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He'S Just Not That Into Anyone: the Impact of Sex Fantasy on Attraction

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Sex fantasies are ubiquitous in our lives and their impact on romantic relationships is complex and controversial. One field and three lab studies show that fantasizing about sex produces a devaluation of romance which, in turn, demotivates individuals to engage in romantic relationship as the latter demands too much effort.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A sex fantasy can be a fleeting thought of some sexual activity or an elaborate story about a sexual encounter; it can involve a blizzard of images or a quite realistic scene; it can involve memories of the past or anticipations of the future; it can occur during sexual activity or apart from it (Wilson 1978). We live in a world enriched with countless triggers of sexual fantasies (e.g., porn, TV, movie, sex in advertising), it is important to examine the consequences of sex fantasies on individuals. Many popular media suggest that sex fantasies can spice up people's romantic relationships, such that fantasies add more fun and steam to romantic encounters and provide erotic stimulation to routine sex life. However, an increasing number of popular press reports suggest that many men would rather watch pornography and fantasize about unrealistic sex than engage in romantic dating and enjoy real sex with their partners. Nonetheless, academic research on the consumption of sexual content and its impact on individuals' romantic relationships is limited and mostly correlational in nature (for a review, see Leitenberg and Henning 1995). This research is to investigate the causal impact of sex fantasies on individuals' romantic relationships with a focus on adult males.

We hypothesize that sex fantasies can decrease individuals' attraction to potential romantic dates and demotivate them to engage in romantic dating. This hypothesis is based on past goal research showing that the activation of a goal might lead to devaluation of stimuli that are inconsistent with or irrelevant to this activated goal (e.g., Ferguson 2007; Brendl, Markman, and Messner 2003). For example, participants who were primed with an academic goal generated negative evaluations of words that were related to a social goal that might undermine the activated academic goal. Brendl and colleagues (Brendl et al. 2003; Markman and Brendl 2000) have suggested that such "devaluation effects" occur when the activation of a given goal renders as negative those objects that might draw resources away from this activated goal. For example, when a goal of getting food is activated by hunger, individuals would devalue goal irrelevant objects, such as movie tickets. Even though movie tickets do not directly undermine the goal of getting food, they do so indirectly by drawing limited resources away from the focal pursuit (Shah, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2002).

In the current context, we propose that fantasizing about sex can activate the goal to engage in sexual activities. Romantic dating, although it might lead to sex, draws too many resources (e.g., time and effort) that are not directly relevant to sexual activities. Thus, we propose that engaging in sexual fantasy tends to decrease attraction to potential romantic dates and that this decrease is driven by a devaluation of the goal to engage in romantic dating.

In Experiment 1, 169 single Chinese heterosexual males between the ages of 20 to 35 living in the Chicago area were invited by email to register for a famous Chinese dating show hosted in Chicago. This dating show provides single heterosexual males the chance to find female dates. Before they began to read the invitation, they were assigned to two conditions (fantasy and control) by fantasizing (or not) about a sexual encounter with a celebrity. Then they evaluated the attractiveness of 12 female participants for this dating show. Lastly, they decided whether to register for the dating show. The results showed that engaging in sexual fantasy decreased male participants' attraction to potential female dates ($M=3.42$, $SD=1.55$ vs. $M=3.84$, $SD=1.52$; $F(1,101)=4.31$, $p<.05$) and fewer participants in the sex fantasy condition actually registered for the dating show ($M=2\%$ vs. $M=10\%$, $\chi^2(1)=4.06$, $p<.05$).

To rule out contrast effect, Experiment 2 tested whether the impact of fantasy on attraction depends on the fantasy content. 37 single male undergraduates were randomly assigned to two conditions by engaging in a highly vs. mildly sexual fantasy then evaluated the attractiveness of 3 females. The results showed that engaging in a highly sexual fantasy decreased participants' attraction to females ($M=2.27$, $SD=1.29$ vs. $M=3.09$, $SD=1.26$; $F(1,35)=6.88$, $p<.01$).

Experiment 3 was to examine the mechanism of the impact of sex fantasy on attraction. 491 heterosexual adult males recruited from Mturk were assigned to two conditions (fantasy vs. control) by looking at sexual vs. non-sexual pictures of the same celebrities and then fantasize. We measured their attraction to 5 females and their valuation of romance by their agreement with the statement--dating is a waste of time and money for guys. Results showed that fantasy produced significantly lower attraction to potential female dates ($M=3.27$, $SD=1.55$ vs. $M=4.12$, $SD=1.52$; $F(1,489)=82.55$, $p<.001$) and also produced a devaluation of romance ($M=3.65$, $SD=1.75$ vs. $M=3.16$, $SD=1.72$; $F(1,489)=6.41$, $p<.01$). A mediation analysis showed that the devaluation of romance mediates the effect of fantasy on attraction.

In Experiment 4, 426 heterosexual adult males (82% unmarried) recruited from Mturk were assigned to two fantasy conditions similar as Experiment 1. Then they were assigned to two scenarios: looking for a date on a dating website or looking for a one-night stand in a bar. Within each scenario, they were asked to rate either two average looking females or two Victoria's Secret models. This constituted a 2 (fantasy: fantasy vs. control) x 2 (target goal-fit: dating vs. sex) x 2 (target attractiveness: average looking women vs. Victoria's Secret models) between-subject design. The results showed that no matter for the average looking women or the VC models, fantasy decreased attraction when male participants were looking for a date but increased attraction when they were looking for a one-night stand. The findings of experiment 4 support the idea that fantasy activates a sex goal, and that sex and dating tend to operate as conflicting goals. As a result, engaging in sexual fantasy increases attraction to sexual targets, but decreases attraction to romantic targets.

This research adds to the literature on sex fantasy, attraction, and offers practical implications on porn watching, sex in advertising, and relationships.

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