

## Romantic Satisfaction in Young Adults as a Function of Sexual Debut

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**ABSTRACT.** Our primary goal was to examine associations between sexual debut (i.e., timing of first sexual intercourse) and romantic relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction within a relationship. A secondary goal was to compare these associations across biological sex and relationship status (currently in a relationship or reflecting on a previous relationship). We also examined whether sexual debut was related to the duration of a failed relationship. Undergraduate men and women who were currently in or had been in a physically intimate romantic relationship rated relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction in their current or most recent relationship. Young adults who waited more than 2 months to have sexual intercourse reported higher relationship satisfaction than those who had sex earlier ( $p = .011$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ). However, no significant association was observed between sexual debut and sexual satisfaction ( $p = .123$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ ). Further, sexual debut predicted the timing of relationship dissolution: Young adults who had sexual intercourse after 2 months reported longer relationships than those who had sex earlier ( $p = .006$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ ). These patterns of results were comparable for men and women and across different forms of intercourse (oral or vaginal/anal). Our data support the sexual restraint theory (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010), which claims that delaying sexual intercourse is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and success.

As a romantic relationship develops, partners contemplate when they might have sexual intercourse for the first time (i.e., sexual debut). Approximately 40% of heterosexual partners in committed romantic relationships have sex within the first month of dating (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977; Sassler, Addo, & Lichter, 2012; Willoughby, Carroll, & Busby, 2014). Expectations about the timing of first sexual experience with a new romantic partner are consistent with this research. Cohen and Shotland (1996) reported that college students expect sexual debut to occur within 2 months, on average, of the start of the relationship, although men expected to have sex approximately 4 weeks earlier than women. Given the relative rapidity with which sexual debut occurs within adult

relationships and the documented sex differences in expectations of sexual debut, it is important to examine how sexual debut is associated with relationship outcomes for men and women. Thus, the overarching purpose of the present study was to examine whether (a) sexual debut correlated with relationship and sexual satisfaction, (b) this association was comparable for men and women, and (c) sexual debut predicted the duration of an already failed romantic relationship.

Busby et al. (2010) summarized two competing models that explained relationship outcomes associated with sexual debut. According to the *sexual restraint model* (Metts, 2004), sexual intercourse is potentially harmful to the development of a young relationship. If a couple has intercourse too early, the relationship may be built on sexual

SUMMER 2017

PSI CHI  
JOURNAL OF  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH

companionship instead of emotional compatibility. Partners who delay their sexual debut can be more assured that their relationship is based on emotional connection rather than sexual chemistry. By contrast, the *sexual compatibility model* (Cassell, 2008) states that sexual interaction is necessary for the relationship's early development because it helps romantic partners explore their sexual and emotional compatibility. During sexual intercourse, partners have the opportunity to express their needs and determine whether their partner can fulfill those needs. According to this model, partners who have an early sexual debut will be more satisfied because they have determined that their partner can meet their sexual and emotional needs.

The extant research examining the relationship between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction supports the sexual restraint model. Peplau et al. (1977) found that partners who waited to have sexual intercourse for at least a month after their first date reported higher relationship satisfaction than those with sexual debuts within a month. Other researchers reported that cohabitating or married couples with sexual debut within the first 2 months of their dating relationship experienced lower relationship satisfaction over time than couples who delayed intercourse (Busby et al., 2010; Sassler et al., 2012). Further, Willoughby et al. (2014) reported that delaying sexual intercourse by "a few weeks" was associated with higher relationship satisfaction in young adults in dating relationships.

However, such associations may not be comparable for heterosexual men and women. Indeed, women report that their first sexual experience in a relationship has a more positive impact on their relationship than for men, supporting the notion that women link emotional intimacy with sexual intimacy (Cate, 1993; Leigh, 1989). Although some researchers have found that delaying sexual intercourse is associated with increases in relationship and sexual satisfaction in married men and women (Busby et al., 2010), other researchers have reported that these associations are specific to women (Sassler et al., 2012). Further, Peplau and colleagues (1977) reported that sexual debut was not associated with men's sexual satisfaction, but women who delayed sexual debut reported *less* sexual satisfaction and more guilt than women with earlier debut.

Previous investigations comparing relationships between sexual debut, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction across men and women

are limited in three respects. First, although it appears that relationship and sexual satisfaction are more closely linked to sexual debut in women (Peplau et al., 1977; Sassler et al., 2012), much of the previous research has been conducted with adults in long-standing relationships who are cohabitating or married (Busby et al., 2010; Sassler et al., 2012). There is reason to believe that these patterns may not generalize to traditional age college students in dating relationships. For example, Varga (1997) found comparable sexual satisfaction scores between men and women in college dating situations, whereas Sprecher (2002) found that married and cohabitating women reported higher sexual satisfaction than their male partners. Although Willoughby et al. (2014) examined dating couples, the majority of respondents were in their later twenties, 15% of the sample reported having one or more children from previous relationships, and most couples were likely moving toward marriage. As such, the sexual restraint theory has not been adequately tested in traditionally aged college students in shorter-term dating relationships.

