

## **“It feels so good it almost hurts”: Young adults’ experiences of orgasm and sexual pleasure**

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**Abstract:** Orgasm is a ‘goal’ of much sexual activity, a source of potentially intense pleasure and fulfillment, yet can be fraught with difficulty or distress. Relatively little social science research has explored people’s experiences around, and their meanings related to, orgasm, and indeed other sexual pleasures, especially with young adults. This study aimed to provide a rich exploration of the meanings associated with orgasm and sexual pleasure during sex with a partner, to understand the social-patterning of orgasm experience. A qualitative survey was used to collect data from 119 sexually-experienced British young adults (81% women, mean age 20; 92% heterosexual). A descriptive form of thematic analysis that prioritizes participants’ meanings and experiences was used to identify and explore patterns in the data. Five main themes reported here are: 1) orgasm: the purpose and end of sex; 2) ‘it’s more about my partner’s orgasm’; 3) orgasm: the ultimate pleasure?; 4) orgasm is not a simple physiological response; and 5) faking orgasm is not uncommon. These (mostly not gendered) themes demonstrate complex and contradictory meanings around orgasm, but also show meaning to be dependent on situation and context. However, they do resonate strongly with widespread discourses of sexuality which prioritize heterosexual coitus, orgasm, and orgasm-reciprocity.

**Keywords:** sexual pleasure, reciprocity, faking orgasm, orgasm imperative, coital imperative

### **Introduction**

Giving an orgasm; having an orgasm; giving better orgasms; having better orgasms; having *multiple* orgasms; not having an orgasm; never having orgasms; faking having orgasms... Orgasm is not simple. Orgasm is something our bodies are designed to experience, a ‘goal’ of much sexual activity, and a source of potentially intense pleasure and fulfillment; it is also *highly* symbolic, with meanings far exceeding a physiological ‘reflex’ (Tiefer, 2004). Much personal, interpersonal, sociocultural and sociopolitical importance has been placed on orgasm (see Fahs, 2011), especially in recent decades, and it is now situated as an indicator of a healthy sexuality and healthy relationships. Orgasm can, however, also be fraught with difficulty, and distress, especially for women, so its meanings are potentially contradictory. Despite the conclusion that “the meanings of orgasm are extremely complex for both women and men” (Jackson & Scott, 2007: 108), relatively little social scientific research has qualitatively explored people’s experiences around, and their meanings related to, orgasm, and indeed other sexual

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pleasures. Given the sociocultural importance of orgasm, this study aims to provide a rich and detailed exploration of the meanings associated with orgasm for young adults, and to theorize this within broader critical theories of (hetero)sexuality.

From the first wave of sexological research onwards, there has been interest in orgasm as an element of human sexuality (e.g., Ellis, 1913; Freud, 1931; Krafft-Ebing, 1965; Kinsey et al., 1948; Masters & Johnson, 1966). Physiologically-oriented researchers aimed to produce an accurate, objective account of orgasm, including the physiological and biological changes that occurred during orgasm. Masters and Johnson's (1966) account of orgasm is now often described as *the* definitive account (see Mah & Binik, 2001), however it is not without its critics (Boyle, 1993; Tiefer, 1995, 2004). Following the publication of Masters and Johnson's (1966) research, orgasm was explicitly positioned as *the* way to achieve sexual fulfillment for both men and women: the key indicator of sexual pleasure (Reich, 1982). Research consistently reports, however, that men experience orgasm more frequently than women (Fisher, 1973; Galinsky & Sonenstein, 2011; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Kinsey et al., 1948; Laumann et al., 1994; Richters, de Visser, Rissel & Smith, 2006), and that most women often do not orgasm from coitus alone (Eschler, 2004; Fisher, 1973; Hite, 1976, 2000; Richters, de Visser, Rissel & Smith, 2006). As orgasm became central to sexual pleasure, *lack* of orgasm also became classified, diagnosed and treated as a sexual disorder or dysfunction (e.g. DSM-IV, 1994; Hawton, 1991; but see Cacchione, 2007). Identifying the benefits of orgasm and solving the *problems* of orgasm now appear to dominate much research literature.

The physiological response or experience of orgasm is, however, not the most important or meaningful aspect of orgasm to consider. Dimensions beyond the physiological, including the subjective experience of orgasm, the meanings people attach to orgasm, and the social discourses and societal practices that provide meaning around orgasm, need to be considered if we are fully to understand orgasm (Jackson & Scott, 2001; Nicholson, 1993). Western cultures are characterized by two connected social discourses vital for understanding the meanings and practices around orgasm: a coital and an orgasm imperative. The coital imperative constructs penis-in-vagina penetration (coitus; Myerson, Crawley, Anstey, Kessler & Okopny, 2007) as 'real' sex, the quintessential form of (hetero)sex, with male ejaculation inside the vagina marking the end of 'sex' (Jackson, 1984; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001). Coitus tends to override other sexual practices, when people are asked what constitutes 'sex' (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999), although there is much variation in individual understandings of what counts as 'sex' (e.g., McCabe, Tanner & Heiman, 2010). The orgasm imperative extends the coital imperative (McPhillips et al., 2001) to construct orgasm as the gold-standard of sexual enjoyment, the goal – and end – of sex; something all individuals should try to achieve (Béjin, 1986; Potts, 2000). A discourse of reciprocity, where both partners should give and take (pleasure, notably orgasm) equally (Braun, Gavey & McPhillips, 2003; Sanders, 1988), coexists with both imperatives, with orgasm constructed as a 'gift' or a commodity to be given, and exchanged (see Fahs, 2011; Gilfoyle, Wilson & Brown, 1992). Finally, intersecting all these is a gendered construction of women's orgasm as potentially complicated or tricky to 'achieve', in contrast to men's, which is constructed as easy (Frith, in press). These broader societal discourses powerfully influence understandings, feelings, experiences and desires around sex, and orgasm, not least as 'norms' of expected behavior (see Tiefer, 2004).

