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“It was the Best Sex of My Life”: A Qualitative Analysis of Black Women’s Most Pleasurable Sexual Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Sexual pleasure is an integral component of sexual health, human rights, and overall wellbeing and can be a helpful lens for understanding the agency and freedom present at the individual, relational, and community level. Further, one’s most pleasurable sexual experience can be a pivotal moment that allows for expanded understandings of pleasure and can change how one structures future sexual experiences. It is particularly important to study sexual pleasure among Black women, as much of the sex research on this population is focused on risk and disease and may reinforce harmful stereotypes. This study explored the most pleasurable sexual experiences (MPEs) of 25 Black women living in the Southern United States to understand the main characteristics present in pleasurable sex. Participants were between the ages of 27–44 ($M = 29.7$ years old). Participants completed semi-structured interviews about their MPEs and responses were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Six interconnected themes were developed: emotional intimacy, out of the ordinary experiences, physical intimacy, intentionality, open communication, and mindful presence. Orgasm was mentioned by only a small portion of study participants. Our findings show that Black women’s MPEs are varied and multifaceted, and a deeper understanding of the characteristics present in these experiences provides important information in working toward sexual liberation.

Introduction

Our pleasure is an act of resistance. We weren’t supposed to make it this far. Our pleasure is activism. We weren’t supposed to find happiness. Our pleasure is liberation. We weren’t supposed to know freedom. –@slipp3rywhenwet, Instagram caption from June 6, 2024.

Pleasurable sexual experiences are important because the ability to experience pleasure in one’s own body is connected to agency and freedom (Philpott & Singh, 2023). While women’s reasons for having sex are multifaceted and complex (Meston & Stanton, 2017), sexual pleasure is often an important motivator for sexual activity across relationship type and sexual orientation. For example, women reported physical pleasure as one of the top five reasons for casual sex and one of the top 10 reasons for sex in committed relationships (Armstrong & Reissing, 2015). Research focused specifically on lesbian, bisexual, queer, and questioning women in romantic relationships found physical pleasure consistently ranked within the top five reasons for having sex (Wood et al., 2014).

For Black people in the United States, pleasurable sexual experiences have been positioned as an act of resistance against the interlocking systems of oppression that aim to police Black people’s sexual experiences and expression (Hargons, 2023). For Black women specifically, pervasive historical stereotypes rooted in chattel slavery such as the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire, and contemporary stereotypes such as the Angry Black Woman and the Superwoman

(Bond et al., 2021; Hill Collins, 2004; Stephens & Phillips, 2005) can produce negative scripts that are constraining and can disconnect Black women from their sexual pleasure. Given that these stereotypes can negatively influence Black women’s self-perceptions and sexual experiences (Bond et al., 2021; Leath et al., 2022; Opara et al., 2022), to experience and understand sexual pleasure can be a powerful act of reclaiming one’s body and selfhood.

The World Association for Sexual Health situates sexual pleasure as fundamental to sexual health and human rights and calls for society to “develop rights-based, evidence-informed knowledge of the benefits of sexual pleasure as part of well-being” (Ford et al., 2021, p. 614). However, it can be extremely difficult to believe and claim a right to pleasure amidst experiences of systemic violence (e.g., over-policing), interpersonal trauma (e.g., sexual assault), and generational disenfranchisement. In fact, Black women have been socialized to fear their own pleasure – in part due to the aforementioned stereotypes as well as religious dogma (Cooper, 2018) – and thus can experience shame and guilt in seeking or experiencing pleasure (Colvin, 2019). As such, it is critically important to speak to experiences of sexual pleasure to begin to undo shame and move toward agency and freedom.

Defining and Understanding Sexual Pleasure

Pleasure in and of itself helps us know how people understand sex and their expectations out of sex, and inquiries about

sexual pleasure help us explore whether people are expecting sex to feel good or connecting and whose enjoyment is prioritized. Sexual pleasure can be considered from multiple frameworks and definitions. Rye and Meaney (2007) provided a broad definition of sexual pleasure as “the positive feelings that arise from sexual stimuli” (p. 30). Boul et al.’s (2009) sex-positive framework of sexual pleasure focuses on both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions, as sexual pleasure can be rooted in both physical sensations and goal attainment, respectively. For example, a study of Black college students’ sexual pleasure narratives at last sex found hedonic pleasure meant having an orgasm, and eudaimonic pleasure was obtained via pleasing a partner and attaining power and respect through sex (Hargons et al., 2018). Work focused on Black women living in the U.S. South demonstrated that peak sexual pleasure was founded on a combination of mental, physical, and emotional factors, and facilitated by partnered interactions, liberation, mind-body-soul awareness, and orgasm (Thorpe, Malone, Hargons, et al., 2022). Research on sexual pleasure as specifically related to orgasm found that women’s reported best orgasms at times led to a sense of transformative embodiment (i.e., feeling fully present in bodily sensations while losing themselves in physical pleasure) and occurred during non-penetrative sexual activities, masturbation, or in the context of deep connection with a long-term partner (Fahs, 2014). We, the authors, synthesized these prior definitions and added our own perspectives to define sexual pleasure as “the cognitive, emotional, sensual, spiritual, and values-based enjoyment derived from engaging in sexually stimulating behavior, either by oneself or with others. One’s definition of sexual pleasure is personal to the individual and experiences of sexual pleasure can change over time.” While each of these definitions provides information on the meaning and experience of sexual pleasure, we allowed participants in this study to define sexual pleasure for themselves so as not to influence their narratives of pleasurable sex with definitions grounded in prior research.

Previous scholarship on sexual pleasurable experiences highlights the importance of context for sexual pleasure and discusses the components of pleasurable sexual experiences. In her book, *Come as You Are*, Nagoski (2021) described the dual control model of sexual response (Janssen & Bancroft, 2023), and named how the sexual excitation system (the “accelerator”) and the sexual inhibition system (the “brakes”) make up the facilitators and barriers to pleasurable sex that are context dependent and unique to individuals. Nagoski discussed how the brain’s interpretation of stimuli is highly contextual, and that for most people, the best context for pleasurable sex is one of low stress, high affection, and explicit eroticism.

Werner et al. (2023) extended this work in focusing on sexual pleasure as a distinct component of sexual response and proposed that the experience of sexual pleasure in the moment is influenced by one’s enduring *capacity* to experience sexual pleasure (i.e., traits) as well as the context of rewarding sexual situations (i.e., states), thus suggesting that more stable traits for liking and enjoyment can be extended to sexual pleasure. They divided sexual pleasure into three domains: hedonic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. The hedonic domain concerns enjoyment and pleasure related to sensual stimulation. The interpersonal domain includes enjoyment

and pleasure related to variables between sexual partners (e.g., bonding and sharing pleasure). The intrapersonal domain of sexual pleasure concerns individual-level factors such as enjoyment related to self-efficacy and self-worth, and pleasure related to mastery and validation (Werner et al., 2023). Taken together, the concepts from this model can be extended to discussions of how each of these components may be important to varying degrees for individuals who have experienced (or who are seeking to experience) highly pleasurable sex.

