

### Original Article

## Development and Initial Psychometric Assessment of the Reasons for Pretending Orgasm Inventory

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**Abstract:** Research suggests that women pretend orgasm with their partner as a mate retention strategy, but the cognitive reasons behind this deception are not well known. To explore women's cognitive reasons for pretending orgasm, we first assembled a list of the reasons women report for pretending orgasm. We refined this list using independent data collected on performance frequencies for each item, followed by a principal components analysis, to generate the Reasons for Pretending Orgasm Inventory (RPOI). We found three components encompassing the cognitive reasons women pretend orgasm: Improve Partner's Experience (i.e., increasing the quality of the sexual experience for the partner), Deception and Manipulation (i.e., deceiving the partner or manipulating his perceptions for other gains), and Hiding Sexual Disinterest (i.e., sparing the partner's feelings about the woman's lack of sexual excitement). Discussion highlights limitations of this research and the RPOI, but suggests that the RPOI is useful as a structured means for assessing women's reasons for pretending orgasm.

**Keywords:** female orgasm, pretending orgasm, human mating, sexual behavior, sexual deception

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### Introduction

There is a debate in the literature about why women have the ability to achieve orgasm. Some scholars (e.g., Lloyd, 2005) argue that female orgasm is a non-functional byproduct that exists because of women's close ontogeny with men. Other scholars contend that female orgasm is an adaptation in its own right and not a byproduct of male orgasm, functioning to increase the likelihood of engaging in future sexual behaviors, facilitating

pair-bond formation, or increasing the likelihood of conception (reviewed in Welling, 2014).

Female copulatory orgasm may facilitate an “upsuck” mechanism that decreases the amount of sperm lost in “flowback” (Baker and Bellis, 1995; Kunz, Beil, Deininger, Wildt, and Leyendecker, 1996; Wildt, Kissler, Licht, and Becker, 1998) by utilizing peristaltic muscular contractions in the uterus and oviducts (Kunz et al., 1996; Wildt et al., 1998). Female orgasm may function to increase the likelihood of fertilization by physically attractive men who possess genes for immunocompetence (reviewed in Scheib, Gangestad, and Thornhill, 1999; Shackelford et al., 2000). Women partnered to more attractive men report more frequent copulatory orgasms than women partnered to less attractive men (Thornhill, Gangestad, and Comer, 1995). Puts, Welling, Burriss, and Dawood (2012) found that women report more frequent orgasms during or after their partner’s ejaculation (i.e., during the optimum window for sperm retention; Baker and Bellis, 1995), but only for women mated to men objectively rated as highly attractive. These findings support a role for female orgasm as a sire-selection mechanism, whereby orgasm functions as a means of cryptic female choice if women orgasm more with certain men (Baker and Bellis, 1995; Puts et al., 2012; Thornhill and Gangestad, 1999, 2008; Thornhill et al., 1995) and orgasm increases sperm retention (e.g., Baker and Bellis, 1995).

Female orgasm occurs least frequently during sexual intercourse, more frequently during oral sex, and most frequently during masturbation (Brewer and Hendrie, 2011), with frequency of vocalizations showing the opposite pattern. This pattern of orgasm vocalizations suggests that women might embellish or fabricate orgasm cues. Although orgasm may serve one or more functions, the cognitive reasons why women pretend orgasm are not well researched. At least 50% of women admit to pretending a copulatory orgasm at least once in their lifetime (Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Wiederman, 1997), and one study found that women pretend to orgasm 13% of the time (Thornhill et al., 1995), but the reasoning behind this deception is not clear. Although much less common, men also pretend orgasm. Muehlenhard and Shippee (2010) reported that 25% of their sample of men had pretended orgasm at least once in their lifetime. However, the majority of cases (~80%) occurred while intoxicated or after the man had already experienced orgasm that same day. Although this phenomenon is worthy of further study, it is not the focus of the current research.

Recent research indicates that women who pretend orgasm perceive that they do not have a sufficiently high quality partner who provides a good reproductive/genetic match to them, suggesting that orgasm functions to promote good mate choices (Gallup, Ampel, Wedberg, and Pogosjan, 2013). Given that men are intensely and expressly concerned with whether their partner experiences a copulatory orgasm (McKibbin, Bates, Shackelford, LaMunyon, and Hafen, 2010), potentially because it is related to their mate quality (Gallup et al., 2013) or serves other adaptive functions (Welling, 2014), women may pretend orgasm to keep their partner invested in the relationship. Kaighobadi, Shackelford, and Weekes-Shackelford (2012) found that pretended female copulatory orgasm may function to retain a mate. They also identified pretended copulatory orgasm as an important facet of male partner satisfaction: Women who *appear* to frequently orgasm have partners with greater self-reported relationship satisfaction compared to women who do not appear to orgasm frequently. Thus, the ability to successfully pretend to orgasm may be one tool women can use to retain a mate (Kaighobadi et al., 2012). Identifying other reasons why

women pretend orgasm may provide insight into the psychological processes involved in female sexual experience.

