Women’s Lived Experiences of Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationships with Men

by

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A Thesis
presented to

The University of Guelph

In partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology

Guelph, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

WOMEN’S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL COERCION IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN

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University of Guelph, 2014

Research on less forceful forms of sexual coercion in the context of intimate relationships has been limited. One hundred and fifty-two university women participated in a prescreen survey and of the 32.24% who had at least one experience with sexual coercion in their most recent exclusive relationship with a man, 12 participated in an in-depth interview about their experiences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to examine women’s subjective experiences with sexual coercion, particularly less forceful forms, in intimate relationships with men. Results found that while some women interpreted their partner’s sexual coercion negatively, many viewed it as unproblematic and were not particularly troubled by it. The severity of coercion and the context of women’s relationships impacted their interpretations of the coercion, which in turn impacted the effects of coercion on the women and their relationships. Implications for sexual victimization outreach, counselling, and prevention initiatives and sexual health research are discussed.
Acknowledgments

Foremost, I would like to express my appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Paula Barata, for her help and feedback throughout this research process. She has been a tremendous mentor and I am very grateful for all that I have learned from her. I would also like to thank my committee member, Dr. Ruth Neustifter, who has also provided me with valuable advice and feedback. Drs. Barata and Neustifter have challenged me to push myself further and to produce a piece of work that I am very proud of. Furthermore, I would like to thank my participants for their willingness to share their time and experiences for this research. I would also like to express my gratitude to my friends and family for their love, support, and encouragement throughout this process. I would not have made it through this without them.
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Chapter One: Literature Review

Introduction

Sexual coercion is an important and widespread social issue. Despite considerable recent research on the topic, the complexity of actual experience with sexual coercion is not well understood. Sexual coercion involves use of verbal or physical tactics to engage in sexual activity with a person who is unwilling. It can involve verbal pressure or manipulation, persistent pleading, sexual arousal tactics (i.e., unwanted attempts to arouse a partner by sexually touching or removing one’s own or one’s partner’s clothing), use of intoxicants or taking advantage of an intoxicated person, and threatened or actual physical force (e.g., Faulkner, Kolts, & Hicks, 2008; Glenn & Byers, 2009; Hartwick, Desmarais, & Hennig, 2007; Katz & Tirone, 2009; Raghavan, Cohen, & Tamborra, 2014).

Sexual coercion can also involve or result in any range of unwanted sexual activity, including kissing, sexual touching, oral sex, and anal or vaginal penetration (Breitenbecher, 2006; Faulkner et al., 2008; Hall & Knox, 2013; Hartwick et al., 2007; Spitzberg, 1998). Hence, the term sexual coercion often encompasses sexual aggression or violence ranging anywhere from less forceful verbal pressure to attempted or completed rape. For the purposes of the current literature review and analysis, I will use the term sexual coercion to refer to the range of tactics outlined above and will specify when I am referring specifically to sexual assault or less forceful forms of sexual coercion.

Research on sexual coercion has tended to use inconsistent definitions. Although most research has defined sexual coercion as pressure or force to engage in nonconsensual sexual activity (e.g., O'Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman, 1998; Raghavan et al., 2014; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994), some has defined it as instances of unwanted sexual activity (e.g.,
This distinction is important in that an individual may consent to unwanted sexual activity (e.g., Katz & Tirone, 2010; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Measures of sexual coercion are often inconsistent in specifying whether consent was eventually given (e.g., Koss et al., 2007; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004), thus not clearly distinguishing between instances with eventual consent or acquiescence, absence of consent, or nonconsent or continued refusal. Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, and Anderson (2003) note that an act is clearly sexually coercive if a person has already refused an initial sexual advance. Termed postrefusal sexual persistence, acts that might initially be considered noncoercive can be defined as coercive if the person persists after the receiver has said no. However, other studies have not made clear this distinction.

Some researchers also do not include rape or physically forceful sexual assault under the term sexual coercion (e.g., Black et al., 2011). Furthermore, some researchers differentiate between sexual coaxing and sexual coercion. Camilleri, Quinsey, and Tapscott (2009), for example, define sexual coaxing as “a strategy to obtain sex from a reluctant sexual partner by using benign, seductive tactics” and sexual coercion as “a strategy to obtain sex from a reluctant sexual partner by using forceful and manipulative tactics that may result in physical and emotional trauma” (p. 970). Thus, comparisons of prevalence rates of sexual coercion across studies are difficult.

Importantly, sexual coercion is a gendered phenomenon, committed most often by men toward women (e.g., Black et al., 2011; Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Hartwick et al., 2007; Raghavan et al., 2014; Zweig, Barber & Eccles, 1997). The present research will take a feminist stance toward sexual coercion, in which the gendered nature is emphasized and viewed as reflecting and contributing to women and girls’ oppression. Feminist theory views partner
violence as stemming from an underlying societal patriarchal system (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). From this lens, sexual coercion is also viewed as being consistent with traditional gender roles and may be normalized in heterosexual dating culture. Traditional sexual scripts often depict men as sexual aggressors and women as resisters (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which may act to normalize and perpetuate male sexual violence against women. Indeed, many women report expecting to experience sexual coercion in a dating situation, despite their rejection of coercive behaviour (Cook, 1995; Morry & Winkler, 2001). Like other forms of male domination and violence, sexual coercion at both micro and macro levels reflects and maintains power differentials between men and women (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1992).

For the purposes of the present research, I have chosen to focus more on less physically forceful, nonassaultive acts, such as verbal pressure, arguments, and arousal tactics. In line with previous research, I conceptualize coercive tactics on a continuum of increasing severity or exploitation: verbal or emotional tactics such as persist pleading and threatening to break up; sexual arousal tactics such as persistently kissing and touching; more forceful verbal tactics such as yelling; using alcohol or drug intoxication to coerce into sex; and physical force or harm. While I acknowledge that they may or may not match women’s own experiences, perceptions, and language, I will use terms consistent with previous research including more or less “forceful” or “severe”. The physicality of the tactic does not necessarily correspond with the severity. For instance, I label attempts to sexually arouse as a less forceful form of physical coercion and yelling as a more forceful form of verbal coercion.

1 The exact sequence is not consistent across research, nor is it vital to the understanding of tactics on a general continuum of forcefulness.
Most of the research on sexual coercion has not separated physical and nonphysical forms, thus my literature review is necessarily mixed. I do, however, attempt to highlight differences where possible, as well as place particular emphasis on research on nonphysical forms of sexual coercion. I have also chosen to focus on women’s victimization of sexual coercion by men. As shown below, women are more likely to be the victims of sexual coercion compared to men and this coercion is more likely to occur at the hands of men.

**Sexual Coercion as a Gendered Phenomenon: An Overview of Research**

**Prevalence rates and contexts.** Research has consistently found significantly higher victimization rates among women and higher perpetration rates among men. Although prevalence rates for both men and women vary depending on the type of sexually coercive tactic, men are more likely than women to report committing both physical and nonphysical sexual coercion (e.g., Brousseau, Hébert, & Bergeron, 2012; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003; VanderLaan & Vasey, 2009) and women are more likely to report experiencing both physical and nonphysical sexual coercion (e.g., Brousseau et al., 2012; Hartwick et al., 2007; O’Sullivan et al., 1998). Some studies have found that between one in 12 and one in 20 college men report having committed sexual acts that meet the legal criteria for rape or attempted rape (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2013). This, along with other forms of sexually coercive behaviour, is likely underreported (Kolivas & Gross, 2007; Koss, 1992; Spitzberg, 1998; Strang, Peterson, Hill, & Heiman, 2013). Conservative estimates suggest that between 11% and 18% of women have been or will be raped in their lifetimes (Basile, Chen, Black, & Saltzman, 2007; Black et al., 2011; Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007; Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013).
When sexual coercion is defined to include less forceful acts, such as pressure and arguments (thus, not legally constituting rape or sexual assault), as many as three in four women report having experienced sexual coercion and as many as one in three men admit to having perpetrated (e.g., Abbey, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & McAuslan, 2004; DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Koss, 1992; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2013; Senn, Desmarais, Verberg, & Wood, 2000; Spitzberg, 1998; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003; Walters et al., 2013).

