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Date of secondary publication: 11.05.2026

Version of Record (Published Version), Article

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-115029x

Primary publication

Klein, Verena; Körner, Robert (2026): Breaking the Script : How Gender, Heteronormativity, and Power Relate to Sexual Assertiveness, in: Journal of social and personal relationships : JSPR, Thousand Oaks, Calif.[u.a.]: Sage Publ., Online First, pp. 1–18, doi: 10.1177/02654075261449519.

Full Research Report

JSPR

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–18

DOI: 10.1177/02654075261449519
journals.sagepub.com/home/spr
Sage

Breaking the Script: How Gender, Heteronormativity, and Power Relate to Sexual Assertiveness

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Abstract

Sexual assertiveness—the tendency to take initiative and act independently regarding one's own sexual desires and behavior—is shaped by gendered expectations that portray men as sexually assertive and women as submissive (i.e., traditional sexual script). Using dyadic data from 383 German couples, including heterosexual and LGBTQ partnerships, we tested competing explanations for sexual assertiveness: gender, heteronormativity, or experienced power within relationships. Multilevel analyses showed no support for gender or heteronormativity hypotheses: women and men reported similar levels of sexual assertiveness across couple types. In contrast, individuals with greater experienced power reported higher sexual assertiveness, a pattern consistent across heterosexual and LGBTQ couples. The strength of the power–assertiveness link varied across couples, being strongest in relationships with higher overall assertiveness. These findings advance theory by demonstrating that sexual assertiveness reflects experienced power rather than gender or heteronormativity, highlighting the importance of socio-relational characteristics in shaping sexual assertiveness.

Keywords

power, sexual assertiveness, sexuality, gender, heteronormativity, LGBTQ

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Sexuality remains a highly gendered domain, with pervasive cultural norms promoting men's sexual assertiveness and women's sexual submission (Conley & Klein, 2022; Peragine et al., 2026; Sanchez et al., 2012). Using the sexual script framework, traditional sexual scripts—internalized social blueprints about how women and men should feel, act, and behave during sex—reflect these expectations (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Women are consequently expected to be submissive, not sexually demanding, and to focus on being desirable rather than expressing their own desires, whereas men are expected to be sexually assertive (Klein et al., 2018; Wiederman, 2005). Being able to express and confidently pursue one's needs and desires in relationships, whether sexual or otherwise, is also a key feature of social power (Overall et al., 2023).

The present study tests whether differences in sexual assertiveness—people's tendency to take initiative and act independently regarding one's own sexual desires and behavior (Snell et al., 1993)[1]—are best explained by gender, heteronormativity, or power within couples. To examine these questions comprehensively, we include both heterosexual and LGBTQ couples, allowing us to assess whether these patterns hold across different relationship contexts.

Gender and Sexual Assertiveness

Whereas early studies consistently documented that men report higher sexual assertiveness than women (e.g., Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Pierce & Hurlbert, 1999), more recent studies report smaller or inconsistent gender differences (Gil-Llario et al., 2022; Lopez-Alvarado et al., 2022; Nagy et al., 2025). As described above, these differences can be understood in the context of gendered socialization and sexual scripts, which reflect broader societal gender stereotypes of men as assertive and independent and women as communal and passive (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Building on this evidence, a gender hypothesis would reflect a traditional view that sexual assertiveness is a gendered disposition: men are more sexually assertive than women, across both heterosexual and LGBTQ relationship contexts. However, it might be worth considering that while gendered socialization and sexual scripts provide a central lens for understanding sexual assertiveness, other factors may also play a role, including individual traits such as agency or extraversion (Costa & McCrea, 1992), and beliefs about the consequences of assertive behavior in specific contexts (Bandura et al., 1999), which shape how assertiveness is expressed.