These theoretical components are presented in the phenomenological research of Kleinplatz and Ménard (2020), which focused on exploring participants’ most pleasurable sexual experiences. The authors conducted qualitative interviews with 30 older men and women who had been in a relationship for at least 25 years, 25 individuals who identified as part of a sexual minority group, and 20 sex therapists to explore the components and contributors to participants’ most pleasurable sexual experiences. Coined as “magnificent sex,” these sexual experiences included those that were extraordinary, highly pleasurable, and deemed “sex worth wanting” (Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2020). Eight major components of magnificent sex were identified: being present and fully embodied in the experience; deep connection with one’s partner(s); sexual and erotic intimacy; extraordinary communication and deep empathy; authenticity and transparency; vulnerability and surrender; exploration, interpersonal risk-taking, and fun; and transcendence and transformation (Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2020). These findings provide a helpful base for understanding components important to the lived experience of magnificent sex. However, as this work was not explicitly focused on Black people, it does not account for the specific racialized social context of Black people that can (and does) impact sexual experiences.

It is especially critical to conduct research that investigates Black women’s experiences of sex from a sex-positive framework, as the majority of sex research about Black women is focused on risk and disease and may inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes while offering an incomplete understanding of Black women’s sexualities (Hargons et al., 2021). The work that is focused on Black women’s experiences of pleasurable sex provides important context for those experiences, insight into the adjectives used to describe those sexual encounters, and descriptive information about the activities involved. For example, Rose (2003) presented oral histories of 20 African-American women from diverse backgrounds. These stories highlight how their experiences of sex (including pleasurable sex) and sexuality are not only intertwined with trauma, grief, loss, and oppression via racism, sexism, and classism but also deeply connected to resilience, vulnerability, hope, agency, and a deep desire for justice in intimate relationships.

In a study more explicitly focused on the descriptors of pleasurable sex, Hargons et al. (2024) found that their sample of 273 Black cisgender women most often described good sex as “passionate,” “intimate,” “fun,” “pleasurable,” and “satisfying.” Research on Black women’s definitions of and feelings toward sexual pleasure found that peak sexual pleasure was founded on a combination of mental, physical, and emotional

factors and facilitated by partnered interactions, liberation, mind-body-soul-awareness, and orgasm (Thorpe, Malone, Hargons, et al., 2022). A quantitative study of Black women aged 18 to 83 found sexual variety (i.e., participating in multiple sexual activities during one sexual encounter) was associated with higher odds of experiencing greater sexual satisfaction (Townes et al., 2019). Further, a qualitative study of Black women's self-reported most pleasurable sexual activities included oral sex, foreplay, clitoral stimulation, kissing, masturbation, vaginal sex, and fingering (among other activities; Thorpe et al., 2021). Research examining Black women's experience of sexual pleasure and orgasm at last sexual encounter found that approximately half of Black women rated their most recent sexual experience as extremely pleasurable and between one-half to two-thirds of women experienced an orgasm at last sex across all age groups (Townes et al., 2021). This research provides information on the context, descriptors, and activities involved in pleasurable sex for Black women and can be extended through an explicit focus on Black women's most pleasurable sexual experiences.

Reflecting on Pleasurable Sex: A Form of Savoring

Reflecting on the most pleasurable sexual experiences allows Black women to focus on a memory through which they can express the interconnections between the activities present in the encounter (e.g., most pleasurable sexual experience), how it felt, the factors leading up to it, and its impact. Such reflections may also constitute savoring, which is defined as the actions taken to deepen the pleasure of a positive experience (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Savoring can occur across three time dimensions – past, present, and future – and savoring past positive events is specifically termed reminiscing (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Reminiscing is a form of savoring that can help increase the salience of important components of a pleasurable experience. The Peak Erotic Experiences exercise, developed by Morin (1996) asks individuals to provide detailed descriptions of their most pleasurable erotic experiences (The Pleasure Mechanics, 2024). Morin posited that focused attention to such memories allows for a clearer understanding of one's desires and the factors important to pleasurable sex, thus providing insight into the ingredients that may be helpful for pleasurable sex in future encounters.

Asking Black women to reflect on and describe their most pleasurable sexual experiences involves reminiscing (i.e., savoring the pleasure of past positive experiences). This is particularly important for Black women, as understandings and social norms about sexuality and sexual pleasure may be constrained by risk- and deficit-based perspectives (Hargons et al., 2021) and negative stereotypes (e.g., the hypersexual Jezebel or the asexual Mammy) misaligned with individual desires for sexual expression. Additionally, centering research on Black women's reflections of their most pleasurable sexual experiences provides agency for Black women to tell their own stories – an important aspect of undoing the shame that can come with experiencing and discussing sexual pleasure.

The Importance of the Most Pleasurable Sexual Experience

Exploring one's most pleasurable sexual experience is important for several reasons. First, exploring these events can offer insight into possibilities for what can be cultivated for future pleasurable sex. Secondly, one's most pleasurable sexual experience can present a "pivotal moment." A pivotal moment, also called a turning point or critical moment, is a positive or negative event that has a lasting impact on one's life trajectory and can affect personal sense of self, meaning making, and values (Sutin et al., 2010; Teruya & Hser, 2010). One's most pleasurable sexual experience can be a pivotal moment in that it allows for expanded understandings of pleasure that the individual may not have previously realized was possible for them and may change how they structure their sexual experiences moving forward. Further, from a clinical perspective, inquiries about the most pleasurable sexual experience and how long ago it occurred can shed light on indicators of libido and/or sexual function.

Adding to the growing and needed literature on Black women's sexual pleasure, this study qualitatively explored US Southern Black women's most pleasurable sexual experiences to better understand the characteristics of these encounters. Our research questions were as follows: How do Black women describe their MPEs? What are the main components of their MPEs?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data for the present study came from qualitative interviews conducted as part of the *Pain and Pleasure Study*, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods investigation of experiences of sexual pain and pleasure for Black women residing in the U.S. South. In Phase 1 of the Pain and Pleasure study, participants ($N = 249$) were recruited through snowball and convenience sampling and completed an online survey. Eligible participants were premenopausal, cisgender Black women who were under the age of 50 and lived in the Southern region of the United States. To further explore the quantitative findings of this study, qualitative interviews were conducted in Phase 2.

In an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study design, the qualitative data can be collected from outlier/extreme cases to help explain the findings from the quantitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Ivankova et al., 2006). As such, we invited participants who were outliers on factors important to sexual pain and pleasure for participation in Phase 2. Specifically, participants were invited for an interview if they were an outlier on Phase 1 survey questions about sexual pain frequency, sexual anxiety frequency, orgasm experience, and/or if they reported a reproductive healthcare diagnosis or sexual pain disorder. While 97 participants from Phase 1 met the criteria for Phase 2 interviews, only 48 indicated included their e-mail and indicated interest in an interview. All 48 participants were contacted, and the first 25 were interviewed. Interviews were limited to the first 25 respondents due to

funding constraints. Further, per prior research, 16–25 interviews are needed to reach meaning saturation and therefore we chose a final sample size of 25 (Hennink et al., 2017).