Second, sexual debut has traditionally been defined as the point in the relationship that vaginal or anal intercourse occurs for the first time. To our knowledge, no research has been conducted on sexual debut for oral sex. Indeed, college students' attitudes about oral and vaginal/anal intercourse differ: Whereas 90% of college students identified vaginal and anal sex as being sexual intercourse, only 60% of college students considered oral sex to be sexual intercourse (Byers, Henderson, & Hobson, 2009). According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (2012), about a fourth of 15- to 24-year-old men and women living in the United States reported that oral sexual debut occurred before vaginal sexual debut. Comparable percentages of young men and women reported vaginal debut occurring before oral debut. Given that oral debut occurs just as frequently before or after vaginal debut, the type of sexual debut may not differentially predict relationship outcomes.

Third, the majority of work on sexual debut has been conducted with young adults in an existing romantic relationship. However, if sexual debut predicts relationship and sexual satisfaction in current relationships, it may also predict the length of a failed relationship. Some indirect evidence supports this prediction. In their meta-analysis, Le and colleagues (2010) reported a moderate association between higher relationship satisfaction and longer relationship duration in married

SUMMER 2017

PSI CHI  
JOURNAL OF  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH

couples. Further, Willoughby et al. (2014) found that relationship length moderated the association between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction in young, unmarried adults' romantic relationships. Adults whose sexual debut occurred within the first few weeks of dating reported disproportionately lower relationship satisfaction after 1 year of dating than did adults who delayed intercourse. In as much as relationship satisfaction predicts relationship dissolution, these findings suggest that early sexual debut would predict shorter romantic relationships.

In the present study, we examined whether different forms of sexual debut (oral, vaginal/anal) predicted relationship and sexual satisfaction in undergraduate women and men who were and were not currently in a relationship. In addition to addressing gaps in previous research, findings from this study could have important implications for professionals who counsel young people about romantic relationships and sexual intercourse such as clinicians or high school guidance counselors. Given that most college students do not consider oral sex intercourse (Byers et al., 2009), these findings could support the belief that oral sex is qualitatively distinct from vaginal/anal sex or could demonstrate that the potential impact of oral sexual debut is comparable to that of vaginal/anal sexual debut. Such information could help young people make informed choices about becoming sexually intimate with their romantic partner.

Consistent with the sexual restraint model (Busby et al., 2010; Metts, 2004), we expected that young adults in romantic relationships with later sexual debut (i.e., 2 or more months) would report higher relationship satisfaction and higher sexual satisfaction than those in romantic relationships with earlier sexual debuts (i.e., less than 2 months). This pattern of findings was expected for both vaginal/anal and oral sex. Further, given the conflicting findings regarding sex differences in sexual debut, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction (Leigh, 1989; Sassler et al., 2012; Sprecher, 2002; Varga, 1997), it was unclear whether sex differences would emerge in the current study. Following from Willoughby et al. (2014), we expected that later sexual debut would be associated with longer relationship duration.

## Method

### Participants

Participants consisted of 229 undergraduates from a public regional university in the northeast who

were enrolled in a psychology course that offered research participation as a curricular component. Most participants were taking introductory level psychology courses and represented a broad cross-section of the student population. Students earned course credit for their participation. Participants who had never been in a romantic relationship and those who had never had sexual intercourse were excluded from the study. An additional 37 participants were excluded for exceeding 25 years of age ( $n = 8$ ), having an open relationship ( $n = 7$ ), cohabitating with their partner ( $n = 19$ ), or being married to their partner ( $n = 1$ ). Two participants were excluded for response bias or not answering four or more items on the survey. Thus, subsequent analyses were based on 194 participants.

Average participant age was 19.80 years ( $SD = 1.46$ ). Most participants were women (67.2%) and were in a monogamous relationship at the time of the study (58.3%). Participants identified as non-Hispanic White (71.9%), African American (10.4%), Latino/a American (9.9%), Asian American (2.6%), and other (5.2%). Participants identified their sexual orientation as being heterosexual (93.2%), gay (1.6%), and other (5.2%). Participants reported being in their current or most current relationship for an average of 21.77 months ( $SD = 18.01$ ,  $Mdn = 18$ ). All participants who were not in a relationship at the time of testing had broken up with their partner within the previous year. On average, participants were 16.20 years old ( $SD = 1.75$ ) when they first experienced oral sex and 16.39 ( $SD = 1.67$ ) years of age when they first experienced vaginal or anal sex. Further, participants reported oral sexual debuts of 4.49 months within their relationship ( $SD = 5.77$ ,  $Mdn = 2$ ), and vaginal/anal sexual debuts of 4.82 months ( $SD = 6.07$ ,  $Mdn = 3$ ).