Heteronormativity and Sexual Assertiveness

However, focusing solely on the dimension of gender overlooks the social structures that produce them. One such structure is heteronormativity which could help to understand differences in sexual assertiveness. Heteronormativity is defined as "a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality" (Robinson, 2016, p. 1). Heteronormativity provides the ideological foundation for traditional sexual scripts by defining heterosexuality and gendered sexual norms as natural and normative. Traditional sexual scripts, in turn, can be understood as behavioral expressions of heteronormativity, reproducing its key

assumptions (Wiederman, 2005). In other words, sexual scripts translate these norms into expected patterns of behavior, prescribing how women and men "should" behave sexually in woman-man relationships, promoting women's submission and men's assertiveness. Tentative evidence supports this assumption, showing that LGBTQ people tend to endorse more flexible sexual scripts (Dolezal et al., 2023; Lamont, 2017) and report higher sexual assertiveness compared to heterosexual people (Nagy et al., 2025). Applying a heteronormativity hypothesis, we expected gender differences in sexual assertiveness to depend on relationship type: women and men were expected to differ in woman-man relationships, but not when comparing lesbian women and gay men in same-gender relationships, where traditional gender-differentiated sexual scripts are less prescriptive.

Power and Sexual Assertiveness

Sexual script theory provides a framework for understanding how gendered and heteronormative norms shape sexual assertiveness, predicting that women and men will differ in woman-man relationships due to prescriptive expectations (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Wiederman, 2005). In contrast, power-based frameworks offer an alternative explanation, positing that power can directly influence assertive behavior by shaping goal pursuit and agency, independently of traditional gendered scripts. Indeed, prominent power theories conceptualize power as a predictor of relationship behaviors and outcomes (Keltner et al., 2003; Simpson et al., 2015). Power and agency, which shares similarities with assertiveness, are closely linked (Rucker & Galinsky, 2016), and research suggests that power similarly affects sexual behaviors in both women and men. For instance, individuals in positions of power are more likely to perceive sexual interest from others, engage in infidelity, or act on gender non-conformist sexual fantasies, with similar patterns observed among women and men (Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lammers et al., 2011; Lammers & Imhoff, 2016). Most importantly, one study showed that power—measured as having authority over others in the workplace—had the same effect on sexual assertiveness for women and men (Lammers & Stoker, 2018). Importantly, power experienced in the relationship have been found to be a stronger predictor for relationship outcomes than work-related or objective power (Körner & Schütz, 2021). As gender and work-related power are somewhat conflated (e.g., men earn more money than women), we focus in the present study on experienced power within the relationship. Accordingly, in the present study, we conceptualize power as the degree to which one partner perceives that they are able to influence their partner (Anderson et al., 2012; Simpson et al., 2015). Consequently, a power hypothesis would suggest that sexual assertiveness is better explained by individuals' experienced power within the relationship—rather than by their gender per se—and that this link should appear both across and within relationship types.

The Present Research

Sexual assertiveness has long been viewed through a gendered lens, with research often showing that men report higher assertiveness than women (e.g., Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Pierce & Hurlbert, 1999). Yet such differences may not reflect inherent

gender traits, but rather the social and relational contexts in which sexuality unfolds. Building on theories of gender, heteronormativity, and power, we tested three competing explanations for individual differences in sexual assertiveness.

(1) Gender hypothesis: Men report higher sexual assertiveness than women, regardless of couple type.
(2) Heteronormativity hypothesis: Gender differences in sexual assertiveness appear only in woman-man couples.
(3) Power hypothesis: Sexual assertiveness will show a stronger association with experienced power than gender.

By testing these competing models, we aim to disentangle whether sexual assertiveness reflects gender differences, heteronormativity, or power. Clarifying this distinction advances theory on gender, sexuality, and power within intimate relationships. Furthermore, studies show that sexual assertiveness is linked with higher sexual self-esteem, greater sexual and relationship satisfaction, better sexual functioning, and safer sex practice (McNicoll et al., 2016; Menard & Offman, 2009; Noar et al., 2002; Santos-Iglesias et al., 2013). Sexual assertiveness is moreover especially important for women's sexual health, as it is linked to greater satisfaction, communication of needs, and improved ability to negotiate consent (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Klein et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2006). Understanding its sources can therefore inform interventions and relational strategies that promote sexual well-being across diverse couple types.