The sexual victimization rate for women peaks in the 16 to 19 year old age group, and the second highest rate occurs in the 20 to 24 year old age group (see Koss et al., 1987 for a review). More recent Canadian self-report data (2004) show that the sexual assault victimization rate for the 15 to 24 year old age group is almost 18 times greater than the rate for the 55 and older age group (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). Canadian police reported data from 2007 indicate that 58% of sexual assault victims were under 18 (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008).

University women are particularly likely to be sexually assaulted. A national U.S. study found that 11.5% of women attending American colleges have ever been raped compared to 18% of a national sample representing all U.S. women aged 18 to 86 (Kilpatrick et al., 2007). More importantly, during a single year alone, 5.2% of college women were raped compared to close to 1% of women in the general population. Although they did not compare with a sample of nonuniversity women, Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, and Martin (2009) found that nearly 15% of undergraduate women experienced physically forced or incapacitated sexual assault since entering university. Thus, university women are an important group in which to examine sexual coercion.

Dyadic research on sexual coercion has found that more than one in two university-aged couples have experienced some sexual coercion (Brousseau, Bergeron, Hébert, & McDuff,
Overall, there was high agreement regarding sexual coercion victimization rates between men and women. The overall female victimization rate was 30.6% as reported by the women and 27.0% as reported by the men and the overall male victimization rate was 20.3% as reported by the men and 17.1% as reported by the women. However, the rate of interpartner agreement on the occurrence of individual sexually coercive acts or events within their relationship was low; less than one third of couples who experienced sexual coercion agreed on its occurrence. It was also found that unwanted sexual activity as a result of verbal pressure, arguments, or because the perpetrator was too excited to stop were the most commonly reported reasons for both men and women, whereas sexual activity as a result of physical force was less commonly reported. The authors suggest that less severe coercion may be more susceptible to ambiguous interpretation by partners. This demonstrates the need for better understanding of sexual coercion in less forceful forms as well as in the context of intimate relationships.

Although most research has examined sexual coercion in the context of heterosexual interactions, some research has compared sexually coercive behaviour among both heterosexual and nonheterosexual men and women. VanderLaan and Vasey’s (2009) study, for example, involved 414 men and women and found that heterosexual men were more likely than any other group (i.e., heterosexual women, nonheterosexual men, and nonheterosexual women) to have committed both physical and nonphysical sexual coercion. Nonheterosexual men were also more likely to have committed nonphysical sexual coercion than heterosexual and nonheterosexual women. Thus, men in both groups are more often perpetrators of sexual coercion than women.

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2 Brousseau, Bergeron, Hébert, and McDuff (2011) classified unwanted sexual activity because the perpetrator was too excited to stop as verbal coercion.
3 VanderLaan and Vasey (2009) use the term “nonheterosexual” (instead of preferred terms such as same-sex attracted) to refer to participants who scored an average rating of 1.01-6 on Kinsey ratings (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) of sexual feelings and sexual behavior during adolescence, since age 18, and during the past year.
Sexual coercion in intimate relationships. Sexual coercion is most often perpetrated by men known to women, including acquaintances, friends, dates, and partners (Banyard et al., 2007; Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Hall & Knox, 2013; Jackson et al., 2000; Senn et al., 2000) and is especially common in intimate and longer-standing relationships (Basile et al., 2007; Black et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2000). Although men sometimes use physical force to acquire sex in established intimate relationships, psychological pressure and manipulation are more common (Abbey et al., 2004; Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & McGrath, 2007; Salwen & O’Leary, 2013). This may be because partners can obtain sex from an unwilling partner without using more forceful tactics (Abbey et al., 2004). Additionally, previous consensual sex among intimate partners may create assumptions of future consent or of obligation to continue to engage in further sexual relations (Ewoldt, Monson, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2000; Lazar, 2010; Shotland & Goodstein, 1992).

There is also evidence that women tend to perceive less threat and are less likely to say that they would leave or resist a sexually coercive interaction as the intimacy of the relationship is increased (Faulkner et al., 2008; VanZile-Tamsen, Testa, & Livingston, 2005). VanZile-Tamsen and colleagues (2005) experimentally manipulated the intimacy level of a relationship in written vignettes depicting sexual aggression and they found that as the intimacy of the relationship increased, women perceived less threat and were less likely to say that they would verbally or physically resist.

Similarly, in Faulkner and colleagues’ (2008) study, when women were asked to stop an audio vignette that depicted an interaction of progressive verbal and physical sexual coercion at the point that they themselves would end the date or leave the interaction, women who were told that the scenario depicted a boyfriend of six months allowed the vignette to continue for
approximately a minute longer than women who were told that the scenario depicted a first date. It is noteworthy that at this point in the vignette depicting the boyfriend of six months, the woman already clearly refused the advances three times. She then became verbally upset, but the man ignored her and became verbally aggressive and increasingly coercive.

Although both of these studies used vignette procedures rather than real experiences, the results are still important. It seems plausible, in fact, that the effect is even stronger for women who have actually experienced a sexually coercive interaction, given the complex emotions and potential consequences of resisting in a longer standing relationship compared to a first date. Women in longer standing relationships may have greater feelings for their partner and therefore not wish to upset him, lose his affection, or lose or harm the relationship. VanZile-Tamsen et al. (2005) and Faulkner et al.’s (2008) findings are particularly concerning given that women are often sexually coerced by a partner (Banyard et al., 2007; Basile et al., 2007; Black et al., 2011; Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Hall & Knox, 2013; Jackson et al., 2000; Senn et al., 2000). Women’s traditional sex roles have been theorized to influence this pattern, whereby women are expected to assertively resist sexual advances from acquaintances to avoid being viewed as “easy” but to submit to advances from partners to adhere to their “role” in the relationship (Faulkner et al., 2008).

There has been a dearth of research examining the relational context of sexual coercion in intimate relationships; however, there is some evidence that sexual coercion often coexists with other forms of violence in relationships. For example, Ramisetty-Mikler and colleagues (2007) examined sexual coercion and its association with other forms of violence among married and cohabiting couples and found higher rates of sexual coercion among couples that also reported men’s use of psychological and physical aggression. Similarly, several studies have found that
abusive husbands are more likely to sexually coerce their wives than are nonabusive husbands (e.g., Hogben & Waterman, 2000; Koziol-McLain, Coates, & Lowenstein, 2001). In Goetz and Shackelford’s (2009) study, men’s self-reported scores of controlling behaviour uniquely predicted their sexual coercion against their female partners, and women’s reports of their male partners’ controlling behaviour and nonsexual violence uniquely predicted their reports of their male partners’ sexual coercion.

With respect to relationship satisfaction and commitment as associated with sexual coercion, results have been somewhat inconsistent. Shackelford and Goetz (2004) found a significant negative correlation whereby women who experienced sexual coercion by their partner were less satisfied with their relationship and also perceived poorer quality of the relationship compared to women who had not experienced sexual coercion by their partner. These results need to be interpreted with caution because the authors did not control for nonsexual physical violence and a positive relationship did exist between nonsexual physical violence and sexual coercion.

Katz and Myhr (2008) similarly found that university women who had experienced continual arguments and pressure leading to unwanted sex compared to those who had not, perceived experiencing significantly more frequent general psychological aggression, monitoring, and emotional abuse from their partner. Women with verbally coercive partners reported significantly lower general relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and sexual desire.

Katz, Kuffel, and Brown (2006), however, did not find a significant difference in partner physical violence or relationship satisfaction for verbally sexually coerced and noncoerced women. They also found that partner verbal sexual coercion was not directly associated with
commitment or later relationship maintenance. Women who experienced verbal sexual coercion in their relationship reported greater investment of personal resources to the relationship. The authors theorized that this might be because women interpret sexually coercive experiences as a personal sacrifice or an obligation to appease their partner. Thus, results indicated an indirect effect, whereby partner verbal coercion was associated with greater subjective investment, which was in turn associated with increased subjective commitment. These findings highlight the importance of further research on sexual coercion within intimate relationships. Qualitative research in particular is important for examining contextual factors and lived experiences of sexual coercion.