### Procedure

This study was reviewed by the institutional review board and deemed exempt. Participants were tested in person using paper-and-pencil methods and were, when possible, asked to sit with at least one seat in between each other to ensure privacy. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine college students' romantic relationships. After signing consent forms, participants placed them in a specially designated folder separate from their responses to subsequent measures. Thus, participant identity could not be linked to responses on the questionnaire.

Next, participants received a stapled

SUMMER 2017

PSI CHI  
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questionnaire containing the measures in the following order: demographics questionnaire, Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), Relationship Events Scale (RES; King & Christensen, 1983), and the Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS; Fischer & Corcoran, 1994). Because the demographics questionnaire required participants to report sexual activity, we presented the relationship satisfaction measure next to reduce the likelihood of participants linking sexual activity to sexual satisfaction. Further, to minimize the chances of participants directly associating relationship satisfaction with sexual satisfaction, we included the RES as an intervening filler measure.

Upon completing the questionnaires, participants received a written debriefing informing them that the true purpose of the study was to examine sexual debut and satisfaction in relationships. We provided contact information for on-campus services so participants could discuss their romantic relationship with a trained professional. We also requested that participants refrain from discussing the study with other potential participants. The procedure lasted about 15 minutes.

### Measures

**Demographics questionnaire.** Participants reported their age, biological sex, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. They also reported their current relationship status, the length of their current or former relationship, the age they first had sexual intercourse (oral, anal, or vaginal), and at what time in their current or former relationship they engaged in sexual intercourse (oral, anal or vaginal). If participants were not in a relationship at the time of testing, they reported how long ago the dissolution occurred.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The RAS measures romantic relationship satisfaction (e.g., “How well does your partner meet your needs?”) using seven questions that are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*poorly*) to 5 (*extremely well*). The internal consistency of the RAS is high with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .86. In addition, the RAS features excellent concurrent and predictive validity. In the current study, interitem reliability analyses revealed high interitem consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  = .91). Responses for all items were averaged into a composite score spanning from 1 to 5 with higher numbers reflecting greater satisfaction.

**Relationship Events Scale (RES; King & Christensen, 1983).** The RES was used as a filler

questionnaire to reduce demand characteristics. It is a 19-item true-or-false questionnaire used to assess progress in a romantic relationship through “milestones,” such as if participants have told each other “I love you” or if they are engaged to be married. This questionnaire was not scored or used in any analyses.

**Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS).** The ISS, developed by Walter Hudson (as cited and reproduced in Fischer & Corcoran, 1994) is a 25-item scale measuring feelings of sexual satisfaction in a romantic relationship (e.g., “I feel that sex is a normal function of our relationship”). Participants rate items on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*none of the time*) to 7 (*all of the time*). The ISS features a high internal consistency of .92, high test-retest reliability, and high concurrent validity. In the current study, the scale exhibited excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  = .94). All items were summed, subtracted by the number of items that were completed, and multiplied by 100. This number was then divided by the number of completed items multiplied by 6. Thus, scores could range from 0 to 100 with higher numbers indicating greater sexual satisfaction.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

The wide variability in sexual debut precluded examining sexual debut as a continuous variable. Thus, we grouped participants using a 2-month cutoff: those who engaged in first vaginal/anal intercourse at or before 2 months ( $n = 91$ ) and those who waited after 2 months for first intercourse ( $n = 102$ ). We also divided participants similarly based on oral sexual debut: 91 participants engaged in first oral sex at or before 2 months and 95 waited 2 or more months (7 participants did not report oral sexual debut). The 2-month cutoff created roughly equivalent sexual debut groups and is similar to the cutoff for early and late sexual debut used in previous literature (Busby et al., 2010; Peplau et al., 1977; Willoughby et al., 2014; but see Sassler et al., 2012, who grouped participants by first month, between 1 and 6 months, and more than 6 months).