In addition, we tested two additional models to advance our understanding of how power and sexual assertiveness intersect: We examined whether a potential significant power-sexual assertiveness link varies across couples, that is, some couples may show a stronger link than others. Further, we examined whether the power-sexual assertiveness link differs between woman-man and LGBTQ couples—past research on power within relationships did hardly study whether associations hold across diverse relationship types.

Method

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, and all measures in the study, and we follow JARS (Kazak, 2018). All data, syntax, and research materials focal to our research question are available at https://osf.io/6u24h. Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 28. Hypotheses, measures, and data analysis strategy were preregistered (after data collection; https://aspredicted.org/ep2n6t.pdf).

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected as part of a larger survey on power and relationship functioning in romantic relationships (Körner et al., 2025). Data collection took place from 2024 to 2025. Only variables relevant to the present research question are reported here. Participants were recruited in Germany for a study advertised as 'Personality in

Relationships' through social media and word-of-mouth advertising. To also reach LGBTQ couples, we posted flyers at queer-friendly venues and counseling centers and used social media groups aimed at LGBTQ audiences. Inclusion criteria were: age ≥18 years and at least one month in the current relationship. Participants completed an online survey (approximately 15–25 minutes). Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants prior to participation. Participants were provided with information about data protection and the voluntary nature of participation, and they indicated their consent before proceeding to the survey. Each partner responded independently, and a couple code was generated to match partners. Students received course credit, while other participants could enter a lottery to win one of three €15 online shopping vouchers (redeemable at wunschgutschein.de). The study was approved by the University of Bamberg Ethics Committee.

The final sample consisted of 383 couples from two samples: 287 woman–man couples and 96 LGBTQ couples (51.6% women, 43.7% men, 4.7% non-binary).[2] Participants were on average 29.06 years old (*Mdn* = 25.00, *SD* = 11.83, range 18–90) and had been in their current relationship for an average of 4.94 years (*Mdn* = 2.83, *SD* = 7.18, range 1 month–37 years). Most participants were not married (87.6%), while some were married (12.4%). Among LGBTQ participants, the majority identified as gay/lesbian (54.3%), followed by bisexual (32.6%) and pansexual (9.7%). Most participants had a high school diploma (without a college degree or vocational qualification, 42.6%), followed by those holding a college or university degree (36.4%), those with completed vocational training (18.4%), and those who had completed intermediate secondary school only (1.6%). Approximately half of the sample consisted of university students (49.0%).

Instruments

Sexual Assertiveness. Sexual assertiveness was measured using the Sexual Assertiveness subscale of the *Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire* (Snell et al., 1993; German version: Brenk-Franz & Strauß, 2011), which consists of five items (e.g., "When it comes to sex, I usually ask for what I want;" "I am very assertive about the sexual aspects of my life"; "When it comes to sex, I usually ask for what I want", 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). In the German validation paper, good internal consistency (α = .94), and in the English original, good test-retest reliability (*r* = .65, after 3 weeks), are reported. The sexual assertiveness subscale showed no significant link to social desirability (*r* = .05) and both good convergent and discriminant validity with other sexuality measures (Snell et al., 1993). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all measures for women and men appear in Table 1.

Power. Power was assessed with the German-language *Personal Sense of Power Scale* (Anderson et al., 2012; Körner et al., 2022). Participants responded to six items (e.g., "I can get him/her to listen to what I say.", 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) using a relationship-specific instruction ("In my relationship with my partner…") to capture their perceived ability to influence their romantic partner. In the German validation paper, good internal consistencies (α ≥ .79; ω ≥ .80), high test-retest reliability (*r* = .72, after three months), and a robust unidimensional structure are reported (Körner et al., 2022).