Cooper, Fenigstein, and Fauber (2014) developed the Faking Orgasm Scale for women (FOS), which contains 22 items assessing four factors: Altruistic Deceit, Fear and Insecurity, Elevated Arousal, and Sexual Adjournment. A difference between the current research and the Cooper et al. study is that they specified the type of sexual activity (i.e., oral sex and vaginal sex), whereas the current research assesses more varied sexual activity. Moreover, the current research used act nomination to generate items, which offers an advantage over the Cooper et al. methodology because act nomination involves the generation of items using participant suggestions (rather than relying on researcher imagination). We also validate our new measure by assessing its predictive and concurrent validity. Thus, the current measure was designed to address the limitations of the only other measure of this construct.

In summary, we investigate the cognitive reasons for pretending orgasm and generate an inventory for use in research. First, we construct a list of items using a participant-driven act nomination procedure (e.g., Buss and Craik, 1983; Shackelford, Leblanc, and Drass, 2000). Next, we used the items generated by act nomination to construct and validate an inventory using an act frequency approach, and we used principal components analysis to identify several components of reasons women pretend orgasm.

## **Materials and Methods**

### *Participants*

Forty-eight sexually active women (mean age = 29.2 years;  $SD = 8.6$ ) participated in the *act nomination* portion of this study. Thirty-nine indicated a heterosexual orientation, two indicated a homosexual orientation, and seven indicated a bisexual orientation. We did not collect data on ethnicity or race. Two hundred and eighty-six heterosexual women (mean age = 32.7 years;  $SD = 10.6$ ) currently in a sexual relationship for at least 3 months participated in the *act frequency* portion of this study. Two hundred forty-eight identified as White, 17 as Black, 10 as American Indian, eight as Hispanic, and three as Asian Indian.

### *Procedure*

The act nomination was conducted online through surveymonkey.com, a platform that allows users to generate and distribute surveys. Participants were not compensated. Participants completed a demographic survey and then provided up to 10 reasons why a woman might pretend orgasm during sex by responding to the following prompt:

Women sometimes pretend to have an orgasm when having sex with a man. What are some of the specific reasons why a woman might pretend to have an orgasm when having sex with a man?

Participants nominated 303 reasons in total. We removed repeated reasons and unusable responses (e.g., responses that did not make grammatical sense), resulting in 86 different reasons for pretending orgasm. Next, we consulted the literature and elicited the aid of nine colleagues (five men, four women) to provide commentary and suggestions on

the items. This resulted in a final list of 95 reasons that a woman might pretend orgasm with her partner.

To generate the Reasons for Pretending Orgasm Inventory (RPOI), we randomized the list of items. Following the act frequency approach (Buss and Craik, 1983), we instructed participants to report the frequency with which they pretended orgasm with their partner for each of the 95 reasons. Participants then completed a brief demographic survey, the Mate Retention Inventory—Short Form (MRI-SF; Buss, Shackelford, and McKibbin, 2008), which assesses the performance of mate retention behaviors, and the Why Humans Have Sex (YSEX) Inventory (Meston and Buss, 2007), which assesses the reasons why people engage in sexual intercourse. Because previous research documents relationships between pretending orgasm and mate retention behaviors (Kaighobadi et al., 2012), we expected to identify correlations between scores on the MRI-SF and scores on the RPOI. Additionally, because of the similarity of some of the items, we predicted that scores on the RPOI would correlate with scores on each of the four domains of the YSEX Inventory: Insecurity, Physical Reasons, Emotional Reasons, and Goal Attainment.

To complete the RPOI, participants responded to each item on a 10-point Likert scale that ranged from 0 (Never) to 9 (Every time we had sex). Total RPOI scores reflect an overall frequency of pretending orgasm. Participants were given the following prompt:

Below is a list of the possible reasons that a woman might fake or pretend to have an orgasm. Please rate how frequently in the past month each item applied to your sexual experiences on the following scale from 0 = never to 9 = every time we had sex.

