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In the Mood: How Sexual Desire Predicts and is Predicted by Romantic Partners' Mood

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ABSTRACT

The association between mood and sexual desire has been the object of significant scientific and public interest. How mood shapes and is shaped by sexual desire is typically studied within one and the same individual, yet sexual desire is often experienced in the context of a romantic relationship. To obtain a more complete picture of the relation between mood and sexual desire, we examined the temporal interplay between mood and sexual desire both within and between partners in a romantic relationship. Using data from an experience sampling study involving both partners of mixed-gender romantic couples ($N = 188$; $M_{age} = 26.34$, $SD_{age} = 5.33$), we investigated how each partner's mood (in terms of positive and negative affect) predicted their own sexual desire as well as that of their partner and vice versa. Results of both concurrent and temporal analyses confirmed bidirectional associations between mood and sexual desire both within and between partners, such that (1) both a person's own and their partner's positive mood predicted an increase in sexual desire, and a person's own and their partner's negative mood predicted a decrease in sexual desire. In addition, (2) both a person's own and their partner's sexual desire predicted an increase in positive mood, and a person's own and their partner's sexual desire predicted a decrease in negative mood. Only a few gender differences were found. The results underscore how sexual desire can predict and be predicted by both romantic partners' mood, highlighting the need for interactional models of sexual desire.

The commonly used expression of "being in the mood" seems to imply that a particular mood can be more (or less) favorable to incite sexual desire. This notion has inspired a line of scientific inquiry into the relationship between mood and sexual desire. So far, this research has mostly focused on intrapersonal processes, examining how one's own mood is related to one's own sexual desire. Yet, sexual desire mostly plays out between individuals, and the importance of an interpersonal or dyadic view of sexuality has been emphasized on both clinical and theoretical grounds (Dewitte, 2014; Masters & Johnson, 1970; Prekatsounaki et al., 2022). The present study aimed to provide more insight into the relation between mood and sexual desire in dyadic contexts, by examining how sexual desire predicts and is predicted by both partners' mood in the context of a romantic relationship.

Mood and (Dyadic) Sexual Desire

According to incentive motivation theories, sexual desire emerges when the sexual response system is activated in response to a sexually rewarding stimulus in the environment (Both et al., 2007; Singer & Toates, 1987). In this study, sexual desire was conceptualized as "the desire to make love with one's partner," akin to Prekatsounaki et al.'s (2022) *dyadic sexual desire for a partner* (Moyano et al., 2017; Pawłowska et al., 2024). Thus, dyadic sexual desire in this study implies a longing to get closer to or approach that person. Incentive motivation theories rely on the broader framework of approach-avoidance motivation theories to understand how people respond to relevant stimuli. In the case of sexual desire, the latter theories may be particularly suitable to help us better understand how emotions relate to desire. On a general level, emotion theories postulate that positive emotions foster approach tendencies, while negative emotions involve withdrawal tendencies (Frijda, 1987). Consequently, positive mood in general can be conceived to be related to increased approach-motivated desire to engage in sexual activities with a partner, while negative emotions might be related to an avoidance-motivated decrease in dyadic desire. Similar mechanisms might be at play with respect to the reverse association, namely, in how mood may be predicted by sexual desire.

Both sexual desire and positive or negative affective states interact with external and internal stimuli and therefore show considerable variation across time and contexts within individuals (Everaerd, 1989; Gonzaga et al., 2006; Kuppens & Verduyn, 2017). Moreover, they mutually interact over time in the sense that mood affects sexual desire and vice versa. Also clinically, affective disorders are often linked to reduced sexual desire (see e.g., Barata, 2017; Kalmbach et al., 2014). Because problems related to (differences in) sexual desire are among the most frequently reported sexual and relationship problems

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in couples, it is important to gain more insight into the link between mood and sexual desire (Dewitte et al., 2020; Goldstein et al., 2017). The majority of research has focused on intraindividual processes, with considerably less attention directed toward interindividual or dyadic processes.

Empirical Evidence of the Intrapersonal Link Between Mood and Sexual Desire

Studies concerning sexual behavior have found that positive mood is associated with increased sexual activity, while negative mood is often not or only weakly associated with decreased sexual activity (Burleson et al., 2007; Fortenberry et al., 2005, 2006). Studies relating affective states to sexual risk-taking also yielded mixed results (Crepaz & Marks, 2001; Mustanski, 2007).

Only a few studies have investigated the association between mood and sexual desire. For this reason, we include in the overview below studies on both sexual desire and subjective arousal, as these concepts often overlap (e.g., Beck et al., 1991; Graham, 2010; K. R. Mitchell et al., 2014; Prause et al., 2008). Research regarding mood and sexual desire, often set in laboratory settings, suggests that people experience increased sexual desire when they are in a positive mood, but mostly found no association with negative mood (W. B. Mitchell et al., 1998; Peterson & Janssen, 2007; ter Kuile et al., 2010). Survey-based research found positive mood to be associated with increased sexual desire, while depressive symptoms were linked to decreased sexual desire (Nimbi et al., 2019), although considerable individual differences exist in these relationships (Janssen et al., 2013; Lykins et al., 2006). Furthermore, daily diary studies found that women experienced increased sexual desire when in a positive mood, while negative mood was generally not associated with sexual desire (Kalmbach & Pillai, 2014; Mehta et al., 2014). A recent diary study by van Tuijl et al. (2022) examined sexual motivation on a momentary basis and found that neither positive nor negative affect directly impacted sexual motivation. In sum, positive mood tends to be associated with increased sexual desire, while findings regarding negative mood are more mixed, with studies showing positive associations, negative associations, or no association whatsoever.

