

Secondary Publication



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Date of secondary publication: 05.03.2026

Version of Record (Published Version), Article

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-112511x

Primary publication

Körner, Robert; Schütz, Astrid (2026): Power and Sexuality : Associations of Experienced and Desired Power with Sexual Aspects of Couples' Lives, in: The Journal of sex research, New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Online First, pp. 1–13, doi: 10.1080/00224499.2025.2599941.

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Power and Sexuality: Associations of Experienced and Desired Power with Sexual Aspects of Couples' Lives

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ABSTRACT

Power, one's perceived ability to influence others, is likely fundamental to the sexual aspects of couples' lives. However, relatively little is known about how different forms of power in romantic relationships relate to sexuality. This is partly because prior research has not clearly distinguished between actor versus partner power, and between experienced (actor) versus desired power. Building on recent theoretical developments that emphasize these distinctions, we examined how power relates to four different aspects of sexuality across four studies ($N_{\text{total}} = 1,109$ participants), including individuals in romantic relationships and both woman-man as well as LGBTQ couples. We found that greater actor power was associated with higher sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, and sexual assertiveness, but was unrelated to sexual control beliefs. Greater partner power was associated only with higher sexual satisfaction. Desired power showed no consistent associations with any aspect of sexuality. These findings largely replicated across both trait-level and daily assessments. Furthermore, the findings differed minimally between women and men and only partly between sexual majority versus minority participants. The current findings advance theory and research on power by highlighting its dyadic nature and by underscoring the importance of distinguishing between experienced and desired power to better understand how power and sexuality intersect.



Does power relate to how people experience their sexual lives? In romantic relationship contexts, power is typically understood as the ability to influence one's partner (Anderson et al., 2012; Simpson et al., 2015). Those who feel powerful can confidently express and pursue their needs and goals; while those who feel they lack power depend on their partners and struggle to get their needs and goals fulfilled (Overall et al., 2023; Simpson et al., 2015). The transformative effects of power on feelings, thoughts, and behavior are well documented (Guinote, 2017; Keltner et al., 2003) and researchers found power to be related to specific aspects of sexuality such as infidelity (e.g., Lammers et al., 2011), yet little research has examined how power is associated with couples' sexual lives. Furthermore, most researchers have focused only on one specific form of power (usually an actor's experienced power; Birnbaum et al., 2025) in relation to sexual outcomes even though different forms of power can have distinct effects (Murphy et al., 2022; Overall et al., 2023).


Across four studies, we examined the relationship between various forms of power (actor power, partner power, and desired power) and key aspects of sexual functioning, including sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, sexual assertiveness, and sexual control beliefs. To generalize our findings across relationship types, we studied both woman-man and LGBTQ couples. Additionally, we asked individuals to report on their power and sexuality over the course of two weeks to examine both between-person and within-person associations. The studies' findings have the potential to enrich our understanding of how two of the most

fundamental aspects of human life – power and sexuality – intersect in romantic relationships.

Power in Romantic Relationships

Most researchers distinguish between two types of power: experienced or subjective power, which is defined as one's potential to influence others (Anderson et al., 2012), and objective power, which is defined as the possession of valuable resources that allow one to impose their will (Keltner et al., 2003; Körner, Overbeck, et al., 2025). We focus on experienced power because in close relationships that aspect is a stronger predictor of outcomes than objective power (Körner & Schütz, 2021; Weisfeld et al., 1992). Romantic relationships typically consist of two people, each of whom brings their own attributes to the relationship – in terms of power, not only does an actor's power matter, but also the degree to which partners can influence the actor (i.e., have power). Recent research shows the importance of distinguishing between forms of power in this endeavor (Körner & Schütz, 2021, 2025; Murphy et al., 2022; Overall & Hammond, 2025; Overall et al., 2023). For example, whereas early assessments of relative power conflate whether high actor or low partner power (or vice versa) is responsible for any documented effect of power on outcomes, recent research shows that actor and partner power are distinct and relate to different outcomes in relationships (Körner & Schütz, 2025; Overall et al., 2023).

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2025.2599941>

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Actor power is an actor's potential to influence their partner. It is strongly linked to a self-focused approach orientation and ensures that one's needs and goals are expressed and promoted (Keltner et al., 2003; Overall et al., 2023). Greater actor power has been associated with higher levels of authenticity (Kifer et al., 2013) and relationship quality (Körner & Schütz, 2021), and lower levels of attachment insecurity (Körner, Overall, et al., 2025). Further, greater actor power makes individuals feel less threatened and experience fewer negative emotions when their partners reject them (Kuehn et al., 2015).

Partner power is a partner's potential to influence the actor. It is distinct from actor power and there is obviously no zero-sum game as actor and partner power are only modestly positively correlated (Körner & Schütz, 2021; Overall et al., 2023). This finding suggests that it is rather uncommon for one partner to feel more powerful than the other, but that instead both partners can feel powerful or powerless (Hanna-Walker et al., 2024; Körner & Schütz, 2025; Körner, Overall, et al., 2025; Overall & Hammond, 2025). In fact, power asymmetries are rare in daily interactions among close relationship partners (Columbus et al., 2021) because typically, both partners feel they have influence over important outcomes (at least in well-functioning couples). Partner power can be assessed in two ways: by asking the partner directly or by asking the actor to report how much they feel influenced by the partner – these ratings are then linked to relationship outcomes. Yet, it is unclear whether partner power, as perceived by the actor or as reported by the partner, shows the same pattern of associations with outcome variables. Note that we simply write partner power below, but both assessment methods (partner self-report and actor perception of partner power) are analyzed, and any divergences will be explicitly mentioned. In general, partner power is strongly linked to an other-focused approach orientation in actors, that is, partners' needs and goals are supported and promoted (Overall et al., 2023). Greater partner power has been associated with higher levels of communal behavior in actors (Overall et al., 2023), prioritizing partners' goals (Laurin et al., 2016), and higher relationship quality in actors (Körner & Schütz, 2025, although this link is weaker than that for actor power). Thus, people in relationships with high-power partners typically evaluate their relationships positively.

The aforementioned concepts focus on the experienced power of actors or partners, which differs from *desired power* (Murphy et al., 2022). Desiring power does not necessarily mean that a person feels powerful. Rather, it reflects the aspiration to attain power over one's partner and the tendency to find power appealing or rewarding. The distinction between experienced and desired power is supported by measurement tools that assess the two aspects separately, as well as by evidence showing that they have distinct correlates and consequences (Kim et al., 2019; Körner, Overbeck, et al., 2025; Murphy et al., 2022). In romantic relationships, greater desired power has been associated with lower levels of closeness, commitment, and relationship satisfaction, as well as the use of cost-inflicting mate retention strategies (Murphy et al., 2022; Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021).

