p. 561) instead of positive affect. Thus, relationship nostalgia was positively associated with relationship satisfaction in the moment but negatively short-term, and long term, the association disappears. Results revealed that relationship history can induce past, positive relational memories that create an enhanced sense of bonding as well as marriage quality, which is consistent across literature (Norton, 1983; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Gottman, 1999).

Although reflecting on relationship history may have short-term positive effects on relationship satisfaction, Mallory et al. (2018) argued that using this technique exclusively to create a sense of bonding could be deleterious due to the potential development of emotional homeostasis within the relationship.

Sexual Nostalgia

Limited research involves the use of sexual nostalgia as a means for sexual enhancement. This form of nostalgia likely has benefits for individuals in a romantic relationship as well as the self. Across four studies, Birnbaum et al. (2019) sought to find if sexually fantasizing about one's partner, called "dyadic fantasies" (p. 461), or someone else, called extradyadic fantasies, could impact a relationship. Researchers discovered a link that dyadic fantasies increased sexual desire and nonsexual, romantic behaviors between partners.

Although research has explored several methods of enhancing sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction via nostalgia, limited research involves the use of sexual nostalgia as a means for sexual enhancement. This form of nostalgia likely has benefits for individuals in a romantic relationship, particularly sexual satisfaction. Currently, only two studies by Muise et al. (2020) and Bjorback et al. (2021) have examined the relationship between sexual nostalgia and relational needs. Muise et al. (2020) examined the relationship between sexual fantasies, called sexual nostalgia, with a past romantic partner and relational needs via the moderating role of attachment avoidance. The researchers used an adaptation of Birnbaum's (2007) Sexual Fantasy Checklist for measurement and assessment of common sexual fantasy themes, with two more items being added to examine fantasies regarding past partners. A scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often) asked how much participants experienced each sexual fantasy type.

Muise et al. (2020) also adapted a general nostalgia scale from Wildschut et al. (2010) and added two items to assessing sexual nostalgia. Muise et al. (2020) discovered that individuals who were low in attachment avoidance experienced greater relational dissatisfaction and greater sexual nostalgia compared to individuals high in attachment avoidance who experienced the opposite effects. However, Muise et al. (2020) focused on sexual nostalgia in relation to extradyadic behaviors, a person's past partner, and the negative outcomes sexual nostalgia may have on one's primary partner. Additionally, the investigators did not manipulate sexual nostalgia to understand how it can be beneficial to sexual satisfaction and enhancement, specifically with one's current primary partner. This is problematic, seeing that positive outcomes of sexual nostalgia with one's primary partner could be used as a therapeutic technique for couples in distress or sexual homeostasis.

Consequently, only one study thus far has investigated how sexual nostalgia (defined as "the sentimental longing for or wistful reflection on past

sexual memories with one's current sexual partner") impacts sexual satisfaction (Bjorback et al., 2021). A total of 227 adults completed an online battery of questionnaires assessing satisfaction, romantic attachment, and sexual nostalgia. An exploratory factor analysis revealed that the Sexual Nostalgia Scale was composed of three subscales including a physical, an emotional, and a novelty subscale (accounting for 52.26% of the variance). Findings revealed that adults engaging in sexual nostalgia to a greater extent reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction than those nostalgizing to a lesser extent, suggesting that sexual nostalgia may serve as a useful technique for enhancing sexual satisfaction. That said, the causal link between sexual nostalgia serving as a useful technique for enhancing sexual satisfaction has yet to be examined.

The Current Study

The current study attempted to address the limitations of existing sexual nostalgia research. By adopting a between-subject design in which we examined the causal relationship between sexual nostalgia and sexual satisfaction. Due to previous research suggesting that adults engaging in sexual nostalgia to a greater extent would report higher levels of sexual satisfaction than those nostalgizing to a lesser extent (Bjorback et al., 2021) and the notion that sexual satisfaction contributes significantly to the quality of one's life while offering a variety of mental/physical health benefits, we hypothesized that after randomly assigning participants to one of three conditions (a condition in which they were asked to engage in sexual nostalgia, general nostalgia, or a control), participants in the sexual nostalgia condition would report the highest levels of sexual satisfaction followed by the general nostalgia condition and the control condition.

Method

Participants

A total of 140 participants (89 men, 51 women) who were 18 years of age or older ($M_{age} = 35.56$; $SD = 11.79$) and in a current relationship of at least 6 months were recruited for this online study via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The majority of the participants were white (75%), followed by Asian (17.86%), African American (6.43%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (1.43%). The average relationship length across all participants was 57.87 months (4.82 years) ($SD = 64.11$). 68.57% of the participants were married and 12.86% were dating. 19.29% of participants were in some form of monogamous relationship while 3.57% were in an open relationship, 2% were cohabitating, and

1.43% were polyamorous. Additionally, the majority of participants identified as heterosexual (75%) followed by bisexual (18.57%), gay (3.57%), lesbian (1.43%), queer (0.71%), and pansexual (0.71%). The ideal relationship style preferred by participants was a monogamous relationship (42.14%). However, over one-quarter of participants' ideal relationship style were consensually emotionally and sexually open (28.57%) followed by consensually sexually open (15%), consensually emotionally open (12.86%), nonconsensually sexual (12.14%) and nonconsensually emotional (3.57%). According to Field (2015), a minimum of 20 participants per experimental condition was needed to obtain significant statistical power when measuring hypothesized effects and to withstand assumptions in regards to parametric violation. This prerequisite was met as 47 participants were assigned to the sexual condition followed by 55 in the general condition and 38 in the control condition.