A person's sexual behaviors, feelings, and cognitions are not only a function of personal factors but also of processes that lie in the interpersonal realm, especially in the context of romantic relationships (Reis et al., 2000). Consistent with this, there is a growing recognition that interpersonal dynamics warrant more attention in research on sexual desire (Dewitte, 2014).

Empirical Evidence of the Interpersonal Link Between Mood and Sexual Desire

While not the same, sexual desire and behavior are of course related. In one of the first studies using experience-sampling methods to assess sexual desire in couples, Pawłowska et al. (2024) found that when both partners reported high levels of sexual desire for their partner, the chance of sexual initiation and receptivity of the partner increased. Looking at studies of the relation between partner mood and sexual behavior, Bodenmann and Ledermann (2008) found that depressed mood in women was negatively associated with sexual activity in men, whereas depressed mood in men was not significantly related to sexual activity in women. Similar patterns were found by Dewitte et al. (2015), who established in a daily diary study that both men and women showed more intimacy behaviors when both partners were in a positive mood. Being in a negative mood was related to decreases in women's intimacy levels, while men reported less intimacy when their partner was in a negative mood (Dewitte et al., 2015). In the present study, we focused on sexual desire instead of sexual behavior, as in the context of romantic couples, clinically, examining mood and sexual desire might be deemed more vital than mood and behavior, given the prevalent treatment of desire-related problems (Dewitte et al., 2020; Goldstein et al., 2017).

In addition to mood predicting sexual desire, we should also consider the possibility that sexual desire may influence and predict subsequent mood. Understanding the reciprocal relationship between mood and sexual desire might uncover potential cycles that reinforce each other, offering insights into how desire contributes to mental health. Acknowledging the potential role of the partner in this equation is emphasized by emotional interdependence theories, suggesting that emotions between partners in a close relationship become interconnected over time (Butler, 2011). Empirical studies investigating this are even more scarce. Dewitte et al. (2015) found partnered sexual activity to increase next-day positive mood for men, but not for women. Additionally, Tavares et al. (2019) looked at dyadic sexual desire and postpartum perceived stress using an online survey. Their results indicated that sexual desire toward a partner was only related to a decrease of perceived stress postpartum in women, but not in men. It was also not significantly associated with the partner's perceived stress postpartum (Tavares et al., 2019).

Based on this scant literature on the interpersonal relationship between the mood and sexual response of both partners of a couple, we expected one's own and one's partner's positive mood to predict higher levels of one's own sexual desire, and one's own and one's partner's negative mood to predict less sexual desire. To gain more insight into possible opposite or reverse associations, we also investigated whether our positive and negative mood can be predicted by both partners' sexual desire.

Individual Differences

Prior research on mood and sexuality has revealed substantial individual differences in their association. Several studies have found that individuals may experience increased sexual desire during positive (or negative) moods, while others would report experiencing the opposite (Bancroft, Janssen, Strong, & Vukadinovic, 2003; Bancroft, Janssen, Strong, Carnes, et al., 2003; Bittoni & Kiesner, 2022; Janssen et al., 2013; Lykins et al., 2006; van Tuijl et al., 2022). Studying sexual desire as part of a range of negative mood symptoms in a sample of women, Bittoni and Kiesner (2022) even found that both patterns can exist not only between-, but also within-persons. Individual variability in the association between negative mood and

sexual desire might be explained using the Dual Control Model of sexual response (DCM; Bancroft & Janssen, 2000; Janssen & Bancroft, 2023), which postulates that individuals vary in their propensity for sexual excitation and sexual inhibition. Consistent with the DCM, several studies have found negative mood to be more often paradoxically associated with stable or even increased levels of sexual desire in individuals who score higher on sexual excitation and lower on sexual inhibition (Bancroft et al., 2009; Bancroft, Janssen, Strong, Carnes, et al., 2003; Janssen & Bancroft, 2007). In light of these findings, which are based on studies in individuals, and on these individuals' own assessment of the effects of mood on sexuality, one might ask how individual variability could manifest itself within the dynamics of a dyadic context. Accordingly, we investigated to what extent the association between mood and sexual desire is a function of a person's average level of sexual desire. Given the exploratory nature of this analysis, no predictions were made regarding positive affect.

The Current Study

The current study aimed to investigate the bidirectional association between one's own and one's partner's mood and sexual desire in the daily life of romantically involved couples. The Experience Sampling Method (ESM; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) was used, which is ideally suited to capture the interplay between emotional and sexual states in the context of daily life, as assessment takes place during life as it is lived (Bolger et al., 2003). Aside from providing high ecological validity, this method also minimizes potential memory biases (Hektner et al., 2007). In the current study, both partners of 94 mixed-gender couples were asked to report on their current positive and negative emotional state and sexual desire six times a day on weekdays and fourteen times a day on weekend days, for seven days in total.