Power and Sexuality

Past Research and Study Rationale

Research on the interplay between power and sexuality has primarily examined objective power and social rank rather than experienced power in romantic relationships. For example, a high position in the workplace hierarchy has been associated with intended and actual infidelity (Lammers & Maner, 2016; Lammers et al., 2011), increased arousal to sadomasochistic thoughts (Lammers & Imhoff, 2016), and greater sexual assertiveness and esteem (Lammers & Stoker, 2019). Further, greater objective power at work has been linked to greater activation of sexual cognitions and expectations of sexual interest from subordinates, regardless of participants' gender (Kunstman & Maner, 2011). In romantic relationship contexts, greater actor and partner-reported power have been associated with greater sexual satisfaction (Körner & Schütz, 2025) and greater actor power has been linked to heightened sexual interest in individuals outside the primary relationship (Birnbaum et al., 2025). These studies support the fundamental role of power in shaping sexual thoughts and behaviors, but they also demonstrate the limited knowledge base regarding power (particularly partner power and desired power) and sexuality in romantic relationships.

We aimed to deepen our understanding of how power is linked to sexual experiences. To achieve this, we replicated findings on previously studied variables (i.e., sexual satisfaction, sexual assertiveness) and examined aspects that have been overlooked in this field (i.e., sexual motivation, sexual control beliefs). Sexual satisfaction reflects how satisfied individuals are with their sexual relationship with their partner. Sexual motivation captures the drive to be sexually active. Sexual assertiveness refers to the degree to which individuals confidently express their sexual preferences and desires. Sexual control beliefs reflect the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as having control over their sexual experiences and decisions (Snell et al., 1993). Although these four sexual aspects are positively correlated, they reflect distinguishable concepts: Sexual satisfaction is an evaluative judgment, sexual motivation refers to the energy of people to engage in sex, sexual assertiveness can be understood as an interpersonal skill, and sexual control beliefs are generalized expectancies (Snell et al., 1993). Together, these four aspects of sexuality capture important evaluative and behavioral elements that are relevant to overall well-being and commitment (e.g., Del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014; Tavares et al., 2024). Further, they are central to sexual health and safety (van de Bongardt & de Graaf, 2020).

Power has often been associated with satisfaction (Körner & Schütz, 2021, 2025), assertiveness (Guinote, 2017), and an internal locus of control (Anderson et al., 2012), as well as with the motivation to achieve one's goals (Guinote, 2017). Similar effects of power have been reported across relationship contexts; for example, greater power is associated with greater satisfaction at work, in romantic relationships, and in friendships (Kifer et al., 2013). This suggests that typical effects of power may also translate into romantic and sexual relationships. For instance, feeling powerful may afford individuals greater influence over sexual decision-making, which could

enhance sexual satisfaction (Körner & Schütz, 2021). Power strengthens approach tendencies and confidence in organizational and intimate relationships (Overall et al., 2023), and may therefore increase sexual motivation and sexual assertiveness in couple relationships. Moreover, power typically fosters perceptions of control (Anderson et al., 2012), which could similarly shape sexual control beliefs. Taken together, there are clear theoretical grounds to expect these four aspects of sexuality to be shaped by power. Thus, it seems worthwhile to examine whether power is associated with these variables – and not in a general sense, but specifically, as they manifest within the sexual domain.

Hypotheses

The specific characteristics of actors' power are expected to shape their sexual lives. Having the power to fulfill one's needs and goals in close relationships should lead to greater satisfaction in one's sexual relationship. Research on couples supports a positive link between actor power and relationship satisfaction more broadly (Kifer et al., 2013; Körner & Schütz, 2021; Murphy et al., 2022), as well as sexual satisfaction specifically (Körner & Schütz, 2025). Power intensifies one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Guinote, 2017) and could thus increase sexual motivation. This aligns with findings that support a positive link between objective power in organizations and infidelity (Lammers et al., 2011; Lammers & Maner, 2016). High-power actors' approach-orientation, as well as their heightened confidence and self-esteem (see Keltner et al., 2003), can result in elevated assertiveness, also in the sexual domain (see also Lammers & Stoker, 2019). Finally, power means having control over one's life (Anderson et al., 2012; Keltner et al., 2003) and should thus also positively impact one's belief in controlling one's sexual life. Altogether, actors experiencing high power in their romantic relationships are likely to report higher sexual satisfaction, motivation, assertiveness, and control beliefs.

Partner power is also expected to shape actors' sexual lives. In well-functioning, close relationships communal orientations are common. This entails that actors tend to prioritize and accommodate their high-power partner's needs and goals while sacrificing their self-interests (Overall et al., 2023). This other-focused orientation could positively affect sexual satisfaction, as attending to each other's wishes and desires enables more satisfying sex (Muisse & Impett, 2015). Indeed, high partner-reported power has been linked to actors' sexual satisfaction (Körner & Schütz, 2025). Similarly, partner power may prompt actors' sexual motivation, as actors may feel motivated to engage in sex to foster connection and fulfill a partner's need for intimacy (see Muise & Impett, 2015). Studies have shown that couples are more motivated to be sexually active when they want to meet each other's needs (Muisse & Impett, 2016). However, high partner power may be associated with lower or higher levels of sexual assertiveness and sexual control beliefs in actors. First, high-power partners often elicit communal behaviors in actors (Overall et al., 2023), which should negatively relate to actors' assertiveness. Further, actors prioritize their high-power partners' goals (Laurin et al., 2016), which could undermine actors' control beliefs. However, since both

partners in a romantic relationship can feel powerful, and since power is typically positively correlated among romantic partners (Körner & Schütz, 2021, 2025; Overall et al., 2023), it should still be possible for actors with high-power partners to confidently express their sexual desires and feel in control of their sex life. This leads to mixed predictions as both positive and negative links between power and assertiveness as well as control beliefs seem possible. Overall, high partner power is likely to be associated with higher sexual satisfaction and sexual motivation in actors, but positive and negative associations with sexual assertiveness and sexual control beliefs are possible.

Finally, the specific characteristics of desired power are also expected to shape people's sexual lives. Desiring power over one's partner has been linked to negative relationship behaviors and outcomes (Murphy et al., 2022; Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021), which suggests it may be associated with lower sexual satisfaction. With respect to sexual motivation, research has linked the general desire for power to a higher motive to be sexually active (Schultheiss et al., 2003), which may also be expected in romantic relationships. Greater desired power has been linked to lower levels of experienced power in relationships, suggesting that people who desire power typically feel they lack power (e.g., Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). Consequently, individuals who desire power may engage in coercive behaviors to gain control (Kim et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2022), which could extend to the sexual sphere. Therefore, both positive and negative links to sexual assertiveness are possible. Finally, people may aim to gain power because they feel they lack control over their romantic life – with respect to sexuality, this means they lack the ability to control their sex life. Overall, greater desired power is thus likely to be associated with lower sexual satisfaction, higher sexual motivation, lower or higher sexual assertiveness, and lower sexual control beliefs.

The Present Research

In the present studies, we aimed to examine the associations between three different aspects of power – actor power, partner power, and desired power – and four aspects of sexuality. Specifically, we expected actor power to be positively associated with all aspects of sexuality and partner power to be positively associated with sexual satisfaction and motivation but either positively or negatively associated with sexual assertiveness and control beliefs. We expected desired power to be negatively associated with sexual satisfaction and control beliefs, positively associated with sexual motivation, and either positively or negatively associated with sexual assertiveness.