We examined whether our early and late sexual debut groups were comparable across demographic characteristics that could be related to sexual or relationship satisfaction (see Tables 1 and 2). Of note, there was a slight, marginally higher proportion of women reporting later oral sexual debut than men [ $\chi^2(1) = 3.49, p = .062$ , Cramer’s  $v =$

**TABLE 1**

**Demographics of Participants With Early and Late Oral Sexual Debut**

	Total	Early Debut	Late Debut
Number of Participants	192.0	90.0	96.0
Biological Sex (% Female)	67.2	60.0	72.9
Race/Ethnicity (% Racial/ Ethnic Minority)	28.1	30.0	24.9
Sexuality (% Sexual Minority)	6.8	12.2	2.1
Age in Years	19.80 (1.46)	19.92 (1.60)	19.67 (1.34)
Length of Relationship (in months)	22.16 (18.68, <i>Mdn</i> = 18.00)	15.54 (14.85, <i>Mdn</i> = 10.00)	28.35 (20.10, <i>Mdn</i> = 24.00)
Age of First Oral Intercourse	16.18 (1.75)	15.84 (1.87)	16.48 (1.56)
Age of First Vaginal/Anal Intercourse	16.39 (1.67)	16.27 (1.61)	16.47 (1.73)
Oral Sexual Debut in Relationship (in months)	4.74 (6.59, <i>Mdn</i> = 3.00)	1.11 (0.61, <i>Mdn</i> = 1.00)	8.14 (7.75, <i>Mdn</i> = 6.00)
Vaginal/Anal Sexual Debut in Relationship (in months)	5.15 (7.26, <i>Mdn</i> = 3.00)	1.96 (3.85, <i>Mdn</i> = 1.00)	7.97 (8.33, <i>Mdn</i> = 6.00)

*Note.* Standard deviations in parentheses. Missing data included length of relationship (*n* = 2) and oral sexual debut in relationship (*n* = 7).

**TABLE 2**

**Demographics of Participants With Early and Late Vaginal/Anal Sexual Debut**

	Total	Early Debut	Late Debut
Number of Participants	192.0	89.0	103.0
Biological Sex (% Female)	67.2	61.8	71.8
Race/Ethnicity (% Racial/ Ethnic Minority)	28.1	30.0	26.2
Sexuality (% Sexual Minority)	6.8	11.3	2.9
Age in Years	19.80 (1.46)	20.11 (1.64)	19.52 (1.23)
Length of Relationship (in months)	22.16 (18.68, <i>Mdn</i> = 18.00)	14.55 (13.54, <i>Mdn</i> = 9.00)	28.58 (20.04, <i>Mdn</i> = 24.25)
Age of First Oral Intercourse	16.18 (1.75)	15.87 (1.96)	16.46 (1.50)
Age of First Vaginal/Anal Intercourse	16.39 (1.67)	16.28 (1.76)	16.48 (1.59)
Oral Sexual Debut in Relationship (in months)	4.74 (6.59, <i>Mdn</i> = 3.00)	1.68 (1.92, <i>Mdn</i> = 1.00)	7.42 (7.95, <i>Mdn</i> = 5.00)
Vaginal/Anal Sexual Debut in Relationship (in months)	5.15 (7.26, <i>Mdn</i> = 3.00)	1.17 (0.67, <i>Mdn</i> = 1.00)	8.60 (8.51, <i>Mdn</i> = 6.00)

*Note.* Standard deviations in parentheses. Missing data included length of relationship (*n* = 2).

**TABLE 3**

**Demographics of Participants Who Were Single or in a Romantic Relationship**

	Total	Single	In a Relationship
Number of Participants	192.0	80.0	112.0
Biological Sex (% Female)	67.2	61.3	71.4
Race/Ethnicity (% Racial/ Ethnic Minority)	28.1	28.8	27.7
Sexuality (% Sexual Minority)	6.8	8.8	5.4
Age in Years	19.80 (1.46)	19.84 (1.52)	19.77 (1.42)
Length of Relationship (in months)	22.16 (18.68, <i>Mdn</i> = 18.00)	18.94 (16.46, <i>Mdn</i> = 12.00)	24.40 (19.85, <i>Mdn</i> = 21.50)
Age of First Oral Intercourse	16.18 (1.75)	15.79 (1.85)	16.45 (1.63)
Age of First Vaginal/Anal Intercourse	16.39 (1.67)	16.33 (1.60)	16.43 (1.72)
Oral Sexual Debut in Relationship (in months)	4.74 (6.59, <i>Mdn</i> = 3.00)	3.52 (4.56, <i>Mdn</i> = 2.00)	5.59 (7.61, <i>Mdn</i> = 3.00)
Vaginal/Anal Sexual Debut in Relationship (in months)	5.15 (7.26, <i>Mdn</i> = 3.00)	4.17 (5.85, <i>Mdn</i> = 2.00)	5.85 (8.07, <i>Mdn</i> = 4.00)

*Note.* Standard deviations in parentheses. Missing data included length of relationship (*n* = 2) and oral sexual debut in relationship (*n* = 7).