As our primary research question, we assessed whether a person's own and their partner's current mood, in terms of positive and negative affect, was associated with sexual desire for their partner (concurrent analysis). We predicted that a person's and their partner's positive affect would be associated with an increase in sexual desire and their negative affect would be associated with a decrease in sexual desire at that moment in time. The models used to answer this question allowed us to explore possible individual differences in this relationship. We investigated to what extent the associational strength between mood and sexual desire was a function of a person's average level of sexual desire. As a second research question, we investigated whether one's own and one's partner's mood at a previous moment in time predicted current sexual desire for a partner, and vice versa, whether one's own and one's partner's sexual desire at a previous moment in time predicted current mood (temporal analysis). We expected that a person's and their partner's positive affect at one moment in time would predict an increase in sexual desire at a later moment in time, and that negative affect at one moment in time would predict a decrease in sexual desire at a later moment in time, and vice versa. With this study, we contribute to the literature by focusing on sexual desire, whose significance is reflected by the fact that desire problems rank among the most frequently reported concerns regarding sexual and relationship health (Dewitte et al., 2020; Goldstein et al., 2017), and including both positive and negative affective states while assessing mood. Moreover, by assessing mood and sexual desire multiple times a day for both partners of a dyad, we obtained temporally and fine-grained moment-to-moment (instead of general or day-to-day) measures that allowed us to uncover a possible interpersonal dimension in the relation between mood and sexual desire that has remained understudied until now.

Method

Participants

This study used existing data that was collected as part of a larger project on emotional interdependence (Sels et al., 2020). Participants were recruited by means of advertisements and flyers that were shared on social media and in local establishments. A total of 101 Dutch-speaking mixed-gender couples entered the study. Of these, seven couples did not reach the predetermined threshold of 50% compliance in the ESM part of the study, and their data was removed from analyses (one participant who had a compliance rate of 49% was retained as together, the couple reached over 50%). This resulted in a final sample of 94 couples or 188 participants. The study was approved by the university's Ethics Committee (SMEC; G-2016 02 466).

Procedure

As part of the larger research project, participants completed online questionnaires (pre- and follow-up), attended a laboratory session, and participated in the experience sampling study. For the current analyses, only the data from the experience sampling phase were used. Participants read and signed an informed consent during the first session. At the beginning of the ESM part, each partner received a research-dedicated smartphone and instructions on its use. To ensure a thorough comprehension of the questions, participants also received a booklet containing more detailed information. In this booklet, as well as verbally during the briefing, participants were instructed not to discuss their answers with their partner. The following 7 days, both partners were asked several times a day about their emotions and behaviors, their perceptions of the emotions and behaviors of their partner (i.e. the partner with whom they participated in the study), and their relationship. To maximize the likelihood that partners were together during sampling, a different schedule was used for weekdays and weekends. On weekdays, both partners were simultaneously beeped six times a day between 5 pm and 10 pm. During weekends, they were simultaneously beeped 14 times between 10 am and 10 pm, including morning hours. Each of these periods was divided into equal blocks of 6, respectively 14 intervals, and a beep was randomly scheduled within each block, which is also known as semi-random scheduling (Delespaul, 1995). The average time between beeps was 50.41 minutes (SD = 21.17 minutes). Compliance was high (M = 93%; SD = 6%). Each couple received 80 euros after

returning the smartphones and an additional 20 euros after completing an online follow-up one year later. Following completion, couples were debriefed about the main goals of the research and thanked for their participation.

Measures

ESM Questionnaire

The complete ESM questionnaire consisted of 24 items assessing participants' emotions and behaviors, their perception of their partner's emotions and behaviors, and their relationship (see online supplementary materials S1). The items were divided into four blocks: items about emotions, events, behavior and feelings toward partner and perceptions of the partner. Within each block, the items were randomized such that partners did not receive the questions in exactly the same order. This was implemented to further reduce the possibility of couples answering questions together. This blockwise randomization also reduces the possibility that questions may prime associations between variables. To study mood and sexual desire, the current study focused on seven of the 24 items, each rated on a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 100 (Myin-Germeys & Kuppens, 2022). The first six items asked participants to indicate how anxious, angry, sad, lonely, happy, and relaxed they currently felt. These emotions were selected to represent the four quadrants of the circumflex model of affect (Russell, 1980; Russell & Barrett, 1999; Sels et al., 2020). Anxious and angry reflected high arousal negative states, sad and lonely reflected low arousal negative states, happy reflected high arousal positive state, and relaxed reflected low arousal positive state. The aim was, albeit with a very limited number of items, to realize good coverage of the spectrum of felt emotions. The mean score of the first four emotions resulted in a measure of negative affect (item-level reliability = .71, person-level reliability = .89), and the mean score of the latter two emotions resulted in a measure of positive affect (item-level reliability = .78, person-level reliability = .96). As a measure of sexual desire, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they felt like having sex with their partner at that moment. Additionally, two contact items were included, asking whether their partner was present at the moment of the beep (Yes or No) and whether they were in contact with their partner since the last beep (None, we texted each other/chatted with each other, we spoke on the phone, or we have seen each other).

Data Analysis

As the data were both dyadic and nested in nature, implying a non-independence between both partners of a dyad and repeated measures, longitudinal Actor Partner Independence Models (l-APIM; Gistelinck & Loeys, 2019) were fitted to investigate the relationship between mood and sexual desire (see below). l-APIM allowed us to predict the score of one partner on a criterion variable based on both their own score on a predictor variable (actor effect) and their partner's score on that predictor variable (partner effect) over time (Gistelinck & Loeys, 2019). All models were fitted using the nlme package (Pinheiro et al., 2022) in R. To do this, four dummy variables were created. Because the dyads were distinguishable by gender, dummy variables *gender* (with male = 1, female = −1), *male* (with male = 1, female = 0) and *female* (with male = 0, female = 1) were created. Additionally, a dummy variable *togetherSeen* was created that took the value of 1 when at least one of both partners reported they were currently together or they saw each other since the last beep and took the value of 0 when both partners reported that they were not currently together or had not seen each other since the last beep. Next, both partners' sexual desire, positive affect and negative affect were person-mean centered and time *t*-1 lags were created for these variables for the temporal analyses. The first lag of each day was set to be missing, because these (overnight) lags would cover a much larger time gap compared to the other lags. Significance was tested using an alpha of 0.05.

