



# “I Think I Just like Having Sex”: A Qualitative Study of Sexual Assault Survivors and Their Sexual Pleasure

Erin O’Callaghan<sup>1</sup> · Katherine Lorenz<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Sexual assaults’ effects on survivors’ sexual pleasure have been well-documented in the literature. However, much of this research is quantitative in nature and focuses on the negative effects of assault on sexual satisfaction. The present study seeks to address a gap in the literature that has failed to ask survivors what they enjoy about having sex and the pleasure they derive from sex. Through a qualitative interview study of a diverse, community sample of sexual assault survivors, we identified several themes around survivors’ sexual pleasure. Prior to the assault, survivors mentioned limited pleasure due to men not being interested in giving them sexual pleasure, but they also enjoyed the emotional connections felt during sex. Some survivors mentioned impacts on their ability to enjoy sex, but this was not universal in the sample. Finally, queer survivors mentioned feeling more sexual pleasure with women, and survivors found empowerment in exploring what they liked about having sex and sexual pleasure with current partners who supported them emotionally. We discuss the importance of a focus on the sexual pleasure of survivors from a sex-positive, rather than a “high risk”, framework in future research, along with suggestions to improve sexual health interventions with survivors.

**Keywords** Sexual Assault Survivors · Queer Survivors · Sexual Trauma · Sexual Pleasure · Sex-positive · Qualitative Methods

## Introduction

Experiences of sexual violence are prevalent among U.S. women, particularly women of marginalized social identities (e.g., sexuality, gender fluidity, disability, and race/ethnicity; Abbey et al., 2010; Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Walters et al., 2013). Decades of research documents the effects of experiencing sexual violence, revealing negative outcomes like depression, anxiety, relationship stress, and PTSD symptoms, with some survivors also experiencing posttraumatic growth (Campbell et al., 2009b; Littleton & Grills-Taquechel, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). As we build our knowledge of the direct and indirect impacts of

sexual violence, researchers have also examined methods of coping with and healing from these experiences, though this often results in an (un)intended consequence of pathologizing some survivors’ behaviors. For example, regarding post-assault substance-involved sex, any substance use during sexual activity following trauma can be pathologized as a “high risk” sexual behavior which can further stigmatize survivors (Campbell et al., 2004; Griffin et al., 2010). This paper will explore a similarly stigmatizing issue – survivors’ experiences and perceptions of sexual pleasure post-assault. Research that has inquired about survivors’ post-assault sex has often focused on sexual dysfunction and the negative outcomes related to sex and the “risk” behavior of engaging in sex as a person with a sexual trauma history. There has been limited research regarding what survivors enjoy about sex, which limits our knowledge of how survivors heal from sexual assault experiences and slows the destigmatizing of sexual enjoyment among survivors and women more broadly. In the present study, we analyze individual interviews with a community sample of primarily queer women and women of color to understand survivors’ experiences of sexual pleasure and how they are shaped by sexual trauma.

✉ Erin O’Callaghan  
eo1@colostate.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, Colorado State University, B258 Clark Building, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Criminology and Justice Studies, California State University Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff St, Northridge, CA 91330-8457, USA

## Sexual Pleasure

Extensive research has been done on sexual pleasure among the general public who identify within the gender binary (for reviews, see Janssen, 2011; Rausch & Rettenberger, 2021; Reis et al., 2021). Indicators of sexual satisfaction/pleasure are usually positively linked to relationship satisfaction, sexual assertiveness (for women), sexual arousal, and frequency of sexual interactions (Rausch & Rettenberger, 2021; Reis et al., 2021). Men in general report higher levels of sexual pleasure than women, likely due to gendered sexual scripts that emphasize men's pleasure and arousal at the expense of women's (Barnett & Melugin, 2016; Gavey, 2005). Indeed, society has historically denied and pathologized the sexual pleasure of women and positioned them as "sexual gatekeepers"—mere vessels for men to derive sexual pleasure from, rather than being active participants in sex or deserving of sexual pleasure in their own right (Klein, 1973; Gavey, 2005). These gender differences may also relate to motivations to have sex, where men report the feeling of pleasure and women report the feeling of emotional connection as the driving factor for engaging in sex (Barnett & Melugin, 2016). One qualitative study of young women in Sweden emphasized the importance of sexual pleasure equality; that is, sexual pleasure was greater when women could expect each person involved in the sexual encounter would equally benefit from pleasure (Elmerstig et al., 2012). Body image and self-esteem are also salient factors for women's experiences of sexual pleasure and satisfaction; women who are more confident about their bodies, despite potential bodily changes, report more sexual satisfaction (Thomas et al., 2019).

While sexual experience and pleasure is gendered in context, less is also known about how sexual pleasure may differ among people across gender and sexuality spectrums (i.e., queer, LGBTQIA+), and much of this research on sexual pleasure is quantitative in nature (Lindley et al., 2021; Withey-Rila et al., 2020). One study comparing heterosexual and queer women's sexual pleasure in focus groups found that while they largely discussed pleasure similarly, there were some differences in the importance of sexual pleasure in that heterosexual women were ambivalent about solitary pleasure through masturbation and equal partnered pleasure (Goldey et al., 2016). Other research on the sexual pleasure of trans and non-binary people tends to misgender them and pathologize their sexual pleasure (Withey-Rila et al., 2020). A recent study on trans-masculine and non-binary folks found that there were unique parts of their sex life related to their trans experience that brought pleasure, such as enjoying sex with other trans/non-binary individuals, experiencing gender affirmation through sex, feeling comfortable in their body, and experiencing sexual pleasure

due to medically transitioning (Lindley et al., 2021). More research is needed on sexual pleasure among non-binary individuals that moves away from a clinical framework and focuses on how they experience and discuss their sexual pleasure.

## The Effects of Sexual Violence on Sexual Satisfaction

Although anyone can experience or perpetrate sexual violence, it is considered a gendered phenomenon in that it is most often perpetrated by cisgender men against folks of marginalized gender identities (e.g., women, trans folks; Breiding et al., 2014). This extends to sexuality as well, with gay and bisexual men more likely to experience sexual assault than heterosexual men (Bullock & Beckson, 2011). Experiencing sexual violence has cumulative negative effects on survivors' mental health and well-being which are shaped by external influences like assault characteristics, survivor experiences of disclosure and help-seeking, and sociocultural factors (Campbell et al., 2009a, b; Littleton et al., 2009; Ullman et al., 2007). Survivors frequently report negative effects on mental health such as anxiety, depression, flashbacks, hypervigilance, PTSD symptoms, and difficulty sleeping and concentrating (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009; Littleton et al., 2009). Self-blame, stigma, and increased alcohol use is associated with experiencing a substance-involved sexual assault (Littleton et al., 2009). Help-seeking following sexual violence is often gendered as well, with women more likely to disclose and seek formal support (e.g., therapy, crisis counseling) than men (Donne et al., 2018).

Experiencing sexual violence results in negative outcomes related to sex and sexuality for many survivors, including sexual dysfunction, more painful sex, a decrease in sexual satisfaction, and reproductive health-related medical issues (Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000; Weaver, 2009). Because of the fact that experiencing sexual pleasure and sexual violence are experiences separately impacted by gender, it is also likely that impacts of sexual violence on sexual pleasure are gendered as well. Sexual satisfaction and functioning problems post-assault persist for years in some survivors, including fear, arousal and low desire which may inhibit sexual responses (Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000). Being victimized at a young age, knowing the offender, and experiencing penetration during assault are also related to sexual problems and emotions felt during and immediately after the assault (Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000). Sexual functioning is connected to the emotional and psychological response to experiencing sexual violence, with emotions such as self-anger, shame, guilt, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and depression having been shown to predict sexual problems (Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000). More recent research suggests that among

both college and community populations, effects of sexual assault on sexual satisfaction and romantic relationships may be more nuanced, in that some survivors have said it did not impact their relationships and recent quantitative results did not find significant associations between sexual assault and satisfaction (Person et al., 2024). For example, while avoiding sexual contact altogether appears related to sexual problems, having a loving, understanding partner is a protective factor (Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000). This suggests that a more nuanced approach to understanding impacts of sexual assault on sexual satisfaction is needed.