Qualitative interviews were conducted from February to March 2021 by the last author, three doctoral students, and a postdoctoral scholar. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and scheduled for an hour. Interviews averaged 50 minutes in length and ranged between 22 and 79 minutes. After providing verbal informed consent, interview participants ($N = 25$) responded to interview questions across multiple domains, including sexual anxiety (e.g., How would you define sexual anxiety?), sexual pain (e.g., Can you describe what sexual pain feels like for you?), reproductive health (e.g., How often does your healthcare provider [OBGYN] ask you about sexual pain without you bringing it up?), sexual pleasure (e.g., Tell me about your most pleasurable sexual experience), and sexual stereotypes (e.g., What stereotypes have you heard about Black women and their sexuality?).

Participant demographics are presented in Table 1. Close to 85% ($n = 21$) identified as heterosexual, and 60% of participants were single. Nearly two-thirds of participants had a reproductive health or pain disorder diagnosis ($n = 16$), and 44% ($n = 11$) reported sexual pain or anxiety. During the interviews, participants were given the following prompt: “Tell me about your most pleasurable sexual experience. What made it pleasurable? Tell it like a story if that is easier.” Participant responses to this prompt were analyzed for the present manuscript. The study was approved by the University of Kentucky IRB, Study # 61705.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used to analyze the data. The six steps of thematic analyses are: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, defining themes, reviewing themes, and writing up

analytic findings. Steps for thematic analysis were completed collaboratively and incorporated input and feedback from all team members throughout the process. To familiarize themselves with the dataset (Step 1), the coders (first and second authors) immersed themselves in the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts and creating memos to capture initial thoughts. These memos included notes on the coders’ responses to reading each participant’s transcript, such as emotional reactions, further questions that came up, and musings on possible connections in the data. Following this, the two coders independently coded the data to generate initial codes (Step 2). Some initially created codes include “consideration and thoughtfulness” and “focus on participant.” The coders met to discuss commonalities and differences in coding, and afterward the first author created a codebook integrating similar codes from both coders. For example, the initial codes “being comfortable with each other,” “all parties comfortable,” and “comfortable with partner,” were collapsed into the single code “Being comfortable with each other” for the integrated codebook. As a second example, the code “oral sex to orgasm” and “cunnilingus” were combined into “receiving head” for the integrated codebook. This codebook was then used for a subsequent round of coding. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasized that themes do not “emerge” from the data but rather are developed and constructed by researchers who approach the data with their unique subjectivities. As such, for Step 3, the first author generated initial themes by grouping coded data together that appeared to have a broader, shared meaning. The preliminary themes were then reviewed and revised after further discussion with the research team (Step 4). For example, the preliminary theme “mood/ambience” was revised into “intentionality” to reflect the underlying meaning of the steps taken to prepare the atmosphere for pleasurable sex. The final author provided guidance on organizing, refining, and naming themes (Step 5), and a final check was done to ensure completeness of thematic development.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Name	Age	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Outlier Identity
Nicole	35	Queer	Married	PCOS
Keisha Wise	25	Heterosexual	Cohabiting	PCOS
T	26	Pansexual	Single	PCOS
Nia	33	Heterosexual	Single	Feels pain half the time; Pain disorder diagnosis
Naomi Silk	25	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Sexual anxiety
Butta P	44	Heterosexual	Single	Sometimes feels pain during sex; Endometriosis; Pain disorder diagnosis
Tori Johnson	27	Heterosexual	Single	PCOS
Regina	41	Pansexual	Single	Endometriosis
Candy	26	Heterosexual	Single	Endometriosis
Michelle	27	Heterosexual	Single	Never felt sexual anxiety; Never experienced orgasm; PCOS; Endometriosis
Pea	23	Heterosexual	Single	PCOS
Alexandra	25	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Feels pain half the time
Kayla	30	Heterosexual	Single	Sometimes feels sexual anxiety
Lola	24	Heterosexual	Single	Sometimes feels sexual anxiety
Jhene	35	Heterosexual	Single	Never experienced orgasm
Janelle	31	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Feels pain half the time
Nikki	23	Gay/lesbian	In a relationship	Sometimes feels sexual anxiety; Endometriosis
Kris	23	Heterosexual	Single	Never felt sexual anxiety
Black Velvet	28	Heterosexual	Married	Sometimes feels sexual anxiety; Feels pain half the time; Pain disorder diagnosis
Amina	29	Heterosexual	Single	Never experienced orgasm; PCOS
Denise	35	Heterosexual	Dating	PCOS
Rita	44	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Endometriosis
Serena Jones	28	Heterosexual	Single	Sexual anxiety
Brittany	32	Heterosexual	Dating	Never experienced orgasm
Zeena	24	Heterosexual	Single	PCOS

Themes were revised three times before the team was satisfied. The first and second authors then wrote up the analytic findings (Step 6), incorporating feedback from the remaining team members and selecting quotes to present in the report.

Researcher Reflexivity

Researchers' social identities influence the research questions asked and how the research process is executed and reflecting on researchers' subjectivities is a core component of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Given this, the research team wrote reflexivity statements to explicitly consider how their subjectivities impacted the data analytic process. The research team was comprised of three Black women and one bi-racial Black woman. All team members were cisgender. The first author was trained as a clinical psychologist and has a background in public health, anthropology, and neuroscience. She has conducted research with the fourth author on Black women's sexualities for the past 4 years and specializes in trauma, the lived experience of pleasure, and sexual and reproductive health. She is interested in exploring pleasure as a mechanism for healing from trauma, particularly for Black women. She works to practice a pleasure ethic, which is apparent in her choices to pay attention to and seek out experiences that make her body, senses, and mind feel good. Her understanding and conceptualization of pleasure is integrated from various academic disciplines and from books that center on the lived experiences of Black women and neurodiverse people. She believes that for marginalized peoples, the act of choosing to prioritize pleasure confers agency and re-aligns one with their internal compass of how to feel good in ongoing and sustainable ways. This author contributed to the conceptualization, literature review, data analysis, original writing, and editing for this article. Her social identities, academic background, and values regarding pleasure coalesced to ensure that the study was executed with a sex- and pleasure-positive Black feminist perspective.

The second author has an academic background in sociology, sport and exercise psychology, and counseling psychology. She conducted data analysis with the first author and contributed to the writing and literature review for this report. The third author is a family nurse practitioner and doctoral candidate whose research is focused on sexual and reproductive health and infectious diseases. This author provided feedback on the results and contributed to writing the report on study implications, with particular attention to the implications for medical providers in sexual health. The final author is a public health educator and researcher focused on Black women's sexualities. This author collected the study data, provided feedback on manuscript structure, and contributed to report writing. Three of the four authors identify as queer and one as heterosexual. Together, our social positionalities, values, academic backgrounds, and research expertise provided a nuanced perspective for understanding and interpreting data regarding Black women's reported MPEs.

Results

While most participants discussed a specific sexual experience, some participants responded to the prompt by describing the components important to them for pleasurable sex in general.

Their responses are included as they still suggest factors important for pleasurable sex. Of all participants interviewed, four mentioned experiencing orgasm, one stated not having an orgasm, and the remainder did not say. The following themes were developed: emotional intimacy, out of the ordinary experiences, physical intimacy, intentionality, open communication, mindful presence, and orgasm. Each theme is comprised of multiple subthemes; all are described in the results below. Names next to the presented quotes are pseudonyms.