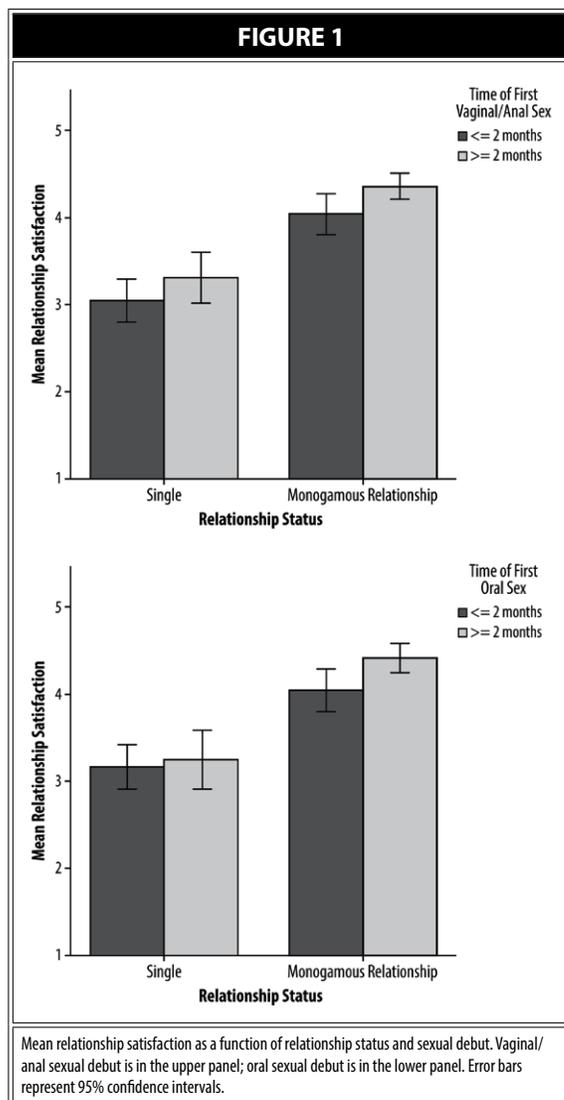
.137], but this marginal difference was not mirrored vaginal/anal sexual debut [ $\chi^2(1) = 2.19, p = .139$ , Cramer's  $v = .107$ ]. Participants reporting early oral sexual debut within their relationships also reported experiencing oral sex for the first time at a younger age than those reporting later sexual debut in their relationships,  $t(184) = 2.52, p = .013, d = 0.38$ . This pattern also held true across early and late vaginal/anal sexual debut groups; participants with earlier vaginal/anal debuts within a relation reported earlier first oral sexual debuts than participants who waited longer to have vaginal/anal sex within their relationship,  $t(187) = 2.36, p = .019, d = 0.34$ . Participants with earlier vaginal/anal debuts within their relationship were significantly, but less than 1 year older than participants with later vaginal/anal debuts,  $t(161.18) = 2.78, p = .006, d = 1.33$ . Not surprisingly,

participants who initiated both oral or vaginal/anal sex earlier in their relationship reported being in that relationship for less time than participants who had waited to have intercourse. Sexual debut within a relationship and the duration of said relationship are partially intercorrelated; if one waits 8 months to have intercourse, that relationship must survive at least 8 months.

Demographic characteristics for participants who were and were not in a romantic relationship at the time of testing are reported in Table 3. Participants in a relationship reported relationships being, on average, 5 months longer than participants who reported on a previous relationship. Participants' ages at the time of their first vaginal or anal sexual experience did not differ across relationship status,  $t(190) = 0.42, p = .673, d = 0.06$ . Participants who were single at the time of testing reported significantly earlier oral sex experience than participants who were in a relationship,  $t(187) = 2.57, p = .011, d = 0.38$ . In addition, participants who were single reported significantly earlier sexual debut in their previous relationship than did participants who were currently dating (vaginal/anal sex:  $U = 3413.50, z = 2.83, p = .005$ ; oral sex:  $U = 3309.00, z = 3.11, p = .002$ ).

**Sex Differences in Sexual Debut and Satisfaction.** To examine our hypotheses regarding sexual debut and biological sex differences, we conducted a series of  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) using sexual debut (early, late), biological sex (men, women), and relationship status (in a relationship, single) as between-subjects independent variables. We conducted separate analyses for different types of sexual debut (vaginal/anal and oral) to evaluate whether similar patterns emerged.

**Relationship satisfaction.** As illustrated in Figure 1, participants who waited longer to have intercourse with their partner ( $M = 3.87, SD = 0.86, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.71, 4.04]$ ) reported higher relationship satisfaction than those who had intercourse relatively early in the relationship ( $M = 3.56, SD = 0.78, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.40, 3.72]$ ),  $F(1, 185) = 6.58, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . Not surprisingly, participants in a relationship ( $M = 4.23, SD = 0.84, 95\% \text{ CI } [4.01, 4.35]$ ) were more satisfied with their relationship than those who were single ( $M = 3.20, SD = 0.72, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.02, 3.37]$ ),  $F(1, 185) = 75.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .29$ . Women and men did not differ in relationship satisfaction,  $F(1, 185) = 2.11, p = .15, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . No two-way or three-way interactions were significant, all  $F$ 's  $< 1.43$ , all  $p$ 's  $> .235$ . Consistent with our hypothesis, early



sexual debut was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. We did not find evidence of biological sex differences in relationship satisfaction.