Associated negative outcomes and subjective reactions. Sexual assault, specifically, has been associated with many negative outcomes for women, including: (1) physical health problems such as chronic illness, chronic headaches, fatigue, sleep disturbance, sexually transmitted diseases, gynecological health symptoms, sexual dysfunction, and unwanted pregnancy (Campbell, Lichty, Sturza, & Raja, 2006; Campbell, Sefl, & Ahrens, 2003; Eby, Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Jozkowski & Sanders, 2012; Koss, Koss, & Woodruff, 1991; Postma, Bicanic, van der Vaart, & Laan, 2013); (2) psychological health problems such as anxiety, humiliation, depression, stress, suicidal ideation, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and trouble concentrating (Elklit & Christiansen, 2010; Gidycz, Orchowski, King, & Rich, 2008; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Ullman & Brecklin, 2003; Zinzow, Resnick, McCauley, Amstadter, Ruggiero, Kilpatrick; 2012); and (3) behavioural problems such as substance use, eating disorders, physical fights, lowered academic achievement, and dropping out of school (American College Health
The negative outcomes of sexual assault can be debilitating and long-lasting; studies have shown that over 90% of adult sexual assault victims meet criteria for PTSD in the week following the assault (Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock, & Walsh, 1992) and close to 50% maintain those symptoms 3 months later (Elklit & Christiansen, 2010; Rothbaum et al., 1992; Steenkamp, Dickstein, Salters-Pedneault, Hofmann, & Litz; 2012). One study found that some negative symptoms may even persist after a decade in about 15% of sexually assaulted women (Kilpatrick, Saunders, Veronen, Best, & Von, 1987). While the effects of sexual assault have been widely researched and relatively consistent across research, the conclusions we can draw from the research on sexual coercion are more limited.

Much of the research on sexual coercion more broadly has tended to examine the negative impacts of both nonphysical and physical forms together, including rape. Research that has combined this range of experiences has found comparable negative effects on women to the research that has examined sexual assault alone, including depression, anger, social isolation, self-blame, lower self-esteem, negative sexual self-perceptions, and restricted sexual decision making (e.g., Breitenbecher, 2006; Katz & Tirone, 2010; Offman & Matheson, 2004; Zweig et al., 1997). For example, although most women appropriately place blame for their sexual victimization on the coercer, many also place some blame on themselves (e.g., Breitenbecher, 2006). In her examination of 944 victim narratives from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), Weiss (2009) found that one in five women who reported an incident of sexual victimization to the NCVS excused or justified the incident, often by “drawing on social...”
vocabularies that suggest male sexual aggression is natural, normal within dating relationships, or the victim’s fault” (p. 810).

Perhaps more importantly, self-blame may exacerbate other negative effects, such as PTSD and poorer recovery (Frazier, 2003; Koss, Figueredo, & Prince, 2002; Najdowski & Ullman, 2009). Breitenbecher (2006) found that when women blamed their sexual coercion victimization on their own character (but not when they blamed it on their own behaviour), they were more likely to experience increased psychological distress. This character self-blame was a stronger predictor than frequency of past victimization and perceived ability to avoid future assaults.

Restricted sexual decision-making is a less apparent consequence of sexual coercion among women. Sexual coercion may hinder a woman’s sense of control and assertiveness in expressing her own desires in later sexual interactions (Offman & Matheson, 2004). Sexual compliance, for example, involves consenting to unwanted sex without sexual desire but in the absence of immediate pressure by one’s partner (Shotland & Hunter, 1995; Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994) and is related to experience with prior sexual coercion (Katz & Tirone, 2010).

Katz and Tirone (2010) found that women who reported partner sexually coercive behaviour were seven times more likely to report later (approximately a month) sexual compliance with the same partner compared to women who did not report partner sexually coercive behaviour. Sexually coercive behaviour undermines a woman’s sexual choices; hence, she may later choose to consent to or not resist undesired sex in the absence of immediate pressure. Qualitative research has found that some women may not distinguish between consent and nonconsent or connect the two to their own desire (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gavey, 1992).
Additionally, some women may not say “no” in fear that their refusal will have no effect and what follows will be construed as rape (Gavey, 1992). These trends may be particularly important in intimate relationships, where there is repeated sexual contact and potentially repeated coercion.

Zweig and colleagues’ (1997) examination of the negative outcomes of sexual coercion found that sexual coercion victimization was associated with lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of anger, depression, and social isolation for both men and women. However, they found that type of sexual coercion victimization (i.e., no coercion, pressure, violent coercion) was differentially related to wellbeing. Specifically, they found that women who reported intercourse in response to pressure (but not rape or sexual assault/abuse) reported higher levels of depressed mood and social anxiety than both noncoerced and violently coerced (rape or sexual assault/abuse but not pressure) women. Pressured women also reported more anger than noncoerced women but not violently coerced women. While the research on negative outcomes of sexual coercion is important, the conclusions we can draw are limited because it often examined both less forceful forms of sexual coercion together with sexual assault or rape. Potentially important differences in the subjective experiences and effects are lost when a wide range of sexually coercive tactics is examined together.

Limited research, however, has begun to specifically examine the negative impacts of verbal and less physically forceful forms of sexual coercion in the absence of more physically forceful tactics. For instance, a few studies have linked low self-esteem and low assertiveness to experiencing sexual coercion but not rape (Testa & Dermen, 1999; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 1998; Zweig et al., 1997; Zweig, Crockett, Sayer, & Vicary, 1999). In their longitudinal study, Zweig and colleagues (1999) found that women who had experienced verbal coercion resulting
in sexual intercourse reported higher levels of depression, anger, and social anxiety compared to women who had not.

Similarly, results from Crown and Roberts (2007) study suggest that psychological distress, including intrusive thoughts, depressive symptoms, self-blame, and life disruption, can result from nonagentic sexual interaction (kissing to intercourse occurring against one’s will) involving minimal intrusion and coercion, albeit less than use of threats, force, or manipulation. Women in Byers and Glenn’s (2012) study who experienced verbal coercion only, compared to those who experienced physical force, blamed the coercer less and experienced fewer trauma symptoms. However, they did not differ in the extent to which they were upset at the time of the incident. These findings, as well as those of Zweig and colleagues (1997), highlight that physical violence need not be present for sexual coercion to be a harmful experience for women. This may be particularly true when it occurs repeatedly in intimate relationships.

These findings have generally been in line with research in the realm of intimate partner violence that has found that psychological abuse has at least comparable negative effects as physical abuse on certain dimensions of victim wellbeing (Abrahams, 2010; Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994; Arias & Pape, 1999; Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; Fortin, Guay, Lavoie, Boisvert, & Beaudry, 2012; Lacey, Dilworth McPherson, Samuel, Powell Sears, & Head, 2013; Pico-Alfonso, 2005; Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006). It has also been theorized that the dominant assumption of rape, suggesting that it involves physical force, may leave many women without a way of articulating or understanding their complex experiences with other forms of sexual coercion (e.g., Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Burt, 1980; Burt & Estep, 1981; Estrich, 1987). Thus, it is important to distinguish between experiences with varying degrees of sexual coercion (i.e., verbal pressure to physical force and unwanted sexual touching to
unwanted sexual intercourse). The current research fills a gap in the literature specifically focusing on experiences and subjective reactions to less physically forceful forms of sexual coercion.

**Qualitative research.** Limited qualitative research on sexual coercion exists. To date, much of this research has examined experiences, effects, help seeking, disclosure, and discourse of rape (e.g., Guerette & Caron, 2007; Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003; Koo, Nguyen, Andrasik, & George, 2013; Wood & Rennie, 1994). Some qualitative research, however, has begun to emerge on less physically forceful forms of sexual coercion. For example, Livingston, Buddie, Testa, and VanZile-Tamsen (2004) examined the nature and consequences of verbal sexual coercion among a representative U.S. community sample of women aged 18 to 30, with a focus on the role of sexual precedence (i.e., a history of consensual sexual intercourse with the perpetrator). The women completed several questionnaires, and those who reported experience with unwanted sexual contact, verbal sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape participated in an individual semistructured interview.

The interviews focused on their most recent sexually coercive experience and the women were asked to describe the experience, including: (1) the perpetrator’s behaviour, (2) their own resistance, (3) their relationship to the perpetrator, (4) where and when the experience occurred, and (5) activities prior to the event. They were also asked to describe the effects of the event on their relationship with the perpetrator and emotional, psychological, or social consequences on themselves. Only transcripts in which the most recent event described was verbal sexual coercion in the absence of rape were included in their current study \(n = 114\). They quantitatively and qualitatively, using Spradley’s (1980) Developmental Research Sequence, analyzed women’s descriptions of their most recent experience with verbal sexual coercion.
The authors coded specific characteristics of the verbal sexual coercion events, including tactics used to obtain sex, resistance to unwanted advances, reasons for compliance, and consequences. Negative, positive, and nonemotionally charged verbal coercion tactics were identified. Negative verbal tactics included threats to end the relationship, verbal aggression, and attempts to elicit sympathy. Positive verbal tactics included use of compliments or promises. Nonemotionally charged verbal tactics included continually requesting, nagging, and pleading.