Qualitative research into the experience and meaning of orgasm – typically focusing on women – has demonstrated complex and nuanced, yet patterned, meanings and experiences related to orgasm (e.g., Cacchione, 2007; Fahs, 2011; Hite, 2000; Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009; Nicholson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2000). Given the sociocultural context noted above, orgasm has often unsurprisingly been identified as *the* peak sexual experience, the desired outcome (goal) of sex, the end and measure of successful sex (Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009; Potts, 2000). Women often report that it is important to ‘give’ their male partners pleasure and orgasm, possibly at the expense of their own pleasure (Nicholson & Burr, 2003). Linked into both Freudian ideas of vaginal orgasmic superiority (e.g., Koedt, 1996), and the coital imperative, women have been found to differentiate between ‘clitoral’ orgasm (often achieved through masturbation) and ‘vaginal’ orgasm (achieved through ‘sex’ with a man), and see ‘vaginal’ orgasms as superior (Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009). And it appears that the meaning of orgasm cannot be divorced from the context it is experienced in. An emotional connection with a partner both affects, and is affected by, the experience of orgasm, with women reporting a sense of intimacy and bonding produced through orgasm with a partner (e.g., Fahs, 2011; Nicholson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2000).

With orgasm idealized as a romantic, sexual highpoint and symbol of femininity, the absence of orgasm has been identified as disturbing to women and their partners (Cacchione, 2007; Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Lavie & Willig, 2005), negatively affecting a woman’s self-image and her emotional and relational wellbeing, as well as her sexual experiences and enjoyment of them (see Cacchione, 2007; Fahs, 2011; Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Lavie & Willig, 2005). Women who viewed themselves as having problems with orgasm have reported anxiety, a sense of anger, of frustration, of sadness, of missing out, of being a failure, and of decreased sexual satisfaction and desire, or that sex has not been completed and their ability to express their sexuality has been hindered (Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009; Potts, 2000). Some women felt the absence of orgasm impacted their relationships, with pressure and tension building-up as their partners wished for them to experience orgasm and were disappointed when it did not happen (Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009; Lavie & Willig, 2005).

The interactional and relational meanings of orgasm are one reason people – typically women – report *faking* orgasm. In one Australian study (Roberts, Kippax, Waldby, & Crawford, 1995), (heterosexual) women faked orgasm to show love and nurturing for their partner and to not disrupt the relationship, because their partner’s technique was not enough to bring them to orgasm. Faking orgasm was seen to affirm men’s masculine technical skills (termed ‘sexpertise’, see Potts, 2002), keep them happy and the relationship functioning. Other studies have reported a strong ‘caring’ component in reasons for faking orgasm given by men and women, related to avoiding negative outcomes (e.g. hurting their partner’s feelings; Bryan, 2001; Fahs, 2011; Hite, 1976; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Shaefer, 1973; Thompson & Muehlenhard, 2003) and creating positive ones (e.g. pleasing their partner, building their partner’s ego, meeting their partner’s expectations; Fahs, 2011; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Shope, 1968; Thompson & Muehlenhard, 2003). Other reasons around faking orgasm include wanting to appear normal (Bryan, 2001; Darling & Davidson, 1986; Hite, 1976; Shaefer, 1973; Thompson & Muehlenhard, 2003; Wiederman, 1997), enhancing sexual excitement for themselves and their partner (Bryan, 2001; Hite, 1976; Wiederman, 1997), and because orgasm was unlikely (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010), and they wanted sex to end (Bryan, 2001; Hite, 1976; Muehlenhard & Shippee; Shaefer,

1973). Orgasm – ‘real’ or ‘faked’ – is recognized as having a strongly *performative* element (Cacchione, 2007; Duncombe & Marsden, 1996; Jackson & Scott, 2007; Jagose, 2010), where the required performance – of what sex/orgasm *ought* to be – is both learned and then necessarily displayed. Cacchione (2007) captured this by theorizing faking orgasm around the concept of ‘performance work,’ as one of three types of ‘sex work’ women with sexual ‘difficulties’ engaged in.

Existing qualitative (and quantitative) research tells us that orgasm is entrenched as the normative marker of sexual pleasure, and is often viewed as a hugely significant personal/relational experience. However, there are three limitations to much of the existing qualitative literature: small sample sizes, an underrepresentation of youth (age <25), and a typical focus on (heterosexual) women’s experiences. In our study, we attempted to address these limits by collecting data from younger, and both male and female participants, by including non-heterosexual participants, and by using a data collection method that allowed us to collect a larger sample. Our study aimed to explore experiences, feelings and meanings of orgasm and sexual pleasure during sex with a partner, in order to understand the social-patterning of orgasm experience.

## Methods

Since sexuality research investigates sensitive topics, surveys are a frequently used method of data collection (O’Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994), as they provide anonymity for participants to report their views, experiences and practices. The surveys typically used in sex research are quantitative. *Qualitative* surveys are less frequently used, but alongside anonymity, large sample sizes and question standardization, they offer the additional benefit of open-ended questioning (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). As they allow participants to identify their own key issues, and “researchers to capture the nuances, contradictions, and ambiguities” in participants experiences (Frith & Gleeson, 2008: 253), they can provide a breadth of knowledge in new areas of research (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). For these reasons, this study employed a qualitative survey design.

### Participants

One hundred and nineteen young adults aged 18-26 (mean 20) completed the survey (97 were women, 21 were men, one individual identified their sex/gender as ‘other’). An inclusive approach was taken so that non-heterosexual participants were not excluded (Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010), with the aim of reporting meanings of orgasm that no longer only reflected heterosexual experience. Yet most participants still identified as heterosexual (straight), white, and a majority was middle class; most were in partner relationships. All were either currently sexually active or had been sexually active in the past. Almost all were students (for more detail, see Table 1).