Three separate types of analyses were conducted: one concurrent analysis (research question 1) and two temporal analyses (research question 2; see the online supplementary materials S2 for the R code used to fit the models). Firstly, the concurrent relationship between sexual desire and mood was investigated. To this end, two l-APIMs were fitted to predict a person's sexual desire based on their own and their partner's respective positive affect (Model 1) and negative affect (Model 2). Secondly, the temporal association between mood and sexual desire was investigated in two directions. In two l-APIMs, we examined how mood predicts subsequent sexual desire, that is how current (time t) sexual desire of one partner was predicted based on both partners' *t*-1 lags of respectively positive affect (Model 3) and negative affect (Model 4). In the supplementary materials S3, two additional l-APIMs were fitted combining Model 1 with Model 2 (concurrent analysis) and Model 3 with Model 4 (temporal analysis), to investigate the association between (lagged) positive affect and sexual desire beyond the association between (lagged) negative affect and sexual desire, and vice-vera. Thirdly, in two l-APIMs we examined how sexual desire predicted subsequent mood, that is how one partner's positive affect (Model 5) and negative affect (Model 6) at time t are predicted by both partners' sexual desire at time *t*-1. All temporal models (Model 3–6) additionally included the lag of the criterion variable of both partners to be able to predict the effect of the predictor variable on top of the effect of the criterion variable and to control for serial dependence in time series data.

The six models described above included random intercepts and the concurrent models additionally included random slopes to allow for the exploration of individual differences. To test for potential gender differences, all six models initially integrated interaction terms with a gender dummy variable (variant a). If the moderation by gender was not significant, an indistinguishable l-APIM was fitted (variant b). In the event that the moderation by gender proved to be significant, an additional distinguishable l-APIM was fitted, containing two distinct dummies for males and females (variant c). This distinguishable l-APIM variant of Model 1 and 2 was used to explore the role of individual differences in average levels of sexual desire by correlating the intercept with the slope of the actor and partner effects, for men and women.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of sample and all used measures.

Measure	$M\ (SD)_{over}$	$M\ (SD)_{within}$
Age	26.34 (5.33)	
Male	27.20 (5.67)	
Female	25.48 (4.81)	
Relationship duration (in months)	55.32 (33.89)	
Happy	62.64 (21.78)	62.60 (17.49)
Relaxed	63.63 (23.05)	63.60 (19.48)
Angry	7.96 (13.95)	7.95 (10.29)
Sad	7.95 (13.92)	8.02 (9.67)
Anxious	6.03 (10.41)	6.06 (6.90)
Lonely	9.80 (16.75)	9.87 (11.45)
Sexual Desire	43.51 (27.74)	43.43 (18.91)
Positive affect	63.14 (20.74)	63.10 (16.73)
Negative affect	7.93 (10.64)	7.97 (7.11)

The mean and standard deviation across persons are reported in the second column. The mean of the mean and standard deviation within persons are reported in the third column.

Results

Sample characteristics and descriptive statistics of all used measures are presented in Table 1. On average, men were slightly older than women in our sample, and sexual desire levels were on average 43.51, which is a little below the middle of the scale ranging from 0–100.

Concurrent Analysis

Table 2 summarizes the results of Models 1b and 2b, predicting a person's sexual desire based on one's own and one's partner's positive affect and negative affect, respectively. A visual representation of these results is depicted in Figure 1A. The results of both Model 1a and 2a revealed no moderation by gender for both the actor and partner effect; thus, the indistinguishable l-APIM model variants were fitted.

Positive Affect

The results of this Model 1b showed a positive actor effect of positive affect and sexual desire at time t. This suggests that the higher someone's level of positive affect, the higher the level of sexual desire they experience at the same moment.

In addition to an actor effect, a partner effect was found. This means that on top of one's own positive mood, the positive mood of the partner was associated with higher sexual desire at the same moment in time.

Table 2. Results of I-APIMs predicting a person's current sexual desire based on one's own and one's partner's current mood.

Fixed Effects	β (SE)	p
Model 1b: Concurrent Prediction of Sexual Desire by Positive Affect		
Intercept	43.55 (1.44)	<.01
Gender	6.03 (0.23)	<.01
Actor Positive Affect	0.38 (0.02)	<.01
Partner Positive Affect	0.10 (0.02)	<.01
Model 2b: Concurrent Prediction of Sexual Desire by Negative Affect		
Intercept	43.56 (1.44)	<.01
Gender	6.01 (0.23)	<.01
Actor Negative Affect	−0.50 (0.05)	<.01
Partner Negative Affect	−0.22 (0.04)	<.01

Level-1 predictors were person-mean centered.

Negative Affect

In contrast to positive affect, the results of Model 2b showed a negative actor effect for one's own current negative affect and sexual desire. This indicates that higher levels of negative affect were associated with lower levels of sexual desire at the same moment in time.

Additionally, a negative partner effect was found, meaning that on top of one's own negative affect, an increase in the partner's negative affect was related to a decrease in sexual desire at that moment in time.

Moderation by Contact

To follow up on the results regarding partner effects, we explored the possible moderation of these effects by whether partners were currently together and/or had seen each other since the last beep. A more detailed description of the analysis and results can be found in the supplemental materials S4. The results of this moderation analysis indicated that the partner effects depended on contact between the two. That is, when couples had had no contact, partner effects were not present, while the partner effects were significant when there had been contact between the two partners.