The research literature reflects conflicting patterns for survivors' engagement with "high-risk" sexual behavior (e.g., having sex while using substances, not using condoms, having more sexual partners than those without sexual assault histories) following sexual violence. Some scholars have shown an increase in these "high risk" behaviors (Weaver, 2009) and increased sexual activity with more alcohol consumption post-assault (Deliramich & Gray, 2008). Other research has found that the frequency of sexual contact decreases after sexual assault (Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000) and therefore "high risk" behavior does not occur across all survivors. Overall, the existing research on sexuality among survivors of sexual violence largely focuses on the negative effects of sexual trauma on sexual behaviors through a risk framework, rather than looking holistically at sexuality (Campbell et al., 2004; Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000; Weaver, 2009).

While survivors often struggle navigating the day-to-day following sexual violence, it is also common to find meaning from the assault that results in some positive changes to their lives, termed post-traumatic growth (PTG; Littleton & Grills-Taquechel, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This is not to imply that experiencing sexual violence is a positive event; this is merely to acknowledge that many survivors do find ways to heal afterwards. The effects of sexual violence occur simultaneously at the individual and interpersonal levels, impacting survivors' social (dis)engagement as well as the quality of relationships between survivors and their friends, family, or significant others (O'Callaghan et al., 2018). As such, the mental health effects of sexual violence can symbiotically influence survivors' sexuality, sexual relationships, and sexual satisfaction (O'Callaghan et al., 2019). Survivors of sexual violence have found empowerment in voicing their sexual needs and wants, but this process is ongoing, and must occur in the context of a comfortable, consenting sexual relationship (Mark & Vowels, 2020). Although previous research has indicated that sexual violence has impacted survivors' sex lives and intimate relationships, survivors also find healing in intimate relationships (O'Callaghan et al., 2018, 2019) through respect, increasing trust in others, and being able

to assert boundaries (Stockman et al., 2024). There is limited research that explores the effects of sexual violence on sexual satisfaction through an empowerment framework that acknowledges sexual violence survivors can (and do) engage in pleasurable sex following trauma.

Moreover, the risk framework has the (un)intended consequence of pathologizing survivors' sexual behaviors and coping after experiencing sexual assault (see Griffin et al., 2010, for a review), especially among queer and/or women survivors who are often stereotyped as hypersexual and any increase in sexual partners is characterized as a "high risk" sexual behavior (Griffin et al., 2010; Worthen, 2023). For queer survivors, experiencing sexual violence has been shown to impact their queer identity, and sometimes in healing from that violence, queer survivors explore their sexual identity (O'Callaghan et al., 2024). A recent qualitative study of Canadian university students who are sexual and gender minority survivors of sexual assault found that survivors made clear connections between their identity and their experiences of sexual violence but did not consider how their sexuality might have been impacted after the assault (Martin-Storey et al., 2022), though this type of exploration has been shown to be helpful for healing after an assault (O'Callaghan et al., 2019). In this study, we expand on past research by exploring how sexual pleasure is experienced following sexual violence among a diverse community sample that better represents queer folks and people of color.

## Current Study

The current exploratory study utilized a sex positive framework rather than a sexual risk framework to explore sexual pleasure among assault survivors. In so doing, this study works toward destigmatizing the sexual activity and desires of sexual assault survivors to promote and support their sexual healing post-assault. Furthermore, understanding what survivors like about sex can inform the work of clinicians and sexual health practitioners in supporting survivors. Previous work utilizing this data set have revealed general impacts on sexuality broadly among the queer subsample but has not delved into sexual pleasure specifically and independently from sexual behaviors (O'Callaghan et al., 2024). In this exploratory study, we sought to answer the following exploratory research questions:

RQ1: What do survivors like about having sex?

RQ2: How do survivors describe their sexual pleasure?

RQ3: How is sexual pleasure specifically impacted by their sexual assault?

## Method

### Sample and Recruitment

The data from this study were drawn from a qualitative study of adult sexual assault survivors in the United States covering substance-involved sexual assault (see O’Callaghan, 2022). Participants were eligible if they were at least 18 years of age and experienced an unwanted sexual experience in adulthood (18 years of age or older) while using substances (alcohol, drugs, or both) at the time of the unwanted sexual experience. Convenience/quota sampling methods were employed within the community to recruit survivor participants for this study to reach a minimum sample size of  $N=30$  (and/or data saturation was reached). These sampling methods were used due to the exploratory nature of the study, but also to achieve a more racially, sexually, and gender diverse sample, which has not been as common in research on substance-involved sexual assault (Lorenz & Ullman, 2016). Ultimately, the sampling and recruitment strategies resulted in a racially and sexuality diverse sample of substance-involved sexual assault survivors for a qualitative interview study (final sample size of  $N=34$ ).

Participants were recruited from March 2021 to August 2021. The final sample was an average of 28 years old. Participants were racially diverse with just over half of the sample identifying as a race other than White ( $n=18$ ). Most of the sample identified as cis-gender women (88.2%;  $n=30$ ) but identified along a sexuality spectrum other than completely straight/heterosexual (76.4%;  $n=26$ ). Over half of the sample reported a disability or chronic health condition, with mental illness/psychiatric disorder being the most common disability reported (50%;  $n=17$ ). Most participants had received degrees in higher education, with 85.3% ( $n=29$ ) having a bachelor’s degree or higher. Most participants were currently employed (76.5%;  $n=26$ ) in a variety of career fields (e.g., research, education, nursing, journalism, etc.), with over a third also currently in school (32.4%;  $n=11$ ). Lastly, income distribution was evenly spread, with 27% ( $n=9$ ) of the sample compensated between \$50,001 to \$60,000, and just over half the sample reported being single at the time of the study (53.0%;  $n=18$ ). For more demographic information on the sample, see Table 1.

### Procedure and Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were utilized because they can allow for survivors to feel comfortable sharing their experiences in a way that could empower them, reflecting feminist methodologies and techniques for interviewing (Campbell et al., 2009a; Hesse-Biber, 2006). Participants indicated willingness to be interviewed by filling out an

online consent form and brief background information sheet where participants provided their contact information for interview scheduling. On the background information sheet, participants were asked questions about their demographics, their substance use behaviors, their sex life, and assault history. Regarding assault history, participants were asked to indicate an unwanted sexual experience where they were using substances that happened since the age of 18 that they viewed as their most upsetting. They also indicated their preference on the order of the topics covered during the interview on the consent form and their preferred pseudonym and personal pronouns, again reflecting a feminist and survivor-directed approach. Overall, survivors’ responses from the background information sheet informed their semi-structured interview and were used as a guide for the interviewer. Interviews were conducted over Zoom video conferencing and audio recorded for transcription purposes. Final interviews ranged from 40 min to 2 and 1/2 hours. Participants were compensated \$25 for their participation through Venmo or a \$25 Amazon gift card and were provided with a list of service referrals.

To begin, the interviewer reviewed the topics to be covered in the interview, and if the participant had a preferred topic to start with first in the interview, which about a third of the sample ( $n=10$ ) chose a topic order preference. Where needed, the interviewer used the responses from the background information sheet to help guide different sections of the interview. Survivors were asked about the assault, disclosure, and help seeking. Interviews also included questions about their drinking/substance use behavior prior to and post-assault and about survivors wanted and/or pleasurable sexual experiences before and after the assault. Participants who indicated they had a wanted/pleasurable sexual experience involving substance use were asked to elaborate on this experience in their interviews. This study complied with all ethical obligations and was approved by the researcher’s university Institutional Review Board.