**Table 1** Participants' demographic information (n=119)

	Range	Mean (SD)
<b>Age</b>	18-26	20.2 (1.3)

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	21	17.5
Female	97	80.8
Other	1	0.8
<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>		
Caucasian/ White	113	94.2
Asian	2	1.7
Greek	1	0.8
Black	1	0.8
Mixed	3	1.7
<b>Sexuality</b>		
Heterosexual/ straight	111	92.5
Bisexual	4	3.3
Gay	1	0.8
Lesbian	2	1.7
Other	2	1.7
<b>Relationship Status</b>		
In a relationship/ partnered	78	65.0
Single	37	30.8
Cohabiting	2	1.7
Engaged	1	0.8
Other	2	1.7
<b>Social Class</b>		
Middle class	65	54.2
Working class	33	27.5
No class	14	11.7
Other	5	4.2
<b>Work Status</b>		
Full time employed	1	0.8
Full time student	94	78.3
Full time student and part time employed	24	20.0

## **The Experiences of Orgasm and Sexual Pleasure Survey**

Participants completed the ‘experiences of orgasm and sexual pleasure survey,’ a qualitative survey developed by CR, VC and VB. The survey was developed on the basis of a thorough review of the orgasm literature, our broader knowledge of sexuality scholarship, and critical theories around sexuality and orgasm (e.g., Jackson & Scott, 2007; Potts, 2000, 2002; Tiefer, 2004), to fit the specific research aims of this project. Questions were carefully designed to eliminate implicit assumptions or reinforce normative ideas about (hetero)sexuality. They were drafted, reviewed, then revised, and the survey organized in the most logical order, progressing from general to more specific questions.

The final survey consisted of 16 open-ended questions, with additional space to continue the answer to any question, and to share any other views or experiences about orgasm and sexual pleasure. Questions related to the meaning of orgasm, and meanings and experiences around orgasm frequency, self versus partner orgasm, orgasm timing, ‘faking’ orgasm, pleasures associated with sex, and descriptions and evaluations of their own typical (or last) orgasm experience (see Appendix for a list of the open-ended questions). To avoid the heteronormativity of much sex research (Stanley, 1995), the term sex was explicitly defined in its broadest sense, to include any kind of sexual activity with any partner (e.g., oral sex, penis-in-vagina intercourse/coitus, anal sex, mutual masturbation). The survey concluded with nine demographic questions, a mix of tick-box and open-ended questions.

### **Procedure**

The study received ethical approval by the School of Life Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of the West of England (UWE). Participants were primarily recruited via the Department of Psychology participant pool (through which students participate in research in return for a small amount of course credit); a small number were also recruited through CR’s personal networks, in an effort to increase sample size and diversity. However, given CR’s demographic profile as similar to the undergraduate student population, there was no notable difference between those recruited in different ways. Interested individuals were given an information sheet describing the study’s purpose, how the data would be used, how to withdraw from the research and any potential risks from participation. Those who agreed then signed a consent form, and were given a copy of the survey (pre-numbered to ensure participant credit could be tracked). Participants completed the survey in their own time, and could complete it in either hard copy (paper and pen) or electronically (MS Word). The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Reminders were sent via the participant pool (no reminders were sent to people recruited through CR’s networks). Anyone who failed to complete the survey did not receive credit.

### **Data Analysis**

Any personal identifiers were removed from completed surveys. All handwritten survey entries were electronically entered into the database by CR and a research assistant, and checked for accuracy by EO. The data were not edited in any way (e.g., no corrections were made to spelling or grammar). In preparation for analysis, demographic information was not attached to participant responses. Our focus was not on *testing* for gender differences, or sexuality differences, in meanings and experiences around

orgasm and sexual pleasure. The analysis was initially conducted without such information, but was added at a later stage, so any potential patterning around gender and sexuality could be explored.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), a method that offers a way of identifying, and providing a rich, detailed analysis of, patterns across a dataset. The analysis was theoretically underpinned by critical realism (Willig, 1999), an approach which: “affirms the existence of ‘reality’ ... but at the same time recognizes that its representations are characterized and mediated by culture, language, and political interests rooted in factors such as race, gender, or social class” (Ussher, 1999: 45). In terms of our participants’ sense-making around orgasm, this approach means we take participants’ accounts at face value, and interpret them as depicting the truth and reality of people’s experiences, but without rendering them independent of the historical, cultural, or political context in which they occur. We correspondingly utilized a largely *descriptive* form of TA that prioritizes participants’ meanings and experiences (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) in developing our themes.

Thematic analysis is a progressive and an iterative process. The data – with all demographic information removed – were read numerous times to ensure immersion; notes regarding potentially interesting aspects of the data were made at this stage. Following familiarization, the entire dataset was coded thoroughly by EO. Codes were derived from the data in a bottom-up process; codes captured descriptive elements of the data or our more theoretically-informed ideas related to the data. After review with VB, which involved a close review of the coding of a segment of the dataset, and assessing the overall coding of the dataset, the dataset was reread and recoded, and codes were added or modified, as necessary, to ensure the entire dataset was coded consistently. Potential themes were then identified from the codes, based on patterned responses and clusters of meaning within the dataset, keeping our research questions in mind. Relevant data were collated under each theme, and the dataset reread to affirm that the themes shaped by the authors captured the participants’ views and experiences. At this point information about gender and sexuality identification of participants was reintroduced. Given the nature of the dataset, themes were not always related to a core concept with a singular meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012), but to a central *idea* that sometimes contained multiple different facets. Through consideration of the collated data, in relation to relevant literature, themes were developed and refined.

In the analysis presented here, sometimes frequency counts are reported, but mostly general descriptors of frequency around a theme or meaning. The terms ‘majority’ or ‘most’ are used when almost all participants reported the meaning, ‘frequently’ refers to meaning described by more than half, and ‘some’ to less than half the participants. Extracts of data illustrate each of them and key analytic points. Each quotation is identified by the survey code and (F)/(M)/(O) to refer to participant sex. Non-significant spelling mistakes have been corrected to aid readability and comprehension of the data.

## Results

Five key themes will be discussed in depth, but to contextualize this analysis we first briefly describe three more general aspects of the dataset. First, when describing orgasm, the most common descriptors revolved around pleasure, confirming the normative status of orgasm as the ‘gold standard’ of sexual pleasure. Over half the participants (n=69) used the words ‘pleasure’ or ‘pleasurable’ to describe their experience of orgasm, often alongside other words that described and emphasized the intensity of the pleasure, such as “intensely pleasurable feeling” (040[F]), “burst of pleasure” (151[M]) or “overwhelming rush of pleasure” (111[M], 191[F]). Orgasm was often also described in a way which suggested an elevated or ultimate status within sex: for example, the word ‘climax’ or ‘climactic’ was used by 33 participants (e.g. “reaching the climax,” 135[F]); the word ‘peak’ by 26 (e.g. “the ‘peak’ of sexual activity,” 021[F]). Less commonly used were variations of ‘ejaculate’, and even fewer participants described orgasm by using the words ‘love’ or ‘intimacy’, although these did appear when orgasm was discussed in other ways (see below).