Negative verbal coercion was used more commonly by perpetrators with established sexual precedence. Tactics involving gaining access (e.g., taking the woman to an isolated setting) were reported in more than a quarter of women with no sexual precedence but in none of the sexual precedence incidents. The authors presumed that this was because a perpetrator with sexual precedence already has access to the woman, including sharing a home or bedroom, or already having isolated interactions. Additionally, men with no sexual precedence typically used positive verbal tactics, including attempts to make the woman feel attractive or loved, or promising further commitment. Although the researchers focused on verbal coercion, nearly half of the women reported having experienced physical coercion tactics, often along with verbal tactics. Most of these physical tactics involved sexual contact, but some women also experienced physical aggression, such as being held down. For most women, sexual coercion was a key factor in their compliance to sexual advances.

The women in the study also described a variety of consequences of the verbal sexual coercion they experienced. Some reported physical consequences including physical discomfort, soreness, pregnancy, and infections. However, most reported only social or psychological consequences including anger, disgust, sadness, and feelings of betrayal. Additionally, most women indicated that the coercion negatively impacted their relationship with the man. For
example, some felt angry, resentful, or like they could not trust him, and some reported ending the relationship. A few women reported long-term depression or anxiety as a result, or making her insecure or cautious about dating. Of the 114 transcripts, 13 women reported no consequences and 3 reported that their relationship improved following the incident. Sexual precedent and no sexual precedent women did not differ with respect to suffering negative affect or long-term distress; however, women with no sexual precedence were more likely to report that the experience negatively impacted the relationship with the perpetrator and these women frequently ended the relationship following the coercive incident.

Like most of the quantitative research, much of the existing qualitative research in this area has examined unwanted sex ranging from less forceful coercion to sexual assault together. Research also sometimes does not separate sexual coercion from sexual compliance (i.e., consenting to unwanted sex without sexual desire but in the absence of immediate pressure by one’s partner); however this may be because many women discuss the two as being intertwined. In reporting on interviews with 21 women aged 28 to 44, Patton and Mannison (1998) found that many women experienced sexual coercion as well as engaged in sex out of feelings of duty, obligation, or guilt.

Rinehart and Yeater (2011) examined university women’s open-ended narratives of their unwanted sexual experiences as outlined in the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss et al., 2007). They sought to examine potential variability between the SES severity categories, including unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape. Their results suggested that there may be contextual differences and similarities between the categories that are not inherent in their definitions. Thus, the assumption that all instances captured in each category are qualitatively similar events may be false. For instance, the narratives revealed that
rape occurs in a variety of relational contexts and that being raped by a stranger may be qualitatively different from being raped by a boyfriend. Women’s reactions to their experiences within the categories were also quite variable. The authors suggest that reactions may be more reflective of contextual factors such as the amount of physical coercion used by the man, whether or not alcohol was involved, and the woman’s relationship with the perpetrator than would be captured by the SES severity categories. The authors contend that the contextual variability within and between SES categories suggests a need for qualitative research to examine contextual factors that might more strongly influence subjective severity than the categories of the SES alone.

Hird and Jackson (2001) compared the narratives of New Zealand and British adolescent boys and girls concerning sexuality and coercion within heterosexual dating relationships. Participants ranged from 15 to 18 years of age and the data came from a larger study in which participants met in same-sex discussion groups to talk about relationships. The authors found that the narratives constructed boys’ sexually coercive behaviour as a normal part of heterosexual dating. The authors suggest that the girls mainly drew on very limited discourses whereby femininity and sexuality are defined in terms of male needs and desires. Additionally, female sexuality was often constructed with “gate-keeping” functionality, whereby girls are responsible for controlling male sexuality. Almost all of the girls in the study reported being pressured, coerced, or forced to have sex with a partner. Unwanted sexual touching was most commonly reported and most of the girls experienced sexual coercion by boys known to them. The authors also found that, for many girls, constant pressure to engage in sexual activity “wearied them into submission” (p. 37). Although some experiences and narratives of sexual coercion may differ between adolescents and adults, the overlap between this adolescent sample (15 to 18) and
university aged students suggests that the above findings may still be relevant to university women.

More recently, Romero-Sánchez and Megías (2013) conducted single-sex focus groups to examine Spanish university men and women’s talk about nonconsensual sexual encounters. Both groups discussed men as perpetrators and women as victims. There were several notable differences between the discourse of the men and women. While both groups discussed sexual assault in casual dating relationships, women described it as having a high prevalence and men as having a low prevalence. The discussions between the male and female participants also differed with respect to perceived causes of sexual assault. Men generally listed factors related to the perpetrator including alcohol consumption, physiological need, and frustrated sexual energy. Women tended to refer to miscommunication and socio-cultural factors including power imbalances and male-chauvinist attitudes. These factors were also discussed by each respective group in terms of exonerating a perpetrator from responsibility. Furthermore, while women suggested that men often misinterpret women’s behaviours, men blamed the subtlety of women’s messages as the cause of confusion. Finally, while neither group suggested that a woman should be blamed for her sexual assault victimization, both groups discussed certain behaviours, such as dressing provocatively or making advances toward men, as increasing her risk or “asking for it”.

Gavey (1992) used women’s discourse surrounding their experiences of unwanted and coerced sex, ranging from less forceful coercion to rape, in heterosexual relationships to demonstrate the operations and effects of male dominance through disciplinary power. Disciplinary power occurs when women’s own desires and behaviours are regulated to obey patriarchy in ways that conceal gendered power relations (Diamond & Quinby, 1988; Gavey, 1992). Her analysis assumed that “sexuality is deployed in ways that are directly related to
relations of power” (p. 327) and that this is both reflected and enacted by dominant, androcentric discourses of sexuality. She theorized that women engage in self-policing in order to comply with normative heterosexual narrative scripts, which can involve women’s participation or acquiescence irrespective of sexual desire. She was mainly interested in instances of the effects of disciplinary power that act to regulate women’s behaviour so that direct force or violence are not necessary to maintain power relations favouring men’s sexual desires.

Many of the women in Gavey’s study described experiences in which knowledge about what is “normal” in a sexual encounter determined their sexual practice. This included knowledge about how long it is acceptable to go without having sex with a partner, coitus as defining sex, and sex being an assumed part of dates among partners with limited privacy or time together. Additionally, Gavey found that some women may engage in unwanted sex because it does not occur to them to question it, because they may not have the language to say no (or fear that saying no would have no effect), or because they feel a lack of control over the process. For some of the women, not signalling nonconsent was described as a way to prevent the outcome from being construed as rape. Gavey also discussed instances whereby women may not distinguish between consent and nonconsent or connect the two to their own sexual desire.

Similarly, in their thematic analysis of 22 undergraduate women’s descriptions of their experiences with unwanted but consensual sex, Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) found that both gendered norms (e.g., women’s passivity and subordination of women’s sexual desires) and neoliberal norms (e.g., personal responsibility) played important roles in women’s discussions of their experiences with unwanted sex.

Burkett and Hamilton (2012) found similar results in their discourse analysis of Australian women’s talk about their perceptions and experiences with consent negotiations in
intimate and casual heterosexual relationships. Neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility permeated women’s talk about their experience of violence and inequality, whereby it is a woman’s responsibility to assertively communicate her sexual choices and, if she does not, it is not a man’s fault should he proceed with sexual advances. The women’s adherence to these ideals also appeared to influence their view that nonphysical pressure and coercion do not constitute a violation of sexual autonomy. Additionally, their analysis found that women’s negotiations of consent in both casual and intimate relationships were shaped by norms encouraging women’s sexual compliance. For some of the women, this was in response to a partner’s verbal pressure or manipulation.

French (2013) used focus groups and thematic analysis to examine how Black adolescent girls navigate sexual expectations and coercion, with specific focus on the influence of racialized and gendered scripts. Many of the girls believed that by taking a moral stance against sexual activity, they could resist both negative reputations and sexual victimization. Some discussed this in relation to the wish for girls to be aware of their own desires and to challenge expectations of promiscuity. Girls sometimes held other sexually active girls responsible for interpersonal coercion because they believed that boys pressured them because other girls were having sex. Threat of losing a boyfriend was discussed as both a direct and indirect form of coercion. While some girls explained that boys threatened to end the relationship to pursue someone else, other girls explained an unspoken knowledge that this could happen.