Measures and Materials

Experimental Manipulation. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of three conditions, sexual nostalgia, general nostalgia, or a control, and received the same opening information: "This study is designed to assess the effects of writing on interpersonal relationships. Writing often activates the right hemisphere of the brain (Zinger, 2000).

Research also indicates that activation of the right hemisphere of the brain can produce positive outcomes for one's relationships (Bat et al., 2019; Flag & Son, 2013). Thus, we want to see if performing a writing task has an effect on interpersonal relationships. It is our hope that the results of this study will inform our understanding of how to enhance interpersonal relationships. It is important to note that in this writing task (as well as in the surveys that follow), you will be asked potentially sensitive questions concerning different matters such as your romantic relationship and sexual intimacy." Then, each group read instructions tailored to the specific condition they were assigned to:

- **Sexual Nostalgia Condition:** In the space below, please write about a positive, past sexual memory involving your current romantic partner. Please describe in detail the specific scene, series of events, the figures, wishes, sensations, feelings, and thoughts that were experienced by you and your partner in the memory. At this point, we want to note that your responses will be completely confidential, so feel free to write anything you like. Please spend at least 2 minutes writing about this memory.
- **General Nostalgia Condition:** In the space below, please write about a positive, past

memory in your life that you miss in your current everyday life (e.g., school, family member, friend, pet, etc.). Please describe in detail the specific scene, series of events, the figures, wishes, sensations, feelings, and thoughts that were experienced by you in the memory. At this point, we want to note that your responses will be completely confidential, so feel free to write anything you like. Please spend at least 2 minutes writing about this memory.

- Control Condition: In the space below, please write about your surroundings at this moment. Please describe in detail what you see, hear, smell, feel, and any thoughts/feelings you experience in your current surroundings. At this point, we want to note that your responses will be completely confidential, so feel free to write anything you like. Please spend at least 2 minutes writing about your surroundings.

The New Sexual Satisfaction Scale (NSSS).

Participants completed the internationally-established NSSS (Štulhofer et al., 2010), which is a 20-item questionnaire that assesses participants' sexual satisfaction via a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied), 2 (a little satisfied), 3 (moderately satisfied), 4 (very satisfied), to 5 (extremely satisfied). Participants were asked to report their sexual satisfaction with their primary partner(s) via two subscales: ego-focused and partner and sexual activity-centered, which asked questions such as the following: "The intensity of my sexual arousal", "My focus/concentration during sexual activity", "My partner's sexual availability", and "My partner's emotional opening up during sex". A high internal consistency of $\alpha = .94-.96$ was found for the full scale as well as both subscales ($\alpha = .91-.93$ and $\alpha = .90-.94$, respectively).

Demographics Questionnaire

Participants responded to a demographics questionnaire consisting of 32 questions, which included topics such as age, race, income, relationship status and length, sexual orientation, sexual frequency and experience, and sexual and romantic satisfaction in the participant's current romantic relationship(s) (See Appendix I).

Procedure

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited for this online study via a recruitment message on MTurk (See Appendix A). Eligible participants (at least 18 years of age and in a current relationship of at least 6 months) who were interested in participating were given an electronic consent form which

provided further information regarding the details of the study, including the study's potentially sensitive questions concerning different matters such as romantic relationship and sexual intimacy, as well as the study's deception that would occur via the following statement: "In order to incorporate a successful experiment, there are details within this study that are misinforming. However, we will explain fully at the end, so please do not skip the final page, the debriefing form." (See Appendix B).

This study adopted a between-subjects design in which all participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (sexual, general, or control; See Appendix C). After completing the experimental manipulation participants were asked to complete the NSSS and the demographic questionnaire. They were then thanked for their time and informed that if they inputted the correct completion code and did not miss any validity checks, they would receive a deposited \$2.00 compensation to their MTurk account for completing the study.