Second, the data show that the meaning and experience of orgasm (or no orgasm) can only be understood in context; meaning, for most participants, was tied to the situation being described or context of their relationship or lives. For instance, the frequency with which orgasm was experienced, or not, with a partner, was important in shaping participants’ meanings, feelings and experiences of orgasm, pleasure, and sex. Participants’ descriptions quite often explicitly referenced how regularly specific events happened (e.g. “quite frequently,” 068[F]; “it rarely happens,” 047[M]), and frequency was particularly important in providing meaning around *not* having an orgasm in a sexual encounter. For instance: “It isn’t a massive issue if it doesn’t happen a lot but I would have thought it would be if it did occur more often,” 010[F]. Therefore, although we present themes around the meaning and experience of orgasm, we do not want to suggest any pure or decontextualized meaning *inherently* associated with orgasm.

Finally, although the survey explicitly defined ‘sex’ very broadly (see Appendix), the data echo much previous work which has demonstrated a conflation of ‘sex’ with coitus (e.g. Sanders & Reinisch, 1999) and the coital imperative (McPhillips, Braun & Gavey, 2001). Heterosexual participants commonly referred implicitly or explicitly to penis-in-vagina intercourse (coitus) when using the term ‘sex.’ For example, participant 017[F] stated “[orgasm is] when you climax during sex, or during other sexual activity”. The term ‘sexual activity’ was frequently used, as it was by this participant, to refer to everything *except* coitus. In some cases, the specific sexual activity (e.g. oral sex, anal sex, mutual masturbation) was explicitly stated. However, *our* use of the term ‘sex’ in this paper is not restricted to coitus.

We now discuss five themes identified in the data: 1) orgasm: the purpose and end of sex; 2) ‘it’s more about my partner’s orgasm’; 3) orgasm: the ultimate pleasure?; 4) orgasm is not a simple physiological response; and 5) faking orgasm is not uncommon. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Proctor, Wagner & Butler, 1973; Vance & Wagner, 1976), men’s and women’s descriptions of orgasm were often very similar. Because of this, results can be interpreted as applying for both genders, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

### **Orgasm: The Purpose and End of Sex**

Having an orgasm was described as the overriding goal of 'sex' (and other sexual activities) for nearly all participants. For instance participant 108[F] wrote "it is the end goal of sex therefore if you haven't reached orgasm during sex you have not fulfilled your 'goal'". The majority reported that they 'aimed' to have an orgasm, or having an orgasm was the primary reason that they engaged in sexual activities: "we aim to both achieve orgasm every time we have sex" (006[F]). Therefore, when one or both partners experienced orgasm, it was seen as an achievement (e.g. "it feels like you have achieved what you are aiming for" 119[F]). The reverse was also stated by some participants, who identified that "the activity would be pointless" (059[F]) or "a waste of time" (168[M]) if they or their partner did not have an orgasm.

Orgasm was also frequently characterized in terms of a trajectory, in that there was a path to orgasm. Participants commonly reported experiencing a 'build up' (e.g. "a buildup of tension during any kind of vagina/penis stimulation resulting in a pleasurable release" 056[F]) through a 'sequence of events' (e.g. "he was touching me all over, focusing on rubbing my clitoris" 105[F]) and various activities (i.e. oral sex, mutual masturbation) which ultimately led to orgasm. Each step was 'en route' to them having an orgasm.

The idea of orgasm as both goal and trajectory related to another very common pattern in participants' descriptions, the idea that orgasm indicated that sex was over: "it is the finishing point of sex" (019[F]); "it is a nice ending to an amazing experience" (054[F]). This frequent meaning meant that when orgasm was not experienced, participants often reported feeling that sex was 'unfinished' or 'left halfway,' as there was no clearly signaled ending (e.g. "not having it makes sex feel unfinished" 022[F]), with some 'wanting more' sex, in order to have an orgasm (e.g. "feel like it [sex] never quite ended so usually left wanting more" 056[F]).

However, orgasm signaling 'the end of sex' was not a gender-neutral phenomenon: it was predominately men's and not women's orgasm that signaled 'the end' (e.g. "I see his orgasm as the end of sex" 006[F]) for both women and men. Several participants reported explicitly that the man's orgasm was the end of (heterosexual) sex, regardless of whether the female partner had had an orgasm: "I find men's orgasms tend to be more important than women's orgasms and sex ends when the man orgasms whether or not the woman has orgasmed" (021[F]). Some women reported that their opportunity to experience orgasm was precluded by this framework (e.g. "if he orgasms before we have reached intercourse or have very short intercourse it makes me feel angry because we have to stop when he is satisfied, but I am not, as I want to go on for longer" 177[F]).

Associated with *male* orgasm signaling the end of sex, the 'typical' pattern of sex and orgasm (for heterosexual participants) reported was the woman orgasming first (via various means such as oral sex or mutual masturbation) followed by the man (usually via coitus) and then sex was over. As participant 186[F] described: "I usually orgasm when more focus is on my clitoris. After orgasming I usually stop. Change positions and then continue intercourse until my partner orgasms". Finally, participants frequently implicitly and explicitly identified men as having responsibility for women's orgasm, and for ensuring that women orgasm first (e.g. "my partner always makes an effort for me to orgasm before he does" 006[F]); this relates to the second theme.

## **'It's More About my Partner's Orgasm'**

A second theme related to perceived ownership of, or responsibility for, orgasm. With orgasm typically characterised as highly pleasurable and *the* goal of sex, it is unsurprising that many participants reported that experiencing an orgasm was important to them. However, almost all participants (106/119) reported that it was more important that their *partner* experience orgasm than that they did themselves. For instance, 002[M] wrote "personally, for me, it is more important that she orgasms, and that is the part I find most pleasurable." Participants also identified that their sexual partners had similar perspectives: even if their own orgasm was not important to them it was important to their partner (e.g. "I think it is important to my partner that I orgasm" 009[F]).