Individual Differences in Average Sexual Desire Level

Visual inspection of Figure 2, depicting individual and mean regression lines of Model 1c and 2c, suggests substantial individual variability in both individual average dyadic desire levels (intercepts) and the strength and direction of the association between dyadic sexual desire and affect (slopes), for both women and men. While for positive affect (Figure 2A), individual regression lines were generally in the same positive direction, for negative affect (Figure 2B) both positive and negative slopes could be found, especially for the male actor effect.

The correlations between random intercepts and slopes of the distinguishable models variant of Models 1c and 2c can be found in Table 3. For positive affect, a higher average sexual desire level was related to a stronger positive association between positive affect and sexual desire, with the exception of the male actor effect. This association was only significant for the female actor effect, meaning that for women with a higher average sexual desire level, positive affect was more positively associated with their own sexual

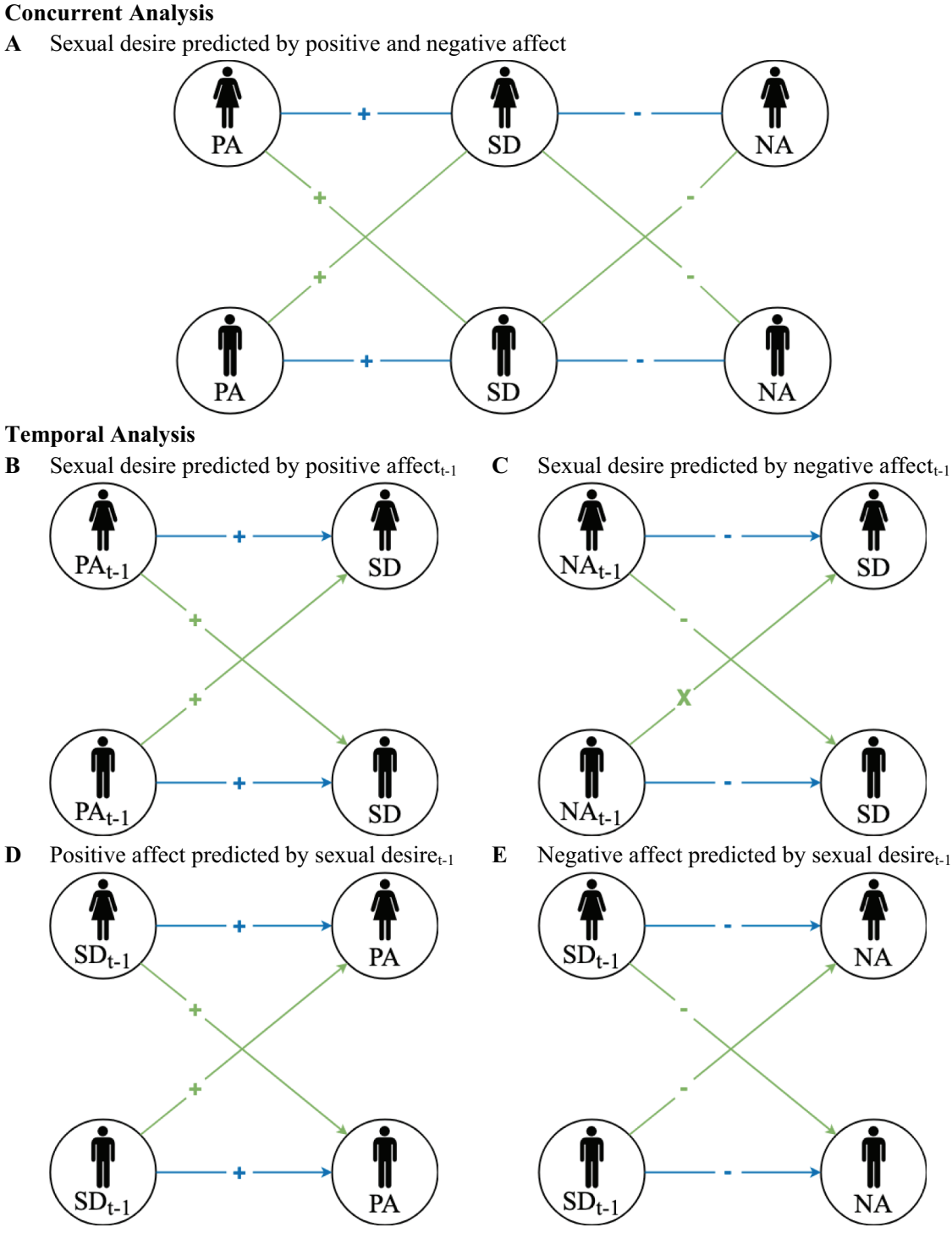


Figure 1. Visual representation of results of APIM models. SD = Sexual desire; +, − and X, respectively, signify a positive, negative and no association. Blue lines denote intrapersonal associations and green lines denote dyadic associations. Arrows indicate temporal associations.

desire. For negative affect, all correlations revealed a negative association between the intercepts and slopes, and was only not significant for the male actor effect. This implies that for both women and men, a higher average level of sexual desire was related to a stronger negative correlation between one's own negative affect and one's own sexual desire. For women, this also applied to their partner's sexual desire. For both positive and negative affect, the correlation between the random intercept and slopes was stronger for women than for men. This means that the association between mood and sexual desire was more strongly correlated with the average sexual desire of women compared to men.