Table 1. Reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients), Skewness, and Descriptive Statistics for Power and Sexual Assertiveness Separated by Gender and Sexual Orientation

	Woman-man sample						LGBTQ sample								
	Woman			Man			Woman			Man			Non-binary		
Reliability															
Power	.71			.73			.75			.73			.63		
Sexual assertiveness	.64			.64			.78			.75			.84		
Skewness															
Power	−1.52			−1.25			−1.21			−0.85			−1.57		
Sexual assertiveness	−0.11			−0.22			−0.32			0.08			−0.33		
Descriptives (*M, SD, range, skewness*)	*M*	*SD*	Range	*M*	*SD*	Range	*M*	*SD*	Range	*M*	*SD*	Range	*M*	*SD*	Range
Power	5.93	0.71	2.33–7.00	5.74	0.79	3.00–7.00	5.68	0.86	2.83–6.83	5.59	0.90	3.50-6.83	5.94	0.68	3.83–6.67
Sexual assertiveness	3.36	0.75	1.40–5.00	3.39	0.71	1.00–5.00	3.20	0.83	1.20–4.80	3.40	0.77	1.60-5.00	3.11	0.87	1.00–4.80

Note. Possible range of power scale: 1 to 7. Possible range of sexual assertiveness scale: 1 to 5.

Further, the scale score demonstrated strict measurement invariance across gender (women, men), known-groups validity, and a nomological pattern closely replicating that of the original scale.

Analytic Strategy

We conducted a sensitivity power analysis to evaluate whether our sample size was sufficient to detect small-to-medium effects of $\beta = .15$ ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed; statistical power = .80). Because participants were nested within couples, we adjusted for the nonindependence of partners by incorporating the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC = .125) into the power calculation (Snijders & Bosker, 2011). Based on analytical approximations for multilevel models (West et al., 2022), we computed that 188 couples would be required to detect a $\beta = .15$ for a fixed effect with low collinearity (VIF $\approx$ 1.00). For effects with moderate collinearity (VIF $\approx$ 1.20–2.00, typical of interactions), the required sample increased to 225–372 couples. Our final sample of 383 couples therefore provided sufficient power ($\geq$.80) to detect small-to-medium effects for all focal predictors.

Prior to estimating the multilevel models, we checked model assumptions by inspecting the linearity of the relationship between power and sexual assertiveness as well as the normality of residuals and random effects; no violations were detected. The correlation between absolute residuals and fitted values was small ($r = -.07$, Model 3), indicating no substantial heteroscedasticity. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated no problematic collinearity among predictors (all VIFs $\leq$1.14).

To account for the nonindependence of partners within couples, we computed a series of multilevel models. Sexual assertiveness was designed as the dependent variable; gender, couple type, and power (and specific interactions, see below) were predictors entered at the individual level. A random intercept for the couple identifier captured between-couple variance. We report two-tailed p values for all tests. We computed three models to test our hypotheses: In Model 1 (gender model), we included gender as a fixed effect and tested whether men report higher sexual assertiveness than women across all couples. Non-binary participants were excluded because we had no prediction about their sexual assertiveness in our gender hypothesis. In Model 2 (heteronormativity model), we included gender, couple type (woman-man vs. LGBTQ couples), and their interaction, testing whether gender differences in sexual assertiveness depend on couple type. Non-binary participants were excluded. In Model 3 (power model), we included power (grand-mean centered), gender, couple type, and their interaction, testing whether individual differences in power predict sexual assertiveness and account for any gender or couple-type differences. Non-binary participants were included. Model fit was compared using information criteria (AIC, BIC), with lower values indicating better fit (though Model 3 was re-computed without non-binary participants to make fit statistics comparable with Models 1 and 2, but key results are reported with all participants included for Model 3).

Additionally, we conducted two supplementary analyses: In Model 4, we added a random slope for power to examine whether the power-assertiveness link varies across couples. In Model 5, we added the interaction between power and couple type to test whether the power-assertiveness link differs between woman-man and LGBTQ couples.