Within participants' descriptions, there was often a sense of 'ownership' over their partner's orgasm. Orgasm or pleasure were frequently described as something that they 'gave' their partner (e.g. "I begin to work as hard as possible to give her as many orgasms as possible" 005[M]), or something that they 'made' their partner experience (e.g. "it makes me happy to know I can make him orgasm" 187[F]). Unsurprisingly then, participants often felt responsible for their partner's orgasm. Again, participants reported that their partners had similar perspectives as they also discussed their partner 'giving' them an orgasm (e.g. "I knew that he would make me orgasm" 188[F]).

This location of responsibility for the other's orgasm meant that the partner's experience of orgasm (or lack of orgasm) often impacted emotionally. When their partner orgasmed, most participants reported they felt happy and good about 'giving' their partner an orgasm and experienced heightened sexual pleasure themselves (e.g. "Good about yourself, it reassures you that you are good at sexual intercourse, or any of the other things that you do. It is nice to know that you can pleasure your partner" 049[F]; "When he reaches orgasm, it makes me feel positive and as if I have done a 'good job'" 085[F]). On the flip side, if their partner did not orgasm, many experienced a range of negative emotions: they felt 'embarrassed', 'inadequate' and 'deflated' that they could not 'give' their partner an orgasm (e.g. "inadequate, loss of self-confidence, insecure ("why can I not make her come?") sad, disappointed" 008[M]). Some also reported similar emotional responses in their partners in relation to their own orgasm (e.g. "I know my partner feels good they pleased me" 003[F]) or lack of orgasm (e.g. "Sometimes I do worry that if I don't orgasm, my partner may worry he is not pleasing me" 003[F]). For many, these negative feelings were often linked to notions of 'sexual performance' or 'being good in bed' and concern that they were doing something 'wrong' (e.g. "I would feel so down. I would completely blame myself and feel like I was doing something fundamentally wrong!" 057[F]). Lastly, participants needed confirmation from their partner that the sexual interaction was pleasurable and enjoyable (e.g. "it acts as feedback for me, so I can know that I made him feel good" 065[F]). This theme demonstrates the emotional significance of orgasm, and how it can have ramifications for individual identity and wellbeing (and potentially relational wellbeing too) .

## **Orgasm: The Ultimate Pleasure?**

Orgasm was described as an embodied experience associated with physical *and* psychological pleasure, although it was not always easy to categorize responses as 'psychological' or 'physical', partly because

the terms used to describe orgasm were often rather vague (e.g., 'feels good' could refer to physical, psychological, and/or emotional domains). Commonly, experiencing orgasm was presented as a physical (and psychological) euphoria (e.g. "it's not comparable to anything else, the most amazing feeling in the world!" 146[F]). Orgasm was experienced as the 'ultimate pleasure,' as a form of extreme and/or unusual pleasure (e.g. "it feels so good it almost hurts" 079[F]; "it's the most extraordinary feeling I have experienced" 097[F]), often better than any other pleasures of sex ("when I actually orgasm it is amazing and better than all the rest of the build up" 030[F]). Participants typically described the physical experience of orgasm as involving tingles and contractions in either the genital region or all over their body, followed by a sensation of (physical) release. This is best captured by participant 021[F]: "It starts by building up from inside me, my whole body starts to tingle as the intensity builds... The intensity then spreads across my whole body and then when I feel like I am going to explode. The intensity is released." After orgasm, participants typically reported feeling relaxed and satisfied (e.g. "It is very satisfying and as if the tension that has been building up has been relieved" 010[F]).

Most participants still reported experiencing physical pleasure and enjoyment in sex when they did not orgasm (e.g. "sexual activity is still pleasurable if I don't" 121[M]), but this pleasure was often explicitly identified as less intense than the pleasures associated with orgasm (e.g. "sexual activity is still pleasurable if I don't orgasm, but it is obviously more enjoyable if I do" 017[F]). Many reported that sex without orgasm was still satisfying (e.g. "there are so many other things enjoyable than orgasms" 073[F]), although some reported feeling unsatisfied if they did not orgasm, which was often related to sex feeling unfinished, as noted above. The physical feelings related to having an orgasm (or not) were often independent of relationship status.

Among the responses more clearly associated with emotion, participants commonly reported feeling happy after orgasm, and often reported feelings of love for their partner, and increased levels of intimacy and closeness. After orgasm, participants indicated that pre-existing intimacy or love was reinforced and deepened. The tenor of these emotional experiences is captured in the following three quotations:

"Really really happy. I feel like I have bonded more with the other person + I'm more likely to fall in love with someone at this point" (020[F])

"I felt very close to her & completely besotted & in love... I love her so much & it really does make the sex the best! Warmth, closeness, love – are all things I feel whenever we make love" (008[M])

"I feel lovely, bubbly, sometimes close to tears because you really do enjoy the intimacy with your boyfriend. It's almost indescribable, just feel so close to the other person" (185[F])

These emotional feelings were frequently tied to relationship status; those in a relationship were more likely to experience feelings of love and intimacy and generally report having more positive feelings regardless of if they had an orgasm or not.

When they did *not* experience orgasm, most participants reported still feeling love and closeness towards their sexual partner (e.g. “even if I don’t orgasm I love my partner and so just doing the activity makes me feel close and intimate to him” 068[F]), but some also felt frustrated, irritated and let down (e.g. “if I don’t orgasm I’ll be somewhat disappointed” 166[M]; “I’m usually annoyed if I don’t” 164[F]). It was common for participants to experience both positive and negative feelings simultaneously when they did not orgasm (e.g. “happy: loved but frustrated” 059[F]; “Sometimes I feel a little disappointed, especially if I am close, but I enjoy the closeness of being with someone” 178[F]).

### **Orgasm is Not a Simple Physiological Response**

As already noted, orgasm was not a decontextualized experience for participants, and their responses referenced numerous factors which facilitated or inhibited the possibility of experiencing orgasm. These could be grouped into relational, psychological and physical factors, although there is overlap between all three.