Study 1 provided an initial test of our hypotheses with individuals in romantic relationships. Previous research has shown that individuals who participated without their partner reported lower relationship satisfaction and commitment than those who participated with their partner (Barton et al., 2020). This difference may be due to self-selection, as people in unhappy relationships may be less likely to participate together. Therefore, including participants who take part alone is more likely to include people with lower satisfaction, which better reflects the full range of relationship experiences

in the general population (DiDonato & Jakubiak, 2023). Moreover, individuals who participate in a sexuality survey without their partners may be less influenced by social desirability.

Study 2 involved woman-man couples, which allowed us to analyze both intrapersonal (actor power) and interpersonal (partner-reported power) links, while accounting for the interdependence of couple members (Kenny et al., 2006). Moreover, we tested the moderating role of gender in this study. Gendered sexual scripts suggest that men are more sexually assertive and motivated than women (Kim et al., 2007), which may lead to gender differences in how power relates to aspects of sexuality. However, research on power in romantic relationships typically shows similar patterns of associations with outcome variables for both women and men (Körner & Schütz, 2025; Overall et al., 2023), and research on power and sexuality has likewise not revealed gender differences (Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lammers et al., 2011; Lammers & Maner, 2016).

In *Study 3*, we broadened the scope of our research by studying LGBTQ couples – a largely underrepresented population in relationship science (Klein et al., 2022; Umberson et al., 2015). This allowed us to examine whether the findings generalize across sexual majority and minority participants.

To increase ecological validity, *Study 4* used a daily diary approach to examine whether within-person variations in power predict corresponding within-person variations in sexual satisfaction, motivation, assertiveness, and control beliefs. This approach allowed us to go beyond cross-sectional trait-level analyses by capturing dynamic, within-person processes.

Data, syntax, and materials for all studies are available online (<https://osf.io/zx59w/>).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Study 1

We collected data in Southern Germany using e-mail lists and word-of-mouth advertising. An online survey with questions pertaining to power and sexuality was distributed. Survey completion time was approximately 15 min. Students received course credit for their participation, others volunteered. In total, 147 participants currently involved in a romantic relationship completed the survey (79% women; age: $M = 24.55$, $SD = 5.75$, 18 to 53). Most identified themselves as heterosexual (77%) and some as bisexual (19%) or homosexual (2%). Most participants had a general qualification for university entrance (65.3%), followed by a university degree (31.4%). Average relationship duration was 3.16 years ($SD = 4.11$, 1 month to almost 31 years). Using G*Power, we assessed achieved statistical power for typical medium-sized effects ($r = .30$; $\alpha = .05$) with this sample size and found we had high power (.96) to detect such effects.

Study 2

Data were collected as part of a larger survey on power and psychological functioning in romantic relationships (e.g., Körner, Schütz, et al., 2025). Here, only variables relevant to

our research question are reported. Participants were recruited via word-of-mouth advertising and the snowball principle in Southern and Eastern Germany. Inclusion criteria were: > 18 years, and at least 1 month in the present relationship. Participants completed an online survey (approx. 15 min). Each person responded independently, and a couple code was generated to match partners. Students received course credit for their participation; alternatively, we offered participation in a lottery of online vouchers to everyone. The final sample consisted of 287 woman-man couples. Men were on average 29.08 years old ($SD = 11.44$, 18 to 67); women 27.23 years old ($SD = 10.80$, 18 to 60). Most participants had a general qualification for university entrance (42.5%), followed by a university degree (34.5%) or vocational training (20.6%). Participants had been in their current relationship on average for 4.96 years ($Mdn = 3.08$, $SD = 7.16$, 1 month to 36 years). Most participants were not married (84.5%) and some were married (11.4%) or engaged (4.1%). Given the study was conducted prior to the current analyses, we assessed achieved power for typical small-to-medium effect sizes with this sample size given the observed correlations of variables across partners ($\alpha = .05$; correlation between errors = .33; correlations between actor and partner variables = .25, Ackerman et al., 2020). We had virtually perfect statistical power to detect medium actor effects of $\beta = 0.30$ and small-medium partner effects of $\beta = 0.20$.

Study 3

Data were collected as part of a larger survey on power and psychological functioning in LGBTQ relationships. Only variables relevant to our research question are reported here. Participants were recruited via word-of-mouth advertising and social media in Southern Germany. Inclusion criteria and procedure were the same as for Study 2. Students received course credit; others volunteered. The final sample consisted of 96 LGBTQ couples (56.3% women, 25.0% men, 18.8% non-binary). Participants were on average 31.10 years old ($SD = 13.02$, 17 to 90) and had been in their current relationship on average for 4.73 years ($Mdn = 2.42$, $SD = 7.12$, 1 month to 37 years). Most participants had a university degree (45.7%), followed by a general qualification for university entrance (43.2%) or vocational training (5.2%). Most participants were not married (82.3%) and some were married (15.6%) or engaged (2.1%). The majority of participants identified as gay/lesbian (54.3%), followed by bisexual (32.6%) and pansexual (9.7%). We assessed achieved power for typical small-to-medium effect sizes with this sample size given the observed correlations of variables across partners ($\alpha = .05$; correlation between errors = .28; correlations between actor and partner variables = .16, Ackerman et al., 2020). We had high statistical power (.99) to detect medium actor effects of $\beta = 0.30$ and adequate power (.85) to detect small-medium partner effects of $\beta = 0.20$.

Study 4

Data were collected as part of a larger daily diary study on romantic relationship functioning. Only variables relevant to our research question are reported here. Recruitment strategy and inclusion criteria were the same as for Study 3. The final

sample consisted of 106 individuals (84% women, 15% men, 1% non-binary) in romantic relationships. Most participants had a general qualification for university entrance (72.8%), followed by a university degree (21.3%) or vocational training (4.7%). Participants were on average 24.18 years old ($SD = 7.25$, 18 to 58) and had been in their current relationship on average for 4.27 years ($Mdn = 2.46$, $SD = 5.75$, 1 month to 40 years). Most participants were not married (88.6%) and some were married (7.5%) or engaged (3.8%). The majority of participants identified as heterosexual (79.2%), followed by bisexual (17.0%) and gay/lesbian (3.8%). Participants completed an intake session with baseline questionnaires, including power and sexuality measures (approximately 20 min), and were given detailed instructions for completing a web-based daily record (approximately 5 min) every day for the following 14 days. Participants received every day an e-mail at 6 p.m. and had time until 12 p.m. to complete the daily report or it was considered missing. Students received course credit for their participation; additionally, we offered participation in a lottery for Apple AirPods to everyone. We required at least 8 surveys to be completed. On average, participants completed 12 daily entries (total entries = 1,197). Our data exceed the minimum recommendations of 50 level 2 units (participants) and 900 level 1 units (daily reports) and had thus adequate statistical power ($> .80$) to detect medium-size associations (Maas & Hox, 2005; Scherbaum & Ferreter, 2009).