### Positionality

In this study, we aimed to obtain a diverse sample of substance-involved sexual assault survivors because so little of the research in this area has examined these experiences among different groups. However, as White, cis, abled, queer women in academia, we know that these identities in addition to our individual experiences, research frameworks, and theoretical orientation impact perceptions and interpretations of the data. Compared to the participants in the study, the interviewer is likely in a position of relative privilege and power over many survivors who participated, particularly given the racial and economic diversity that exists in the project setting and in the sample. We reflected

**Table 1** Participant Demographics

	<i>N</i> (%)	Range	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Age		23–60	28.24 (6.80)
Gender			
Man	1 (2.9)		
Woman	30 (88.2)		
Non-binary	1 (2.9)		
Trans man	0 (0.0)		
Trans woman	0 (0.0)		
Other	1 (2.9)		
Genderqueer	1 (2.9)		
Education			
Less than high school	0 (0.0)		
High school/GED	1 (2.9)		
Some college	4 (11.8)		
Graduated college/beyond	29 (85.3)		
Race			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0 (0.0)		
Asian	3 (8.8)		
Black/African American	8 (23.5)		
Hispanic/Latinx/o/a	4 (11.8)		
Middle Eastern/North African	0 (0.0)		
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0 (0.0)		
White	16 (47.1)		
Multi-racial	3 (8.8)		
Other	0 (0.0)		
Marital status			
Single	18 (52.9)		
Living w/someone	5 (14.7)		
Married	8 (23.5)		
Domestic partnership	1 (2.9)		
Divorced/separated	1 (2.9)		
Widowed	0 (0.0)		
Missing	1 (2.9)		
Sexual orientation			
Only lesbian/gay	1 (2.9)		
Mostly lesbian/gay	1 (2.9)		
Bisexual	11 (32.4)		
Mostly heterosexual/straight	8 (23.5)		
Only heterosexual/straight	8 (23.5)		
Pansexual	5 (14.7)		
Asexual	0 (0.0)		
Income			
>\$10,000	3 (8.8)		
\$10,001-\$20,000	5 (14.7)		
\$20,001-\$30,000	2 (5.9)		
\$30,001-\$40,000	2 (5.9)		
\$40,001-\$50,000	3 (8.8)		
\$50,001-\$60,000	9 (26.5)		
\$60,001-\$70,000	2 (5.9)		
\$70,001-\$100,000	2 (5.9)		
>\$100,000	4 (11.8)		
Missing	2 (5.9)		
Disability status*			
Chronic physical illness	3 (8.8)		
Mental illness/psychiatric disorder	17 (50.0)		
Learning disability	0 (0.0)		

**Table 1** (continued)

	<i>N</i> (%)	Range	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Learning or cognitive disability	1 (2.9)		
Visually impaired	1 (2.9)		
Substance use disorder	4 (11.8)		
Other	1 (2.9)		
Multiple disabilities	6 (17.6)		
None	16 (47.1)		
Sexual partners			
Only men	15 (44.1)		
Mostly men	14 (41.2)		
Equally men and women	1 (2.9)		
Mostly women	1 (2.9)		
Only women	1 (2.9)		
Other	2 (5.9)		
Never had sex	0 (0.0)		
Current sexually active relationship			
Yes	28 (82.4)		
No	6 (17.6)		
Other	0 (0.0)		

*Note.* These values exceed the sample size because participants could endorse more than one response

on this constantly, as certain participants may not have wanted to reveal certain aspects of their experiences due to this positionality and our privileged identities. Although we have extensive experience working directly with survivors outside of a research setting, we had to reflect and be cognizant that the interview setting is distinct from other activist and volunteer work we have done with survivors. Interview participants were likely at various stages of their healing/ability to talk about their experiences, and some may have been disclosing for the first time (which one participant indicated). It was important for us as feminist forward researchers to mentally prepare for the diversity of participants to capture their experiences in a holistic way.

## Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis from a constructionist approach was used to analyze the data for the current study (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In doing so, we developed themes from the codes using a reflexive process, by which we generated themes mediated by the positionality of our research approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis was the method best fitting our desire for an unstructured, organic process that allows for a deeper understanding of the data that clearly reflects our participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Our analysis process was not linear, though reflected Braun and Clarke's six-phase process of a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

To gain familiarity with the data, after conducting each interview, we created summaries of the interview, including initial impressions, surprising points, questions, overall

thoughts, reflections, and unanticipated feelings or emotions felt after the interview. These summaries were used to inform initial coding of the interviews as well as the final write up and analysis to reckon with potential researcher biases and visible identities and their potential influence on the interview. The interviewer transcribed the interviews using Zoom's transcription feature and analyzed the transcripts through the qualitative software program MAXQDA. Audio recordings of the interviews were destroyed after all transcripts were transcribed, uploaded to MAXQDA, and checked for accuracy. During the transcription process, first impression codes and notes of patterns were gathered (Ezzy, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). After these initial codes were developed, the researcher went back through the transcripts in more detail to identify themes and patterns occurring across the interviews and utilized a flexible coding process (Deterding & Waters, 2021).

We developed a codebook based on patterns that emerged during data familiarization that were rooted in the research questions for the study and interview guide (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Semantic codes were descriptive in nature and summarize the primary topic of the excerpts associated with the codes (Saldana, 2012). To check the reliability of the codebook, another qualitatively trained researcher unaffiliated with this study was brought in to ensure there are no themes or patterns that were missed in the coding process based on potential multiple interpretations of the data. With the additional researcher, discrepancies in the codebook were resolved through a collaborative and reflexive process that honored the complexity of the data. As we engaged in this collaborative process, codes were revised, renamed,



and/or combined. The codebook was entered directly into MAXQDA for further analysis.

The process of coding and theme development was flexible and organic and evolved throughout the analysis process as we grew more familiar with the data (Braun et al., 2019). We adopted a predominantly inductive approach to analyzing data, prioritizing meanings rooted in the data. However, we considered the research questions and extant theory and literature in producing meaningful themes, reflecting a level of deductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Interviews were coded using reflexive thematic analysis and open coding to best represent meaning as communicated by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019). Line-by-line coding was not used, as certain sections of the interview were not included in the present analysis (e.g., section of the interview focused on general substance use behaviors) as they were not relevant for the current study's research questions and aims. Rather, index codes were used, which as defined in the flexible coding process represent larger chunks of text that will aid as the themes emerge and the analysis is completed (Deterding & Waters, 2021). Double coding was also used in this process to ensure that the complexity of the data was not reduced to one theme and that multiple concepts could be present in one data point (Saldana, 2012). The external qualitative researcher double-checked the coding using the codebook by coding a random sample of 10% ( $n=4$ ) of the interview data.

After coding was completed, we reviewed codes to develop meaningful themes across the data set that reflect relationships and commonalities among the different codes. Through this process, several themes were identified based on organic commonalities across codes (i.e., 'central organizing concepts'; Braun & Clarke, 2019). We then reviewed, defined, and renamed our themes to reflect the data and research questions. Our results present the themes that naturally emerged as interpreted and coded data surrounding sexual pleasure of our participants.

## Results

A primary goal of this study was to move beyond the literature that focuses solely on sexual risk when examining the sexuality of sexual assault survivors to understand the positive aspects of survivors' sex. The first participant interviewed mentioned that they had never been asked this question of what they like about sex before. Many participants reported that there were things they enjoyed about having sex, both physically and emotionally. Sexual pleasure could differ among participants based on what they wanted out of sex and who they were having sex with (e.g., many participants found more sexual pleasure in sex with

women than men). Through the analysis, we found 3 themes related to sexual pleasure with some associated subthemes (see Table 2). Participants were asked about sexual pleasure before the described assault (most upsetting unwanted sexual experience involving substance use) and after the described assault. As such, the results are organized by these timepoints with their associated themes, starting with prior to the assault.