Because relationship length, age, and relationship type can affect structural aspects of the relationship—such as commitment, household labor division, and financial arrangements—which in turn may shape power dynamics, we ran additional models while including these variables as covariates.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the power and sexual assertiveness measures. The means and standard deviations of the power scale were comparable to those reported in other research conducted in the same cultural context (i.e., Germany, Körner & Schütz, 2025), but were slightly lower than those reported in other cultural contexts (i.e., New Zealand, Overall et al., 2025). Power showed moderate negative skewness (mean across subsamples = −1.28), indicating that participants tended to report relatively high levels of power. This suggests slightly restricted variability, which would likely yield more conservative estimates of associations. Sexual assertiveness showed descriptive statistics similar to prior research (Brenk-Franz & Strauß, 2011), and skewness was minimal (mean across subsamples = −.18).

Primary Analyses

Table 2 displays results of the multilevel models. The gender hypothesis (Model 1) was not supported: Gender was not a significant predictor of sexual assertiveness ($p = .214$). In other words, we found no gender differences in sexual assertiveness.

The heteronormativity hypothesis (Model (2) was also not supported: Adding the interaction between gender and couple type slightly decreased the non-significant coefficient for gender, but the interaction was also non-significant ($p = .175$). Thus, gender differences in sexual assertiveness did not depend on couple type (woman-man vs. LGBTQ). In fact, in woman-man couples the difference in sexual assertiveness was negligible between women and men (mean difference = 0.07, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .268$) whereas in LGBTQ couples the difference between women (mostly lesbian) and men (mostly gay) just missed conventional levels of significance (mean difference = 0.23, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .070$). Model fit indices (AIC, BIC) became slightly worse relative to the gender model.

The power hypothesis (Model 3) was supported: Power was a significant predictor of sexual assertiveness ($p < .001$). Individuals who felt one unit more powerful reported being 0.22 units more sexually assertive. Further, the power model showed the best fit indices compared to the gender model and the heteronormativity model. Adding power ($R^2 = .06$) increased the explained variance (see row marginal R^2) in sexual assertiveness compared to the gender model ($\Delta R^2 = .059$) and the heteronormativity model ($\Delta R^2 = .053$). The power model (fixed and random effects) explained in total 18% of the variance in sexual assertiveness. This indicates that power accounted for a small to moderate portion of individual differences in sexual assertiveness, beyond between-couple variability (see Table 2).

Table 2. Results of Multilevel Models Testing the Effects of Gender, Couple Type, Gender × Couple Type, and Power on Sexual Assertiveness

Model	Model 1: Gender		Model 2: Heteronormativity		Model 3: Power		Model 4: Power (w random slope)		Model 5: Power × couple type	
Fixed effects	*b* (95% CI)	*p*	*b* (95% CI)	*p*	*b* (95% CI)	*p*	*b* (95% CI)	*p*	*b* (95% CI)	*p*
Intercept	**3.32** [3.25, 3.40]	<.001	**3.20** [3.06, 3.35]	<.001	**3.08** [2.83, 3.32]	<.001	**3.07** [2.82, 3.31]	<.001	**3.07** [2.82, 3.31]	<.001
Gender[a]	0.07 [−0.04, 0.17]	.214	$0.02_{WomanManSample}$ [−0.09, 0.14]	.694	$0.06_{WomanManSample}$ [−0.05, 0.18]	.284	$0.07_{WomanManSample}$ [−0.05, 0.18]	.242	$0.06_{WomanManSample}$ [−0.06, 0.17]	.247
			$0.22_{LGBTQSample}$ [−0.04, 0.48]	.095	$0.22_{LGBTQSample}$ [−0.03, 0.47]	.085	$0.16_{LGBTQSample}$ [−0.10, 0.41]	.225	$0.23_{LGBTQSample}$ [−0.03, 0.48]	.078
Couple type	—		0.16 [−0.01, 0.33]	.067	0.10 [−0.07, 0.27]	.252	0.06 [−0.10, 0.23]	.452	0.09 [−0.08, 0.26]	.282
Gender × couple type	—		−0.20 [−0.48, 0.09]	.175	−0.16 [−0.44, 0.12]	.264	−0.09 [−0.36, 0.19]	.530	−0.17 [−0.45, 0.11]	.229
Power	—		—		**0.22** [0.15, 0.29]	<.001	**0.22** [0.14, 0.30]	<.001	**0.32** [0.19, 0.44]	<.001
Power × couple type	—		—		—		—		−0.14 [−0.29, 0.02]	.080
Model fit										
AIC	1592.61		1594.55		1559.70 (1656.45)[b]		1556.28 (1650.33)[b]		1558.24 (1656.66)[b]	
BIC	1601.71		1603.65		1568.80 (1665.64)[b]		1574.47 (1668.72)[b]		1567.33 (1665.85)[b]	
Marginal R^2	.002		.008		.061		.059		.065	
Conditional R^2	.131		.138		.183		.227		.184	