Measures

Power

Actor power was assessed using the *Personal Sense of Power Scale* (Anderson et al., 2012; Körner et al., 2022). We used a relationship-specific instruction (“In my relationship with my partner . . .”) to assess participants’ capability to influence their romantic relationship partner with 6 items (e.g., “I can get him/her to listen to what I say,” $\alpha_{Study1} = .87$, $\alpha_{Study2Women} = .74$, $\alpha_{Study2Men} = .74$, $\alpha_{Study3} = .74$, $\alpha_{Study4} = .72$). Responses to all instruments were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

To assess partner power, we not only assessed this statistically (by relating partner-reported power to actor’s sexuality), but we also measured actor-perceived partner power in Studies 2 to 4. We employed a partner-report version of the *Personal Sense of Power Scale* (Anderson et al., 2012; Körner et al., 2022). Participants were instructed to think about their partner (e.g., “In your relationship with your partner . . . your partner gets you to listen to what he/she says,” $\alpha_{Study2Women} = .73$, $\alpha_{Study2Men} = .73$, $\alpha_{Study3} = .77$, $\alpha_{Study4} = .76$).

The desire for power was assessed with the corresponding subscale of the *Feeling Powerful and Desiring Power Scales* (Murphy et al., 2022). Items were adapted to match the relationship context. The subscale captures the wish to possess power and exert control over one’s partner with 6 items (e.g., “I like to tell my partner what he/she should do,” $\alpha_{Study1} = .90$, $\alpha_{Study2Women} = .87$, $\alpha_{Study2Men} = .89$, $\alpha_{Study3} = .87$, $\alpha_{Study4} = .89$).

In Study 4, we assessed daily forms of power. Daily *actor power* was assessed with three items (“Today I made the decisions in our relationship,” “Today my views had a lot of influence in the relationship,” and “Today I had control over

my partner,” $\alpha = .67$). Daily *perceived partner power* (“Today, my partner made the decisions in our relationship”) and daily *desired power* were assessed with a single item (“Today it was important to me that I had influence and control over my partner”).

Aspects of Sexuality

To assess aspects of sexuality, we employed the *Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire* (Snell et al., 1993).¹ Participants were instructed that the items pertain to their current romantic relationship. All subscales have five items each. *Sexual satisfaction* assesses participants’ satisfaction with the sexual aspects of their romantic life (e.g., “I am very satisfied with my sexual relationship,” $\alpha_{Study1} = .92$, $\alpha_{Study2Women} = .92$, $\alpha_{Study2Men} = .94$, $\alpha_{Study3} = .90$, $\alpha_{Study4} = .91$). *Sexual motivation* reflects the wish or desire to be sexually active (e.g., “I am very motivated to be sexually active,” $\alpha_{Study1} = .89$, $\alpha_{Study2Women} = .90$, $\alpha_{Study2Men} = .88$, $\alpha_{Study3} = .88$, $\alpha_{Study4} = .90$). *Sexual assertiveness* addresses confident assertiveness regarding one’s sexual preferences (e.g., “When it comes to sex, I usually ask for what I want,” $\alpha_{Study1} = .90$, $\alpha_{Study2Women} = .64$, $\alpha_{Study2Men} = .64$, $\alpha_{Study3} = .79$, $\alpha_{Study4} = .83$). *Sexual control beliefs* reflect the belief that sexual aspects are influenced by personal control (e.g., “I am in control of the sexual aspects of my life,” $\alpha_{Study1} = .72$, $\alpha_{Study3} = .63$, $\alpha_{Study4} = .70$). Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).²

In Study 2, we used the *Dyadic Sexual Regulation Scale* (Catania et al., 1992) to assess sexual control beliefs. This different scale was used because this study was part of a different project that aimed to test another scale on sexual control beliefs. Yet, due to somewhat low reliabilities the remaining studies used the original scale. The scale captures with eleven items the belief to control one’s sexual activity (e.g., “When I am not interested in sexual activity, I feel free to reject sexual advances by my partner,” $\alpha_{Study2Women} = .62$, $\alpha_{Study2Men} = .49$). Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

In Study 4, we used the most face-valid items from the Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire and adapted them for the daily diary for sexual satisfaction (“I was very satisfied with how my sexual needs were/are met today”), sexual motivation (“I was very motivated to be sexually active today”), sexual assertiveness (“If I wanted sex, I would have asked for it today”), and sexual control beliefs (“I had control over the sexual aspects of my life today”). Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*applies completely*).

¹Although we used the full scale in Study 1, we only present results for the four aspects that were theoretically justified in the Introduction and collected in the other studies as well.

²We computed confirmatory factor analyses for Study 1 using WLSMV estimation to compare a four-factor model (items load on separate factors for sexual satisfaction, motivation, assertiveness, and control beliefs) with a unidimensional model (items load on a single common factor) in *Mplus*. Residuals were designed to be uncorrelated. The four-factor model showed acceptable model fit for most fit indices, $\chi^2(164) = 481.65$, $p < .001$, CFI = .938, TLI = .929, RMSEA = .115, whereas the unidimensional model did not show good fit, $\chi^2(170) = 1337.38$, $p < .001$, CFI = .774, TLI = .747, RMSEA = .216. Thus, it can be concluded that the four sexual aspects reflect different constructs.

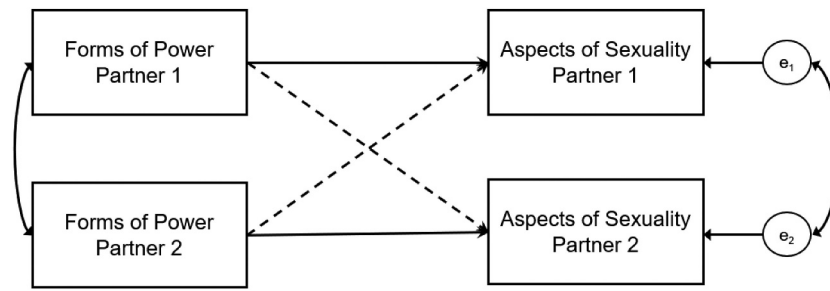


Figure 1. Actor-partner interdependence model with sexual aspects predicted by power. *Note.* Continuous arrows = actor effects. Dashed arrows = partner effects.

Analytic Strategy

In Study 1, we computed Pearson correlations. In Studies 2–3, we computed a series of Actor-Partner-Interdependence Models (APIMs; Kenny et al., 2006). Actor effects are intrapersonal; partner effects are interpersonal associations between the predictors (power measures) and outcomes (sexuality measures; Figure 1). We use the term “effect” in line with APIM terminology, but it does not imply causality. Analyses were done with *Mplus* 8.8 (Maximum Likelihood estimation with structural equation modeling). For Study 2, we tested a saturated model (all effects freely estimated) against an equal-actor-equal-partner-effects model. The equal-effects model indicates the absence of gender effects and is favored when the Likelihood Ratio test is nonsignificant ($p > .20$; Kenny & Ledermann, 2010). Results of Likelihood Ratio tests examining the moderating role of gender are displayed in the Online Supplement. If the saturated model was favored, but the b coefficients were still similar for men and women, we tested an equal-actor-different-partner-effects model or a different-actor-equal-partner-effects models against the saturated model. In Study 3, we accounted for the arbitrariness in the assignment of dyads of romantic partners by setting all corresponding paths, means, intercepts, and (residual) variances equal across partners because LGBTQ partners are indistinguishable (i.e., participants cannot be distinguished by their gender, Olsen & Kenny, 2006). As an effect size measure, we calculated the coefficient Δ (Körner & Schütz, 2021), which describes the change in the outcome in standard deviations when the predictor changes by 1 point ($\Delta_{W/M} = b/SD_{W/M}$).

