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# If you leave, don't leave now: The role of gender, sociosexuality, and fear of being single on desire to engage in breakup sex

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## ABSTRACT

Experiencing a romantic breakup is often a complicated and emotional experience, and in many cases, this emotional ambivalence leads to people having “breakup sex” with their ex-partners. To better understand this complicated relationship stage, we sampled 987 single adults to understand how individual differences in sociosexuality and fear of being single predict one's desire to have breakup sex and previous breakup sex experience. We observed that both men and women who reported more unrestricted sociosexual orientations reported greater desire for breakup sex. However, women—but not men—who reported greater fear of being single reported a greater desire for breakup sex. Lastly, those who reported a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation were more likely to have had breakup sex in the past. Results suggest that both men's and women's desire for casual sex impacts engagement in breakup sex and that women's desire is also motivated by their fear of being single.

## 1. Introduction

The post-breakup period of a romantic relationship is associated with an array of emotions, motivations, and behaviors (Asselmann & Specht, 2022). One such behavior reported by men and women is having sex with their ex-partners. This post-breakup behavior is common; 27 % of adolescents and 14 % of college students reported their last sexual encounter was with an ex-partner (Lewis et al., 2012), and 22 % of divorced individuals reported sleeping with their former spouses (Mason et al., 2012). One common type of ex-sex, *breakup sex*, involves formerly-partnered individuals engaging in post-relationship sex shortly after relationship termination (Moran et al., 2020). However, research on breakup sex is relatively sparse; to date, little is known about the individual differences that predict desire for, and engagement in, this type of ex-sex.

### 1.1. Breakup sex

Breakup sex is conceptualized as a specific form of ex-sex that occurs within two weeks post-breakup (Asselmann & Specht, 2022). The psychological and relationship consequences of breakup sex vary; rather than providing closure at the end of the relationship, it may also lead to

individuals getting back with one another, or may turn the former relationship into on-again/off-again quasi-relationship (Dailey, 2019; Dailey et al., 2020). This relationship can also become a category of friends with benefits, known as the “transition out” friends with benefits relationship. Within this type of friends with benefits relationship, the individuals are ex-partners; they have transitioned out of a monogamous romantic relationship but continue to have sex with one another (Mongeau et al., 2013). Thus, this transition-out breakup sex behavior might serve as a means for the former couple to maintain a relationship until they assess how they feel about one another. This is consistent with previous work on motivators of breakup sex suggesting that one motivation is to think about the future of the relationship and understand whether rekindling a relationship is possible (Moran et al., 2020).

Beyond these general motives, men and women also report different—and similar—reasons for why they would be motivated to engage in breakup sex. Men tend to report feeling more positive about themselves after having breakup sex and tend to want to have breakup sex for hedonistic or pleasurable reasons (e.g., “Sex is fun”) or out of ambivalence (e.g., “I am not sure;” Moran et al., 2020). On the other hand, women tend to report more positive feelings about the terminated relationship after participating in breakup sex (Moran et al., 2020).

Interestingly, in the same study, researchers observed no gender

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difference in wanting to have breakup sex to maintain or rekindle the relationship. Thus, the possibility that breakup sex may rekindle the relationship or lead to a positive post-breakup relationship (i.e., friends) is a motivator for both men and women. Generally, these gender differences map onto evolved mating strategies whereby men's mating strategies are more unrestricted due to the asymmetries in investment (e.g., Trivers, 1972), and is consistent with results suggesting that men are more likely to report having sex for hedonistic reasons, while women are more likely to report having sex for emotional closeness reasons (e.g., Meston & Buss, 2007). Women's lower motivation to have breakup sex for reasons of pleasure and ambivalence may reflect the asymmetrical costs of becoming pregnant with a non-supportive partner. From a more proximate perspective, women's sexual desire tends to decrease over time in long-term relationships (e.g., Murray & Milhausen, 2012), suggesting that on average women may have less desire to have sex with their ex-partners. Additionally, breakup sex can be seen as a form of casual sex and as such women may be less hedonically interested, since heterosexual women report a lower likelihood of reaching orgasm during casual sex (a phenomenon known as the 'orgasm gap'; see Wetzel et al., 2022). Overall, there exist both ultimate and proximate reasons to expect gender differences in the specific motivations for engaging in breakup sex.