[a]Models 2–5: Gender effects are presented separately within woman-man and LGBTQ samples, and reflect only comparisons between women and men. Model 3–5: Comparisons involving non-binary participants are not reported here.
[b]Models 3–5: the first AIC/BIC values correspond to versions estimated without non-binary participants (for comparability with Models 1–2), while the second values refer to the full models for which fixed-effect statistics are reported (used for comparisons of Models 3, 4, and 5).
Bold values indicates that coefficients with *p* values smaller than .05.

Secondary Analyses

We tested whether the strength of the power-assertiveness link varies across couples (Model 4) by adding a random slope for power. The average link between power and sexual assertiveness (fixed effect) remained almost identical to Model 3. Yet, we found that couples differed in how strongly power predicted assertiveness. Specifically, the random intercept variance ($\sigma^2 = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.16], $p = .007$) showed that couples differed in their average level of sexual assertiveness. The random slope variance for power ($\sigma^2 = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.20], $p = .023$) indicated that the link between power and assertiveness varied significantly across couples—some couples showed a stronger positive link than others. Finally, the positive covariance between intercept and slope ($\sigma = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.09], $p = .014$) suggested that couples with higher overall assertiveness tended to show a stronger power-assertiveness link. Moreover, model fit was better compared to Model 3 for the AIC but not the BIC value. Model 4 (fixed and random effects) explained in total 23% of the variance in sexual assertiveness, indicating that allowing the random slope to vary captured additional between-couple variance.

In a final model, we tested whether the link between power and assertiveness differed between woman-man and LGBTQ couples (Model 5). The interaction between power and couple type was not significant ($p = .080$), indicating that the power-sexual assertiveness link is similar across couple types. Model fit indices were not better than those for Model 3 and Model 4.

Note that the results of all five models replicated closely when controlling for age, relationship status (married vs. not married) or relationship duration (see Online Supplement, https://osf.io/6u24h).

Finally, in an exploratory fashion we computed Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (Kenny et al., 2020) for indistinguishable dyads to examine whether partner's power related to actor's sexual assertiveness (for details, see Online Supplement). We found a significant link between actor's power and actor's sexual assertiveness ($b = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.30] $p < .001$), replicating the results of Model 3 from the multilevel models. The link between partner's power and actor's sexual assertiveness was non-significant ($b = -0.02$, 95% CI [−0.10, 0.06], $p = .639$).

Discussion

We explored whether differences in sexual assertiveness are best explained by gender, heteronormativity, or power in relationships. Including both heterosexual and LGBTQ couples, we found in our samples that only power significantly related to sexual assertiveness, with no support for the gender or heteronormativity hypothesis. In an exploratory fashion, we found that the power-sexual assertiveness link varied across couples and was strongest among couples who reported the highest sexual assertiveness.