Results

Data Cleaning

Data was screened and cleaned using methods detailed by (Pallant, 2020). Out of 530 participants, 140 participants satisfied all data cleaning criteria. However, three participants were removed for missing more than 20% of their data with the rest being removed for the following reasons: under the age of 18 years, a relationship status of single, divorced or less than 6 months, missing validity checks, failing to properly fill out the experimental manipulation (e.g. copying and pasting the instructions into the text box, using a one-word answer, or writing about an event that was unrelated to what the manipulation asked), and taking the survey more than once. Using a cut-off score of ± 3.00 , one outlier was identified for the NSSS variable with a score of -3.12. This participant was not deleted due to the next closest score being -2.71 and keeping as many participants as possible in the study. This participant also had no missing data and adequately completed the experimental manipulation. As a result, the study ended with a final sample of 140 participants (89 men, 51 women) with a ($M_{age} = 35.56; SD = 11.79$)

After data cleaning and checking for outliers, tests of skewness were performed and indicated that scores on the TotalSex scale were not skewed (-1.63). To determine the skew, an overall mean score for all of the variables (TotalSex) was determined. In SPSS, the TotalSex score was inputted into variables under descriptives, and skewness was selected to calculate the skew. Given the output results in SPSS, the skewness statistic was then

divided by the skewness standard error. A critical value of ± 2.58 was adopted given the large sample size.

Descriptive Results

Results showed that 47 participants were in the sexual condition followed by 55 in the general condition, and 38 in the control condition. An overall mean NSSS score of 3.90 (SD = 0.61). These results indicated that people were “fairly satisfied in their relationship.” An analysis of a manipulation check was also conducted. The manipulation check, which stated, “At the beginning of the study you were asked to participate in a writing task, which of the following tasks did you complete?” resulted in 55 participants indicating that they received the sexual condition, 48 indicating that they received the general condition, and 37 indicating that they received the control condition.

Primary Analyses

To test the effectiveness of the manipulation, a between-subjects one-way ANOVA was conducted. Results indicated that there was not a significant effect of the nostalgia condition on self-reported sexual satisfaction ($F [2,137] = 1.45, p = 0.24$). While results indicated that the mean sexual condition score was slightly higher than the general condition, which scored slightly higher than the control condition, these scores were not significant. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.

Discussion

Due to the limited research involving the use of sexual nostalgia as a means for sexual enhancement, the current study adopted an experimental design to examine the causal relationship between sexual nostalgia and satisfaction. The study used MTurk to recruit participants, who were then assigned to one of three experimental conditions (sexual nostalgia, general nostalgia, or a control) and reported on their sexual satisfaction. It was expected that participants randomly assigned to the sexual nostalgia condition would report the highest levels of sexual satisfaction followed by general nostalgia and the control condition.

Findings from this study were not consistent with previous literature, which suggested that sexual nostalgia may serve as a useful technique for enhancing sexual satisfaction. While scores in the sexual nostalgia condition were higher than any other category, they were not significant. Nevertheless, these findings have implications for clinicians working with couples experiencing low sexual desire and/or unmet sexual needs

Limitations and Future Direction

The following limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting this study’s results and expanding on the topic in the future. Findings revealed that there was not a significant effect of the nostalgia condition on self-reported sexual satisfaction, likely because of the short duration of the research design. In the future, researchers should examine the impact of sexual nostalgia using a longitudinal format by assessing satisfaction weeks later. Additionally, this study adopted a between-subjects design. Thus, participants’ attitudes pre- and post-manipulation were unassessed. Future research should adopt a repeated measures design to assess the changes, if any, in participants’ attitudes across time.

Conclusion and Implications

Sexual nostalgia is a neglected topic of research within the field of sexuality. Thus, research assessing the prevalence of sexual nostalgia and its impact on sexual relationships is important. Research suggests benefits regarding mental, physical, emotional, and overall health in terms of sexual satisfaction. While research has looked into various methods of increasing interpersonal satisfaction via nostalgia, a neglected and novel way that sexual satisfaction may be enhanced is via sexual nostalgia. The limited literature involving sexual nostalgia is problematic due to the potential for sexual nostalgia to be used as a technique and resource to enhance sexual satisfaction within a romantic relationship. Additionally, by utilizing sexual nostalgia with one’s current primary partner(s), practitioners, clinicians, educators, and the general public can learn and better understand the benefits of sexual nostalgia on romantic relationships, sexual satisfaction, and sexual enhancement.

Despite extensive literature, only one study has investigated how sexual nostalgia (defined as “the sentimental longing for or wistful reflection on past sexual memories with one’s current sexual partner”) impacts sexual satisfaction (Bjorback et al., 2021), whose results revealed that adults engaging in sexual nostalgia to a greater extent reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction than those nostalgizing to a lesser extent, suggesting that sexual nostalgia may serve as a useful technique for enhancing sexual satisfaction. That said, the causal link had yet to be examined prior to this study. The current study adopted an experimental design to examine the causal relationship between sexual nostalgia and satisfaction. Findings of this study suggested that there was not a significant effect of the type of nostalgia individuals participate in and self-reported sexual satisfaction. Nevertheless, the hope is that this study will lead to further research on the link between sexual nostalgia serving as a useful technique for enhancing

sexual satisfaction, as well as help clinicians working with couples experiencing low sexual desire and/or unmet sexual needs.

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Condition	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Sexual	47	3.97	0.65
General	55	3.93	0.55
Control	38	3.76	0.62
Total	140	3.90	0.61

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics for Each Condition