### Sexual Pleasure Pre-Assault

#### Emotional Connection as Primary Source of Sexual Pleasure

Most, but not all, who mentioned that they liked the emotional connection they felt with another person during sex were either currently in a monogamous sexual relationship or usually only had sex with people they knew well/in a monogamous context. Whether participants wanted a more emotional connection during sex was also fluid dependent on the point in their lives they were discussing their sexual pleasure. Casey mentioned the emotional connections that she liked about sex prior to the assault are described below:

I liked, like for me, the biggest thing was the emotional connection like one time, and he didn't mean it very nicely and it didn't come off nicely but it's not quite an insult either, but my long-term boyfriend in college once told me that my drug of choice was love. And he was angry, when he said it, and it was kind of like a like I think he was trying to say that, like I use sex as an emotional crutch because I need to connect with somebody. And it, but it didn't really hurt my feelings because that's like kind of true and I'm okay with that like for me, it was very much like I need to connect with this person I need that feeling of closeness I need that you know intense emotional tie with another person, so I think it was definitely that was the biggest thing for me.

Casey had also said she did not derive pleasure from sex with people she did not know well, because this emotional connection was key to her sexual pleasure. Bunny mentioned a serious partner she had prior to the assault, and how much she enjoyed both the physical pleasure in their sex life and the emotional connection she had with her partner:

What I liked about him is that he is someone I really did love, and I knew him for some time even before we started our relationship. I trusted him. It was something that was built with time. For me, it [sex] was a way of showing him that I loved him. As I've mentioned, it

**Table 2** Thematic Findings

Theme	Description	Example
Sexual Pleasure Pre-Assault	How survivors discussed their sexual pleasure prior to the index substance-involved sexual assault, which included the following subthemes of: a. Emotional connection, such as feeling emotionally connected to a long-term sexual and romantic partner b. Sexual experimentation, such as exploring sexual fantasies during sexual activity c. Bad sex and limited pleasure, such as linking bad sexual experiences to the lack of physical pleasure and orgasm during sex	a. Definitely just the feeling of closeness. You feel like—I don't know—something that you're not just—at least for me, I was not just going out and doing this all the time. To me, it was a signifier that I really trust the person and that I trust them enough to be even that level of vulnerable even though I wasn't doing everything. It was a sign that I really cared about a person, they really cared about me, and that we were going to have this very involved—you can't think about anything else 'cause you're just having fun in the moment, space, and time. To me, it was super important and a signal of love. (Anna) b. I thought it [sex] was fun. Even before, let's say before I got the STD, and I was just sleeping with a bunch of people, it was always fun because I tried a lotta different things, and I was a little bit more inclined to try these things. I also liked meeting people. I'm very charismatic, and I really like meeting people, and it seemed like a pretty easy way to meet people is to have sex with them. (Cassie) c. I don't know. I think I enjoyed foreplay, but sex itself, I don't know that I did. I don't know that there was anything that I liked about it. I really don't think that I knew that I was supposed to kind of like it. It was supposed to be like—get them to finish. (Rosa)
Impacts of Sexual Violence on Sexual Pleasure	How survivors discussed the index substance-involved sexual assault impacted their sexual pleasure	a. I think- I think it [the assault] did greatly. Um, this is hindsight, like. This is my interpretation of my life I guess. Is that it really did make me averse to having sex for a while. Um, not even that like I wasn't enjoying sex just felt like I was confused about it, and I just didn't want to didn't want to deal with it. (Sonya)
Sexual Pleasure Post-Assault/ At time of the Interview	How survivors discussed their sexual pleasure both after the index substance-involved sexual assault and at the time of the interview, which included the following sub-themes of: a. Emotional connection, such as feeling emotionally connected to a long-term sexual and romantic partner b. Sexual experimentation and empowerment c. Sex with women, such as experiencing more physical and emotional pleasure in having sex with women d. Sexual pleasure with current partners, such as experiencing physical pleasure with their current romantic partners	b. Yeah when I have sex with my partner it's, it's a lot of emotional connection. But there's some physical pleasure, so I feel like it's been tilted a little bit more, um toward like valuing that emotional connection with my partner and that closeness. (Penelope) c. I don't know, feeling like I'm a woman. Yeah, you know, especially because I'm, you know, not the most feminine of women. So. So sort of like a normal woman. (Marie, 60) d. The only sex I'd had that I just really enjoyed and was enthusiastic about was with women. That was because we were on more equal footing. 'Cause in my mind, it was something men did to women. If I was with a woman, I was—we were equal partners. Until then, sex with men and sex with women were different categories in my head. One of them was a thing I did, and another one was a thing that I enjoyed. (Vivien) e. I usually feel safe when I'm with him yeah because, uh, he always wants the best for me. He can't push me to do something that I don't want to. Even right now, if he wants it and I don't want it, he can-he can't push me to do, he always respect my decision and the fact that he is my lover, he is also my best friend. (Ariana)

used to give me pleasure, and also explore my fantasy. Those are the feelings that I can say.

Penelope enjoyed physical pleasure from sex, but said that the emotional connection was more enjoyable for her in her sex life prior to the assault:

Um, and then, with men yeah it was like also. (pause). In college, it was always yeah I enjoyed having sex with my partner physically and emotionally, um. Prior to that, I like the attention, I like the yeah, like the feeling wanted, I like the emotional connection, I like the physical part of it, um but when I would have sex like, and I think this is like characteristic of just being younger too like I like, my physical pleasure from



sex wasn't that great it was mostly like because I was in relationships with people, I thought that sex was expected of me.

Emotional connection was mostly mentioned as important for sexual pleasure by survivors who were having sex with people they knew well, though not exclusively.

### Deriving Pleasure through Sexual Experimentation and Exploring Fantasies

Prior to the assault, many survivors also talked about finding pleasure in sexual experimentation and exploring fantasies. Leonardo talked about his sexual pleasure he found in his first sexual experiences in high school. He was having sex with someone in his high school, though they were not open about being sexually active with each other because neither of them was out as gay. Leonardo talks about why he enjoyed this sex:

It was innocent. There wasn't any pressure. It wasn't malicious or it didn't feel wrong. It was pure. It was wholesome. It was just me and another person exploring each other and using our bodies to please each other. Frankly, that's what we did. It was enjoyable. We liked what we were doing, so we did it. There was nothing wrong about it. Nothing to be ashamed of. It was good.

Veronica talked about the first person she had sex with where, like Leonardo, she enjoyed that sex because she felt comfortable to explore different sexual fantasies. As she recalled:

He was the first person I had sex with, and it was wonderful. We were very experimental. I was like, "Here's what my fantasies are, and here's what I'm interested in. Let's do this, and let's try this." We did all kinds of stuff, and he reciprocated, and it took a while for me to orgasm, but it's because we were figuring out each other's bodies. I had only ever been his second sexual partner, and he'd only had sex two times with the other person.

Katerina found physical pleasure and emotional connection in her sex life prior to her assault and talked about the empowerment pleasure she felt during sex:

Um. I don't know I think like sex is a human experience that has a lot of physical pleasure and I liked that. Um, I think I was lonely and I liked being around other people, um, I also felt like this is gonna sound so

awful but it's like a sense of power as a young woman to like you, you feel powerful when like people want to sleep with you and will really try to work to impress you and achieve that.