Temporal Analysis: Sexual Desire as Criterium

Table 4 summarizes the results of Models 3b and 4a, predicting sexual desire at time t based on one's own and one's partner's

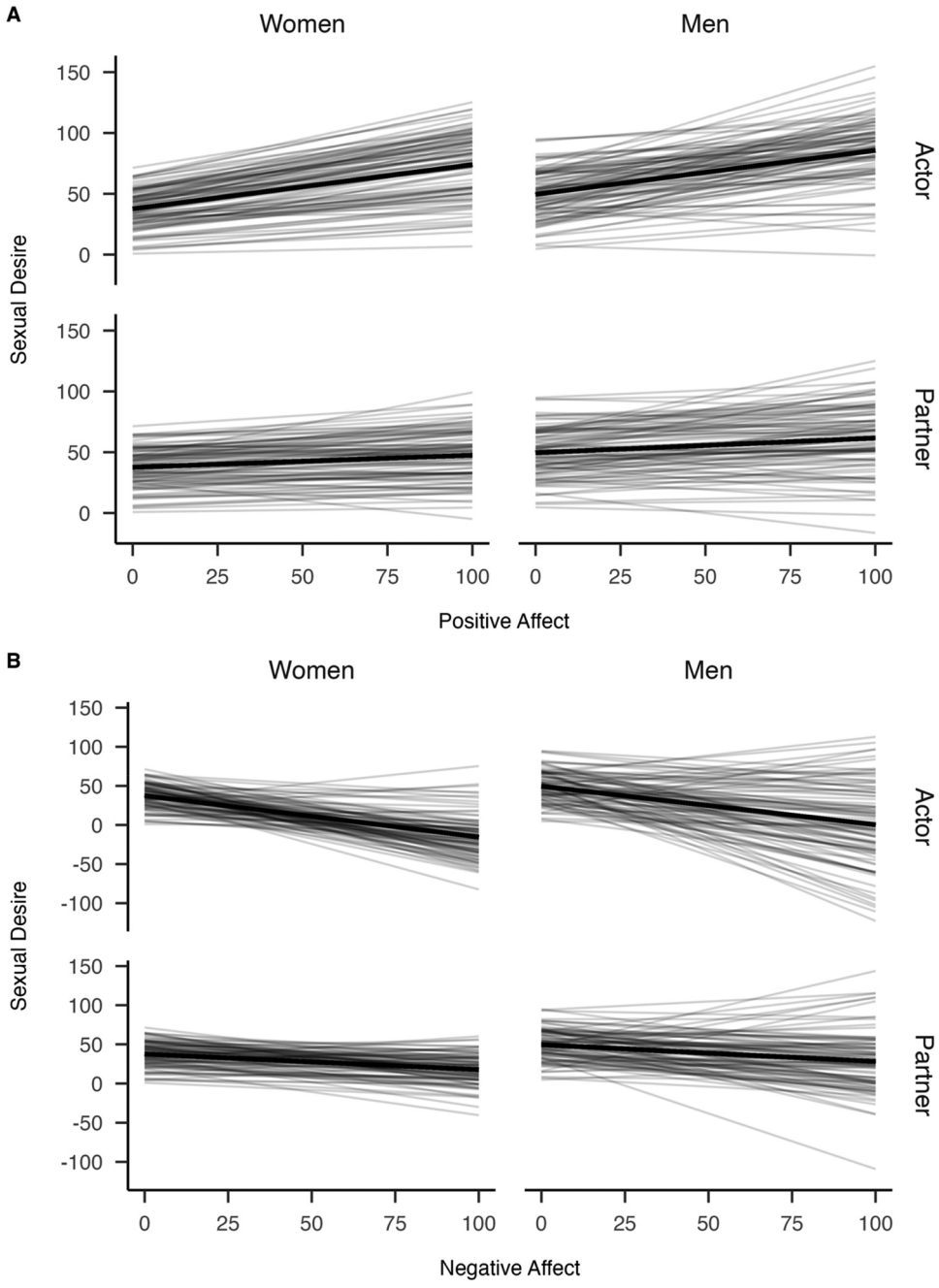


Figure 2. Individual and mean regression lines of Models 1 and 2 predicting sexual desire based on positive affect and negative affect. The individual intercepts of the regression lines reflect the average sexual desire levels per person. The individual slopes reflect the strength and direction of the association between affect and sexual desire.

Table 3. Correlations between random intercepts and slopes of Model 1c and Model 2c.

		Intercepts			
		Positive affect		Negative affect	
Slopes		Women	Men	Women	Men
Women	Actor effect	.61*	–	−.55*	–
	Partner effect	.10	–	−.50*	–
Men	Actor effect	–	−.17	–	−.15
	Partner effect	–	.07	–	−.21*

* $p < .05$.

Table 4. Results of the l-APIMs predicting a person's current sexual desire based on one's own and one's partner's t-1 lagged mood.