The Role of Power in Sexual Assertiveness

Although sexual script theory predicts gender differences in sexual assertiveness, our findings suggest that experienced power may be a stronger determinant. Social

psychological power-based frameworks (e.g., Guinote, 2017; Keltner et al., 2003; Rucker & Galinsky, 2016) propose that individuals with greater power pursue their goals more effectively and express higher agency—concepts closely aligned with sexual assertiveness. Power further attenuates the influence of gendered expectations (Lammers & Imhoff, 2016), which in turn enables individuals to behave assertively regardless of traditional sexual scripts. Consistent with this perspective, participants with higher power in their relationship reported greater sexual assertiveness, suggesting that power-based frameworks may better account for our observed patterns than gendered scripts alone. This result provides further evidence that experienced power in romantic relationships shapes sexual behavior (Körner & Schütz, 2025; Overall et al., 2025). It further extends prior work by showing that not only work-related power (Lammers & Stoker, 2018) but also experienced power within romantic relationships matters for sexual assertiveness. Interestingly, consistent with a previous study (Lammers & Stoker, 2018), the link between power and sexual assertiveness was independent of gender and, additionally, independent of sexual orientation. This supports the literature suggesting that observed gender differences in sexual behavior may reflect actual differences in power rather than inherent gender traits (Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lammers et al., 2011; Lammers & Imhoff, 2016). This finding also aligns 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). Further, the current findings strengthen theoretical approaches suggesting that power facilitates the pursuit of personal goals (e.g., Guinote, 2017; Overall et al., 2023), including sexual ones in relationships.

Gender Differences in Sexual Assertiveness

Our findings make an additional theoretical contribution. Contrary to predictions derived from sexual script theory, we found no evidence that men report higher sexual assertiveness than women, nor support for the heteronormativity hypothesis. This lack of gender differences aligns with emerging literature documenting comparable—and in some cases higher—levels of sexual assertiveness among women (Gil-Llario et al., 2022; Lopez-Alvarado et al., 2022; Nagy et al., 2025). For example, in one study, women in a Dutch sample reported greater sexual assertiveness than men (whereas men reported higher sexual assertiveness in South-East Asian and British samples, and no gender differences emerged in an U.S. sample; Lammers & Stoker, 2018). This pattern suggests that traditional sexual scripts prescribing men's dominance and women's submission may be weakening in some sociocultural contexts.

One interpretation of these converging findings is that sexual scripts are undergoing meaningful transformation in Western contexts, with increasing flexibility in sexual assertiveness for both women and men. However, longitudinal research tracking how sexual scripts evolve over time is lacking, which limits this conclusion. Moreover, our study was conducted in Germany, a context comparable to the Netherlands in terms of liberal sexual attitudes (Klein & Brunner, 2018); whether a similar pattern would emerge in majority-world settings remains an open question. Replication among couples from diverse cultural contexts is therefore crucial for evaluating the generalizability of our findings. Finally, although women may report higher sexual assertiveness in some

studies, research also shows that they continue to face backlash (such as reduced romantic interest from partners) for expressing sexual agency (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2014; Klein et al., 2018), reflecting the persistence of gendered expectations.

Sexual Minority Status and Sexual Assertiveness

Some groups of LGBTQ participants in our sample showed descriptive differences in sexual assertiveness compared to heterosexual participants, although differences between woman and men regardless of sexual orientation were not statistically significant. Heterosexual and gay men scored similarly, while lesbian women scored lower than heterosexual women, and non-binary participants scored the lowest. This finding contrasts with a recent multi-country study suggesting that sexual minority individuals often report higher sexual assertiveness compared to heterosexual people (Nagy et al., 2025), potentially due to norm-challenging orientations or more egalitarian relationship structures. However, our findings should be interpreted cautiously and may reflect contextual factors specific to Germany or differences in sample composition compared to earlier cross-national work.

Another possible explanation for these results comes from intimate justice theory (McClelland, 2010, 2014), which proposes that individuals' feelings of deserving and expectations around sexual satisfaction are shaped by their social position. Historically marginalized groups, such as women and sexual minorities, may internalize lower expectations or reduced entitlement to sexual pleasure (McClelland, 2010, 2014), which can be reflected in lower sexual assertiveness. This seems to be particularly true for groups with (at least) two minority statuses (e.g., lesbian women). From this perspective, lower sexual assertiveness may reflect broader social hierarchies rather than relationship-specific dynamics. These unexpected findings among lesbian and non-binary participants highlight the need for intersectional research on how social location shapes sexual assertiveness. Future studies should explore variations in sexual scripts across sociocultural contexts and how structural inequalities interact with relational dynamics to influence sexual experiences.