### Bad Heterosex because of Limited Pleasure

Although many survivors mentioned experiencing sexual pleasure prior to their assault they talked about in the interview, some mentioned having bad sex and limited sexual pleasure in their sex lives. Most attributed this to the fact that their partners (all men) were not interested in their sexual pleasure, or that participants did not realize that sex was supposed to be about their pleasure as well. Ella talked about how she did not have pleasurable sex with her partners because they were not interested in her physical pleasure:

Before? 'Cause I've only had—at the time, I've only been with one person, which was my ex. Not a very good sex life at that time 'cause he was my first, and it was underwhelming, I think. I was like, "What's the hype all about? I don't understand," 'cause he really didn't care about female pleasure that much. He would try, but it's like, "Come on, dude." I was never satisfied. Also, towards the end of the relationship, it was very weird that I was just disgusted by him. It felt like he was disgusted with me too. We didn't have sex for three months, I think, before we broke up. I think we tried, but it was like, "Eh, I don't wanna." Sex life before that was just not satisfying. It wasn't fun. I didn't know what it was supposed to feel like to have satisfying sex.

Sara also did not enjoy penetrative sex because she experienced physical pain and did not orgasm during sex. Sonya talked about not feeling empowered to discuss her pleasure during sex prior to her assault and said that the positive about her sex at the time was that it was not assault-which she said was a low bar. Sonya discusses why her sex was not that pleasurable:

Um, yeah I think I was so like. Like not inexperienced, I feel like inexperienced isn't the right word, but like not vocal and like in what made me feel good. Right so like I would come sometimes but not every time. I was mostly like oh, I felt like this is my boyfriend so we're doing this and it's like bringing us closer together and he feels good about it and I don't feel bad about it so. This is good um yeah.

Survivors who mentioned not experiencing pleasure during sex prior to the assault felt differently about their current sexual pleasure (discussed below). What they all describe is likely indicative of societal messaging about sex that does not emphasize women's pleasure and a heteronormative view of sex.

### Impacts of Sexual Violence on Sexual Pleasure

Almost the entire sample discussed impacts on their ability to enjoy sex because of their sexual assault experience. Leonardo mentioned how his sex life was much more enjoyable and healthier before his sexual assault experience. His sexual assault was part of a broader pattern of abuse from a partner, and his sex life dramatically changed once he got out of that relationship. After the assault, he mentioned having more casual sex with people he met on dating apps. Those sexual experiences were wanted, but he was also trying to process the sexual assault and broader abuse he experienced, so he did not find them particularly pleasurable. At time of the interview, he had been married and with the same partner for nearly a decade, and discussed what he likes about their sex life:

It's a lot more of like an open discussion than it's ever been before. We're very into exploring things. We just got a vibrator recently. We've been using that and that's been a healthy way for me to engage in sex without having to physically do anything myself. Like manipulating a toy is like something we haven't really explored before so that's been pretty good for us. I wouldn't say that we have a bad sexual relationship. I would say that I'm just I don't know if it's like a hormonal thing or like a mood-related thing or I'm just I don't want to do it all the time.

A couple of participants mentioned dealing with physical pain during sex or having issues orgasming post-assault. Penelope said her sexual assault made it hard for her to orgasm having sex with a man. Nickie shared pain she had during sex post-assault:

Um, I definitely just felt a lot more uncomfortable towards sex, I was a lot more nervous um engaging in sex I, um, would be a lot more like in my head about it and would be thinking about it a lot more. I've also, um, like since this experience have like experienced a lot of, um, like painful sex.

Valerie and Marie's (60)<sup>1</sup> first sexual experiences were the sexual assault experience they had talked about in the interview. Valerie mentioned several ways that the assault impacted her sex life and made her feel ashamed that this was how she "lost her virginity," even though she recognized virginity as a social construct. However, she explained why, before her current partner, none of her sexual experiences were that enjoyable, even if they were wanted:

Yeah, I just think that I was never really that attracted to people because I think that I [audio cuts out 01:10:00]. I also think that it had to do with me too. I didn't feel good about myself. I think it was both, and just since I felt uncomfortable in so many of the experiences, but I wanted to not feel uncomfortable. Does that make any sense?...I think that was more of it. Yeah, I think that a lot of—I can say almost certainly that most of the guys that I slept with, I don't think I was that interested in, and I just felt like I should be interested in somebody and wanted things to progress. I was like, "Oh, maybe I'll give it a chance; then it'll be a nice relationship." I'd been told before that I was picky too. I think part of me was like, "Maybe it'll get better once I like—I don't know." I think that was part of the mindset is things will develop more eventually, which is silly.

Several participants discussed feeling upset that the sexual assault impacted their ability to enjoy sex and derive pleasure from sex. These survivors had enjoyed sex in the past, but had this joy taken from them due to the trauma that was inflicted upon them against their will. Phoebe said the assault made her think that she was "meant to deny her body the enjoyment" that she used to get from sex prior to the assault. Cirilla concurred with Phoebe, and talked about how upset she was that she could not enjoy sex now:

I'm angry. I'm really pissed off because I'm the type of person that I enjoy sex. I like sex, at least when it's consensual. It just sucks that drugs and alcohol have played a part. That I've gotten a lot of my traumatic events through the decisions, the poor decisions I've made under the influence. Just tryin' to get drugs. It sucks. I feel like a part of my life is missing. A vital part of my life is missing. Sex isn't dirty. It wasn't meant to be dirty or perverted or anything like that. When you have people who twist that around, I think it just fucks everything up. It sucks.

<sup>1</sup> There are two participants who chose the same pseudonym, so they are differentiated by their age in parentheses after their pseudonym.

Lastly, some other survivors had a more nuanced perspective on how the assault they experienced impacted their sexual pleasure. Drew talks about how she did not necessarily think the assault hampered her ability to enjoy sex, but that it changed her thoughts on boundaries:

Just, having something in between you and that person like being in your house like...makes all the difference, but it does make me like I still enjoy like it hasn't ruined sex for me like. Obviously, there are some things that like would still make me very uncomfortable but that's because they would be inappropriate and not because, like you know sex has been ruined or anything like that so.

Veronica and Eve talked about how they re-found and relearned what they found pleasurable about sex after the assault. Eve said that she was able to find enjoyment in sex again after their assault:

I can stop having sex this one way, and I can have—I don't just have to have one kink that I focus on, or one thing. I can have five things, or three things, or no things, or this, or that. I had to relearn what I loved about sex. I think the one thing that I loved about sex is that I could just have sex. I was using it to cope, and I wasn't really sure what I loved about it. I was just doing it to do it. Like when I was drinking, to almost feel something. Then, when I was learning to enjoy it, it was still just like okay, I'm having sex, but I'm not really sure what I like about sex. Then, I started learning about okay, I also like this, and I also like this. Falling out of love with it, and then relearning about what I actually liked about it.

Survivors' experiences of sexual violence affected their sexual pleasure, but in much more diverse and nuanced ways than quantitative research has shown previously. For some, pleasure was hampered due to physical discomfort during sex or the emotions that survivors felt towards sex. For others, they felt it did not necessarily impact their enjoyment, but other aspects of their sex life.

## Sexual Pleasure after the Assault

### Valuing Emotional Connection as Sexual Pleasure

Although survivors discussed a variety of ways that sexual violence impacted their ability to enjoy sex, the majority of the sample (82%;  $n = 28$ ) was currently in a sexually active relationship at the time of the interview and discussed their post-assault/current sexual pleasure. Regardless of whether

their sexually active relationships were monogamous, most survivors were currently finding pleasure and satisfaction in sex. Katerina realized that after her assault, she found the most pleasure in the emotional connection she wanted during sex:

yeah I, I think part of its like want-wanting a good emotional connection, um, and (sighs) I don't know how to describe it like part of it is wanting people to respect me and not treat me like I am a sex object and not a person, and I think a lot of the people I had sex with before, um, didn't really give a damn about who I was like it didn't matter, that was irrelevant, um. And that became much more important to me.