Emotional Intimacy

Participants described the importance of emotional intimacy – defined as feeling seen, connected, and cared for – within their MPEs. They described feeling emotional intimacy in how they felt comfortable and connected to their partners and shared how having an established relationship with their sexual partners helped nurture feelings of safety important to enjoying the MPE. Feeling connected and comfortable in these ways indicated a level of safety and comfort that laid the foundation for increased sexual pleasure. Additionally, having partners who prioritized their sexual pleasure and paid attention to their needs – sexual or non-sexual – allowed participants to feel cared for and added to the sexual pleasure they experienced.

For example, participants spoke about how feeling *connected and comfortable* enhanced their sexual pleasure. Nicole (age 35) discussed how, in her MPE with her wife, they were not only “very horny” but also “feeling really connected” and “just enjoying that.” Describing the importance of an emotional connection for pleasurable sex, Zeena (age 24) stated that she “liked” her partner, which made her emotions “way more heightened” and contributed to the pleasure of her sexual experience. Brittany (age 32) spoke generally of the importance of feeling connected, and how she likes to “really get to know someone . . . as a person” even if the relationship is not long term because that emotional connection “makes sex that much more enjoyable.” For these participants, feeling emotionally connected contributed to the pleasure that made that experience their chosen MPE.

Relatedly, participants discussed how their MPEs often occurred within the context of *established relationships*. This allowed emotional intimacy to be present because they knew the partner in their MPE for some time. While for some participants this meant the sexual encounter was with a long-term romantic partner, such as a boyfriend (Kayla, age 30), husband (Black Velvet, age 28), or wife (Nicole), for others this was an established sexual non-romantic relationship. Serena (age 28) said of the partner in her MPE, “so I wasn’t in a relationship with this person, but it was someone I was sexual with for a relatively long period of time.” Other participants stated having an established friendship with the partner in their MPE. Tori (age 27) shared how she was “close friends” with her partner before they introduced sex into their relationship, “so the level of comfortability was higher than it had been with anybody else.” For Tori, deep friendship allowed for the emotional connection and comfort that contributed to her MPE.

Similarly, some participants expressed that their partners *prioritized their sexual pleasure*, which contributed to feeling cared for and led to the sexual experience being their most pleasurable. Kris (age 23) shared that her MPE consisted of a “focus on [me] ... [and] there being some sort of at least consideration of [me] and [my] wants.” Kayla stated her MPE “had more focus on making sure that I received sexual pleasure, because it made sure that I reached my peak too.” Serena gave specific details that highlighted how her partner prioritized her pleasure, stating “I appreciated that he would also make efforts. He would focus on my clitoris or do different things to help with that [my pleasure].” Speaking to both attentiveness, physical touch, and her sexual pleasure as a priority, Alexandra (age 25) shared, “I guess having the male be more attentive I guess and actually focus on my sexual pleasure as opposed to you only focus on their own ... involving touch, care, effort to make sure that I am pleased sexually.” Kris, Kayla, Serena, and Alexandra emphasized having their sexual pleasure prioritized was a key component that contributed to their MPEs.

While Alexandra described sexual attentiveness as important to her MPE, others spoke to how attentiveness to overall comfort and non-sexual needs added to the context of the MPE; this was the emotional intimacy of being cared for in a non-sexual context. For example, Janelle (age 31) shared how prior to her MPE (a threesome with her boyfriend and roommate), her boyfriend stated that he wanted her to have a good time on New Year’s Eve because he knew she had her first experience with depression prior to the holiday. Regina (age 41) similarly named the non-sexual attentiveness she experienced with the sexual partner of her MPE, who brought her a “whole care package” when she was sick. Both sexual and non-sexual attentiveness were present for Denise (age 35), who shared how her partner “paid so much attention to [her] life it was unreal.” She also shared about his attentiveness during sex, stating, “he was so attentive ... he knew I needed to relax and was telling me to breathe ... I appreciated that because no one takes the time out to pay attention to me.” For Denise, attentiveness was also present in how her partner knew how to please her without explicit guidance. She said, “I didn’t even have to tell him what to do or how to do it. It was just like, he knew what to do.” Jhene (age 35) expressed similar sentiments, saying, “he knew what to do and everything was right, almost like he was in my head sometimes.” For both Denise and Jhene, the fact that their partners provided sexual pleasure without their explicit guidance heightened their enjoyment, perhaps because they were able to let go – they did not have to be in control or be concerned about providing clear directions to another person for their own pleasure. Overall, attentiveness from partners – whether sexual, non-sexual, or both – made participants feel cared for and comfortable, and this level of care was important to the context of enjoying these pleasurable sexual experiences.

An Out of the Ordinary Experience

Some participants expressed how their MPEs were out of the ordinary because they included elements different from what they usually do. In these instances, the experiences of

pleasurable sex represented something different from the occurrences of everyday life. Participants’ reported pleasurable sexual experiences were *spontaneous*, *passionate*, involved *variety*, and included the *right amount of aggression*. Several participants described how their MPEs were *spontaneous*. Nicole stated that she “love[d] the spur of the moment” component of the sexual experience she had with her wife. Lola (age 24) named how her MPE was “unexpected,” and similarly, Naomi (age 25) stated her MPE was “wasn’t preplanned, it kind of just happened.” Both Brittany and Janelle named spontaneity as important to their MPEs. Brittany shared “it was the spontaneity of it, for sure, that made it the most pleasurable for me.” After naming spontaneity as important to her MPE, Janelle also shared that she “desire[s] spontaneity with sex” because it brings “an element of excitement” to the experience. For these participants, the unexpectedness added to the pleasure of these sexual experiences because they enjoyed the excitement and surprise of doing something unplanned.

Some participants also named how the sex in their MPE was *passionate*. Both Janelle and Denise shared that their experiences were very “passionate,” and Michelle (age 27) described how her first time having sex with her current partner was “very intense. ... I didn’t know I could feel like this and I didn’t know I could make someone else feel this way.” The passion she experienced in that encounter was new for her. Nikki (age 23) named how the “room should have been steamy” in the sex she had with her partner after they had been apart for some time. The passion these participants described was important to their pleasurable sexual experiences because it signified the electric nature of the connection present in the sexual encounter.

Participants named how their MPEs involved *variety* in either timing or the activities involved. This variety kept sex from becoming mundane. Rita (age 44) stated her enjoyment of variety regarding the timing of sex, saying “that’s what makes my most pleasurable experience pleasurable, it’s not like we’re clockwork, like a certain night of the week ... or certain timing.” Butta P (age 44) echoed appreciation for variety in sex acts saying, “we use a variety of positions ... we’ve utilized toys, lube ... it just depends.” Nia (age 33) stated how her MPE involved “not just doing penetration all the time, but all the different stuff,” and Janelle named how she appreciated sex where “it’s not always the same thing.” In a different vein, Kayla shared the importance of communication as related to sexual variety because talking helps to “build an arsenal” of mutually pleasurable sexual activities so that “sex never becomes a routine.” For these participants, variety in sexual timing or activities contributed to the out-of-the-ordinary nature of the MPE because it allowed for novelty and prevented sex from becoming routine.