In Study 4, we analyzed the data using a two-level random-intercept (fixed-slope) multilevel model in *Mplus* 8 (MLR estimation), allowing participants to differ in their baseline level of daily sexual aspects, while estimating a common within-person effect of daily power forms on same-day sexual aspects. Daily reports ($N = 1,197$, level 1) were nested in participants ($N = 106$, level 2). Daily power (group-mean centered) was specified as a predictor of daily sexual aspects, controlling

for between-person differences in baseline power and baseline sexuality (both grand-mean centered). At the within-level, same-day effects were modeled because power should immediately shape sexual aspects within each day.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations across all measures appear in the Online Supplement.

Study 1

As expected, greater actor power was associated with greater sexual satisfaction ($r = .47, p < .001$), greater sexual motivation ($r = .24, p = .004$), and greater sexual assertiveness ($r = .37, p < .001$). Yet, the link to sexual control beliefs was nonsignificant ($r = .13, p = .133$). By contrast, desired power was not significantly associated with sexual satisfaction ($r = -.02, p = .807$) and sexual assertiveness ($r = .08, p = .322$). Links to sexual motivation ($r = .15, p = .068$) and internal sexual control ($r = .13, p = .125$) were only weakly positive and nonsignificant. These findings provide initial evidence that, as expected, actor power is a positive predictor of different aspects of sexuality, whereas desired power, contrary to our hypotheses, showed little evidence of associations with aspects of sexuality.

Study 2

Results for the main analyses testing our hypotheses appear in Tables 1–3. As expected, greater actor power was associated with greater sexual satisfaction, greater sexual motivation, and greater sexual assertiveness (see Table 1). The link between actor power and sexual control beliefs was not significant.

Partner-reported power was not significantly related to any sexual aspects except sexual motivation: Greater partner power

Table 1. Study 2: results (unstandardized regression coefficients, bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals, p -values for two-tailed Wald tests, effect sizes) of APIM analyses predicting aspects of sexuality from actor and partner power.

Criteria	Actor-reported power				Partner-reported power			
	b	95% CI	p	$\Delta_{F/M}$	b	95% CI	p	$\Delta_{F/M}$
Sexual satisfaction	0.23	[0.13, 0.33]	<.001	0.27 ^W 0.24 ^M	0.08	[-0.01, 0.16]	.064	0.09 ^W 0.09 ^M
Sexual motivation	0.09	[0.01, 0.17]	.028	0.10 ^W 0.12 ^M	0.13	[0.06, 0.21]	<.001	0.15 ^W 0.18 ^M
Sexual assertiveness	0.18	[0.09, 0.28]	<.001	0.24 ^W 0.25 ^M	0.00	[-0.10, 0.09]	.933	0.00 ^W 0.00 ^M
Sexual control beliefs	0.07	[-0.03, 0.18]	.205	0.08 ^W 0.09 ^M	0.02	[-0.08, 0.11]	.749	0.02 ^W 0.03 ^M

Note. W = women's score. M = men's score.

Table 2. Study 2: results (unstandardized regression coefficients, bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals, *p*-values for two-tailed Wald tests, effect sizes) of APIM analyses predicting aspects of sexuality from perceived partner power.

Criteria	Actor's perception of partner's power				Partners' perceptions of partners' power			
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ
Sexual satisfaction	0.23	[0.14, 0.32]	<.001	0.27 ^W 0.24 ^M	0.06	[-0.03, 0.14]	.190	0.07 ^W 0.06 ^M
Sexual motivation	0.11	[0.04, 0.18]	.002	0.13 ^W 0.15 ^M	0.16	[0.08, 0.24]	<.001	0.19 ^W 0.22 ^M
Sexual assertiveness	0.09 ^W 0.24^M	[-0.02, 0.20] ^W [0.10, 0.39] ^M	.103 .001	0.12 ^W 0.34 ^M	0.04	[-0.05, 0.13]	.367	0.05 ^W 0.06 ^M
Sexual control beliefs	0.02	[-0.06, 0.09]	.632	0.02 ^W 0.03 ^M	0.15	[0.07, 0.21]	<.001	0.17 ^W 0.20 ^M

Note. W = women's score. M = men's score.

predicted greater sexual motivation of actors (see Table 1). Greater *perceived* partner power was associated with greater sexual satisfaction and greater sexual motivation (see Table 2). Further, greater perceived partner power was associated with greater sexual assertiveness for men, but not women. The link to sexual control beliefs was not significant.³

Finally, desired power was not significantly related to any aspect of sexuality, except that greater men's desired power was associated with lower levels of men's sexual satisfaction (see Table 3). Overall, the findings largely replicated those of Study 1 but also provide insight into the links between an additional power form (partner power as reported by partners or perceived by actors) and aspects of sexuality by examining couples. Additionally, the findings indicate that the links between power and sexuality are largely independent of gender, as only two out of 16 tests showed a gender difference.

Study 3

As expected, greater actor power was associated with greater sexual satisfaction and sexual assertiveness (see Table 4). The links to sexual motivation and sexual control beliefs were positive but not significant.

As hypothesized, greater partner-reported power was associated with greater sexual satisfaction (see Table 4). Yet, partner-reported power was not significantly associated with sexual assertiveness, motivation, and control beliefs. Greater perceived partner power was associated with greater sexual satisfaction, sexual assertiveness, and sexual control beliefs (see Table 5). The link to sexual motivation was not significant. Finally, desired power was not significantly related to any aspect of sexuality (see Table 6).

Overall, the results for actor power and desired power largely replicated the findings from the first two samples, which consisted mostly of heterosexual participants. However, in contrast to Study 2, partner-reported power was significantly associated with sexual satisfaction but not with sexual motivation. Sexual minority participants seem to be more sexually content when their partner also feels powerful, but this pattern was not observed for their motivation to be sexually active. Additionally, perceived partner power was not significantly related to sexual motivation, also diverging from Study 2's results.

³For completeness, we also assessed links between (a) perceived partner power or desired power and (b) partner's sexual aspects. Yet, as these links are not theoretically relevant, they are not discussed here.

Study 4

On days when participants reported higher-than-usual power, they also reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, sexual assertiveness, and sexual control beliefs (see Table 7). At the between-person level, participants who reported greater baseline power also reported higher sexual satisfaction and sexual control beliefs across days. The between-person associations with sexual motivation and sexual assertiveness were not significant.

All within-person associations between daily perceived partner power and daily sexual aspects were not significant (see Table 7). At the between-person level, participants who reported greater baseline perceived partner power also reported greater sexual satisfaction (but not sexual motivation, assertiveness, and control beliefs) across days.