Drew also agreed with Katerina; even though Drew was not interested in having a monogamous relationship, she did say that to ensure a pleasurable sexual connection, she wanted an emotional connection as well:

Um no, I think, other than maybe like I just am looking to like have a sexual connection with people that I also have, um, like somewhat emotional connection with. Like I'm certainly like not I don't know I can still be very like emotionally closed off so I'm not like dating all of these people or like trying to date them but it's good to have like at least some sort of friendly emotional connection before like having sex with them. So from that standpoint it's changed because I'm not like fucking rando's off the street um but in terms of like actual physical things I think it's still all the same.

For Em, they were assaulted by a partner-someone they were still with after the assault for a while, but not at the time of the interview. They talked about the complexity they felt in having been assaulted by this person, but also having great sex with this person because of their emotional connection:

(laughing) And now I was like less repressed, and it was like fun and I also like, even after that negative sexual experience I had like, some of the best sex I've ever had with that person. Like and that was after we both like. We-we both had like really strong feelings for each other, and it was like really, well just like. I, I just feel like so dumb saying this because like, this is after like this person has like done all this like. It was after like you know the, all that, like really awful unwanted experience but, like, I, I had like, a lot of strong feelings and they had strong feelings for me, and it was like, that was like sex on a, sex on an emotional level, you know.

Emotional connection seemed to become more important for some survivors' post-assault, but this was not exclusive to their enjoyment of sex. Many survivors enjoyed sex simply because they like having sex, as discussed in the next section.

### Finding Empowerment through Sexual Experimentation

Like prior to the assault, survivors mentioned finding pleasure in experimenting with sex and having lots of it! Marie (23) stated that she liked having lots of sex, and she distanced herself from the stereotype that she was hypersexual, which is a stereotype dating back to colonialization particularly applied to women of color (Tillman et al., 2010). Yennefer and Rosa both discussed feeling more empowerment in asserting their sexual pleasure and needs in their sex lives. For Yennefer, she talked about how she is more straightforward which has increased her sexual pleasure:

Um, I think not putting as much like mental pressure on it, um, or like on myself like. Having an orgasm by the end of it, um, or whatever like I feel like I put a lot of pressure on that, and then I would make myself anxious and I'm like I don't care, so I don't make myself anxious, so I just like try and enjoy it more. I'm a little more. Straightforward I guess if I don't like something they're doing or like. Or like they need to move so that I do like enjoy it more.

Rosa concurred with Yennefer but also talked about how she did not feel guilt like she used to feel in centering her pleasure in sex:

Now, I feel like I can actually do things that I like. I think I think about myself more, and so I can do positions specifically because I like to do positions, and I just feel like it's a lot more equal I would say in our relationship, and I don't have to feel bad when my husband is trying to pleasure me and there's nothing being done to him. I think that's part of it. For a long time, I felt guilty, like this is doing nothing for him, and I have to be doing something to get him there, and now, it doesn't feel that way. I can almost like I can take up space a little bit.

Marie (60), Francesca, and Casey all described different empowerment pleasure they felt through sex. Casey talked about how she liked rough sex, that at first, she was ashamed about, but came to feel secure in this sexual pleasure. Francesca talked more generally about finding empowerment not only in having sex but in talking about sex:

Yeah. Yeah. Definitely a lot better. One of my birthday parties, I had a sex toy party, and we had someone come sell us sex toys, and another time, we went to the <Place> in <City> and had real conversations about it. I think I've really shifted to a very like this is what we talk about. I talk about sex toys and sex with all my friends, and I think really shifted to that.

Similar to prior to the assault, it is clear that survivors still found empowerment and joy in exploring what they liked about sex post-assault. Although they have also experienced impacts on their sexual pleasure from the assault, survivors mention numerous pleasurable factors of having sex, which counteracts research narratives that primarily emphasize survivors' sexual dysfunction (Deliramich & Gray, 2008).

### Finding Increased Pleasure through Sex with Women

The majority of this sample identified as LGBTQIA+. For the bisexual/pansexual women in this study, they unanimously agreed that they preferred having sex with women than with men, even though most of them were currently either single or in relationships with men. Katerina was one exception, but she states that is because she was sexually assaulted by a woman, and it was her first sexual experience with a woman, so she has since not engaged in sex with women. Still, she said she was more sexually attracted to women than to men. Besides Katerina, many women discussed that having sex with women was better than having sex with men due to communication and that it felt like a more mutual sexual experience. Drew discussed a relationship she had with a woman, which did occur prior to her unwanted sexual experience:

Yeah, um so I'm bisexual, I was dating a girl for three years, actually like in late high school into college. And like she and I had a fantastic relationship like I mean I never felt like pressured by her like sexually ever she was always like very in tune with just like wanting me to be happy and like that being like emotional but also like sexual like I don't know, there was never any like. Pressure from her like in any way like it was always like she was just very happy to like make me feel good and that kind of thing and like vice versa, like, I found that very. Like good, so I guess like I do have like a good example to draw on which has been helpful in knowing that like, the unwanted sexual experience was like, fucked up.

At the time of the interview, Abbi had recently come out as gay and was in her first relationship with a woman. Much of her sexual history, and ability to find pleasure during sex,

was clouded because of being with men, her trauma experiences, unhealthy relationships, and purity culture. She overall reported better sexual pleasure with women than with men, and she states what she likes about sex with her current girlfriend:

I do enjoy having sex with her, but I do still get anxiety, and nervous around her, but that's more of like, I really don't want her to be like—she knows that penetration is painful for me. She checks in with me a lot to make sure I'm okay, and that I'm comfortable every time that we're together. Every time that we're together, there's consent. Every time that we're together there's can you check in.

Cassie directly compared having sex with men and women, sharing that she never had issues orgasming with women, which explains why she preferred having sex with women over men:

I don't wanna say all men because I've definitely had very loving experiences with men. Even if they're not loving, they're just cool and kind and nice. Like <Name> and my ex-fiancé at points. There's a major difference in that I always come. I never have an issue with that. I communicate very effectively. I get to explore so many things. There weren't a ton of men that wanted to explore things. The ones that did that was fun and also the ones that didn't was fine in certain instances like those relationships I was just talking about. Then there's always just a little bit of a disconnect with men. With women, I mean I communicate better. I'm able to have those hard conversations. I feel more comfortable. I feel more emotionally connected and involved. I still get those fun, exciting experiences, except they go slower. I feel way more comfortable communicating with women.

For the survivors in this study who preferred having sex with women and/or enjoyed having sex with women usually cited heightened physical pleasure and increased communication as to why they found more pleasure in these sexual experiences.

### **Trust and Prioritizing Physical Pleasure with Current Partners**

Some survivors did mention having enjoyable sex with men and that they appreciated men who were loving, giving, and cared about their physical pleasure. Most survivors discussed the sexual pleasure they felt with their current

male partners. Ella explained how her current partner far exceeded her previous sexual partner because of this:

He's just very loving and giving. Back then, with my ex, he cums and then we're all done. All done. I just didn't feel cared for. Now, I feel more wanted. He really prioritizes my pleasure as well. It's very healthy and very loving. That's what I love so much about it. Just by that, I could feel that he really loves me and wants me to be happy. That was very different for me. I was very confused when I first felt that. I was like, "What?"

As part of prioritizing physical pleasure, foreplay was important for survivors to experience satisfaction during sex. As Francesca explained:

He's very attentive to what I want. We do and try a lot of different things. I think we have a lot of different types of sex, like very intimate or also very kink related or very like—there's a lot of fun different ways, and we talk about it. It's a very fun environment and also very safe. I feel very safe with him.