A minority of participants appreciated how their partners displayed the *right amount of aggression*. Jhene shared, “I like the way he grabbed me. It was a little bit of aggression but not too much.” Janelle named how her preference for roughness was present in her MPE, saying “I like when my partner takes physical control of me” and that “choking bondage” added on to her “great sexual experiences” with her partner. These participants may have enjoyed the aggression displayed by

their partners because it differed from the usual tenor of their interactions, indicated desire and possessiveness that made them feel wanted, and possibly increased their arousal. Overall, participants described their MPEs as out of the ordinary, and discussed how elements of spontaneity, passion, variety, and desired aggression added to the pleasure of these sexual experiences.

Intentionality

Participants described how intentionality was present in their MPEs in how their partners or they themselves took steps to prepare for pleasurable sex. For some, this involved *setting the mood* through making the physical space or emotional atmosphere conducive to sex. Kris described how the privacy of having her “own place” with her partner, a space that was “clean” with “candles” lit and “music playing” helped her feel more comfortable during her MPE. For Keisha (age 25), having “lights dim, candles lit, . . . a hot bubble bath” and dinner “already cooked” was part of the ambience that allowed her to feel “relaxed.” For these participants, attention to the physical environment, engagement in calming activities, and having completed household duties heightened the pleasure of the experience by curating an atmosphere of relaxation and sensuality.

Intentionality also involved *spending time together before sex*. Regina “hung out a time or two” with her sexual partner when he was “in the neighborhood.” Zeena went “on a date” with the sexual partner involved in her MPE. Lola “hung out” with the partner in her MPE “outside at night” where they could “see the stars,” then were “up on the sidewalk, just chillin.” Spending time together allowed participants to get to know their sexual partners better or for an emotional connection to be developed and helped facilitate the pleasurable sex that occurred.

Other participants shared how *substances* enhanced the mood and contributed to the context of their MPEs. Nia “smoked and had an edible” with her partner, Janelle was “drinking rum” with her roommate and had “champagne” with her partner before her MPE (a threesome with her roommate and partner), and Nicole spent time with her wife at a “brewery, where you can just try different beers” prior to her MPE. In using alcohol or cannabis with their partners, these participants used a shared activity to intentionally enter an altered state of consciousness that then increased the pleasure of the sexual experience by promoting an atmosphere of connectedness, sensuality, and relaxation.

Physical Intimacy

Participants shared the importance of physical intimacy to their MPEs and spoke specifically to the pleasure experienced in the corporal body. This physical intimacy was present through *foreplay*, *physical touch*, *specific sexual activities*, and *physical connection*. Participants described how warming up through foreplay was important to their pleasurable sexual experiences. Kayla shared that her MPE “was more heavy on the foreplay than the actual insertion of penis into vagina for sex.” Tori stated how her partner in her MPE incorporated

more foreplay than other partners: “. . . the tendency with the guys I came across was for them not to do a whole lot of foreplay. But this person did a lot. So that made a huge difference in the outcome of sex for me.” For these participants, spending significant amounts of time on foreplay enhanced the pleasure they experienced during sex. Although participants mentioned foreplay as part of their pleasurable sexual activities, it is important to note that the concept of foreplay may be observed as problematic for some individuals, as it implies the prioritization of vaginal penetration and/or orgasm.

Other participants named how intentional *physical touch* was incorporated into their MPE. For example, Rita described the importance of touch in her MPE with her long-distance partner:

Whatever hormone it is where you need to be hugged or whatever – it was depleted! It [the reunion] was very pleasurable because it was like, now you have the touch. And even before the sexual act, it’s the anticipation and then the initial embracing and the just being around each other.

Rita spoke to how physical touch with her long-distance partner not only felt good but also built anticipation for the sex itself and released “feel good” hormones that further increased the pleasure of the moment. Michelle, a heterosexual woman who described her MPE as her one time being sexual with a woman, shared how physical touch amplified her pleasure “. . . there’s more touching, there’s more rubbing, there’s more ‘I’m going to take my time and explore your body.’ I think that was amazing.” She further recalled, “I remember exploring almost every inch of her body . . . I’m playing with each dread, and then her neck and her shoulders and just working myself down, and being like ‘Wow.’” For Michelle, the pleasure stemmed from both receiving physical touch and providing it to her partner. From this participant’s perspective, she and her partner were able to amplify pleasure by increasing physical touch and slowing down the experience, which allowed them to explore and savor each other’s bodies.

Others described *specific sexual activities* during the MPE, including cunnilingus, fingering, breast play, and anilingus. Jhene shared how her partner “did a lot of oral sex” in her MPE, and Regina named that her MPE included “oral as well as vaginal intercourse.” Amina (age 29) stated that in her MPE, “there was no penetration. It was more so just his fingers.” Nia shared that her partner in the MPE “sucked [her] breasts” and “grabbed [her] butt,” and then “rubbed [her] back nicely . . . and cuddle[d] afterwards.” She described how this partner often provided “those nice, soft, sensual touches.” For Nia, the sexual activities in her MPE extended to the aftercare (e.g., cuddling) present after sex and included physical touch that indicated closeness. Pea (age 23) described how her MPE involved the first time she experienced anilingus or got her ass ate:

So this was the first time anybody’s ever ate, first time anybody has ever ate my ass. I have never in my life. . . it was just yes, full throttle. . . And then, girl, he start eating. Like, ooh, okay. And then he started eating my ass, I was like, “Ooh.” I have never in my life. You feel? . . . Like, bro. . . when I got done, I felt like that. . . yeah, I’m that girl. Yeah. He ate my ass.

Pea described a sense of wonderment at the pleasure of experiencing anilingus and a feeling of pride that her partner ate her ass. For others, physical intimacy was described not in sexual activities but in the *physical connection* of the experience. Black Velvet specified the importance of feeling physically connected during her MPE, saying:

That night was, I would say, one of the best experiences mainly because it was us physically connecting. We've always connected emotionally. So it was that physical connection where I felt comfortable, but then I felt like I can also show you this other side of me, my freakier side.

For Black Velvet, having a physical connection with her partner where she felt comfortable to be multifaceted was part of what made that sexual experience her most pleasurable one. Jhene called that physical connection “sexual chemistry,” saying: “I think it's because of our sexual chemistry and there was a level of comfort I have with him.” Overall, physically touching each other's bodies, through foreplay and different sexual activities, as well as having a strong physical connection, enhanced participants' pleasure through the sensory experience of touch.

Open Communication

Open communication was an important component of participants' MPEs. This theme was concerned with the transparent messages given and received to facilitate the MPE. Participants described *what, how, and when* these messages were communicated (Table 2). Kayla described how she communicated her sexual needs and desires with her partner before sex through explicit conversation: “I enjoy sex, this is what I enjoy. What do you like, what do you enjoy?” Serena discussed how sexting was important to her MPE, because it was a “fun way” of “very direct communication about what you like and don't like.” She shared, “I was able to lay out scenarios of exactly how I wanted it and he would do the same and we would do that in real life.” For both Kayla and Serena, direct communication about their sexual likes and dislikes – either by explicit conversation or sexting prior to sex – was integral to pleasurable sex. Communicating this information was a way to provide clarity about their sexual preferences (and gain information about their partners' preferences), as well as build anticipation prior to the sexual experience itself.