In terms of relational factors, some participants reported that whether they had an orgasm depended on their partner and relationship status (e.g. “it completely depends on who it is with” 193[F]). Most participants were less likely to experience orgasm during casual sex, which was attributed to being less physically and emotionally ‘comfortable’ in the sexual relationship, and/or to their sexual partner being unaware of their sexual preferences (e.g. “I tend to feel more comfortable with someone I am emotionally involved with and therefore don’t orgasm usually if I have casual sex” 189[F]; “one night stand, don’t really know what the other person likes” 188[F]). Concurrently, the reasons participants provided for being more likely to experience orgasm in a long-term relationship related to being at ease and relaxed with their partner, having a routine, and awareness of each other’s sexual preference. For instance: “we have been together over two years and so have a good connection with each other. This means we know what each other likes and he is able to pleasure me” (160[F]).

These relational factors invoke a psychological state – being ‘comfortable’ – associated with familiarity that facilitates orgasm. Psychological factors more generally were framed as important for experiencing orgasm, with participants often describing orgasm as something they had to be ‘in the mood’ to experience (e.g. “I am not always in the mood to orgasm” 019[F]). More specifically, participants identified particular psychological or emotional states as necessary conditions for orgasm. Most commonly these were being relaxed and unstressed, and not having ‘too many things on their mind’. For example, 005[M] wrote:

“sometimes my mind isn’t ready for sex, but I have sex. When I orgasm it tends to be when I’m really aroused and unstressed. Sometimes my mind wanders during sex as I have too much on and my girlfriend seems to climax but I don’t”

Relational and psychological/emotional factors were commonly intertwined, as participants often reported that a cluster of ‘states’ are necessary to experience orgasm; they needed to feel relaxed, ‘in the mood’, comfortable, and know each other’s preferences:

“my current partner is in touch to my needs and listens to me when I tell him how to improve to make the experience more intense. Also I am comfortable and relaxed with him... I think being able to relax is an important part to being able to orgasm” (021[F])

The final group of factors participants reported as inhibiting or facilitating orgasm were physical ones, and they were primarily reported by women. The key factor these women noted was that coitus did not provide adequate stimulation for them to orgasm. Other forms of stimulation (manual or oral) were necessary – either alone or in combination with coitus – to experience orgasm (e.g. “I can’t orgasm through sex alone, I have to have clitoral stimulation in order to orgasm, when I do I always orgasm” 142[F]; “I am unable to orgasm from sexual intercourse, and usually do from oral sex afterwards. If my boyfriend and I just have sex, I do not orgasm” 175[F]). For some women, certain coital positions facilitated orgasm (e.g. “I was on top – the only way I can reach orgasm” 192[F]).

The other main physical factor noted by both women and men as an inhibitor of orgasm was alcohol, especially when consumed in large amounts (e.g. “I never orgasm when I’m drunk” 005[M]; “if me and my partner have drunk too much it is sometimes even quite hard to” 068[F])

### **Faking Orgasm is not Uncommon**

The final theme we discuss relates to faking orgasm. *Over half* the participants (65, 54%) reported that they *had* faked an orgasm during sex with a partner (almost everyone else indicated that they had not). Unsurprisingly, it was predominantly women who disclosed faking having an orgasm; the data commonly evidenced the idea that men *cannot* fake an orgasm (e.g. “guys can’t [fake orgasm] really because there is a clear end result” 102[M]) or that it would be more difficult for them to do so (e.g. “As a male, I think this would be incredibly hard to ‘fake’” 190[M]). Despite this, some men reported faking orgasm and their justifications for faking were no different than women’s with the exception of one male who faked an orgasm because he ‘went soft’ (e.g. ...I wasn’t in the mood for sex at the time, but I felt pressure to provide the service. Went soft, so to protect my manlihood, faked it...” 182[M]).

Among those who disclosed faking an orgasm, ‘doing it for their partner’ was the most common justification. Some participants reported that their partner’s pleasure was related to the participant’s own orgasm, and framed their explanation in terms of creating pleasure and sexual satisfaction for their partner (e.g. “I did it so that my partner would feel the pleasure of me having an orgasm” 097[F]; “even though I didn’t actually orgasm as I’m aware that his enjoyment depends on mine” 195[F]). On the flip-side of this, others reported faking orgasm to avoid upsetting or distressing their partner (e.g. “I didn’t want my partner to feel he wasn’t good enough or satisfied me. So it was to make sure they didn’t feel bad about themselves or not capable” 019[F]; “did not want to disappoint him” 014[F]), or hurting their feelings (e.g. “I thought it appropriate to fake it, so as not to hurt my partners feelings” 003[F]). Participants also did not want their partner to think that they were not able to pleasure them (e.g. “didn’t want him to think he hadn’t pleased or excited me” 070[F]). These quotations show that both orgasm and faking orgasm perform an ‘emotion work’ function (Hochschild, 1979).

A second, but less common, pattern was that participants faked orgasm so that sex would be over (e.g. “I did it so we could stop really” 119[F]; “I wanted sex to be over” 001[F]). This is related to the

notion that orgasm signals the end of sex, and to ideas of reciprocity; women were more likely to fake orgasm so that the man would then orgasm and sex would be over. Thirdly, and relatedly, participants reported that they faked orgasm if they *knew* they could not have one (e.g. “I’m not in the right mood and I know that I won’t orgasm” 006[F]). These three main reasons for faking orgasm were often intertwined (e.g. “either it’s been taking too long or I’m not going to orgasm + so that he doesn’t feel like he’s done an inadequate job” 072[F]; “I wasn’t 100% in the mood and just wanted to finish. As long as he was satisfied and he thought I was then it’s ok” 187[F]).

Several participants who had not faked an orgasm did mention that they had ‘faked’ their level of *arousal* so that their partner would continue pleasuring them (e.g. “I’ve faked how aroused I’ve been in the past, as to help an old partner increase their confidence and to motivate them to continue the activity” 190[M]), or exaggerated pleasure to further arouse their partner (e.g. “I have however acted as if I am enjoying it more than what I am to turn them on” 178[F]).