### 1.2. Individual differences and sexual behavior

Breakup sex research remains in its infancy, and little is known about how (or which) individual differences influence motivations. Previous work has suggested that post-breakup contact is strongly influenced by personal and individual factors rather than environmental ones (e.g., Lannutti & Cameron, 2002). Two individual factors that are robustly associated with previous ex-partner sex are sociosexuality and fear of being single. Hedonistic motivations can drive individuals to behave in ways to obtain pleasure (Moore, 2019). So sociosexuality—specifically an unrestricted sociosexual orientation—may be related to ex-sex and breakup sex, due to hedonistic motivations.

Sociosexuality is generally conceptualized as one's trait-level desire for casual sex (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Individuals scoring higher in sociosexuality (or who are more "sociosexually unrestricted") tend to have a higher sex drive, have a significantly higher number of lifetime sexual partners, have greater intentions to engage in infidelity, place lower value on chastity in a partner, and behave more sexually on dating and non-dating apps (e.g., Snapchat) to solicit sex (Bakker & Walker, 2020; Marcinkowska et al., 2021; Moran et al., 2018; Ostovich & Sabini, 2004; Urganci et al., 2021).

Of course, people also have a desire to form long-term romantic relationships of some sort (e.g., Kenrick et al., 2010; Pick et al., 2022). Previous research on breakup sex suggests that men and women are equally likely to have breakup sex in order to maintain the relationship, meaning they may desire to rekindle (and re-form) the previous relationship or to remain friends. However, this relationship maintenance may arise in part due to the stress or uncertainty of being able to form another relationship in the future. This individualized construct has been conceptualized as the "fear of being single" (Spielmann et al., 2013). One's fear of being single (or distress that they will be single in the future) may influence motivations to have sex with an ex-partner. Research has demonstrated that many behaviors are aimed at alleviating stress and anxiety as the fear of singlehood negatively impacts one's well-being (Adamczyk, 2017). For example, those more concerned with singlehood have a stronger desire for ex-partners after a breakup, regardless of the timeframe of the breakup (i.e., beyond the short-term timeframe for breakup sex; Spielmann et al., 2016). Those more fearful of singlehood are more likely to "settle" and form relationships that are optimal for them (Spielmann et al., 2013). These findings suggest that those who are more distressed about being single will engage in sexual and romantic behaviors to alleviate these fears, which may end in the formation of a maladaptive relationship (Spielmann & Cantarella,

2020) or might lead to them engaging in sex with an ex-partner.

### 1.3. Overview of the current investigation

The current study assessed how individual differences in sociosexuality and fear of being single predict one's desire to have breakup sex. We investigated the degree to which engaging in breakup sex functions as 1) a means to hedonically enjoy a sexual encounter via sociosexuality and/or functions as 2) a strategy to rekindle a romantic relationship stemming from the distress and uncertainty of singlehood (fear of being single). Therefore, the following preliminary hypotheses were tested in the current study: (H1) Unrestricted (high sociosexuality) men, but not women, will be more likely to report a greater desire for breakup sex, based on previous results suggesting that men are more likely to desire breakup sex for hedonistic reasons (Moran et al., 2020). Secondly, (H2) both men and women who are more fearful of being single will be more likely to report wanting to have breakup sex, given previous results suggesting that both men and women report engaging in breakup sex for relationship maintenance purposes (Moran et al., 2020).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 987 single adults who reported having a sexual relationship (560 women, 427 men, mean age = 36.32,  $SD = 15.39$ ), who participated either via the undergraduate research pool of a university in the southern United States ( $n = 211$ ,  $Mage = 18.45$ , women = 156) or through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (USA only, States ( $n = 776$ ,  $Mage = 41.19$ , women = 404). Power to detect a true correlation of  $r = 0.15$  was over 0.85 in both women and men separately. The sample was primarily White (72.3 %), and the average age of the participants' sexual debut was 17.78 years ( $SD = 3.35$ ), and the majority of participants reported having at least one ex-long-term romantic partner (89.5 %). The majority of participants identified as exclusively heterosexual (81.1 %; preliminary analyses indicated that the focal variables did not differ by sexual orientation), and over a third of the sample had participated in breakup sex in the past (34.5 %; women = 37.5 %, men = 30.7 %). Undergraduate participants were compensated with partial course credit; Mechanical Turk participants were compensated \$1.50 USD.