Edwards et al. (2014) conducted a content analysis on women’s descriptions of their resistance to sexual assault. Relevant to the present research, many of the women included discussion around self-blame, minimization, and normalization of their sexual assault. These women claimed that the assault was “not a big deal”, that it “could have been [worse]”, or that
“[things like this] just happen” (p. 11). With respect to self-blame, some women claimed that the assault was their own fault for not saying no. Several women also discussed “giving in” or “caving”, especially in response to verbal or emotional tactics (e.g., accusing her of being a bad girlfriend) in relationships marked by greater intimacy. In these cases, giving in was often discussed along with concerns about maintaining the relationship.

Harned (2005) conducted a phenomenological analysis on the process of labeling unwanted sexual experiences with a dating partner as sexual abuse or assault. She found that women often reported labeling their experiences as sexual abuse or assault because there was physical force, no consent, physical resistance, or because they experienced negative physical or emotional impact. This labeling also often did not occur immediately, but gradually through social support, gaining educational information, sobering up, thinking about the incident, realizing the negative impact of the incident, learning that the perpetrator had previously done similar things to other women, or going through a process of personal growth. Most of the women (78.5%), however, did not label their unwanted sexual experience with a partner as sexual abuse or assault. Some of the reasons they gave included issues of consent (e.g., having given coerced consent), self-blame, lack of physical force, having had the ability to stop it but chose not to, having had no serious harm, or being unsure about how to label it.

Relatedly, Deming, Krassen Covan, Swan, and Billings (2013) used grounded theory to explore how university women interpret ambiguous rape scenarios. Women in focus groups were presented with three vignettes depicting scenarios that met the legal definition of rape but that might have been considered ambiguous because of the presence of rape myths, alcohol, varying degrees of consent, and a known perpetrator. Indeed, the presence of alcohol or misinterpreted signals, such as the woman kissing the man, led some women to excuse the man’s behaviour.
Many also felt that it was a woman’s responsibility to ensure her own safety in such environments, particularly when the man was an acquaintance. Some women suggested that the woman in the scenarios could have done more to stop the incident by leaving or resisting, displaying clearer nonconsent, or not drinking alcohol. Some also labeled the scenarios as “just the way men are” (p. 475). Scenarios that the women felt were common among friends and acquaintances were often justified as happening “all the time” and were less likely to be labeled as sexual assault or rape. Some women were not sure how to label the scenario when the rape did not involve penile penetration and when nonconsent was less clear.

Other recent qualitative research has examined women and girls’ experiences with sexual assault disclosure (e.g., Ahrens & Aldana, 2012; Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013; Moors & Webber, 2012), revictimization and recovery from sexual assault (e.g., Ranjbar & Speer, 2013), motivators for reporting sexual assault to police (e.g., Taylor & Norma, 2012), and experiences with sexual assault nurse examiners (e.g., Fehler-Cabral, Campbell, & Patterson, 2011). Recently, qualitative researchers have also begun to examine sexually coercive experiences among sexual minority women (e.g., Budge, Keller, & Sherry, 2014).

Qualitative research focusing on the lived experience of sexual coercion within intimate relationships and the meaning that women place on these experiences greatly contributes to our understanding of this phenomenon. The present research places particular emphasis on women’s experiences with a partner’s sexual acts or advances that occurred without consent or following an initial refusal rather than their own acquiescence to unwanted sex in the absence of immediate partner pressure, though the two are related. The possibility that some women submitted to their partner’s coercion or eventually consented and some women continued to resist, left, or their partner stopped the coercion was left open. Additionally, sexual coercion that involved, led to, or
attempted to lead to any sexual activity ranging from kissing to vaginal penetration was included. It was also not required that participants self-identified their experiences as sexual coercion.

**Summary of the Literature and Rationale for the Proposed Research**

The purpose of the present study is to qualitatively examine: (1) women’s experiences, including subjective reactions and emotional responses, with a male intimate partner’s sexual coercion; and (2) women’s accounts of the relational context within which sexual coercion occurs in intimate relationships with men. Given the qualitative nature of this research, I did not make predetermined hypotheses (see Theoretical and Analytical Approaches section for a more detailed explanation).

Quantitative research has established that women’s experience of less physically forceful acts of sexual coercion is a common occurrence (Abbey et al., 2004; DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Koss, 1992; Senn et al., 2000; Spitzberg, 1998; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003; Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013) and has a number of negative outcomes such as low self-esteem, low assertiveness, and higher levels of depression, anger, and other psychological distress (Crown & Roberts, 2007; Testa & Derme, 1999; Tyler et al., 1998; Zweig et al., 1997; Zweig et al., 1999). Quantitative research has also highlighted the gendered nature of sexual coercion (Brousseau et al., 2012; Hartwick et al., 2007; O’Sullivan et al., 1998; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003; VanderLaan & Vasey, 2009) and emphasized important differences in the experience of sexual coercion for men and women (Byers & Glenn, 2012; O’Sullivan et al., 1998; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994; Zweig et al., 1997). Although quantitative work has demonstrated the prevalence and harmfulness of sexual coercion, it has provided little insight into context, including why it occurs and how it is experienced.
Qualitative research has also greatly contributed to our understanding of the gendered nature of sexual coercion and has provided context for how women experience it. Specifically, it has highlighted various characteristics and consequences of coercive tactics (e.g., Livingston et al., 2004; Rinehart & Yeater, 2011), the normality of sexual coercion within heterosexual dating (e.g., Hird & Jackson, 2001; Romero-Sánchez & Megías, 2013), issues of consent, desire, and compliance as related to experiences of sexual coercion (e.g., Gavey, 1992), and the importance of gendered and neoliberal norms in the occurrence of sexual coercion (e.g., Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Limited research has examined the negative impacts of less violent forms of sexual coercion (e.g., verbal pressure, arguments, and arousal tactics) in the absence of more violent tactics. Some research suggests that physical violence need not be present for sexual coercion to be a harmful experience for women (Byers & Glenn, 2012; Crown & Roberts, 2007). Additionally, sexual coercion is most often committed in long-term relationships (Black et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2000) and the experience may be very different in this context (Faulkner et al., 2008; VanZile-Tamsen et al., 2005).

The above findings demonstrate the need for a better understanding of sexual coercion in both less forceful forms as well as in the context of intimate relationships. A focus on the lived experience of sexual coercion within intimate relationships and the meaning that women place on these experiences greatly contributes to our understanding of how women interpret and live with various forms of sexual coercion. Thus, phenomenological methods are used to add women’s voices and perspectives to the body of knowledge that already exists and to contribute a deeper examination of the complexities of sexually coercive experiences and the relational contexts in which they occur.
Chapter Two: Method

Prescreen

Procedure. An online prescreen questionnaire was used to identify women who had at least one experience with sexual coercion in their most recent heterosexual relationship to participate in interviews. Upon obtaining approval by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board (REB), participants were recruited to complete the prescreen questionnaire through two sources: (1) psychology students through the Psychology Department Participant Pool and (2) nonpsychology students by posting advertisements around campus.

The study was advertised as being about women’s intimate experiences in dating relationships with men, including sexual experiences that may have been unwanted or distressing. The participant pool only advertised this study to female students. All advertisements for the study (i.e., Participant Pool and campus posters) specified that I was recruiting only women whose most recent dating relationship: (1) was with a man, (2) was exclusive/monogamous, (3) occurred at least partially within the past year, and (4) lasted at least three months. They also specified that women needed not still be in the relationship as long as he was her most recent partner. Thus, they must have been currently in that relationship or single. It was not required that this be a current dating relationship so as not to exclude women who may have already ended a relationship with a sexually coercive partner. This inclusion was relevant because the present research attempts to address the relational context in which sexual coercion occurs, including commitment to an intimate partner. I also included a single screening question at the beginning of the prescreen questionnaire (see Appendix A) to ensure that only eligible students were permitted to access the remainder of the survey.
Women were first presented with a consent form and asked to agree electronically. The consent form explained that some participants would later be invited to participate in an individual interview to discuss and elaborate on the experiences that they outlined in the questionnaire. Following the consent form, participants were directed to a page ensuring they met the eligibility criteria. If they indicated that they did, they were directed to the background and prescreen questionnaires. At the end of the survey or anytime a participant withdrew from the study, a list of community resources that could be accessed for assistance was presented.