Looking at the reports of participants who did *not* fake orgasm, three main reasons were given: faking an orgasm would reduce the likelihood of future orgasms; they did not want to offend or upset their partner; and dishonesty. The participants reported that faking an orgasm would not help their partner learn how to give them an orgasm and would potentially mean that they would not have orgasms in the future, (e.g. “If I don’t orgasm I’m not gonna fake one because that’s not gonna help anyone. It just means he would do whatever he thought caused the orgasm again” 040[F]). Participants also commented that once they *started* faking orgasms, they may have to continue to fake them. Faking having an orgasm could also upset or offend a partner (if they found out) (e.g. “he would realize I was faking and then be upset because of it” 004[F]). Furthermore, faking orgasm was lying and therefore unfair to their partner and potentially harmful to the relationship (e.g. “It’s very dishonest and as sexual activity is part of being in love, it wouldn’t benefit the relationship” 033[M]).

## Discussion

Through collecting data from *young* adults, we are able to explore sexual meanings evident relatively early in people’s sexual lives. The meanings and experiences young (British) adults – women and men – describe in relation to orgasm and sexual pleasure remain very similar to the experiences reported in previous qualitative research on orgasm. Orgasm is predominantly understood as an ultimate pleasure, and the ‘goal’ (and end) of sex, but also something that produces happiness, love, intimacy and closeness within relationships (Béjin, 1986; Fahs, 2011; Lavie & Willig, 2005; Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009; Nicholson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2000). Our data show that our participants’ experiences, the ways they interpret those experiences, and the meanings they attribute to orgasm and sexual pleasure, are already strongly socially-patterned, and are underpinned by dominant systems of meaning related to sex, heterosex and orgasm. This reinforces the claim that any analysis of orgasm must be located within social contexts (Jackson & Scott, 2001).

The frequent conflation of ‘sex’ with orgasm, and the assumption of coitus as ultimate (hetero)sex, demonstrate the ongoing power of the coital imperative (McPhillips et al., 2001) in shaping

(hetero)sexual assumptions and desires. The situating of orgasm as the usual ideal outcome of sex reiterates an orgasm imperative (Potts, 2000). Although the acceptance in some accounts of *not* having an orgasm appears to disrupt this, this was often contextualized as acceptable *if orgasm usually happens*, indicating the normalization of orgasm being positioned as ideal and expected sexual pleasure. We do not want to suggest that orgasm is not positive, and that individuals should not desire, or feel entitled, to experience orgasm. But sexual norms can create anxieties about *abnormality*, distress, and indeed enactments to achieve the perceived normality. Women in Fahs' (2011) research, for instance, experienced pressure – sometime self-induced – to experience orgasm. And the expectation of 'spectacular sex' (often related to orgasmic experience) has been used to sell female genital cosmetic surgery (Braun, 2005), procedures which are not medically indicated and are of questionable safety and efficacy (Braun, 2010; Liao, Michala & Creighton, 2010). Furthermore, the focus on and almost fetishization of orgasm can obscure or sideline other pleasures and satisfactions in sex, reinforcing a very heteronormative model of what sex and sexual pleasure are (see Fahs, 2011).

These young adults' meanings and experiences around orgasm are not simple or straightforward. What our data do reveal is the power of the context, immediate as well as social, in determining the meaning of an experience of orgasm, or non-orgasm. The immediate context, the purpose and intent of the sexual encounter, the relationship with the other person, and the history of sex with that person, all appear to be important factors clustering together to shape the meaning in any particular moment (Eschler, 2004). So as well as being strongly socially-patterned, the meaning of any particular orgasm or non-orgasm is contextual and relational.

The data suggest not only that the descriptions of what orgasm feels like may not be particularly gendered (Proctor, Wagner & Butler, 1973; Vance & Wagner, 1976), but that meaning and experience around it – at emotional, psychological and interpersonal levels – may also not be particularly gendered, or not necessarily (always) gendered in ways we might expect. As the experience of men has not been the focus of most research which has examined orgasm through a gendered lens, a more serious consideration of men's meanings, experiences, investments and engagements around orgasm is needed, particularly if we are better to understand how it is, and is not, gendered, how this might affect *heterosexual* experiences, and how these gendered enactments might intersect, or not, with sexual identity.

Unlike research which has theorized the 'giving' of orgasm as a gendered phenomenon; something 'given' to women, by men in heterosexual relationships (Fahs, 2011; Gilfoyle et al., 2003), both women and men participants reported here that they felt responsible for their partner's pleasure and (ultimately) orgasm, and, reciprocally, that their partner felt responsible for theirs. The reciprocal exchange of orgasm has been identified as another dominant discourse shaping contemporary heterosex (Braun et al., 2003), and is also evident in lesbian women's accounts (Fahs, 2011). Fahs (2011) argues, compellingly, that this results in a *commodification* of orgasm, where it becomes a product to be given, exchanged, and consumed. The 'exchange and balance' logic of a reciprocity discourse underpinned most participants' accounts. However, it was the other's pleasure – and the 'gift' of giving them an orgasm – that appeared most important, regardless of gender. This was not one sided; participant's reported that their partners also felt that it was the participants' orgasm that was

important, and felt responsible for ‘giving’ the participant pleasure (and therefore orgasm) (for more critical discussion of this, see Fahs, 2011).

Where gender did remain prominent related to faking orgasm. Previous research has understood and theorized faking orgasm as a gendered phenomenon, wherein (heterosexual) women perform an emotional/physical labor – faking orgasm – in order to preserve the (fragile) ego of their male partner by situating them as skilled and able as lovers, or to create a positive emotional experience for them, or to avoid negative social interactions (Bryan, 2001; Cacchione, 2007; Fahs, 2011; Hite, 1976; Roberts et al., 1995; Wiederman, 1997). Although our data reveal ‘faking’ not exclusively to be the domain of women (see also Jagose, 2010 and Zilbergeld, 1999), it was practiced by a majority of (female) participants (see also Wiederman, 1997), and this practice was strongly gendered. The data suggest a difficulty in simply *not* experiencing an orgasm with a partner, particularly for women, raising the question of choice and obligation in relation to sexual interaction (Braun et al., 2003). Although a typical feminist analysis of the gendered practice of faking orgasm renders it highly problematic in many ways, Jagose’s (2010) innovative theorization of faking orgasm as potentially *also* an act of agency (Gavey, 2012) provides an interesting framework for thinking *differently* about how we might understand the what the gendering of faked orgasm might mean for (hetero)sex. That remains a project best explored in future research.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