## **Results**

We used principal components analysis (PCA) to identify the component structure of the RPOI. To secure a reliable index for each component, we included only items loading at least 0.40 on the component and not loading greater than 0.40 on any other component. A PCA with varimax rotation revealed an interpretable structure when we extracted and rotated three components, which accounted for 57% of the variance in ratings. We removed 31 items from the RPOI because either the item did not load significantly onto a single component (i.e., did not load .40 or above on any component;  $n = 1$ ) or an item loaded too strongly (greater than .40) on multiple components ( $n = 30$ ). The components are presented in order of variance accounted for, hereafter labelled Improve Partner's Sexual Experience ( $\lambda = 26.2$ ), Deception and Manipulation ( $\lambda = 16.4$ ), and Hiding Sexual Disinterest ( $\lambda = 12.1$ ).

Improve Partner's Sexual Experience ( $\alpha = .98$ ;  $r_{sb} = .96$ ,  $p < .001$ ) includes reasons to pretend orgasm that indicate an interest in increasing the sexual and emotional experience for the male partner and, to a lesser degree, an interest in increasing the pleasure in the sexual event for both partners. Deception and Manipulation ( $\alpha = .92$ ;  $r_{sb} = .92$ ,  $p < .001$ ) includes reasons to pretend orgasm that indicate more manipulative motivations, including hiding infidelity and exacting revenge. Hide Sexual Disinterest ( $\alpha = .93$ ;  $r_{sb} = .91$ ,  $p < .001$ ) includes reasons to pretend orgasm that indicate a desire to end a specific sexual event for lack of enjoyment. Total inventory Cronbach's  $\alpha = .97$  and split-half reliability =

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.86 ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that the items included in the four components also reflect a single, broad construct.

Table 1 presents the correlation matrix for total RPOI score and scores on the three components of the RPOI with scores on the MRI-SF and YSEX. Scores on the RPOI correlated positively with most of the domains and categories of the MRI-SF and the YSEX. Scores on the Public Signals category of the MRI-SF and the Emotional factor of the YSEX did not correlate with scores on the Hiding Sexual Disinterest component of the RPOI. Also, the Goal Attainment domain of the YSEX did not correlate with scores on the Improve Partner’s Sexual Experience component of the RPOI. However, total scores on the MRI-SF and the YSEX correlated with total scores on the RPOI.

**Table 1.** RPOI correlation matrix

	RPOI Total Score	Improve Partner’s Sexual Experience	Deception and Manipulation	Hide Sexual Disinterest
<b>MRI-SF</b>				
Total Score	.45**	.42**	.44**	.33**
<i>Domains</i>				
Direct Guarding	.42**	.35**	.47**	.31**
Intersexual Negative Inducements	.43**	.34**	.49**	.35**
Positive Inducements	.26**	.34**	.13*	.16*
Public Signals	.23**	.26**	.19**	.11
Intraseexual Negative Inducements	.41**	.33**	.52**	.33**
<i>Categories</i>				
Cost-Inflicting	.28**	.33**	.18**	.16*
Benefit Provisioning	.27**	.36**	.17**	.16**
<b>YSEX</b>				
Insecurity	.45**	.41**	.41**	.37**
Emotional	.17**	.21**	.13**	.10
Physical Reasons	.25**	.23**	.27**	.12**
Goal Attainment	.25**	.12	.426**	.22**

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed)

**Discussion**

Men’s concern about their partner’s orgasm is linked to perceived threats to infidelity (McKibbin et al., 2010), and men react to discovering that their partner is pretending orgasm in a similar way as they do to discovering an infidelity (Shackelford et al., 2000). Although future research should examine the tactics women use to successfully pretend orgasm and the cues that men use to infer the truthfulness of their partner’s sexual

response, the goal of this research was to generate a list of cognitive reasons women provide for pretending orgasm, and to construct and provide an initial psychometric assessment of an inventory for assessing reasons for pretending orgasm. The Reasons for Pretending Orgasm Inventory (RPOI) was constructed by using act nomination to secure reasons for pretending orgasm directly from participants. Act nomination is a useful method because the burden of generating items is not limited by the researcher's knowledge, experience, or imagination, and participants can identify what they think is important. Using responses to the items identified by act nomination, in addition to input from researchers and the literature, we identified a three-component structure that explained substantial variance in performance frequency ratings. Pretending to orgasm can be usefully organized into three broad components or tactics: Improve Partner's Sexual Experience, Deception and Manipulation, and Hiding Sexual Disinterest.