### 2.2. Procedure and materials

Participants were recruited for a larger study of people who identified as single and who had engaged in sexual intercourse, throughout the Fall 2021 semester. The variables of interest in the present study were secondary variables that were not focal variables of the larger study. All study materials were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. After providing informed consent, participants were asked to report, using a yes or no forced choice, "Are you currently single, that is, you are not in a committed romantic relationship?" and "Have you ever been in a sexual relationship? That is, have you ever engaged in consensual sexual contact with someone? This may be in the form of penetrative sex or touching the other person's genitals?" If they responded yes to both of those questions, they then completed the Sociosexuality Orientation Inventory-Revised (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), the Fear of Being Single Scale (Spielmann et al., 2013), breakup sex desire (standardized), and previous breakup sex experiences (yes or no). They then reported their demographic variables and were debriefed and compensated for their time. All data were collected via Qualtrics survey software.

#### 2.2.1. Sociosexuality

The 9-item Sociosexuality Orientation Inventory-Revised (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008) was used (sample item: "Sex without love is OK." 1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). The 9 Likert items were

averaged to create a global measure and then standardized ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ), with higher scores indicating more favorable attitudes and motivations toward casual sex (unrestricted sociosexuality).

### 2.2.2. Fear of being single

The Fear of Being Single Scale (Spielmann et al., 2013) is a 6-item measure assessing one's distress of singlehood (sample item: "I feel anxious when I think about being single forever." 1 = Not very true, 5 = Very true). A mean composite ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) was created for the six items and then standardized, with higher scores indicating greater fear about being single.

### 2.2.3. Breakup sex desire

Participants were asked one Likert scale question with the endpoints: 1 (Extremely Unlikely) to 7 (Extremely Likely): "For the following question, please picture that you recently ended a romantic relationship. Please indicate your desire to have breakup sex after this said breakup. We define breakup sex as sexual intercourse with an ex-romantic partner that you were in a long-term committed relationship. However, the relationship ended, and sexual intercourse happened after you broke up, but no longer than two weeks after the breakup." This one item question was then standardized for analysis.

### 2.2.4. Breakup sex experience

After responding to the desired question above, participants indicated with a "yes" or "no" whether they had breakup sex in the past.

### 2.2.5. Demographics

Participants finally responded to several demographic questions reported above.

## 3. Results

Preliminary means comparisons (via three independent samples *t*-tests) indicated that men and women did not significantly differ on fear of being single or breakup sex desire ( $p$ 's > 0.50), but, consistent with previous research, men reported being significantly more sociosexually unrestricted ( $d = 0.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 1 shows means and correlations between the central variables for both men and women separately. Overall, breakup sex desire was positively related to fear of being single,  $r = 0.14$ ,  $p < .001$ , and sociosexuality,  $r = 0.37$ ,  $p < .001$ . Sociosexuality and fear of being single was also positively related to one another,  $r = 0.08$ ,  $p = .02$ . Additionally, more women (37.5 %) reported having breakup sex in the past,  $\chi^2(3) = 4.98$ ,  $p = .026$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.07$ , compared to men (30.7 %).

### 3.1. Breakup sex desire

#### 3.1.1. Hypothesis 1 (Sociosexuality)

In order to test the first focal hypothesis, we performed a multiple regression wherein we centered sociosexuality scores, gender (dummy coded men = 0), and their interaction as predictors of desire for breakup sex.<sup>1</sup> Results of this analysis indicated main effects of both sociosexuality and gender ( $p$ 's < 0.001), which were qualified by a significant sociosexuality by gender interaction ( $B = 0.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Analysis of simple main effects showed that, as predicted, sociosexuality significantly predicted desire for breakup sex among men,  $b = 0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95 % CI [0.12, 0.21]; however, inconsistent with the hypothesis, this predictive relationship was significantly stronger among women ( $b = 0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95 % CI [0.24, 0.34], see Fig. 1.

<sup>1</sup> Using ordinal regression produced inferentially identical results for all analyses reported here.

#### 3.1.2. Hypothesis 2 (fear of being single)

In order to test the second focal hypothesis, we performed a multiple regression wherein we centered fear of being single scores, gender (dummy coded men = 0), and their interaction as predictors of desire for breakup sex. Results of this analysis indicated a nonsignificant main effect of gender ( $p = .77$ ) and a main effect of fear of being single ( $p < .001$ ), which was qualified by a significant fear of being single by gender interaction ( $B = -0.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Probing this interaction revealed that, as predicted, fear of being single significantly predicted desire for breakup sex among women,  $b = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95 % CI [0.12, 0.27], however, inconsistent with the hypothesis, this predictive relationship was nonsignificant among men,  $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = .52$ , 95 % CI [-0.05, 0.11], see Fig. 1.