Consistent with our hypothesis, the pattern of results for oral sexual debut mirrored the results for vaginal/anal sexual debut. Participants in late oral sex relationships ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) reported higher relationship satisfaction than those in early oral sex relationships ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ),  $F(1, 178) = 4.89$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . Also, participants in a relationship ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) were more satisfied with their relationship than those who were single ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ),  $F(1, 178) = 63.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .26$ . Men and women reported comparable levels of relationship satisfaction,  $F(1, 178) = 2.43$ ,  $p = .121$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , and no two-way or three-way interactions were significant, all  $F$ 's  $< 0.96$ , all  $p$ 's  $> .329$ .

**Sexual satisfaction.** We used the same analytic approach to examine associations between biological sex, relationship status, and sexual debut with sexual satisfaction. The timing of vaginal/anal sexual debut was not related to sexual satisfaction,  $F(1, 185) = 2.41$ ,  $p = .123$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ . However, participants in a relationship ( $M = 82.26$ ,  $SD = 17.25$ ) reported significantly higher sexual satisfaction than participants reporting on a previous relationship ( $M = 73.16$ ,  $SD = 16.11$ ),  $F(1, 185) = 14.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ . Women and men did not differ in sexual satisfaction,  $F(1, 185) = 0.70$ ,  $p = .403$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .004$ , and no two-way or three-way interactions were significant, all  $F$ 's  $< 1.01$ , all  $p$ 's  $> .318$ . Of note, Levene's test for equality of variances was marginal (2.04,  $p = .052$ ). Contrary to our hypothesis, sexual debut was not associated with sexual satisfaction. As with relationship satisfaction, we did not find evidence of biological sex differences in sexual satisfaction.

Comparable to vaginal/anal sexual debut, timing of first oral sex in a relationship was not significantly associated with sexual satisfaction,  $F(1, 178) = 0.92$ ,  $p = .340$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .005$ . Participants in a relationship ( $M = 81.93$ ,  $SD = 17.46$ ) reported significantly higher sexual satisfaction than participants reporting on a previous relationship ( $M = 72.66$ ,  $SD = 16.92$ ),  $F(1, 178) = 13.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ . Men and women reported comparable sexual satisfaction,  $F(1, 178) = 0.41$ ,  $p = .524$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ , and no two-way or three-way interactions were significant, all  $F$ 's  $< 1.80$ , all  $p$ 's  $> .181$ .

**Relationship Dissolution.** We expected that later sexual debut, independent of relationship or

sexual satisfaction would be associated with longer relationship duration. The following analyses were conducted with participants who were single at the time of testing and reported on a previous (failed) relationship ( $n = 78$ ). We corrected a positively skewed distribution for relationship duration with a square-root transformation. Two participants did not report relationship duration. A linear, forced-entry multiple regression confirmed that relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction did not predict relationship length, adjusted  $R^2 < .01$ ,  $F(2, 75) = 0.24$ ,  $p = .701$ . Thus, we did not include sexual and relationship satisfaction in subsequent analyses to evaluate the relationship between sexual debut and relationship duration.

**Vaginal/anal sexual debut.** A 2 x 2 ANOVA using sexual debut (early, late) and biological sex (men, women) as between-subjects variables and relationship duration as the between-participants variable revealed that women ( $M = 4.36$  months,  $SD = 1.93$ , 95% CI [3.81, 4.92]) reported longer relationships than men ( $M = 3.21$  months,  $SD = 1.55$ , 95% CI [2.62, 3.80]),  $F(1, 74) = 8.54$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .104$ . Consistent with our hypothesis, participants whose sexual debut within the relationship occurred after 2 months ( $M = 4.62$  months,  $SD = 1.71$ , 95% CI [4.02, 5.23]) reported longer relationships than participants whose sexual debut had occurred earlier ( $M = 3.42$  months,  $SD = 1.85$ , 95% CI [2.85, 4.00]),  $F(1, 74) = 8.05$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .098$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 74) = 0.36$  and  $p = .549$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .005$ .