Limitation and Future Directions

Our correlational design precludes causal conclusions. However, power theories conceptualize power as a predictor of relationship behaviors (e.g., Guinote, 2017; Keltner et al., 2003; Overall et al., 2023; Simpson et al., 2015) such as sexual assertiveness. Empirical research also supports the causal effect of power on sexuality (Kunstman & Maner, 2011) and general assertiveness (Rucker & Galinsky, 2016). Nevertheless, longitudinal or experimental research would be valuable to confirm the direction of this association.

Although we used an established scale on sexual assertiveness (Snell et al., 1993), it was measured via self-report; while objective behavioral measures would be ideal, these are not feasible due to ethical constraints in sexual contexts. Further, one might expect that self-reported sexual assertiveness is a stronger predictor of sexual health and related positive outcomes than actual sexually assertive behavior. Future research could also

examine additional predictors of sexual assertiveness, such as endorsement of sexual scripts or gender roles. Perhaps the degree to which people conform to traditional gender roles is a better predictor of sexual behaviors than gender per se.

Moreover, the sexuality scale has not been examined for measurement invariance across gender, raising concerns whether scale scores are comparable across woman and men. However, other sexual assertiveness scales have been found to be invariant across gender (e.g., Gil-Llario et al., 2022; Nagy et al., 2025). Furthermore, because our measures relied on self-reports, socially desirable responding may be a concern. However, recent research indicates that associations between power and relationship outcomes remain stable even after controlling for social desirability (Körner & Altmann, 2025).

Our sample is drawn from a Western country (Germany), limiting the generalizability of our findings to other cultural contexts. Sexual assertiveness is a culturally shaped construct, as norms around it differ widely across societies, with women's sexuality and assertiveness more restricted in some countries than others (e.g., Hall, 2019). Moreover, our inclusion of LGBTQ participants reflects a population that remains stigmatized in many parts of the world (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015), highlighting that both our sample and our findings are situated within a Western context and underscoring the need for cross-cultural research.

Furthermore, our study focused exclusively on sexual assertiveness within committed relationships, leaving it unclear how the links we identified operate among singles or in casual sexual encounters. Singlehood involves unique intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal dynamics, including differences in social support, discrimination, and well-being (Girme et al., 2021, 2022). Power in casual contexts may differ from power within established partnerships, and traditional gendered sexual scripts appear more prevalent in early-stage or casual encounters (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993; Seal et al., 2007; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010; Wiederman, 2005). Consequently, gender differences in sexual assertiveness and the role of power may be amplified in these contexts (Klein et al., 2023), suggesting that testing our hypotheses beyond committed relationships represents a promising direction for future research.

Finally, the relatively small number of non-binary participants limited group comparisons. However, our study contributes to extending research beyond traditional heteronormative frameworks.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that sexual assertiveness is shaped less by gender or heteronormative expectations and more by how powerful partners feel within their intimate relationship. Those who feel powerful are more likely to have their sexual needs prioritized, highlighting that experienced power—not societal norms—contributes to sexual assertiveness. Recognizing this can inform sexual education, relationship counseling, and interventions aimed at promoting mutually satisfying sexual experiences.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants who were included in the study.

Author Contributions

VK conceived of the present idea. RK collected the data and performed the computations. VK and RK drafted the initial manuscript and critically revised it together.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data and code are available at https://osf.io/6u24h/. This research was pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/ep2n6t.pdf).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Sexual assertiveness (or sexual agency) has been conceptualized in diverse ways across studies, with researchers emphasizing different dimensions and approaches (for a review see Fahs & McClelland, 2016).
2. Note that 85 participants were excluded from the analyses because their partner did not take part in the study or they could not be matched based on couple codes (thus, data of 851 participants were collected in total).

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