### 3.2. Past breakup sex engagement

A logistic regression was performed to ascertain the effects of gender (men = 0), centered sociosexuality, fear of being single, and their interactions on the likelihood that participants had breakup sex in the past (dummy coded, no = 0). The logistic regression model including the interaction terms was nonsignificant ( $\chi^2(2) = 1.61$ ,  $p = .44$ ). However, the model with just the main effects was statistically significant, ( $\chi^2(3) = 10.12$ ,  $p = .018$ ), and correctly classified 65.5 % of cases. Individuals scoring higher on sociosexuality (Wald = 5.11;  $B = 0.16$ ,  $p = .02$ , 95%CI [1.02, 0.13]) had an increased likelihood of having had breakup sex, Exp (B) = 1.77. Additionally, women were more likely to report having engaged in breakup sex than men (Wald = 8.01,  $B = -0.41$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95%CI [0.49, 0.88], Exp(B) = 0.66). Fear of being single did not predict previous engagement in breakup sex ( $B = -0.12$ ,  $p = .85$ ).

## 4. Discussion

The results can be summarized as follows: for women, both sociosexuality and fear of being single uniquely predicted greater desire for breakup sex, whereas for men, sociosexuality—but not fear of being single—uniquely predicted breakup sex desire. Sociosexuality also positively predicted whether people had engaged in breakup sex in the past. The predictive effects of sociosexuality are consistent with previous work suggesting that sex with an ex-partner is perceived as casual sex (Halpern-Meeekin et al., 2013). For some individuals, then, breakup sex may be a means of shifting a committed relationship into a non-committed one while concurrently exploring other relationships. This finding is supported by previous research suggesting that on-again/off-again partners do not find communicating about their desires for other partners to be a functional part of their on-again/off-again relationship (Dailey et al., 2017).

The current study found that sociosexuality predicted breakup sex desire for both men and women. Previous research suggests that both men and women who are sociosexually unrestricted report greater levels of well-being after casual sex (Vrangalova & Ong, 2014), and that women higher in unrestricted sociosexuality are more likely to reach an orgasm during casual sex encounters (Wongsomboon et al., 2020). Relatedly, there is growing evidence that heterosexual women are less likely than men to reach orgasm when having casual sex (Mahar et al., 2020). This sexual inequality—known as the orgasm gap—may be mitigated during sex with an ex-partner given her partner knows her expectations and desires (e.g., Wetzel et al., 2022). Future work is needed to assess if there is less of an orgasm gap during breakup sex and if breakup sex positively impacts one's well-being.

Women who were more fearful of singlehood reported a greater desire to have breakup sex. This relationship is conceptually consistent with findings indicating that within days of a breakup, people who are more afraid of being single report a greater desire to recommit to their partner (Spielmann et al., 2016). However, this relationship was unique to women. This gender difference may be due, at least in part, to the fact that women tend to be more stigmatized for being single (Byrne & Carr,

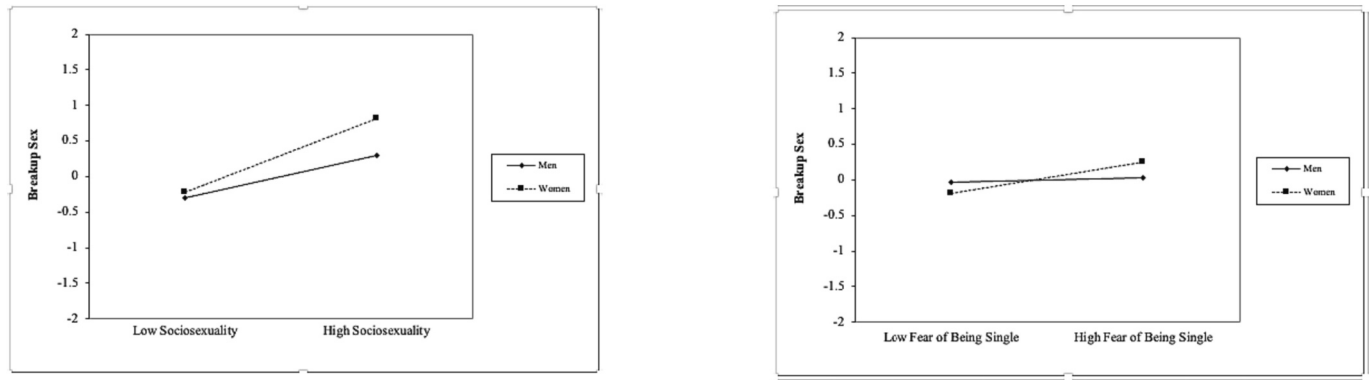
**Table 1**

Means, effect sizes of mean differences between men and women, and correlations between the predictor measures and breakup sex for men and women separately.