**Oral sexual debut.** The pattern of results for oral sexual debut mirrored that for vaginal/anal sexual debut. Women ( $M = 4.37$  months,  $SD = 1.93$ , 95% CI [3.80, 4.94]) reported longer relationships than men ( $M = 3.24$  months,  $SD = 1.57$ , 95% CI [2.63, 3.85]),  $F(1, 71) = 7.31$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .093$ . Consistent with our hypothesis, participants whose sexual debut within the relationship occurred after 2 months ( $M = 4.72$  months,  $SD = 1.76$ , 95% CI [4.04, 5.41]) reported longer relationships than participants whose sexual debut had occurred earlier ( $M = 3.49$  months,  $SD = 1.80$ , 95% CI [2.96, 4.02]),  $F(1, 71) = 5.48$ ,  $p = .022$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .072$ . The two-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 71) = 1.01$ ,  $p = .318$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .014$ .

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to compare associations between sexual debut within a

SUMMER 2017

PSI CHI  
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romantic relationship, relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship duration in undergraduate men and women involved in dating relationships. We found that young adults who delayed sexual intercourse (both vaginal/anal sex and oral sex) within their relationships reported higher relationship satisfaction than those who had sexual intercourse within 2 months. These findings are consistent with previous research (Busby et al., 2010; Peplau et al., 1977; Willoughby et al., 2014) and with the sexual restraint theory (Metts, 2004), which posits that early sexual debut compromises the development of emotional intimacy and, hence, relationship satisfaction.

The effect size of the association between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction was small in the current study (.03), which is consistent with previous research. Busby et al. (2010) surveyed only married couples and also reported a small effect for the association between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction (.02). Willoughby and colleagues (2014) also reported a very small effect size (.01) in young adults who were in dating relationships. Peplau et al. (1977), who also sampled young adults in dating relationships, did not report effect size or dispersion statistics. Nevertheless, it appears that the effect size was slightly stronger in Peplau et al. (1977) than in the current study, which is likely due to the increased sensitivity from interviewing couples within the same relationship. Taken together, these findings suggest that sexual debut exerts small effects on relationship satisfaction in dating couples as well as married and cohabiting couples. Although the design of the present study did not allow for conclusions regarding the causal direction of the association between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction, previous research using structural equation modeling has suggested that sexual debut influences relationship satisfaction (Busby et al., 2010).

Contrary to prediction, we observed no statistically significant association between sexual debut and sexual satisfaction across men and women. Busby and colleagues (2010), who found that early sexual debut was associated with lower sexual quality, quantified sexual quality using three questions, one of which involved the frequency of intercourse. By contrast, the ISS (Fischer & Corcoran, 1994) used in the present study is a 25-item measure that does not include frequency of intercourse. Thus, our unexpected null results regarding sexual satisfaction may be due to qualitatively different operationalizations of sexual satisfaction. Future

research should examine this possibility.

Associations between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction were comparable across men and women in the present study, which is contrary to some previous research. Sassler et al. (2012) found that later sexual debut produced a 6% increase in women's, but not men's, relationship satisfaction. By contrast, Busby et al. (2010) and Willoughby et al. (2014) found that sex did not moderate the association between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction. This discrepancy may be due to differences in the definition of late sexual debut. Sassler et al. (2012) considered late sexual debut as 6 months after the start of the relationship, compared to 2 months in the present study and other research (Busby et al., 2010; Willoughby et al., 2014).

Peplau et al. (1977) found that women with later sexual debut reported less sexual satisfaction than women with earlier sexual debut. Women with later sexual debut also noted greater guilt about sexual intercourse than women with earlier debut. However, consistent with Busby et al. (2010), we found that sex did not moderate the association between sexual debut and sexual satisfaction. This difference may reflect a shift in women's enjoyment of sex. Overall, views in the United States about sex have changed drastically since the 1970s. As "hook-up" culture has become more acceptable (Bogle, 2007), sexual satisfaction may be dependent on the couple's sexual debut. In this hook-up culture, contemporary young adults are likely to have more experience with sex outside of their current relationship and less guilt about having sex within the relationship. Future research should examine whether young adults'—and especially women's—feelings of guilt over sexual intercourse within a romantic relationship have changed since the 1970s.

Previous research and the current study testing the sexual restraint model (e.g., Busby et al., 2010) assumes that sexual debut predicts subsequent relationship satisfaction. However, the relationship between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction could be bidirectional. To our knowledge, no research has longitudinally followed newly dating couples to track their satisfaction before and after sexual debut. Such an approach would prove challenging given that approximately 40% of dating couples have sexual intercourse within the first 2 months of dating (e.g., Willoughby et al., 2014). Further, this approach would preclude couples who have sexual intercourse casually before entering

into a romantic relationship.