It is recognized that those who volunteer to participate in sexuality research are likely different to those who do not (Boynton, 2003; Saunders, Fisher, Hewitt & Clayton, 1985), meaning we should be cautious of simple generalization. The use of an anonymous survey may have encouraged a wider range of people to participate than in face-to-face qualitative research, and allowed us to explore the meanings around orgasm with a sample than is larger than is typical of qualitative research, giving us access to a sense of wider patterning of meaning. But depth of data – one of the advantages of qualitative methods – was sacrificed, and, despite our attempts to create *open* questions, the survey itself will have guided participants’ answers to some extent. Regardless, the patterning identified demonstrates systematic socially-available meanings, suggesting that, to paraphrase Jackson and Scott (2007), even relatively young sexually-active western adults ‘know’ what the meaning of orgasm (and non-orgasm) *is*, and experience it thus.

The multiple meanings and contextualization of meaning expressed superficially in the data do beg for more in-depth, interactive qualitative research. The use of such methods could better explore the detail, complexity, contextualization and potential contradictions in the experience and meanings of orgasm. Key questions for deeper examination that arise from this survey include the ways the meaning of orgasm relates to context and situation, and the constraints produced by context, including the ways elements like relationship context and duration intersect to create orgasm meaning. Indeed, research with couples where meaning-making of each couple member was explored would produce telling insights into the personal and relational production of orgasm; for heterosexual couples, it would provide a potent site to explore the gendering of orgasm.

We aimed to explore the views and experiences of a more diverse, and younger, sample than is typical of previous qualitative orgasm research, not with the intention to ‘test’ for differences, but with the aim of reporting understandings of orgasm that reflected diversity. However, our sample did remain dominated by female participants, and was predominantly white, heterosexual, able-bodied and middle-class. In relation to sexuality, the patterning of meanings expressed in the data *were* articulated by non-heterosexual participants as well as heterosexual ones, but the prioritizing of penile-vaginal intercourse within heterosex, the positioning of men as almost gatekeepers of women’s orgasm, and the construction of ‘giving’ of orgasm as a gendered phenomenon, frame orgasm in very heteronormative ways. Potential thus remains for exploring the ways orgasm is enacted in gendered, sexualized, classed, (and other) ways, and to understand the potential for those located outside of heteronormativity to create meanings around, and experience, orgasm quite differently to what is captured here. However, as Fahs’ work on gender, race and class and body hair (Fahs & Delgado, 2011) has compellingly shown, we must be wary of assuming those marginalized in relation to dominant and privileged social categories are *necessarily* (more) easily able to escape their influence than those privileged by them. We are all, more or less, enmeshed within dominant systems of meaning and the power – and power relations – that accompanies them (Bordo, 1997; Gavey, 2012).

### Conclusion

This study explored and unpacked young British adults’ experiences and meanings of orgasm and sexual pleasure, identifying five main patterns of meaning and experience around orgasm. Participants provide familiar accounts of (hetero)sex, orgasm, and faking orgasm. Our data suggest that although an expectation of orgasm has become firmly entrenched for young women (as it is for young men), this is not unequivocally good. The social, relational and personal meanings of having (and ‘giving’) orgasm mean that orgasm is not necessarily easy to experience, or the *simple* pleasure it might appear to be. For young women, and young men, whether heterosexual or not, it appears that orgasm is not always a desirable expectation in sex, and it carries potential shifting *and stable* meanings associated with both its presence and absence. Our critical analysis demonstrated the ways the meanings around orgasm continue to be underpinned by dominant social sexual discourses – the coital and orgasm imperatives, and the expectation of reciprocity – which have been critiqued for establishing norms that not only potentially reduce pleasure, but also increase the likelihood of unsafe sexual activities and/or create conditions for unwanted sexual experiences (Braun et al., 2003; Gavey, 2005, Potts, 2002). However, despite the heavily-socially-patterned nature of meaning around orgasm, the experience and meaning of orgasm was highly context-, situation- and partner-dependent, raising questions for how social meanings become resisted, enacted and or sedimented at the level of interpersonal interaction.

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## Appendix: “Experiences of orgasm and sexual pleasure” open ended questions

- 1.1 What does ‘orgasm’ mean to you?
- 1.2 During sexual activity with a partner, do you (a) always orgasm; (b) orgasm most of the time; (c) orgasm some of the time; (d) never orgasm; or (e) are you unsure if you orgasm? Please indicate a, b, c, d or e and explain *why* you think you always/most of the time/some of the time/never/are unsure if you orgasm during sexual activity with a partner?
- 1.3 Is it important *for you* to orgasm during sexual activity with a partner (is sexual activity with a partner still pleasurable if you don’t orgasm)? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.4 How do you feel if you orgasm during sexual activity with a partner?
- 1.5 How do you feel if you *do not* orgasm during sexual activity with a partner?
- 1.6 Is it important for you that *your partner* orgasms during sexual activity? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.7 How do you feel if your partner orgasms during sexual activity?
- 1.8 How do you feel if your partner *does not* orgasm during sexual activity?
- 1.9 How important is the experience of simultaneous orgasm during sexual activity with a partner (i.e., when you and your partner both orgasm at the same time)? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.10 Have you ever faked an orgasm during sexual activity with a partner? *Please explain why or why not and how you feel about this (during the event and afterwards).*
- 1.11 What pleasures (other than orgasm) do you experience during sexual activity with a partner?
- 1.12 Is orgasm for you the ultimate sexual pleasure? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.13 Please can you describe in detail your last (or typical) experience of orgasm during sexual activity with a partner (what physical and emotional sensations do you experience)? (Please specify whether this is your last or your typical – or both – experience that you are describing.) If you have never experienced orgasm, or are unsure, during sexual activity with a partner, please describe an experience which you feel is the closest you get to experiencing orgasm.
- 1.14 If you experience orgasm, does your experience of orgasm vary? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.15 How do you think your experience of orgasm (or experience of no orgasm) compares to that of other people? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.16 Do you think there are any differences between women’s and men’s experience of orgasm? *Please explain your view(s).*