Variables	Men M (SD)	Women M (SD)	Cohen's <i>d</i>	1	2	3
1. Sociosexuality	0.37 (1.00)**	-0.28 (0.90)	0.68	-	0.14**	0.45**
2. Fear of Being Single	-0.02 (1.00)	0.02 (0.99)	0.05	0.03	-	0.21
3. Breakup Sex Desire	-0.02 (0.93)	0.01 (1.04)	0.03	0.33**	0.03	-

Note: Mean(Standard Deviation). The mean and standard deviations are standardized. The correlations for the men are in the bottom quadrant, and women are in the top.

\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Fig. 1.** The interaction between gender and sociosexuality (left), and gender and fear of being single (right).

2005) and for having casual sex (Conley et al., 2011). Breakup sex may be a strategy for women to mitigate this stigmatization. Future research should explore why women engage in breakup sex under various circumstances. It is well documented that while many people find singlehood to be an enjoyable experience (Adamczyk, 2021; Apostolou, 2017), it also can be stressful. Thus, one may hypothesize that under conditions where there are very few partners around (e.g., the chances of being single are high), women may be more likely to engage in breakup sex.

Additionally, women reported engaging in past breakup sex more frequently than men. This finding may be explained by the stigma of singlehood and casual sex among women (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Conley et al., 2011). For women, it may be less stigmatizing to sleep with an ex-partner than with a new partner. From a more distal perspective this difference may also reflect an artifact of differences in evolved mating strategies, whereby men have to have a greater desire novel sexual partners compared to women (Buss & Schmitt, 2017). These results may also reflect the mate switching hypothesis (Buss et al., 2017). Under this framework, one switches mates for another mate; here, having breakup sex may be a mating strategy to leave a disinteresting relationship, but to sequester their mate before they begin a new relationship while ensuring that the ex-partner does not find a new partner.

In summary, women are more likely to engage in breakup sex and this may be due to 1) greater stigma regarding being single, 2) greater stigma regarding having casual sex, 3) an attempt to narrow the orgasm gap, and/or 4) a strategy to prevent an old partner from finding a new relationship whilst simultaneously searching for a new partner themselves. There is also the possibility that, given greater male sexual desire on average, a woman seeking break up sex is less likely to be rejected than a man seeking the same from his ex-partner. Future research is warranted to test the difference between these reasons. This study only asked about successful attempts to have break up sex in the past, not attempts that were rejected. All of these factors may play a role in female motivations for break up sex, and as the data indicate here, this may be a more popular mating strategy for women than previously thought.

Future research should also examine the various levels of social stigma for different sexual behaviors, and whether breakup sex more or less stigmatizing for women than other sexual behaviors. Although breakup sex could be classified as a type of casual sex (Halpern-Meekin

et al., 2013), this form of casual sex is different due to the familiarity of the partner (Mongeau et al., 2013). While benefits can be accrued from engaging in breakup sex, such as positive feelings toward the person and wanting to have a pleasurable experience (Armstrong & Reissing, 2015), it would be interesting to see how those benefits compare to the costs of stigmatization and derogation.

Several limitations and opportunities for future work deserve note. First, the first set of analyses aimed to assess desire for breakup sex. Given their sensitive nature, responses to these hypothetical questions could be impacted by perceived social desirability (and, this perceived social desirability may differ between men and women). Although we also captured reported behavioral manifestations via questions of actual breakup sex experience, future research would benefit from conducting prospective studies or even longitudinal methodologies, following couples as they break up to assess their breakup sex desires over time. Additionally, only a third of the participants in the present research reported engaging in breakup sex. Nevertheless, since desire and behavior differ, future research with a larger proportion of individuals who engaged in breakup sex could provide additional nuance to the findings of this research. It is also important to note that this study only examined successful attempts to engage in break up sex in the past; no questions were asked regarding attempts to initiate break up sex that were rejected. This may provide insight on both the general desire to have break up sex and the specific finding that women had break up sex more often.

**5. Conclusion**

Ultimately, the current study provides initial evidence that men and women generally do not differ in their desires to have breakup sex. However, when delving into specific traits, men and women who are higher in sociosexuality and women who are more fearful of being single desire breakup sex more compared to their peers. Additionally, unrestricted sociosexual individuals are more likely to have had breakup sex in the past. This research is the first to begin to understand individual differences in predicting this post-breakup behavior.



## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Data availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2023.112420>.

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