Participants. One hundred and fifty-two participants completed the prescreen questionnaire. Five withdrew from the original sample of 160, one did not begin the survey, and two completed the survey twice, in which case only the first attempt was retained. Of these women, 49 (32.24%) had at least one experience with sexual coercion in their most recent past or present relationship. One hundred and fifty-two women was a sufficient sample from which to invite women with diverse ethnicities and sexual histories, including diverse sexually coercive experiences, to participate in the interviews. The purpose was not necessarily to be representative of the population from which I drew (i.e., University of Guelph women).

Measures. A background questionnaire was developed for this study to determine age, gender, ethnicity, university information (such as year and major), and dating information (such as sexual orientation, relationship status, and dating experiences; see Appendix B). The prescreen questionnaire measured experience with sexual coercion using the Sexual Experiences Survey–Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV; Koss et al., 2007), a revised version of Koss and Oros’ (1982) Sexual Experiences Survey. Respondents are asked to indicate for each item, in a yes/no format, whether a person has engaged in the behaviour and, if so, how many times. The design of the SES is valuable because items are not labeled as “sexual coercion”, thus it can
include respondents who do not identify with the term or who may not have defined their experiences as such. The SES-SFV has been widely used as a screening tool (Koss et al., 2007) and respondents do not find it to be overly distressing (Edwards, Kearns, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2009; Johnson et al., 2012).

The SES-SFV is meant to measure the level of sexual victimization that women have experienced by someone in the past 12 months. Because item wording was not permitted to be modified, additional instructions were added to the beginning of the survey asking respondents to answer all questions about their most recent past or present relationship that (1) was with a man, (2) was exclusive/monogamous, (3) occurred at least partially within the past year, and (4) lasted at least three months. The SES uses a 4-point scale to measure how often each act has occurred through different sexually coercive tactics (see Appendix C). Questions regarding the relationship participants were responding about were added to the beginning of the questionnaire (e.g., gender of the partner, length and current status of the relationship, etc.).

The original scoring of the SES is meant to give the following categories: nonvictim (no attempted or completed coerced sexual activity), sexual contact (physically coerced sexual contact/touching), sexual coercion (attempted or completed verbally/emotionally coerced oral, anal, or vaginal sex/penetration), attempted rape (attempted physically coerced oral, anal, or vaginal sex/penetration), and rape (completed physically coerced oral, anal, or vaginal sex/penetration; Koss et al., 2007). For the purposes of the present study, the scoring was modified such that a response of 1 or more incidents of tactics a to b (including verbal and emotional tactics) for sexual activities 1 through 4 (including sexual touching, oral sex, vaginal penetration, and anal penetration) was scored as having experienced less forceful sexual coercion. Additionally, a response of 1 or more incidents of tactics a to b for sexual activities 5
through 7 (including the partner trying to engage sexual touching, oral sex, vaginal penetration, and anal penetration, even though they did not occur) was scored as having experienced attempted or resisted less forceful sexual coercion. A response of 1 or more incidents for all remaining items was scored as having experienced attempted or completed forceful or violent sexual coercion.

Though the SES has generally been found to have Cronbach’s alphas on the lower end of acceptability (typically in the low .70s; see Cecil & Matson, 2006 for a review), this may be due to the inappropriateness of this model of reliability for this measure. This model may inappropriately assume that sexual victimization influences all unwanted experiences on the SES and that these experiences are necessarily interrelated (Koss et al., 2007). Relevant to the present study, Koss et al. suggest that the purposes for which the SES is used (i.e., measure of prevalence, selection tool, predictor variable, or outcome measure) do not theoretically require that women’s experiences be interrelated.

**Interview**

**Procedure.** After collecting prescreen information, I recruited women who indicated some experience with sexual coercion victimization in their most recent relationship to participate in an individual interview. I invited women who had relatively diverse amounts and types of experience with sexual coercion, including verbal coercion only, verbal and physical coercion, having experienced coercion only once, and having experienced it many times. I also invited women who had relatively diverse sexual and relationship histories, including number of past romantic and sexual partners and types of sexual activity engaged in with the partner in question.
Although the study’s focus was on less violent or forceful forms of sexual coercion, I still invited some women whose responses to the prescreen questionnaire indicated experience with physical force tactics or sexual assault (in addition to less violent tactics). These experiences may be relevant to their experiences with less forceful sexual coercion and the relational context within which they occurred. Thus, all participants must have experienced nonphysical sexual coercion, but some also experienced more violent or physically forceful tactics. I also included women who experienced attempted coercion (i.e., coercive tactics that were resisted or did not lead to the intended sexual activity) and completed coercion (i.e., coercive tactics that did lead to the intended sexual activity).

Eligible women were ranked in order of precedence to be invited based on diversity of sexually coercive experiences and ethnicity. The first ten women were invited, followed by the next ten after some women declined. Two additional smaller rounds of recruitment were carried out until the sample was sufficient to acquire a wide range of sexually coercive experiences. A total of 27 women were invited and 12 were ultimately interviewed for the current analysis.

The women were informed of why they were being invited and of the purpose of the research they were being invited to participate in, that is, to elaborate on the experiences outlined in their online survey. The term “sexual coercion” was not used in any communication with participants. I emphasized that all interviews would be audio-recorded. To improve recall, it was required that both the prescreen questionnaire and interview questions be answered about the most recent partner that they dated at least partially within the past year. I did not require that participants self-identify their experiences as sexual coercion as past research has found that women are less likely to acknowledge an experience as rape when the perpetrator is an intimate partner (e.g., Kahn et al., 2003) and may have a harder time articulating a sexually coercive
experience that does not involve physical force (e.g., Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Burt, 1980; Burt & Estep, 1981; Estrich, 1987).

Interviews were conducted in a psychology research space at the University of Guelph. Upon arrival, the women were first asked to sign the consent form. All interviews, upon consent, were audio-recorded in full. If a participant did not wish to be audio-recorded, the interview would not have taken place (though this never came up). After each interview, participants were given a list of available community resources that could be accessed for assistance.

**Participants.** A total of 27 women were invited to participate in an interview. Three did not respond, nine declined, and 15 agreed but one did not show up. Of the 14 women who completed an interview, two were excluded from the final analysis for not meeting the eligibility criteria. The final 12 women were aged 18 to 21 (\(M = 19.25\)) and most identified as heterosexual (\(n = 10\); one wrote “female” for sexual orientation and another did not respond). The majority of the women identified as White/European (\(n = 10\)), while one identified as South Asian and one as Black/African/Caribbean. Participants were from a wide range of university majors including Psychology; Biomedical; Hotel and Food Administration; Agriculture; Child, Youth, and Family Studies; Arts and Sciences; and Brain and Cognition.

Participants had varied relationship and sexual histories. They reported having been in between one and four exclusive, committed romantic relationships (eight women reported one to two relationships and four women reported three to four relationships) and having between zero and ten past sexual intercourse partners (\(M = 2.17, SD = 2.92\); see Table 1 for more details on participants’ sexual histories). Participants had been with their most recent past or current partner (the man they answered the interview questions about) for three months to four years (\(M = 20.08\) months, \(SD = 13.80\) months) and none had lived with their partner. Half of the participants were
still in a relationship with their partner at the time of the interview. Participants experienced a
range of sexually coercive experiences as reported in the prescreen questionnaire (see Table 2).

**Interview Format.** I conducted individual semistructured interviews with the women
recruited from the prescreen questionnaires. At the beginning of the interview, participants were
asked to think about their most recent relationship that lasted at least three months and that
occurred at least partially within the past year. Four questions guided the interviews, followed by
probes when necessary (see Appendix D). Each participant was asked to:

1. Describe her relationship with the man at length.

2. Describe at length an incident of sexual coercion (i.e., a time when her partner wanted her
to engage in sexual activity with him when she did not want to).

3. Depending on her response above, describe at length an incident of *nonphysical* or
   *physical* (if there was one) sexual coercion.