On days when participants reported higher-than-usual desired power, they also reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction and sexual assertiveness (see Table 7). The within-person associations between daily desired power and daily sexual motivation and control beliefs were not significant. At the between-person level, participants who reported greater baseline desired power also reported greater sexual motivation across days. The between-person associations with sexual satisfaction, assertiveness, and control beliefs were not significant.

Overall, the results show that, in a daily context, within-person variations in actor power are robustly positively linked to within-person variations in aspects of sexuality, while perceived partner power was not significantly associated with aspects of sexuality. Within-person variations in desired power predicted within-person variations in sexual satisfaction and assertiveness. Most results examining between-person associations between baseline power and daily sexual aspects were not significant. Yet, this study replicated the positive link between baseline actor power and sexual satisfaction found in Studies 1–3, as well as the positive link between baseline perceived partner power and sexual satisfaction found in Study 2.

Summary of Results

Table 8 provides a summary of the significance of the results. In addition, we meta-analyzed the effects for the links between forms of power and sexual aspects across all studies by converting all statistics to correlations and computed random-effects meta-analyses (Goh et al., 2016)

Table 3. Study 2: results (unstandardized regression coefficients, bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals, *p*-values for two-tailed Wald tests, effect sizes) of APIM analyses predicting aspects of sexuality from desired power.

Criteria	Actor's desired power				Partner's desired power			
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ
Sexual satisfaction	0.11 ^W -0.20^M	[-0.09, 0.31] ^W [-0.40, -0.01] ^M	.246 ^W .037 ^M	0.13 ^W -0.21 ^M	-0.19 ^W 0.06 ^M	[-0.38, 0.01] ^W [-0.16, 0.26] ^M	.060 ^W .569 ^M	-0.22 ^W 0.06 ^M
Sexual motivation	-0.02	[-0.14, 0.11]	.780	-0.02 ^W -0.03 ^M	-0.06	[-0.18, 0.07]	.373	-0.07 ^W -0.08 ^M
Sexual assertiveness	-0.05	[-0.19, 0.08]	.438	-0.07 ^W -0.07 ^M	-0.03	[-0.16, 0.11]	.668	-0.04 ^W -0.04 ^M
Sexual control beliefs	0.06	[-0.07, 0.19]	.385	0.07 ^W 0.08 ^M	-0.18	[-0.32, -0.05]	.009	-0.20 ^W -0.24 ^M

W = women's score. M = men's score.

Table 4. Study 3: results (unstandardized regression coefficients, bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals, *p*-values for two-tailed Wald tests, effect sizes) of APIM analyses predicting aspects of sexuality from actor and partner power.

Criteria	Actor-reported Power				Partner-reported Power			
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ
Sexual satisfaction	0.21	[0.04, 0.37]	.011	0.22	0.15	[0.01, 0.28]	.032	0.16
Sexual motivation	0.09	[-0.05, 0.24]	.205	0.10	0.04	[-0.08, 0.16]	.513	0.04
Sexual assertiveness	0.31	[0.16, 0.47]	<.001	0.38	-0.002	[-0.14, 0.14]	.972	0.00
Sexual control beliefs	0.20	[0.01, 0.42]	.051	0.32	0.07	[-0.11, 0.25]	.434	0.11

Table 5. Study 3: results (unstandardized regression coefficients, bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals, *p*-values for two-tailed Wald tests, effect sizes) of APIM analyses predicting aspects of sexuality from perceived partner power.

Criteria	Actor's perception of partner's power				Partners' perceptions of partners' power			
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ
Sexual satisfaction	0.32	[0.20, 0.47]	<.001	0.34	-0.08	[-0.20, 0.03]	.156	-0.09
Sexual motivation	0.04	[-0.06, 0.14]	.396	0.04	-0.06	[-0.16, 0.05]	.251	-0.07
Sexual assertiveness	0.14	[0.03, 0.26]	.016	0.17	0.06	[-0.07, 0.18]	.355	0.07
Sexual control beliefs	0.26	[0.09, 0.45]	.004	0.41	0.05	[-0.11, 0.23]	.606	0.08

using the Comprehensive Meta-Analysis Software (CMA). The overall links between actor power and sexual outcomes were of medium size (Funder & Ozer, 2019; see Table 9). By contrast, for partner power only one medium-sized effect emerged and for desired power the effects were small to negligible. There was considerable between-study heterogeneity, which is why we do not interpret effects for which more tests were non-significant than significant (see Table 8).

Discussion

The present research offers a comprehensive account of power's pervasive role in shaping sexuality. Across four studies, we found that actor power was significantly linked to several sexual aspects, whereas partner power showed only consistent links to sexual satisfaction. Desired power showed little evidence of associations with sexuality. The

associations hardly differed between women and men, but somewhat between sexual majority and minority participants. These findings advance existing power research and theories by highlighting the importance of distinguishing between different forms of power to better understand their links to sexual relationship functioning.

Cohering with and Advancing the Current Knowledge Base

Across studies greater actor power was robustly associated with greater sexual satisfaction and sexual assertiveness. These results replicate previous findings on sexual satisfaction in couples (Körner & Schütz, 2025) and work-related power and sexual assertiveness (Lammers & Stoker, 2019). Yet, our findings are the first to demonstrate these links with diverse samples, including LGBTQ individuals and in the context of daily life. Further, we found for the first time that greater actor

Table 6. Study 3: results (unstandardized regression coefficients, bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals, *p*-values for two-tailed Wald tests, effect sizes) of APIM analyses predicting aspects of sexuality from desired power.

Criteria	Actor's desired power				Partner's desired power			
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Δ
Sexual satisfaction	-0.16	[-0.34, 0.02]	.076	-0.17	-0.05	[-0.24, 0.13]	.585	-0.05
Sexual motivation	0.09	[-0.05, 0.22]	.170	0.10	0.10	[-0.05, 0.24]	.186	0.11
Sexual assertiveness	-0.08	[-0.27, 0.12]	.423	-0.10	-0.12	[-0.29, 0.05]	.162	-0.14
Sexual control beliefs	-0.004	[-0.20, 0.18]	.969	0.00	-0.09	[-0.27, 0.08]	.307	-0.14

Table 7. Study 4: results of multilevel analyses testing the within-person and between-person associations between power and sexuality.