Because previous research (e.g., Kaighobadi et al., 2010) documents relationships between mate retention and pretending orgasm, a measure of the cognitive reasons for pretending orgasm should predict scores on the MRI-SF. As predicted, total RPOI scores and scores on each of the three components of the RPOI correlated positively with the total scores and scores on both broad domains (i.e., Cost-Inflicting and Benefit-Provisioning) of the MRI-SF. Only the correlation between Public Signals and Hiding Sexual Disinterest was not significant. This is unsurprising given that the Public Signals category of the MRI-SF includes mate retention tactics in which an individual publically alerts others that their partner is in a relationship with them, whereas pretending orgasm typically occurs in private with one's partner. The correlations between scores on the RPOI and its components with scores on the MRI-SF and its domains demonstrate the predictive validity of the RPOI.

In light of conceptual and item similarities, the YSEX was included as an assessment of the concurrent validity of the RPOI. As predicted, total RPOI scores correlated positively with scores on all four domains of the YSEX. Moreover, scores on the four domains of the YSEX correlated positively with scores on the three components of the RPOI with two exceptions. First, scores on the Improving Partner's Sexual Experience component of the RPOI did not correlate with scores on the Goal Attainment component of the YSEX. Improving Partner's Sexual Experience is the most altruistic of the three components, with items reflecting concern with increasing the partner's pleasure or to meet the partner's expectations. Therefore, this component reflects concern with the partner's experience, whereas the Goal Attainment domain of the YSEX includes items that reflect an exterior motive for the sexual activity. Second, scores on the Hiding Sexual Disinterest component of the RPOI, which includes items reflecting a lack of sexual and emotional commitment to the partner, did not correlate with scores on the Emotional Reasons domain of the YSEX, which includes items that describe emotional investment in the partner. This result is not unexpected because the two sets of items reflect differing motivations. Overall, correlations between scores on the RPOI and the YSEX provide additional support for the validity of the RPOI and its components.

The current research may be limited in several ways. The act nomination method is limited by participant expressiveness and relies on the reasons for pretending orgasm given by a relatively small sample of participants. However, this method may be preferable to reliance on the imagination of researchers (although, as mentioned, we also sought input from several researchers familiar with the literature), and increasing the sample size is

unlikely to yield novel reasons given that many of the nominations we secured were repeated by many participants. Additionally, the act frequency approach may not accurately or comprehensively capture the reasons why women pretend orgasm and participant memory is subject to biases in recall (Block, 1989). Despite these limitations, act nomination and performance frequency assessment have been used successfully to construct many psychometrically sound inventories (e.g., Buss, 1988; Church, Katigbak, Miramontes, Del Prado, and Cabrera, 2007; Ivcevic, 2007; McKibbin et al., 2009; Shackelford et al., 2000) that provide reliable methods of predicting trends in behavior (Buss and Craik, 1983). Finally, we acknowledge that the RPOI was developed to apply to the reasons why women pretend orgasm within heterosexual relationships. Certainly, future research could investigate differences in the cognitive reasons for pretending orgasm as a function of the sex of the romantic partner or the sexual orientation of the participant.

The RPOI is a useful tool for investigating differences in the reasons for pretending orgasm in different populations of heterosexual women. Past research has found that women who report having intercourse at a younger age, women who view themselves as more facially attractive, and women who report more lifetime sexual partners are more likely to pretend to orgasm (Wiederman, 1997). These variables may likewise predict differences in the reasons for pretending orgasm. Similarly, the RPOI may be useful for understanding differences in motivation to pretend orgasm among women who suffer from sexual arousal disorders, as a function of mate value discrepancy (i.e., differences between the relative “mate value” of two people in a relationship, such as differences in financial prospects; Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield, 2007), or differences arising as a consequence of menopause and its associated physical and sexual changes (see Dennerstein, Alexander, and Kotz, 2003; Winterich, 2003; reviewed in Hayes and Dennerstein, 2005).

Women may have different reasons for pretending to orgasm over the course of a relationship. Women report different frequencies of experiencing pleasure and orgasm during their first sexual encounter with a new romantic partner (Sprecher, Barbee, and Schwartz, 1995), during long-term relationships (reviewed in Eschler, 2004; Wallin and Clark, 1963), for women who engage in risky sexual behavior (Taylor-Seehafer and Rew, 2000), and for women taking hormonal contraceptives (Caruso et al., 2004). A longitudinal study of romantic couples could investigate the temporal stability or instability of the reasons women pretend orgasm over the course of a relationship. In short, there are many aspects of human sexuality that can influence women’s sexual experiences and these same factors may play a role in how often and why women pretend orgasm. The RPOI is useful for assessing the likelihood of pretending orgasm and the reasoning behind this pretense. As we come to understand more about the psychology of sexual activity, the RPOI will be a useful metric of an individual’s motivation behind sexual deception.