T shared how communication of ongoing consent and care through conversation during sex was a large part of what contributed to her MPE:

It was not even necessarily the sex itself. . . It was like ‘I'm checking in with you. I'm making sure that you're good. I'm being very intentional about asking you what you want and don't want. If we are having sex, I'm asking you if that's okay and if it's not okay, if you want something else, if you want things to be added, things to be taken away . . . At that point, if they were like “do you like this?”

And I say, “No,” They're going to be like okay so what do you like instead?” It didn't detract from what was happening. Nothing had to necessarily stop.

For T (age 26), communication during sex – via check-ins and questions – facilitated ongoing consent that heightened the pleasure of the experience because such questions signified care about her pleasure and safety. Rita shared how communicating affirmations during sex, like “That feels good,” was important to her MPE: “we communicate with each other, and that way we know, whether its verbal or non-verbal, that okay, the other person is having a good experience.” Both verbal and non-verbal communication for Rita were important to sexual pleasure because it provided confirmation that the experience was enjoyable for all parties involved.

For these participants, open communication enhanced the sexual experience because it allowed for exchange of information about likes and dislikes, facilitated the process of consent, and provided an avenue for affirmation. This communication happened both verbally and non-verbally, and either happened before or during the sexual encounter.

Mindful Presence

Some participants shared how their MPEs involved mindful presence, defined as being in the “here and now” of the experience. For some, this meant the MPE was *unrushed*. Lola described how her MPE involved a “very slow build up” that occurred “over hours” where “nothing fast happened.” Rita shared about the pleasure of slowing down in her MPE, stating: “We don't just rip each other's clothes off. So it's just the pleasure in that, just like oh, we're just taking our time getting into it.” Michelle shared the pleasure of the unrushed pace during her MPE, stating “I don't want to rush through this. I want to take my time. I want to enjoy all of you.” For Rita, the ability to slow down the pace was tied to fewer concerns about tasks that needed to happen afterward. She shared how she “didn't have to be somewhere at a certain time or be thinking about the next thing,” and this provided space for her to be more present in the experience. For these participants, the unhurried nature of the sexual experience allowed a state of mindful presence that prolonged the pleasure of the experience through building up anticipation and sexual tension.

Other participants described their MPE as having an element of *flow*, in which sex felt smooth and unawkward. T shared, “it was just fluid in what was happening. What happened was whatever happened.” In a similar vein, Rita stated how for her MPE, there was “no prescription or position . . . it's just kind of like however it flows.” Nicole articulated this quality in her MPE by saying how the sex was “light” and “organic” rather than being “formal” or “robotic.” Naomi shared how flow added to her enjoyment of the MPE, a threesome with her roommate and her boyfriend: “ . . . it

Table 2. Components of Open Communication in Reported Most Pleasurable Sexual Experience

Message Communicated	Means of Communication	Timing of Communication
Sexual likes and dislikes	Explicit conversations, sexting	Prior to sex
Ongoing consent	Check-ins, questions	During sex
Affirmations	Verbal statements, non-verbal cues	During sex

was lots of fun. It was free, you know? We weren't really thinking about anything, just kind of going for it. It was fun." For these participants, being in flow during the MPE allowed them to be present in the experience, which added to the context of pleasure.

Orgasm

Of the 25 participants interviewed, only four explicitly stated they experienced an orgasm during their MPEs; the remaining 20 participants did not. Serena shared that she typically orgasms during sex because of "something [she's] done," in her MPE she "felt a very strong orgasm, which was great because...according to the conversations I have, not a lot of women are having orgasms." Regina attributed her orgasm in her partner's attentiveness, saying, "I was able to orgasm both from oral sex as well as vaginal intercourse. He was very attentive." Candy (age 26) stated how her experience of orgasm during her MPE came after multiple rounds of sex over the span of a few days:

So that was like a Friday night, and then we ended up having sex again on Sunday, and that's when I had an orgasm. So I didn't have an orgasm the first night. It was great. It was good. But I did not have orgasm. I don't think. But then Sunday, we had sex again, a few times, maybe like three or four times, because we didn't have a whole lot of time. And then I came. And so that was the best experience.

Per Candy's recount, the sex was still pleasurable during the times she did not orgasm, but the orgasm she had during the time they had sex on Sunday was what rose that experience to the height of the most pleasurable.

Amina was the only participant who explicitly described not experiencing an orgasm. Her MPE was about the time she came close to orgasming when fingered, but lost the sensation when she got up to go pee because she did not realize the pressure she felt meant an orgasm was coming. She described feeling "so mad" that she did not orgasm during that experience because future sexual encounters with that same partner did not create the same level of pleasure. She also named her frustration with partners who came while her pleasure was still building:

...It would start to build and then the guy would just orgasm. I'm like, "You bitch. How fucking dare you?" Excuse my French, but it was like I remember I used to get really jealous. And as soon as they go, I'm done. And then [they say], "I can use my tongue or I can use my fingers," and I'm like, "No. Just go on ahead and enjoy your orgasm, I'm done."

Amina felt frustrated with the fact that she did not experience an orgasm during her MPE and that frustration was compounded by the fact that, in future situations, her sexual partner orgasmed while her pleasure was still building; after they came, she felt unable to reach her sexual peak.

Discussion

Intentional exploration of the factors present in pleasurable sex provides useful information for what needs to be cultivated to facilitate and heighten sexual pleasure. As such, this study qualitatively investigated Black women's MPEs using reflexive thematic analysis. Our analysis found that these Black

women's MPEs were often physically and emotionally intimate events that differed from their usual sexual experiences and involved elements of intentionality, presence, and open communication. Of note, only a few participants explicitly named having an orgasm as part of their MPE.

While the themes represent independent constructs, several participants mentioned multiple themes within their responses. This highlights the interconnected nature of the factors present in pleasurable sexual experiences, as it is the confluence of these factors working together that heightens the pleasure of the event. As such, it may be the case that Black women may have the most pleasurable sex in experiences that are out of the ordinary where emotional and physical intimacy, intentionality, open communication, and mindful presence have been fostered.

The components of participants' MPEs hold some similarities (as well as differences) with findings on pleasurable sex from other samples. For example, recent research among a majority White sample of adults aged 18 to 69 – in which approximately two-thirds identified as women, one-third as men, and one individual as genderqueer – found orgasm, emotional care, chemistry/connection, and sexual skills, sexual responsiveness, and sexual mindfulness were crucial for great sex (Walker & Lutmer, 2023, 2024). Furthermore, a study of college students' most recent partnered sexual encounters found that students reported nonphysical components of partnered sex – such as emotional connection and trust – to be just as pleasurable as physical components (e.g., sexual behaviors and bodily sensations; Beckmeyer et al., 2023).