Sara shared that not only was her current partner interested in pleasing her sexually, he prioritized her pleasure over her own, which she enjoyed:

Yeah. When we met, we actually—it was different from all the other string of partners I had before. We didn't hook up immediately. He was always really interested in my pleasure. Almost always, we would figure my stuff out before we even got to his stuff. It's been that way since we met, and we've been together for four years.

Sonya stated that now having sex with her current partner, she finally feels like she actually enjoys sex and derives lots of pleasure from it:

it's really good like- I feel like I feel like I have, not like I'm in control, but like I feel like at this point, we have a good understanding what the other person likes are also willing to like try new things and be really open about that. So, I feel really comfortable like saying what I like-And what I don't like and it's it's fun, but in like a very pleasurable way. Whereas before it was like a this is sort of an obligation and it's also kind of fun and like we're close, but now it's like, we can like really give each other pleasure. And I think that's more so, what sex is for me now.

While physical sexual pleasure was paramount for survivors' sexual enjoyment, it was not limited to physical pleasure. The feeling of being desired was also important in survivors' current sexual pleasure. Marie (23) described a fun sexual encounter she had around the time of the interview:

I don't know, because I feel like they [prior sexual partners] just wanted to have sex with me, so they didn't try, whereas this past weekend, one, I had sex in a van, so that was pretty cool. Two, he continuously talked to me and he was like, "Oh, you're drop-dead gorgeous." He tried to make me have a good time. I was like, "What? This happens?" I always feel like I'm trying to please—there's been another time—the only other time where I felt like that was with this other guy who was also a musician. They're my type apparently. I felt like he was the only other one who tried—who tried to make me have a good time. Whereas I didn't just feel like I had to make him have a good time.

Feeling safe with men was another key factor in being able to find pleasure in sex. Anna discussed feeling safety with her current partner during sex, and realizing that sex can be safe and enjoyable was connected to her sexual pleasure:

To me, I feel fortunate that I have the option of having a loving relationship where sex can be safe. Sex can be enjoyable. We can be vulnerable together and even laugh together, truly having a fun experience and recognizing that, wow, I used to take that for granted 'cause that's not how all the experiences could be.

Vivien also reflected what Anna said about vulnerability with your partner—and talked about how pleasurable she found her current sex with her partner and being intimate:

He's losing his hair a little bit, and I just find that so sexy in the context of a relationship because we've come this far together. Also, being completely naked with him is huge. I find that so sexy because for a while, I had roommates all the time. When you're going through childhood abuse like that, there's a lot of just your pants are pulled down real quick. Being completely naked with him, it's my favorite thing.

There were many survivors who were having sex currently and finding much pleasure in their sex lives, which was powerful to hear despite having experienced sexual trauma. What these survivors' experiences show is that sexual pleasure and finding sexual pleasure again after an assault should be addressed more when discussing recovery in survivors.

## Discussion

The current study explored experiences of sexual pleasure and satisfaction in a community sample of sexual assault survivors. Although survivors discussed how their sexual assault impacted their sexual pleasure in various ways (e.g., experiencing physical pain during sex post-assault), survivors described many pleasurable aspects of sex and enjoyed having it. Survivors found pleasure in physical aspects of sex, in both casual and monogamous sexual contexts, as well as pleasure in the emotional connections felt during sex. Their personal narrative accounts of sexual pleasure appears to run counter to past research and societal narratives of survivors as sexually "damaged," and that post-assault sexuality is dysfunctional or risky (Deliramich & Gray, 2008; Griffin et al., 2010; Peters, 2019). In particular for the queer survivors in this study, women survivors enjoying sex with women and being able to sexually experiment and explore fantasies aided in centering pleasure in their sex lives after an assault. Furthermore, queer survivors being able to center pleasure in this way after assault was key for survivors to push back against societal heteronormative sexuality/sexual behaviors (e.g., limited sexual pleasure for women) that characterized their pre-assault sexual pleasure.

## Summary of Findings

The results of this study are novel in that sexual pleasure was asked about at two time points: prior to the assault and after the assault. Most research on sexual satisfaction focuses on what sex looks like post-assault and the detrimental impacts on satisfaction (Deliramich & Gray, 2008; Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000). Prior to the assault, some survivors described experiencing sexual pleasure, but most described bad sexual experiences with limited pleasure, which is consistent with past research on women who have sex with men reporting less sexual pleasure and linking this to heteronormative sexual ideals (e.g., sex should highlight men's pleasure over women's; Gavey, 2005). After experiencing a sexual assault, survivors discussed being able to find enjoyment through sex, but this was not universal. Two survivors mentioned more nuanced effects on their sex lives and sexuality, in that it did not impact their pleasure, but rather how they approached sex more broadly. For others, they felt they had to re-learn how to enjoy sex due to experiencing sexual trauma. Additionally, some survivors experienced physical pain and struggled to orgasm during sex post-assault, which supports prior research on sexual dysfunction experienced after a sexual assault (Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000). Finally, some participants at the time of the assault were currently still experiencing problems enjoying sex, which has negatively affected their mental health. What



these differences show is that healing and recovering from sexual assault does not look the same for each survivor.

Much of what survivors found enjoyable about sex is consistent with reports among non-survivor samples (Barnett & Melugin, 2016; Reis et al., 2021). Queer women found that sex with women was more pleasurable than sex with men. They attributed this increased pleasure to feeling on more equal footing with women, better communication, and more mutual interest in giving pleasure than men. For example, Ella and other participants commented that they felt their (male) partners were simply not interested in their physical pleasure. Again, we tie this back to patriarchal heteronormativity in sex where men's pleasure is prioritized over the needs of women (Gavey, 2005). Additionally, queer women survivors who found increased pleasure with women mentioned that equal footing contributed to feeling safer having sex with women.

In the heterosexual context, survivors found enjoyment in post-assault sex because they felt empowered to communicate their needs which were heard by their partner. Survivors also mentioned enjoying emotional connections during sex (both pre- and post-assault), which may be because most of the sample were women, reflecting prior research that women enjoy emotional connection during sex as compared to men (Barnett & Melugin, 2016). Not only were emotional connection and feelings of equality tied to pleasure (pre- and post-assault) but were regarded as a prerequisite for folks to feel safe and comfortable to experience physical pleasure. Queer women participants were able to find this more readily with women post-assault but also commented achieving this with male long-term partners who were invested in their safety and emotional well-being. This finding partially reflects previous research on survivor changes in sexuality (O'Callaghan et al., 2019), though survivors in the current study did not directly tie their assault experience to this increased sexual pleasure. Overall, we cannot conclude that women who experience sexual assault subsequently seek out sex with women, however, the qualities that were described as contributing to pleasurable sex post-assault were more easily found in woman partners.