4. Describe how the incident(s) of sexual coercion affected her and her relationship with her
   partner.

Participants were then given the opportunity to discuss anything they felt was missed in
the interview. These questions were used merely as a guide and participants were encouraged to
elaborate or raise additional issues on their own (see Theoretical and Analytical Approaches
section for a more detailed explanation). Throughout the interviews, I emphasized that I was
interested in both positive and negative experiences and reactions associated with the incidents
and their relationships more generally. The time of the interviews varied but took approximately
20 minutes to one hour.
Chapter Three: Theoretical and Analytical Approaches

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded for emergent themes regarding subjective experiences of being the recipient of sexual coercion within the context of a dating relationship. The data were analyzed primarily from a phenomenological framework, specifically, using Smith’s Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; e.g., Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Phenomenology is mainly concerned with personal experiences of a phenomenon and how people make sense of that phenomenon, rather than attempting to produce an objective statement about it. Phenomenology also recognizes the importance of context. This method was appropriate given my interest in women’s subjective lived experiences with sexual coercion in the context of an intimate relationship.

IPA in particular aims to explore detailed perceptions or accounts of personal lived experiences, while recognizing and emphasizing the active role of interpretation by both participant and researcher in making sense of those personal accounts. In this sense, it is hermeneutic and places more emphasis on interpretation than does descriptive phenomenology (e.g., Smith, 2004). IPA assumes a connection between people’s cognition, affect, and discourse but recognizes that it is not possible to access a person’s life world; thus, IPA understands that the researcher may be required to interpret meaning, including interpreting emotional state through what people say.

IPA is idiographic in that it aims to say something in detail about the experiences of a particular group rather than to make general claims. Thus, the claims that come from this research are not considered generalizable outside of this group of women. Universal claims will be possible only after further research has been done with university women and more diverse samples with respect to age, ethnicity, country, sexual orientation, and so forth. Research
questions are formed broadly and openly and there is no attempt to test predetermined hypotheses, hence my decision to formulate general research questions without hypothesizing as to their results.

IPA recommends use of small sample sizes (i.e., 1 to ~15) and an attempt to recruit participants for whom the topic is personally relevant and who can offer a meaningful perspective on the phenomenon (purposive sampling; e.g., Smith, 2004). Discussing recent intimate relationships was personally relevant for all the women in this study; however, whether or not sexually coercive incidents were personally meaningful varied. I chose to allow for this variation because it speaks to the experience of sexual coercion.

In using IPA, an attempt should be made to identify and keep constant variation that matters. Given that university aged women are particularly likely to experience sexual victimization, age was held relatively constant. Nonetheless, some women did discuss coercive incidents that occurred before university in their interviews. Additionally, only participants who identified as women and who had recently been in a relationship with a man were invited to participate in the interviews.

While IPA analyses can be conducted using data from a range of sources, the semistructured interview may be most appropriate (e.g., Smith & Osborn, 2007). Smith and Osborn (2007) suggest that semistructured interviews allow for a dialogue between the researcher and participant in which initial questions can be adapted to the participant’s responses. Participants should be viewed as experiential experts and given ample time to tell their own story. Researchers using IPA generally construct an interview schedule in advance, thinking about the broad range of issues they hope the interview will cover, with several relatively open questions and probes only when necessary. More specific questions should generally be used
only when participants are hesitant. Relatedly, it can be beneficial to allow participants to first give their own views to a very general question before funneling them into more specific questions of interest to the researcher.

Although not meant to be prescriptive, the founder of IPA, Jonathan A. Smith (e.g., Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2007), offers a step-by-step approach appropriate for analyses using IPA. I used these steps as a rough guide for my analysis:

1. Reading and rereading the transcripts to engage with the data.
2. Initial noting of the semantic content and language on a descriptive level.
3. Developing emergent themes, looking especially for objects of concern to the participant and the meaning that she/he makes of them. Caution must be made to ensure that connections between participants’ words and the researcher’s interpretations are not lost.
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes and developing superordinate themes with excerpts from the data to support them.
5. Moving to the next case (unless conducting a single case study) and conducting steps 1 through 4.
6. Looking for patterns across cases to reach a broader, more theoretical level. Both convergences and divergences in the data should be recognized. A final list of superordinate themes should be decided on, based not necessarily on prevalence but on the richness of the passages that highlight the themes.
7. Writing up the themes into a narrative account by explaining and illustrating them with verbatim excerpts from the data. The results are often discussed in relation to the extant literature on the topic.
There is considerable debate among feminist researchers about appropriate and productive research frameworks for advancing women’s issues. Some suggest that authority be given to women’s own voices and experiences, especially since others have traditionally defined and misconstrued them (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Miller, 1986). In contrast, the push towards a more constructionist approach whereby language is viewed as constitutive of experience stems from the argument that phenomenological approaches that privilege women’s voices move “parallel to hegemonic discourse” (e.g., Weedon, 1987, p. 110) and thus cannot challenge dominant discourses and power relations. Despite the importance I place on women’s voices and perspectives, I, like some other researchers using phenomenological approaches (e.g., Langdridge & Butt, 2004; Rather, 1994; Svedlund, Danielson, & Norberg, 1994), have sought to engage more critically with the data so as to acknowledge and identify power relations embedded in experience.

While IPA is concerned with an “insider’s perspective” of lived experience, it allows for the possibility of different levels of interpretation, including asking critical questions of the text that participants may be incapable of themselves (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Eatough, Smith, & Shaw, 2008; Smith, 1996; Smith, 2004). These different possible levels of interpretation in IPA relate to Ricoeur’s (1970, 1981) distinction between an empathic (demythologizing) and a suspicious (demystifying) process in attempting to understand meaning in text (e.g., Smith, 2004). While the former views lived experience as existing independent of language and thus trusts that experience can be extracted from content of talk, the latter involves interpretation that goes beyond face value of the text (Ricoeur, 1970 as cited in Langdridge, 2007; Langdridge & Butt, 2004). Ricoeur suggests that both levels of interpretation are possible because text becomes
separate from the original context of when it was spoken, allowing a critical analysis of the structure of the text (as cited in Langdridge, 2003; Langdridge & Butt, 2004; Sullivan, 2012).

Ricoeur suggests that a hermeneutic of suspicion can come from sources such as psychoanalysis and Marxism; however, Langdridge (2003) argues for one that borrows from work in discursive psychology (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and critical discourse analysis (e.g., van Dijk, 1993), whose purposes are to uncover function, construction, and variation in the text. While IPA generally involves a middle position between hermeneutics of empathy and suspicion, becoming more questioning only if prompted by a close reading of the text, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggest that it is “possible to couple an IPA analysis with one more formally adopting hermeneutics of suspicion” (p. 106). This can come from psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, or critical theory but should be presented separately from the empathic reading.

Thus, the current analysis begins with an empathic phenomenological approach whereby women’s lived experiences are given central focus and their words are taken to reflect that experience, but later introduces “moments of suspicion” (Langdridge, 2007) whereby interpretation of that experience through language is used to explore “how experience is created and shaped by different sets of power relations within the text” (Sullivan, 2012, p. 11). In following with Smith’s (2004) IPA, the critical analysis in the current study came after the empathic reading of the text throughout steps 1 through 7 (outlined above) and still acts to uncover the meaning of the experience. In addition, the critical interpretation through language is incorporated into the discussion section following the empathic interpretation in the analysis section that is closely grounded in participants’ words. However, the analysis section,
particularly the final theme, does include some connections that the participants themselves did not make directly.

Combining these two levels of interpretation enables me to simultaneously capture the embodied, phenomenological meaning of the text and hidden meaning through the use of language, including the reproduction of oppressive discourses and ways in which experience is constrained by gendered power relations. Thus, I examine language for both content and function in order to fill gaps in using either one level of interpretation on its own. Although there are limitations to combining two approaches (e.g., potentially conflicting epistemologies), I believe it opens possibilities for new and more nuanced understandings of women’s experiences with sexual coercion.

Past researchers have similarly combined these two approaches to interpretation, for example: (1) Langdridge’s (2007) Critical Narrative Analysis, a phenomenologically informed narrative analysis that includes an attempt to critically examine tone and rhetorical function; (2) Larkin, Watts, and Clifton’s (2006) attempt to balance hermeneutics of empathy and suspicion in their IPA research on breakups; and (3) Leeming and Boyle’s (2013) discussion of using both a contextual constructionist thematic analysis and a Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore the management and repair of shame. In the latter example, Leeming and Boyle (2013) reflect on the value of using two approaches and suggest that while the thematic analysis identified aspects of the subjective experience of shame, the addition of a discursive analysis uncovered the contradictory and ambivalent nature of shame and its connection with power relations.