Fixed Effects	*β (SE)*	*p*
Model 3b: Temporal Prediction of Sexual Desire by Lag Positive Affect		
Intercept	43.34 (1.49)	<.01
Gender	5.88 (1.23)	<.01
Actor Lag Positive Affect	0.08 (0.01)	<.01
Partner Lag Positive Affect	0.04 (0.01)	<.01
Actor Lag Sexual Desire	0.46 (0.01)	<.01
Partner Lag Sexual Desire	0.05 (0.01)	<.01
Model 4a: Temporal Prediction of Sexual Desire by Lag Negative Affect		
Intercept	43.29 (1.49)	<.01
Gender	5.88 (1.23)	<.01
Actor Lag Negative Affect	−0.14 (0.02)	<.01
Actor Lag Negative Affect x Gender	0.00 (0.02)	.85
Partner Lag Negative Affect	−0.08 (0.02)	<.01
Partner Lag Negative Affect x Gender	−0.05 (0.02)	.02
Actor Lag Sexual Desire	0.46 (0.01)	<.01
Actor Lag Sexual Desire x Gender	0.05 (0.01)	<.01
Partner Lag Sexual Desire	0.05 (0.01)	<.01
Partner Lag Sexual Desire x Gender	−0.02 (0.01)	.06

Level-1 predictors were person-mean centered.

respective *t*-1 lagged positive affect and negative affect on top of *t*-1 lagged sexual desire. Figure 1B,C visualizes these results.

Positive Affect

The results of Model 3a showed that the actor effect as well as the partner effect was not moderated by gender, and therefore Model 3b was fitted. This model revealed a positive actor and partner effect for lagged positive affect and sexual desire when accounting for lagged sexual desire. This means that both a person's own and their partner's high levels of positive affect predicted an increase in levels of sexual desire at a later moment in time, controlling for the effect of lagged sexual desire.

Negative Affect

Model 4a revealed a negative actor effect for lagged negative effect and sexual desire when accounting for lagged sexual desire, such that a person's higher levels of negative affect at one moment predicted a decrease in levels of their sexual desire at the next moment in time. This actor effect was not moderated by gender.

Moreover, a negative partner effect was found. This suggests that a partner's high levels of negative affect at time *t*-1 predicted a decrease in levels of sexual desire at a later moment in time, while controlling for lagged sexual desire. This effect was moderated by gender, and therefore a distinguishable l-APIM was fitted. This Model 4c revealed that the partner effect was only significant for men ($\beta_{lagNApartner_men} = -.14$, $SE = .03$, $p < .01$), but not for women ($\beta_{lagNApartner_women} = -.03$, $SE = .04$, $p = .46$).

Temporal Analysis: Sexual Desire as Predictor

Table 5 summarizes the results of Model 5b predicting positive affect based on *t*-1 lagged sexual desire and positive affect and Model 6b predicting negative affect based on *t*-1 lagged sexual desire and negative affect of both partners. Figure 1D,E visualizes these results. The results of both Model 5a and 6a revealed no moderation by gender for both the actor and partner effects; thus, the indistinguishable l-APIM model variants were fitted.

Table 5. Results of l-APIM predicting a person's current mood based on one's own and one's partner's t-1 lagged sexual desire.

Fixed Effects	*β (SE)*	*p*
Model 5b: Temporal Prediction of Positive Affect by Lag Sexual Desire		
Intercept	63.65 (0.97)	<.01
Gender	0.24 (0.72)	.74
Actor Lag Sexual Desire	0.08 (0.01)	<.01
Partner Lag Sexual Desire	0.02 (0.01)	.01
Actor Lag Positive Affect	0.42 (0.01)	<.01
Partner Lag Positive Affect	0.05 (0.01)	<.01
Model 6b: Temporal Prediction of Negative Affect by Lag Sexual Desire		
Intercept	7.84 (0.58)	<.01
Gender	−0.23 (0.32)	.47
Actor Lag Sexual Desire	−0.01 (0.00)	<.01
Partner Lag Sexual Desire	−0.01 (0.00)	.02
Actor Lag Negative Affect	0.49 (0.01)	<.01
Partner Lag Negative Affect	0.11 (0.01)	<.01

Level-1 predictors were person-mean centered.

Positive Affect

The results of Model 5b indicate a positive actor and partner effect of lagged sexual desire predicting positive affect when accounting for lagged negative affect. This means that when controlling for lagged positive affect, higher levels of both one's own and one's partner's sexual desire at time *t*-1 predicted an increase of positive affect at the following moment in time.

Negative Affect

Finally, Model 6b revealed a negative actor and partner effect of lagged sexual desire predicting negative affect when accounting for lagged negative affect. This indicates that lower levels of both one's own and one's partner's sexual desire at time t predicted an increase of negative affect at the following moment in time.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the (potentially) bidirectional association between one's own and one's

partner's mood and sexual desire in the daily life of romantically involved couples. Firstly, we assessed whether a person's own and their partner's mood, in terms of positive and negative affect, was associated with sexual desire for their partner. Additionally, we explored to what extent the strength of the association between mood and sexual desire was a function of a person's average level of sexual desire for a partner. Secondly, we investigated whether a person's own and their partner's mood at a previous moment in time could predict current sexual desire for a partner, and vice versa.

Regarding the first research question, we found a significant actor and partner effect for both positive and negative affect. This means that someone's sexual desire was positively associated with both their own and their partner's positive affect, and negatively associated with the respective levels of negative affect. This pattern of results was in line with what we predicted based on the literature. We found neither the actor effect nor the partner effect to be moderated by gender, for both positive and negative affect. Additionally, we found that these associations between mood and sexual desire were more pronounced for individuals with higher average sexual desire levels, for both positive and negative affect. This stands in contrast to the claims from the DCM, which would expect that in individuals who are more prone to sexual excitation, negative mood is more often positively associated with sexual desire. This finding could potentially be attributed to the fact that we utilized sexual desire as a proxy for sexual excitation proneness, which are typically positively correlated but not entirely synonymous (Janssen & Bancroft, 2023). Additionally, it is noteworthy to point out that several individual regression lines (as depicted in Figure 2B, particularly those of men) did show an upwards trend, signifying increased levels of sexual desire in association with higher levels of negative affect. The fact that not all of these positive regression lines started at a higher intercept prompts consideration of what constitutes someone's baseline or average sexual desire level. In other words, is desire at negative affect scores of 0 (reflecting the intercept with person-mean centered predictors), the appropriate reference for someone's average sexual desire?