After the assault and at the time of the interview, survivors mentioned finding empowerment through sexual experimentation and having sexual pleasure with current partners, regardless of whether they were in a monogamous relationship or having more casual sex. For survivors who discussed the sexual pleasure they felt with their current partners, their experiences reflect previous research that has found pleasure and healing in intimate relationships (Stockman et al., 2024). Participants discussed being relieved of the societal stigma of enjoying rough sex, the stereotype of being hypersexual as a woman of color, and the guilt of wanting to center their sexual needs post-assault. What

survivors found pleasurable about sex dismantles sexual stereotypes about women and queer people (e.g., women do not find pleasure in sex, queer people are hypersexual; Gavey, 2005; Worthen, 2023) and show the utility in research and intervention adopting an approach that centers sexual pleasure post-assault rather than avoiding risk/abstinence frameworks. These findings also show that survivors who engage in casual sex do experience pleasure and/or are not a "risk" group that should be targeted for intervention and/or stereotyped as "hypersexual" (Campbell et al., 2004). Indeed, being able to support survivors' sexual pleasure choices, whether they want to engage with a long-term, monogamous romantic partner or have sex with multiple individuals, should be a priority with any service provider, researcher, or informal support provider working with/supporting survivors. Sexual violence research and interventions frequently take a deficit-based approach rather than one of healing, and by focusing on how folks can feel safe and empowered from sex can help survivors focus on healing in their own way. Anti-violence research in particular would benefit from a pleasure-focused approach to understanding survivors' post-assault sexual pleasures, motivations, and behaviors to avoid stereotyping an already oppressed group.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study adds several important contributions to the literature on sexual pleasure and sexual satisfaction of survivors, there are some limitations to address. First, the sample was limited due to access; participants had to be able to speak English and needed a phone/computer to call in to Zoom. Future research should replicate this study with survivors who may have been unable to participate because of these access restrictions. Although this sample was racially and sexuality diverse, most of this sample were cisgender women. It is likely that the results would have varied as a function of different gender identities as well, which has been shown in non-survivor samples (Lindley et al., 2021). Future research should replicate this study with a sample of survivors who are gay men, trans folks, and other gender identities to see how gender and sexuality can shape these experiences.

The majority of this sample had a child sexual assault (CSA) history, and their responses regarding their sexual pleasure could have skewed more negatively than a population without a CSA trauma history, though this was not necessarily determined in this analysis and was not a focus of this study. Given previous research on the impact of CSA on sexual pleasure, this warrants further research (Rellini, 2008). Furthermore, we did not compare survivors who had multiple substance-involved sexual assaults to those

who only had one, and how this may have impacted their responses. Also, although some participants brought this up in their interview, we did not specifically inquire about a history of intimate partner violence and/or other violence experiences. Particularly with intimate partner violence, it is possible that these experiences could have contributed to the results we found for the impacts on sexual pleasure. Future research should look at the co-occurring impacts of CSA, history of intimate partner violence, and substance-involved poly victimization (or all three overlapping, which was the case for some participants in this study), in addition to comparative research, to see how each of these may interplay to impact sexual pleasure of survivors.

Our results support a revisiting of how research on sexual behavior and sexuality with survivors is conducted. In our endeavors to highlight survivors' experiences and be survivor-centered, we must avoid pathologizing language and assumptions that post-assault sexual behavior must be risky and/or dysfunctional simply *because* someone has a sexual trauma history. This is particularly important given that our sample was majority queer people, whose sexuality and behavior is already pathologized, stigmatized, and criminalized (Adams, 2016; Gaynor, 2018). Utilizing risk paradigms to study sexual pleasure of survivors should be balanced with research that uses a sex positive framework (Fahs, 2014; Wodda & Panfil, 2018). Sexual risk framing has been criticized in other contexts; for example, critiques of studies of Black folks that overwhelmingly emphasize trauma/racism/other negative biases rather than investigating Black joy have recently been discussed and highlighted the importance of moving away from this framing (Tichavakunda, 2021). The results of this study also show that the sexuality/sexual behavior research and sexual assault research areas should be bridged in future research on sexuality and survivors, and in a way that promotes healing rather than deficits from a nuanced perspective.

Some research recognizes the possibility for PTG following experiences of sexual violence (Littleton & Grills-Taquechel, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Our findings suggest that posttraumatic growth can occur regarding sex, sexuality, and sexual relationships. Survivors discussed exploring what they like about sex, finding their voice to communicate their needs when engaging in sex, feeling empowered to center their needs, shedding heteronormative or gender expectations while engaging in sex, and being relieved of stigma surrounding how a person finds pleasure in sex. Overall, survivors discovered what elements they needed to find safety, enjoyment, and pleasure in their sexual encounters and (for some) long-term sexual relationships. These discoveries did not occur only in emotional self-reflection, but from the safe spaces created with their sexual partner. More research is needed to assess the

potential for PTG in the context of sexual experiences and to understand how survivors integrate the experiences of trauma into their sexuality and sexual relationships.

Building on our findings, research should also assess how sexual pleasure and satisfaction were experienced prior to the assault among survivors; approaching sexuality impacts from a structural lens as participants in our study discussed how heteronormative ideals about sex limited their ability to engage in pleasurable sex. Their experience of assault sometimes compounded feeling like sex was already not pleasurable for them, and this history of bad sex and limited pleasure may more fully explain why survivors experience sexual dissatisfaction post-assault. In other words, the combination of having sex that was heteronormative coupled with experiencing sexual trauma may have impacted their post-assault pleasure rather than just the sexual assault alone. This should be addressed in future research with survivors, possibly taking a more "life history" approach to understanding how survivors' sexual pleasure changes over time.

### Practice Implications

Survivors in this sample did mention effects of sexual assault on their ability to enjoy sex. For survivors who felt that they were unable to enjoy sex or derive pleasure from sex, they were justifiably angry—they wanted to have sex and enjoy it. Clinical practitioners working with survivors may benefit from focusing on sexual healing in survivor recovery. This could be a central element in clinical practice that emphasizes sex positive sexual health and sexual healing. Indeed, one participant, Yennefer, mentioned the importance of a sex positive therapist in healing from prior sexual trauma (O'Callaghan et al., 2024). While this was beneficial for Yennefer, we must acknowledge the limitations in access to therapy services based on class and sociocultural barriers like race and gender where people of color and men are less likely to engage in such services (Galdas et al., 2005; Ketchen Lipson et al., 2022; Weist et al., 2014). As such, we need to address structural barriers that limit access to formal services for marginalized populations and ensure that such services promote healing, empowerment, and sex positivity in an intersectional manner.

Comprehensive sexuality education has been shown for decades to improve sexual outcomes internationally (Braeken & Cardinal, 2008; Haberland & Rogow, 2015). For example, a recent meta-analysis analyzing sexual health interventions in Australia shows that adding sexual pleasure as a component to interventions improves a host of sexual health outcomes, including increased condom use (Zaneva et al., 2022). Yet, whether someone will receive this education varies widely based on geographic area, particularly in the

United States. Consequently, there are structural limitations on who gets to benefit from comprehensive, sex positive education in the U.S. which continues to further marginalize folks, particularly queer people, as anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation incessantly expands. With inconsistent and limited sexual education in the U.S., we are inhibiting the efforts of primary prevention strategies and limiting the opportunity for positive sexual health outcomes that span the gender and sexuality spectrums. We suggest that sexual health interventions be integrated across clinical and educational spaces, including, but not limited to, therapy, peer support/advocacy, age-appropriate education, and other long-term sexual healthcare.

## Conclusion

Sexual violence research examines methods of coping and healing from experiences of sexual violence, often with the (un)intended consequence of pathologizing survivors' behaviors. In this study, we sought to shed light on the often-stigmatizing issue of sexual pleasure among folks with histories of sexual violence, through a sex-positive framework. While sexual violence can impact survivors' experiences of sexual pleasure, survivors can and do enjoy sex, which counteracts narratives that survivors are "damaged" and that post-assault sex is dysfunctional or risky. Overall, we find that sexual pleasure is complex particularly regarding gender, sexual orientation and heteronormativity, and trauma history, which calls for more research to understand the nuance of sexual pleasure among survivors. Everyone deserves to have good sex, and in our efforts to reveal the negative impacts of sexual violence, we should not pathologize how survivors try to find sexual healing and do what we can to support sexual healing on an individual, community, and structural level.

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**Data availability** Not applicable.

## Declarations

**Ethical approval and consent to participate** This study was IRB approved and all participants went through an informed consent process and consented to participate in this study.

**Consent for publication** Not applicable.

**Human and animal ethics** This study followed all ethical guidelines for conducting research with human subjects. This study did not involve research with animals.

**Competing interests** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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