All the participants in the current sample focused their responses to the prompt on partnered interactions while only one included information on how sexual self-exploration informed pleasurable sex, which is consistent with previous studies on Black women's experiences of pleasure (Thorpe, Malone, Dogan, et al., 2022; Thorpe, Malone, Hargons, et al., 2022). Despite this, each of the factors of pleasurable sex found in the current study can be fostered through solo sexual experiences. For example, solo sexual experiences are an opportunity to practice communication with oneself through verbal or non-verbal affirmations about what feels good and check-ins about how to make the moment more pleasurable. Comfort with making these sounds during sex and knowledge of ways to increase pleasure in the moment can translate to improved communication with partners. Solo sex can also foster physical intimacy because it can be a space to practice savoring one's physical body instead of quickly masturbating to orgasm on autopilot.

Emotional intimacy was commonly reported by our participants, as they enjoyed feeling seen, cared for, and more intimate with their partners. This finding supports similar results that suggest emotional closeness and connection are foundational for Black women's experiences of peak pleasure (Thorpe, Malone, Dogan, et al., 2022; Thorpe, Malone, Hargons, et al., 2022). Prior work on Black college students' experiences of intimacy during their first and last sexual encounters found increased emotional intimacy elevated sex from solely a physical act to one with added pleasure, meaning, and fulfillment (Dogan et al., 2018) – highlighting the importance of intimacy even at this developmental stage. In *Longing*

to Tell, one participant, Cocoa, stated “Intimacy to me is being able to share feelings and comments with someone and not worry about them running away from you” (Rose, 2003, p. 150) and shared she did not believe she had experienced intimacy with anyone in her life, including her parents. Colonization and chattel slavery have caused intergenerational trauma that can disrupt the ability to express and develop emotional intimacy with others (Corbitt, 2023; DeGruy, 2017). As such, the experience of emotional intimacy in a sexual context can be pleasurable (and liberating) because the violence of slavery and colonization were meant to destroy Black people’s capacity for deep emotional connection.

While some participants reported that their MPEs occurred with their romantic partners, other participants shared that their MPEs occurred with a friend or a long-term sexual partner. Comfort and safety within these established relationships seemingly provided foundational intimacy, which further fostered feelings of emotional closeness and possibly even a sense of relaxation during sex, as participants could let their guard down and enjoy the sexual experience. This aligns with findings from a large study of Black women and sexual behavior, in which over 70% of women reported their most recent sexual encounter was with a romantic partner, e.g., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, significant other (Townes et al., 2021), and is also consistent with findings that Black women who reported knowing their sexual partners for a longer period of time were more likely to report experiencing an orgasm (Thorpe et al., 2021). Goldey et al. (2016) found similar qualitative results among a majority White woman sample, with participants expressing the importance of trust and closeness in partnered sexual experiences. Recent work exploring intimate relationships among unmarried women in midlife (35–60 years old) found that Black women, women with greater income, and queer women were more likely to engage in “situationships” as compared to women who were White, heterosexual, and/or had lower income (Armstrong et al., 2024). Authors defined a situationship as a sexual and/or romantic liaison lasting at least 6 months with no expectation of escalating commitment and/or public acknowledgment. Situationships can be relationships of emotional closeness, even if they are private and barred from public view. Armstrong et al. (2024) asserted that situationships represent a creative avenue in which women who are not advantaged in White heteronormative institutions (such as marriage) – for example, women at midlife who are Black and queer – can continue to experience sexual and romantic pleasure while preserving autonomy and freedom. Prior findings coupled with this study’s results could mean that Black women’s sexual pleasure is largely tied to their established closeness and comfort with their sexual partner and thus, trusting, established relationships may be foundational for experiencing peak pleasure.

Additionally, for some participants, experiencing a partner’s attentiveness and having their sexual pleasure prioritized by their partner fostered pleasure because their partners were actively considering the participants’ non-sexual and sexual needs and desires during the encounter. This attentiveness made participants feel cared for and provided them with the sexual activities they desired. These findings are not surprising,

as prior literature indicates that women may not expect pleasure, but rather hope for sexual pleasure or must prioritize their pleasure for themselves in their partnered sexual encounters, while men expect pleasure (Hargons et al., 2018; Kettrey, 2018). Our findings suggested that our participants were pleasantly surprised and excited to experience a partner who prioritized the participant’s sexual pleasure, which potentially added to the physical pleasure that the participants experienced during the encounter.

Of note, only four of the participants explicitly mentioned orgasm as part of their MPE. There were no direct questions asked about orgasm, and so some participants may have felt the experience of having an orgasm during their MPE was implied. However, the minimal mention of orgasm also speaks to the fact that it was not the most important component of pleasurable sex. This is aligned with research on the experience of magnificent sex, in which participants described orgasms as a “bonus” that were nice to experience but not necessary or sufficient for magnificent sex (Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2020). In fact, some sex-positive programs focus on sexual pleasure more broadly rather than orgasm specifically (Afrosexology, 2024; For Goodness Sake, L., 2024), as equating orgasms to the totality of sexual pleasure ignores the many other relevant dimensions present in sexual experiences. For example, OMGYes, an organization dedicated to presenting science-based information about women’s pleasure, includes exercises for exploring mental, communication, and touch-related techniques for enhancing pleasure with oneself and others (For Goodness Sake, L., 2024). As such, it may be the case that both individuals and sex-positive organizations recognize that fostering the other reported components of pleasurable sex, such as an out-of-the-ordinary experience, open communication, emotional and physical intimacy, intentionality, and mindful presence may be more important to experiencing pleasurable sex than achieving orgasm.

In a recent review, Chadwick (2024) explicated the benefits and drawbacks of prioritizing women’s orgasm. On the one hand, this prioritization may signal an embedded sociocultural investment in women’s sexual pleasure, and is important because orgasm can represent a particular form of embodied pleasure that can support sexual wellbeing more broadly (Chadwick, 2024). However, prioritizing orgasm as an event that is always pleasurable or enjoyable can flatten more complex narratives, such as complicated experiences of orgasm during coerced sex or during consensual sex marked by negative affect (e.g., boredom, fatigue), and can contribute to a social environment in which women are more likely to fake orgasms (Chadwick, 2024). As such, educators, researchers, and organizations working with women toward the goal of experiencing more sexual pleasure may best serve their intended audience through an approach that discusses orgasm as often important to sexual pleasure, while offering significant nuances so as not to frame it as unilaterally positive or all-encompassing of sexual pleasure.

The sexual self-disclosure of expressing one’s sexual likes and dislikes (Brown & Weigel, 2018) and the sexual assertiveness of negotiating sexual requests and navigating consent (Darden et al., 2019; Morokoff et al., 1997) are key components of sexual communication that were captured in the open

communication theme in this study. Recent work found that communicating during sex not only heightened sexual pleasure but also increased emotional intimacy (Séguin, 2024). Further, communicating prior to initiating sex can increase anticipation and help set expectations for the sexual experience. Curiously, examples of open communication *after* sex were absent among participants' responses. Despite the benefits of sexual communication, recent work has found that individuals may not communicate during sex to avoid spoiling the mood, hurting a partner's feelings, or experiencing negative emotions (Séguin, 2024). It is possible that people may not communicate after sex for similar reasons. As such, it may be useful to not only explicitly investigate *what* messages were communicated after pleasurable sex but to also disseminate best practices for *how* to communicate feedback after sex in order to improve sexual agency and to increase the potential for pleasurable sex in the future.