**Received 08 October 2014; Revision submitted 24 November 2014; Accepted 24 November 2014**

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## **Appendix A**

### Reasons for Pretending Orgasm Inventory (RPOI)

*Instructions:* Below is a list of the possible reasons that a woman might fake or pretend to have an orgasm. Please rate how frequently in the past month each item applied to your sexual experiences on the following scale from 0 = never to 9 = every time we had sex.

1. I am mad at my partner
2. Pretending to have an orgasm can get me more in the mood.
3. I don't want to ruin the moment.
4. I want to appear sexier for my partner.
5. The things I do when pretending are considered sexier
6. I want to maintain a healthy sexual relationship with my partner.
7. I don't want my partner to know that I don't feel emotionally connected enough to him to have an orgasm.
8. I want to stop having sex with my partner.
9. I don't want my partner to know that the sex is not pleasurable.
10. I don't want my partner to think that I am having sex with another man.
11. I want my partner to feel good about his sexual performance.
12. I want to relax my partner.
13. I don't want my partner to have sex with another woman (i.e., cheat on me).
14. I want my partner to feel masculine.
15. I don't want to disappoint my partner.
16. I am insecure because I do not have orgasms.
17. I want my partner to have an orgasm.
18. I am planning to use the faked orgasm to get back at my partner for something.
19. I have other things to do, and I want my partner to have an orgasm sooner.
20. I am aware of something that I do during real orgasms and it embarrasses me.
21. I don't want my partner to know that I have feelings for another man.
22. I want my partner to feel confident.
23. I don't want to embarrass my partner.
24. I don't want my partner to know that something is making him less attractive to me that day.
25. I am not having a good time.
26. I want to hide my sexual feelings toward other women.
27. My partner expects me to have an orgasm.
28. I want my partner to think we are having an orgasm together.
29. I want to keep the relationship with my partner harmonious.
30. I don't know how to tell my partner that I want to stop having sex.
31. I am no longer sexually aroused and I am unable to regain that arousal.
32. I already had an orgasm and want my partner to have an orgasm.
33. Real orgasms are not impressive enough for my partner.
34. I don't want my partner to know that he is not a good sexual partner.
35. I am trying to spare him the embarrassment of having had an orgasm too early.
36. I think it is normal for other women to experience orgasm.

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37. I want my partner to feel better about himself.
38. I think I should have an orgasm because that is what is supposed to happen during sex.
39. I want to appear normal to my partner.
40. I don't want my partner to think that I have feelings for another man.
41. I don't want my partner to know that I am having sex with another man.
42. I don't want my partner to know that he is not arousing me sexually.
43. My partner told me to fake an orgasm.
44. I want to get something from my partner.
45. I want to boost my partner's ego.
46. I don't want my partner to know that the sex doesn't feel good.
47. I want to avoid conflict in the relationship with my partner.
48. I want to hide my homosexual feelings.
49. I want my partner to be able to brag to his friends.
50. I am too drunk to have a real orgasm.
51. I don't want my partner to know that I am not sexually aroused.
52. I want to make my partner sexually excited.
53. I want my partner to feel better about his sexual ability.
54. I don't want to hurt my partner's self-esteem.
55. I want my partner to think I am sexy.
56. I don't want my partner to have performance anxiety.
57. I feel ashamed because I rarely have an orgasm.
58. I enjoy tricking my partner into thinking that I am having an orgasm.
59. I want to make sex better for my partner.
60. I wasn't sure how an orgasm would really feel.
61. I don't want my partner to know that he is not satisfying me sexually.
62. My partner is not hitting the right areas for me to have an orgasm.
63. I don't want my partner to know that the sex is painful for me.

Component scoring

*Improve Partner's Sexual Experience*

Sum Items 2-6, 11-15, 17, 22, 23, 27-29, 32, 36-39, 45, 47, 52-56, 59

*Deception and Manipulation*

Sum Items 1, 10, 16, 18, 20, 21, 24, 26, 33-35, 40, 41, 43, 44, 48-50, 57, 58, 60

*Hiding Sexual Disinterest*

Sum Items 7-9, 19, 25, 30, 31, 42, 46, 61-63