In our study, the relationship between sexual debut within a relationship may be, in part, due to relationship duration. Indeed, the median duration of relationship for participants reporting early debut was under 1 year, whereas the median for those who prolonged sexual debut was 2 years. Previous research that controlled for relationship duration is mixed. Busby et al. (2010) found comparable associations between sexual debut and satisfaction after controlling for relationship duration. Willoughby et al. (2014), who tested “serious” dating couples, found that relationship duration did moderate the association between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction such that there was no effect of sexual debut within the first year of dating. Although we did not have the statistical power within our study to properly control for relationship duration, we ran exploratory 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVAs with relationship duration ( $\leq 12$  months,  $> 12$  months), sexual debut, and relationship status as between-participants factors and found no interactions between sexual debut and relationship duration. Therefore, we cautiously conclude that the associations we observed between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction are not due to relationship duration. Nevertheless, future research should further examine this possibility.

The present study was the first to differentiate between oral and vaginal/anal sexual debut. We found that the association between early sexual debut and lower relationship satisfaction was comparable for vaginal/anal and oral intercourse. Thus, our findings demonstrated that *any* early sexual intercourse is associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Most college students do not consider oral sex to be sexual intercourse (Byers et al., 2009). As such, the present results could help sex educators and clinicians counsel young people who are considering becoming sexually active within their romantic relationships.

The association between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction may be small, but it is pervasive. Neither sex nor type of intercourse moderated the association. Further, early sexual debut was associated with poorer relationship satisfaction regardless of relationship status in the current study. Consistent with Willoughby et al. (2014), young adults in the current study with later sexual debut tended to have longer relationships than participants with earlier sexual debut. Further, participants in failed relationships reported significantly earlier vaginal/anal and oral sexual

debut within a relationship than students in intact relationships. Of note, single participants in the current study were comparable to participants in romantic relationships across all demographic characteristics we gathered with the exception of their age during their first oral sexual experience. Although it is possible that the association between sexual debut and relationship duration we observed in single participants was due to substantial qualitative differences between these participants and students in a relationship at the time of testing, we have little evidence to suggest that is the case.

Unlike Le et al. (2010), we did not find a positive association between relationship satisfaction and relationship duration. Perhaps our sample did not have a sufficient range of longer term relationships for this association to emerge. However, single participants’ previous relationships ranged from 1 to 66 months, with nearly 20% of participants having been in relationships spanning more than 2.5 years. A more likely explanation involves the retrospective nature of participants’ report. Le et al. (2010) studied relationships longitudinally, so their participants in failed relationships rated relationship satisfaction while still in their relationship. Not surprisingly, in the current study, young adults in failed relationships reported significantly poorer relationship and sexual satisfaction than their counterparts in intact relationships. Our findings could reflect hindsight bias, when people feel as though they knew something was going to happen only after that event occurred (Roese & Vohs, 2012). Thus, if people already knew their relationship was destined to fail, they would report less satisfaction, regardless of the duration of their relationship.

There are some demographic limitations of the current study. Most studies that compare sexual debut and sexual and relationship satisfaction have been conducted with heterosexual adults. Our study is no exception. Although we included participants who did not identify as heterosexual within our sample, the number was too small to permit comparisons across sexual orientation. In addition, our sample was largely Caucasian and under 20 years of age. Relationship between sexual debut, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction may be different across racial and ethnic groups and in older young adults (e.g., 30-year-olds) who likely have more experience with sexual intercourse and in romantic relationships. Future research should examine whether the current findings extend to more diverse samples.

SUMMER 2017

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The present study produced four important findings. First, early sexual debut was associated with less relationship satisfaction, but not less sexual satisfaction in young adults in dating relationships. Second, associations between sexual debut and satisfaction were comparable regardless of the type of sexual intercourse (anal/vaginal, oral). Third, neither sex nor current relationship status moderated associations between sexual debut and relationship satisfaction. Fourth, earlier sexual debut was associated with shorter durations of failed relationships. Taken together, these findings support the sexual restraint model (Busby et al., 2010; Metts, 2004). Delaying sexual intercourse may provide young adults with more time to develop emotional connection with their partners, thereby increasing relationship satisfaction and motivation to remain in the relationship. Based on these findings, young adults who desire a more satisfying and longer romantic relationship may choose to delay their first sexual intercourse. The sex will still be just as satisfying.

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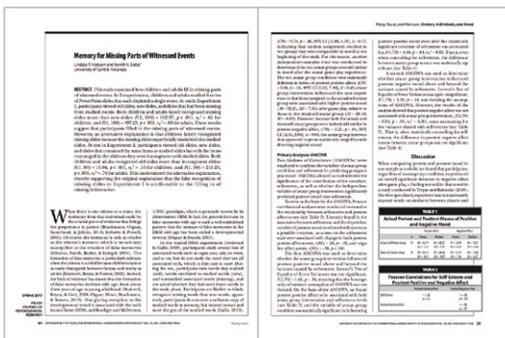
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