Two participants named that the right amount of aggression – meaning right for them, with that specific partner, in that specific encounter – was a component of their MPE. It is possible that their partner's aggression in that moment heightened their arousal. This aligns with recent reports that some young women find choking exciting (Herbenick et al., 2022) and tracks with the increased presence of sexual choking and dominance in mainstream media (Herbenick et al., 2023). Given that choking and other forms of rough sexual behaviors can be experienced as pleasurable, it is important for sex educators and professionals to have nuanced understandings of rougher and more dominant, kinky sexual behaviors to better disseminate information about how to negotiate sexually aggressive activities, like choking, during sex in safe and pleasurable ways.

Strengths and Limitations

This study brings new insights to the literature and had several strengths, including its sex-positive approach to the study of Black women's sexual experiences, the connection to broader psychological constructs (i.e., savoring), and the composition of the research team (as Black women interviewing and analyzing data from Black women research participants is an empirically supported approach that facilitates increased comfort with the research process and enriches data quality; Walton et al., 2022).

This study also had limitations that must be acknowledged. First, interview participants represent individuals with high levels of sexual anxiety and pain, and thus, future research should be conducted to compare their MPEs to those of other Black women with lower levels of sexual anxiety and sexual pain. Additionally, the majority of the sample identified as heterosexual; this work can be extended to explore how the factors present in this sample's most pleasurable sex are similar to or different from those of queer Black women. Lastly, not all participants anchored their responses to the prompt to a specific sexual experience. Sexual pain and sexual anxiety may be correlated with overgeneral memory, an impaired memory style in which participants do not recall a specific event even when clearly asked to do so (Williams & Broadbent, 1986). Given that the participants in this study were sampled

from a broader study of individuals with sexual pain and anxiety, it is possible that mental health concerns such as depression and PTSD were more likely among this sample, and thus, results may not generalize to Black women with a stronger ability to recall specific memories.

Implications

This research underscores the importance of a positive, pleasure-focused approach to sexual health, sex education, and sexual wellbeing. Given that pleasure is one of the main reasons people have sex, it is imperative for sex educators to include content about sexual pleasure in sex education curricula and programming. This values-oriented approach (also harm reductionist in nature) can help Black women approach their own understanding of sexual experiences – which has often been shrouded in shame and silence – from a place of open curiosity about what brings pleasure.

Implications for Sexuality Educators

Several resources from Black sexuality educators (e.g., @afrosexology, @dr.donnaoriowo, and @thesexpottherapist on social media) exist for moving toward Black liberation through sexual pleasure. Exercises for sex-positive sex education can build on the findings from this study to include prompts that probe for memories of experiences of pleasurable sexual experiences that contained these themes (e.g., What sexual experience was your most fun? What was fun like in that experience? Which of your sexual experiences had the most emotional intimacy? Did that heighten the pleasure of that sexual experience?). Questions and points for discussion can also be extended to thinking through desires for future interactions related to the themes of Black women's most pleasurable sexual experiences. Such questions could include, "How can I be intentional in my sexual experiences to increase sexual pleasure (through paying attention to the environment, devoting quality time to spend with my partner/myself before sex, etc.)?" "What factors need to be in place in order for me to experience mindful presence in sex?" Such inquiries can help Black women foster awareness and stimulate communication with partner(s) about the factors important to pleasurable sex, and in doing so begin to unravel the shame Black women may experience in desiring and experiencing such sex.

Implications for Medical Providers

Findings are also particularly relevant for Black women whose sexual experiences have historically been examined through a predominantly risk-centric lens by clinicians (Johnson et al., 2024). Previous efforts have advocated for a transformative approach to sexual health, yet there remains significant room for embracing a truly sex-positive framework. To this end, the National Coalition for Sexual Health enhanced the standard Centers for Disease Control (CDC) 5P framework of sexual health history – which focused on partners, practices, past history of STIs, protection, and partners – to 6Ps to include elements of pleasure and pride (National Coalition for Sexual

Health, 2024), thus highlighting the integral role of pleasure, sexual identity, and personal satisfaction in sexual wellbeing.

Building on this foundational change, findings from this study emphasize the need for clinicians to adopt and promote strategies that facilitate the exploration and enhancement of sexual pleasure within both individual and partnered contexts. By encouraging the use of memory recall techniques that focus on positive sexual experiences during sexual health history inventories, clinicians can help counteract the prevalent negative narratives surrounding sexual health. Recalling and discussing past pleasurable experiences may enable individuals to reconstruct their perceptions of intimacy and become more aware of the components that contribute to fulfilling sexual encounters.

Implications for Mental Health Clinicians

To further these objectives, clinicians should guide individuals in practices that promote self-intimacy, many of which may fit well within existing clinical paradigms familiar to mental health clinicians and sexuality educators. For example, mindfulness-based approaches to address sexual dysfunction and genital pain (Brotto, 2018) can be extended to mindfulness in sexual scenarios (Cruz et al., 2017) more broadly. Pleasure mapping, which involves exploring one's body and erogenous zones using touch to discover what is pleasurable (The Pleasure Centre, 2021; Thorpe et al., 2021) can foster physical intimacy, open communication, and intentionality. Reflective journaling about early sexual experiences and sexual messages using solo sex workbooks (Afrosexology, n.d.; Garvin, 2022) can provide individuals with the space to understand how prior narratives and trauma may impact their sex lives presently. Combined, these practices not only enhance self-awareness but also may build confidence in expressing and fulfilling sexual needs. By fostering a supportive environment for self-exploration, mental health clinicians can help individuals understand their bodies and preferences, which is essential for articulating and achieving sexual satisfaction in partnered experiences (Atkinson, 2013). Additionally, clinicians can offer strategies for discussing sexual health and pleasure with partners, including how to express preferences and negotiate consensual, pleasurable sexual activities. Training in communication skills should emphasize the importance of openness and honesty, ensuring that discussions about sexual health and pleasure are constructive and inclusive of both partners' desires.

Of note, some MPEs involved completely different characteristics from others (e.g., sex that was spontaneous versus sex that was intentional). Mental health clinicians can work with individuals desiring these seemingly opposite factors by fostering acceptance of duality and change. This can help move individuals away from a formulaic understanding of sex (i.e., "I will always need [x] to be present for a pleasurable sexual experience"), and toward one that normalizes how multiple truths can exist with an acceptance of how what is experienced as pleasurable can change over time. Such acceptance can translate into actionable steps, such as regular self-check-ins via pleasure mapping or use of yes-no-maybe sexual checklists to assess

how characteristics needed to facilitate pleasurable sex have changed over time.

Developing workshops and resources focused on enhancing sexual pleasure would be especially beneficial to supporting these clinical practices. Such resources could include workshops geared toward women who want to experience increased sexual pleasure and the clinicians who support them. Topics can include sexual communication, consent, and pleasure-focused sexual education, tailored to the specific needs and experiences of Black women. By adopting these implications, clinicians will not only address the direct needs of their patients but also contribute to a broader cultural shift toward recognizing and valuing sexual pleasure as an integral aspect of overall health and wellbeing. This shift is essential for dismantling stigmatized views of sexuality and fostering an environment where all individuals can pursue and attain sexual health and satisfaction without prejudice, pressure, and biases.

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