Regarding the second research question, for the temporal prediction of sexual desire for a partner based on time-1 lagged positive affect, results indicated a significant positive actor and partner effect. This implies that a person's own and their partner's previous positive affect predicted increased own current sexual desire for a partner. Similar results were found for negative affect. Namely, a person's own and their partner's previous negative affect predicted decreased own current sexual desire for a partner. Here, the partner effect was moderated by gender. Additional analysis showed that the previous negative mood of women only significantly impacted the current sexual desire of men, but not vice-versa. Dewitte et al. (2015) also reported partner effects to be stronger for men than women and considered this as supportive of criticisms regarding models that describe female sexual responding as more context-dependent and relationally oriented (Basson, 2000; Sand & Fisher, 2007). The results regarding the reverse relationship of affect predicted by sexual desire were, again, as expected. For positive affect, we found that both a person's own and their partner's previous sexual desire for a partner predicted increased own current positive affect. Also, for negative affect, results indicated that both a person's own and their partner's previous sexual desire for a partner predicted decreased own current negative affect.

These results are situated within the spectrum of mixed findings presented in the introduction, especially those regarding the intrapersonal association between negative mood and sexual desire. The fact that significant associations were consistently found for both positive and negative affect (even when accounting for each other when both entered in the same model as predictors of sexual desire, see online supplemental materials S3) does not provide evidence for the hypothesis that sexual desire is perhaps stronger associated with positive than negative affect because the effects of negative emotions on sexual desire are derived from the lack of positive emotions (W. B. Mitchell et al., 1998; Peterson & Janssen, 2007). This discrepancy might be explained by our operationalization of sexual desire as toward a partner. Indeed, Frohlich and Meston (2002) found that women with depressive symptoms were less inclined to engage in partnered sexual behavior, while masturbation frequency was unaffected or even increased. This might suggest that negative mood may be negatively associated with partnered sexuality (such as the desire to engage in sex with a partner), while it may have a relatively small influence on individual sexual behavior. Most importantly, our results, taken together, indicate that a person's sexual desire is not only a function of one's own mood, but also that of one's partner, and vice-versa. This is in line with theories that pose that emotions of individuals in close relationships are part of interpersonal dynamical systems and become linked over time (Butler, 2011). Also, with regard to research on sexuality, increasing attention is being paid to the importance of partnered, or dyadic, rather than just individual processes. The findings also have implications for clinical practice. For instance, when counseling couples facing mood problems, addressing sexual aspects of their relationship, and potentially increasing dyadic desire levels, could prove beneficial. Likewise, for couples experiencing desire discrepancies it might be useful to examine their affective dynamics.

This study had some limitations worth noting. Firstly, sexual desire was operationalized using an item assessing "the desire to have sex with one's partner," known as dyadic sexual desire (Pawłowska et al., 2024; Prekatsounaki et al., 2022). This may not fully capture the diverse and multifaceted nature of sexual desire. Different forms of sexual desire might yield different findings regarding the underlying emotion mechanisms involved. Secondly, we did not assess whether or not sexual activity occurred. Consequently, we were unable to explore the potential effects of sexual behavior, partnered as well as solitary, on the relationship between mood and sexual desire or of the associations between mood and sexual desire on sexual behavior. Considering that mood and sexual desire have previously been associated with sexual activity (e.g., Dewitte & Mayer, 2018; Dewitte et al., 2015), it would be interesting for future investigations to focus on the interplay among these three variables. On the one hand, mood might be related to sexual activity through its effects on sexual desire. For instance,

a positive mood might lead to increased desire, which in turn might lead to the increased possibility for sexual activity to occur. On the other hand, mood might be related to sexual desire through sexual activity. For instance, a positive mood might increase the odds of sexual activity to occur which in turn might impact sexual desire. Thirdly, this study approached mood and sexual desire as variables that may vary from moment to moment, while no relationship-level variables were taken into account that might play a role in the associations examined in this study. Sexual responding is a complex phenomenon influenced by personal, relational, and sexual factors that are intricately intertwined (Dewitte, 2014; Dewitte & Mayer, 2018; Prekatsounaki et al., 2022). Thus, not accounting for relationship dynamics may limit the understanding of how mood and sexual desire interact within the broader context of couples' relationships. Lastly, same-gender couples were not included in the study from which our data were derived (Sels et al., 2020). The original study focused on a relatively understudied topic, emotional interdependence, for which a more homogeneous sample was preferred. Future studies could expand recruitment efforts to include same-sex couples. Janssen et al. (2013) found that the associations between mood and sexuality, as reported by men and women, differed as a function of sexual orientation. This highlights the need for inclusivity and diversity in research samples to better understand potential variations in the relationship between mood and sexual desire across different sexual orientations.

To conclude, the results of this study indicate that one's sexual desire shapes and is shaped by not only one's own but also one's romantic partner's mood. In addition, these patterns can be a function of individual differences in average sexual desire. These findings emphasize the pivotal role of dyadic influences in understanding how mood and sexuality interact in the daily life of romantic couples and highlights the need for interactional models of sexual desire taking both partners of a couple into account.

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Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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