	Actor-reported power			Perceived partner power			Desired power		
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Sexual satisfaction									
Within level									
Daily power → Daily sexual aspects	0.15	[0.07, 0.22]	<.001	0.00	[-0.05, 0.05]	.992	-0.09	[-0.15, -0.03]	.004
Between level									
Trait power → Daily sexual aspects	0.22	[0.03, 0.41]	.021	0.28	[0.14, 0.43]	<.001	-0.11	[-0.22, -0.00]	.044
Trait sexual aspects → Daily sexual aspects	0.45	[0.24, 0.66]	<.001	0.49	[0.30, 0.68]	<.001	0.49	[0.29, 0.68]	<.001
Sexual motivation									
Within level									
Daily power → Daily sexual aspects	0.21	[0.12, 0.30]	<.001	0.06	[-0.01, 0.12]	.085	-0.02	[-0.08, 0.04]	.485
Between level									
Trait power → Daily sexual aspects	0.04	[-0.15, 0.22]	.684	-0.10	[-0.28, 0.08]	.281	0.15	[0.03, 0.27]	.016
Trait sexual aspects → Daily sexual aspects	0.42	[0.25, 0.59]	<.001	0.42	[0.25, 0.58]	<.001	0.41	[0.25, 0.57]	<.001
Sexual assertiveness									
Within level									
Daily power → Daily sexual aspects	0.18	[0.09, 0.28]	<.001	0.01	[-0.05, 0.07]	.767	-0.07	[-0.13, -0.01]	.028
Between level									
Trait power → Daily sexual aspects	0.19	[-0.04, 0.41]	.097	0.04	[-0.17, 0.24]	.725	0.04	[-0.10, 0.18]	.592
Trait sexual aspects → Daily sexual aspects	0.29	[0.07, 0.52]	.010	0.33	[0.11, 0.55]	.003	0.34	[0.13, 0.56]	.002
Sexual control beliefs									
Within level									
Daily power → Daily sexual aspects	0.15	[0.07, 0.24]	<.001	0.00	[-0.05, 0.05]	.986	-0.03	[-0.08, 0.02]	.183
Between level									
Trait power → Daily sexual aspects	0.32	[0.14, 0.49]	<.001	0.14	[-0.01, 0.29]	.068	-0.10	[-0.20, 0.01]	.078
Trait sexual aspects → Daily sexual aspects	0.60	[0.33, 0.87]	<.001	0.64	[0.38, 0.90]	<.001	0.64	[0.37, 0.90]	<.001

power was associated with greater sexual motivation. These findings on three aspects of sexuality uniquely demonstrate that actor power shapes one's sexual life. Being able to have one's needs and wishes fulfilled (i.e., having power), along with the typical confidence and approach orientation of high-power actors (Keltner et al., 2003; Overall et al., 2023), might explain why actor power was positively associated with sexual satisfaction, motivation, and assertiveness. However, in only one out of four studies was actor power associated with sexual control beliefs: On days when participants experienced high power, they also reported feeling in control over the sexual aspects of their lives. Yet, this association was not observed with trait-level measures. Links between trait power and satisfaction, approach orientations, and confidence have been reported to be stronger than links to internal locus of control (Anderson et al., 2012; Körner et al., 2022). Apparently, (sexual) control beliefs are shaped more by situational factors than by generalized relationship power.

Partner power (either self-reported by partners or as perceived by actors) was only associated with sexual satisfaction

(but not with other sexual outcomes) in actors. Four out of six tests (see Table 8) showed that greater partner power predicted higher levels of sexual satisfaction (see also Körner & Schütz, 2025). This aligns with our theoretical consideration that high-power partners prompt actors to accommodate partners' needs and goals, which could lead to more satisfying sex for both members of a couple. Yet, most tests on partner power and sexual motivation, assertiveness, and control beliefs were not significant. With respect to sexual motivation, partner power may be more likely to shape evaluative assessments than internal drives in the sexual domain – the wish to be sexually active is more influenced by one's own attributes and less by the partner. We proposed competing hypotheses for the links between partner power and sexual assertiveness and sexual control beliefs, which is why positive and negative effects may cancel each other out. Altogether, partner power was less relevant in explaining various aspects of sexual relationship functioning, as it only showed consistent links to one aspect (sexual satisfaction). Further, the findings also show that actors' *perceptions* of partner power are more relevant

Table 8. Summary of results (+ = positive link, 0 = non-significant link, - = negative link) across studies.

	Actor power					Partner power (Partner-reported power Perceived partner power)								Desired power				
	S1	S2	S3	S4T	S4D	S2	S3		S2	S3	S4T	S4D	S1	S2	S3	S4T	S4D	
Sexual satisfaction	+	+	+	+	+	0	+		+	+	+	0	0	0 ^{W/-M}	0	-	-	
Sexual motivation	+	+	0	0	+	+	0		+	0	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	
Sexual assertiveness	+	+	+	0	+	0	0		0 ^{W/+M}	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	
Sexual control beliefs	0	0	0	+	+	0	0		0	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Note. S1 = Study 1 (individual sample). S2 = Study 2 (woman-man sample). S3 = Study 3 (LGBTQ sample). S4T = Study 4 trait measures (daily diary). S4D = Study 4 diary measures (daily diary). W = women's score. M = men's score.

Table 9. Meta-analyses across studies.

	Actor power		Partner power		Desired power	
	<i>r</i> (95% CI)	<i>I</i> ²	<i>r</i> (95% CI)	<i>I</i> ²	<i>r</i> (95% CI)	<i>I</i> ²
Sexual satisfaction	.31 [.22, .40]	47%	.24 [.11, .36]	75%	-.12 [-.22, -.03]	42%
Sexual motivation	.19 [.08, .29]	52%	.12 [.03, .20]	39%	.08 [-.03, .19]	53%
Sexual assertiveness	.28 [.20, .36]	32%	.08 [-0.005, .17]	43%	-.04 [-.14, .06]	40%
Sexual control beliefs	.20 [.09, .31]	56%	.08 [.001, .16]	31%	-.003 [-.10, .10]	41%

Note. *I*² indicates the percentage of heterogeneity in effects due to between-study differences. Partner power was calculated by aggregating coefficients from partners' self-reported power and actors' perceptions of partners' power in Studies 2–3, and by using only actors' perceptions of partners' power in Study 4.

than partners' self-reported power in explaining sexual aspects, which aligns with research highlighting the central role of partner perceptions for relationship quality (Joel et al., 2020).

Although we expected desired power to be associated with aspects of sexuality, the overall pattern of associations provided little evidence for such links with sexual relationship functioning (see Table 8). This highlights three important points. First, desired power is distinct from experienced power, as evidenced by their differing patterns of associations with sexual outcomes. This finding aligns with other theories and research highlighting the importance of separating the state of experiencing power from the desire for power (Kim et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2022). Second, because the associations were non-significant, we cannot conclude that evaluative item content explains the pattern of correlations among the variables. The results provide no indication that shared evaluative item content (e.g., positive constructs such as actor power and sexual satisfaction correlating positively; negative constructs correlating negatively) is driving the observed associations. Third, these findings are promising as the negative correlates and consequences of desired power so often reported (e.g., Kim et al., 2019; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021) do not seem to spill over into the sexual domain. Yet, there were still two significant effects of desired power in the same study: Greater daily desired power was associated with lower levels of daily sexual satisfaction and assertiveness. Although these associations were not observed with trait measures, they illustrate that within-person variations in daily desired power can (negatively) predict two aspects of sexuality.

The associations between forms of power and aspects of sexuality differed more by sexual orientation than by gender. Only two out of 16 tests revealed gender differences, which might be due to chance. Thus, our research aligns with others reporting that the correlates and consequences of power do not differ by gender (Körner & Schütz, 2025; Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lammers et al., 2011; Overall et al., 2023) and fits with broader findings that differences in psychological experiences and behaviors can be better explained by power than by gender differences (see Galinsky et al., 2024). At the same time, the absence of consistent gender effects in our analyses does not necessarily imply that gender is irrelevant in shaping sexual experiences. Gender and power are often interconnected in relationships (Connell, 2013), and gender may exert its influence indirectly through the experience of power. From this perspective, our findings suggest that individuals' experiences of power may offer a more proximal explanation for the sexual aspects examined here while not ruling out broader gendered influences on these experiences. This interpretation is consistent with models emphasizing relational determinants (here:

power) of behavior (e.g., Fiske, 2010) and underscores the value of assessing power directly when seeking to understand sexuality-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

However, we found that four out of eight tests for partner power differed by sexual orientation (i.e., woman-man vs. LGBTQ couples). The most consistent difference pertained to sexual motivation: Partner power was not associated with sexual motivation in LGBTQ couples, but greater partner power related to greater sexual motivation in woman-man couples. We had assumed that partner power would be positively related to actors' sexual motivation because couples tend to pursue sex more when they aim to meet each other's needs (Muis & Impett, 2016), as is often the case when high-power partners prompt actors to accommodate their wishes – such as engaging in sex. This theoretical consideration aligns with our results for woman-man couples. In contrast, LGBTQ couples have been reported to value more egalitarian relationship norms (Kurdek, 2005), which may lead both partners to accommodate each other's wishes, regardless of power. Consequently, partner power may be less relevant for sexual motivation in these relationships. However, future research should examine whether these variations between woman-man and LGBTQ couples reflect issues of sexual orientation or are due to other confounding factors such as age, or relationship length, or dyad gender composition.

Implications

The findings have important theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. First, they advance power theories by emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between actor and partner power. This research is the first to thoroughly test actor and partner power in the sexual domain by analyzing couples and daily diary data. General power theories typically focus on the effects of actor power only (e.g., Guinote, 2017; Keltner et al., 2003), whereas relationship power theories often focus on the effects of relative power between partners (see Simpson et al., 2015). Our findings show that both perspectives are incomplete: Partner power, too, matters for sexual satisfaction and thus should be incorporated into power theories. Notably, both actor and partner power were positively associated with sexual satisfaction, which suggests that power is not a zero-sum construct. Relative conceptualizations of power, which imply a trade-off between partners' power, may therefore obscure how power is linked to sexual outcomes. They would suggest that either actor or partner power shows a positive link but the other forms a negative link. Instead, both parties can feel powerful. Similarly, actor power and partner power did not show opposite associations with sexual

motivation and assertiveness, further supporting the notion that actor and partner power are distinct and not a zero-sum game. All in all, our results thus align with recent theoretical advances suggesting that actor power and partner power serve distinct relationship behaviors and goals (Overall & Hammond, 2025; Overall et al., 2023).

Similarly, this research also advances methodological features of research on power and sexuality by clearly assessing both actor and partner power (see Körner & Schütz, 2025). Past research has typically examined only actor power or has used relative power measures (“Who has more power: You or your partner?”) – but the latter impedes our understanding of whether high (low) actor or low (high) partner power are responsible for any documented effect. As our research shows, low partner power does not produce opposite effects to high actor power, underscoring that relative power measures are inadequate for attaining a full understanding of power in couples. Additionally, our research demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between experienced power and desired power, as evidenced by the different patterns of association with sexual outcomes (see section on desired power above).

Finally, the findings may be useful for practitioners in couples therapy. Enabling individuals to experience greater power in their relationships may allow for greater sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, and sexual assertiveness – which in turn might be positive for a person’s overall well-being, commitment, and sexual health (Tavares et al., 2024). Thus, interventions targeting power issues (Young & Seedall, 2024) could enhance actors’ sense of power and thus help to foster a more flourishing sex life. For example, as people in close relationships often underestimate their own power (Körner & Overall, 2026), it may be helpful to teach partners to recognize the influence they have on each other and to understand that high levels of power for both partners can be beneficial (Körner & Schütz, 2025) – for women, men, and everyone else.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the present findings mostly replicated across four studies, the current research does not allow for causal conclusions. Both directions of effects between power and sexual aspects are possible. On the one hand, sexual experiences are likely to shape how power is negotiated and perceived in relationships. For example, experiencing high sexual satisfaction or assertiveness may strengthen feelings of influence. On the other hand, power theories typically conceptualize power as a predictor of variables such as sexual satisfaction or motivation (Keltner et al., 2003; Overall et al., 2023; Simpson et al., 2015). Further, experimental research has shown the causal effect of power on extradyadic desire and sexual cognitions (Birnbaum et al., 2025; Kunstman & Maner, 2011). Nevertheless, future experimental research is needed to tackle the question of causal inferences with respect to the relation between power and the sexual aspects studied in this research.

Further, future research may investigate whether curvilinear effects between power and sexual outcomes can be observed. Although only significant linear but not significant curvilinear effects have been found between power and sexual

satisfaction (Körner & Schütz, 2025), studies on samples with rather dysfunctional and imbalanced relationships might be able to detect such links using dyadic response surface analyses (Schönbrodt et al., 2018). Ideally, in future research, optimized versions of our sexual control beliefs measures can be used, as the scales showed somewhat low reliability in some of our studies.

Finally, although we aimed to increase the generalizability of our findings by including both sexual majority and minority participants in our studies, the findings are restricted to the cultural background of Germany. Germany is generally characterized as a Western, individualistic society with comparatively egalitarian gender norms, widespread acceptance of premarital sexuality, and high levels of sexual liberalism relative to international averages (Haerpfer et al., 2020; Klein & Brunner, 2018). At the same time, German culture emphasizes personal autonomy, equality, and influence in close relationships. These cultural features suggest that the associations observed here might apply to contexts that prioritize autonomy and egalitarianism, but they may unfold differently in sociocultural settings where gender roles, sexuality, or power are organized according to more traditional or collectivistic norms (see Torelli et al., 2020). Future research is therefore needed to examine whether the patterns documented here generalize to other cultural contexts. Moreover, future studies should expand on other sociodemographic variables, such as studying participants in polyamorous relationships where power and sexuality may be negotiated differently, as well as couples that include asexual members.

Conclusion

Across four studies we found that actor power was associated with greater sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, and sexual assertiveness (and sexual control beliefs with daily power only). By contrast, partner power shaped sexuality less as it was only associated with greater sexual satisfaction. We found little evidence that desiring power over one’s partner was linked to sexual aspects, suggesting that the negative features of this form of power do not spill over into the sexual domain. These findings advance existing research on power and sexuality by clarifying which forms of power are linked to specific aspects of sexuality across both woman-man and LGBTQ couples, and across trait-level and daily assessments. In doing so, the findings enrich our understanding of how two of the most fundamental aspects of human life – power and sexuality – interact.

Author Contributions

RK conceived of the present idea, designed the studies, collected the data, and performed the computations. RK drafted the initial manuscript, and critically revised it together with AS.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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