Validity and Quality Checking

Various quality-checking procedures were carried out before, during, and after data analysis. Before any formal coding and analyses were made, participants were given the
opportunity to review their transcript (a process called participant validation); however, none wished to do so. As Smith et al. (2009) suggest for IPA research, care was taken during the process of analysis in grounding claims in the participants’ accounts and the analysis includes a considerable number of verbatim extracts. This, in part, allows the reader to check the interpretations being made. A process of triangulation was also carried out throughout the research whereby the data and analysis were cross-verified to see if they generally matched past research and theory on sexual coercion.

**Role of the Researcher**

Smith’s IPA recognizes and emphasizes the active role of interpretation by both participant and researcher in making sense of personal accounts (e.g., Smith, 1996, 2004). Thus, Smith (2004) does not advocate for the use of bracketing, but rather a process of reflexivity. Whereas bracketing involves setting aside previous understandings, knowledge, and assumptions about the phenomenon throughout the research process, reflexivity involves a critical awareness and foregrounding of conceptions and assumptions so they do not prevent new understandings and representation of participants’ personal views and experiences. In addition to this reflexive process, throughout the research I checked my own interpretations against the individual transcripts as well as against the data as a whole and the extant psychological literature.

Though I have not personally experienced sexual assault, I have a longstanding personal and academic interest in women’s health issues and violence against women. I completed my honours thesis in the area of cyber intimate partner violence and am currently working as a research assistant for a National Sexual Assault Resistance Randomized Controlled Trial. I have also volunteered in a food bank and homeless shelter for women, interacting with many women who experienced domestic violence. Finally, I have conducted interviews with victims of
domestic violence as part of a practicum placement for a collective of domestic violence victims’ services agencies. These experiences have enhanced my knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity to the issues being addressed in this study and helped in my interaction with participants. I also recognize that these experiences have contributed to my feminist values and to my assumptions and biases regarding violence against women.

My personal and academic goals also contribute to my assumptions and biases in this research. I am interested in contributing to the feminist psychological literature and in creating social change, particularly surrounding women’s issues on a broader social level. I place importance on bringing women’s voices to the forefront of creating this change. I am also explicit in that my research operates from a feminist lens, in which sexual coercion is viewed as being consistent with problematic traditional gender roles.

Chapter Four: Analysis

Illustrative excerpts from the transcripts are identified by pseudonyms chosen by the participants. Ellipses are used to indicate both pauses in participants’ sentences as well as omission of words or sentences without altering the speaker’s meaning. Care was also taken not to take participants’ words out of context. The following themes and subthemes were developed based on the structure of the interviews and the emergent data:

1. Sexual Coercion Tactics
2. Subjective Reactions and Emotional Responses to Sexual Coercion
3. Interpretations of Sexual Coercion
   a. Nonnegative Interpretations
      (i) Minimizing Sexual Coercion
      (ii) Contrasting Sexual Coercion
(iii) Justifying Sexual Coercion

b. (Overtly) Negative Interpretations

4. Relational Context within which Sexual Coercion Occurs

5. Effects of Sexual Coercion
   a. Effects on Relationship
   b. Effects on Self
      (i) Internalization
      (ii) Giving in to Sexual Coercion

6. Interrelatedness of Tactics, Reactions, Interpretations, & Context

**Theme 1: Sexual Coercion Tactics**

Participants experienced both physical and nonphysical sexually coercive tactics including: complimenting, guilt or relational pressure, pouting or expressing disappointment, continually asking or trying to convince, making jokes or mocking her choice, attempting to sexually arouse or expressing how aroused he is, disregarding nonconsent, taking advantage when drunk, getting angry, and using mild or strong physical pressure or force (see Tables 3 and 4 for women’s ranges of sexually coercive experiences as described in the interviews).

Sexual coercion was typically an attempt to acquire unwanted sexual intercourse but sometimes was an attempt to acquire other sexual activity like oral sex or new sexual activities the woman had not done before. It was never described as an attempt to acquire kissing alone, but sometimes included (un)wanted kissing or other sexual activity that might have occurred before intercourse.

Positive verbal tactics such as complimenting or sweet-talking were commonly used to try to coerce women into sex following a refusal. Nikki gave an example of complimenting when
she noted, “…he’ll just start like complimenting me, he’s like but you’re just so…hot”. Sarah discussed sweet-talking: “…he was like oh, he misses me and he wants me to stay and he doesn’t want us to fight anymore…he wanted to be closer”.

Although less common, two women described situations where their partner made jokes about consent or about their decline. Carly said, “He’s like…I’ll just like give my mom all my kisses”. Nikki said, “…sometimes I’ll even say like no means no and then he’ll just be like…no means yes”. While the men in these two instances framed the jokes more positively, Jade described an argument where her partner more aggressively and angrily mocked her decision not to have sex: “…he started like poking me and being like, does me touching you make you uncomfortable…is this not okay?”

Other negative verbal tactics that the women experienced included using guilt or relational pressure to coerce them into sex. Examples included the man threatening to break up with her, implying that she must not “love [him] anymore”, and pointing out all of the “nice things” he has done for her.

More neutral verbal tactics included nagging, continually asking, or trying to convince (e.g., reminding her how good it feels, requesting small acts at a time). Sophie’s partner told her that she “[couldn’t] really stop” once she had begun a sexual act, that is, giving him oral sex. Some men would pout or express disappointment when the women refused sex, including ignoring her or being quiet or upset after she said no. Nikki illustrated this when she said, “…he’ll like pout like sometimes he’ll like turn away and like we won’t like cuddle at all”.

Arousal tactics were very common and generally involved continual sexual touching such as kissing or touching her body after a woman refused sex. Most women who experienced this knew that their partner was trying to arouse them. For example, Nikki said, “What he thinks he’s
doing is he’s trying to like…seduce me into wanting to do it”. Other men would express how aroused they were either by telling their partner or “pressing [their] body into [hers]”.

A few of the women experienced incidents where their partner disregarded or did not take seriously their nonconsent. This typically involved physically touching them after a refusal, as in Jade’s experience: “…he would want to finger me but I wouldn’t want him to so he just kept like putting his hand down there and like trying and I’m like pushing it away”. For others, like Carly, it involved just initiating sex after a refusal:

…he was like oh like, you wanna try like something new and I was like no like I don’t think so and then he’s like no like take off your pants so I was like no like I don’t really want to. And then like suddenly I think he just like took off my pants…then we were like having sex… (Carly)

Sophie described a situation where she felt that her partner “took advantage of [her] a little bit” while she was “not really in the right state of mind” because she was intoxicated and angry with him. Although she was coherent and they did not end up having intercourse, she felt that he was trying to take advantage of the situation “to satisfy his own needs”. While other women did experience coercion when they were intoxicated, Sophie was the only one to describe in her interview that she felt taken advantage of. Others did not link the occurrence of sexual coercion with the fact that they were intoxicated, though Sophie and Sarah did connect coercive incidents to their partners’ intoxication.

More forceful tactics like getting angry and using physical force or pressure were much less common among the women in this study. Two women experienced situations where their partner became angry and started yelling or arguing when the women said that they did not want
to have sex. Sometimes other coercive tactics were used in conjunction, such as relational pressure or threats:

...I wasn’t in the mood, I just wanted to go to bed. And then he started to get like angry with me. And like why don’t you wanna have sex and you don’t love me anymore and like yelling at me... (Jade)

Mild and strong physical force or pressure were experienced by a few women, including men using their strength or stature in order to attempt to engage in their desired sexual activity:

…and then he’d try to pull me closer and then like just get on top of me and start kissing... (Later in interview): …or if you’re like cuddling and you are trying to like, if I’m trying to like get out of the bed or like leave, he’d just be holding me tightly to the point that I like...can’t fight off his like h—grip around me. (Sarah)

It was common for the women to experience a number of different coercive tactics during and across encounters. For example, arousal tactics were sometimes used in conjunction with positive or neutral verbal tactics such as complimenting or trying to convince. When one tactic was unsuccessful, some men would stop while others would continue with another tactic. Examples included expressing disappointment after arousal tactics were unsuccessful and using relational pressure after trying to convince was unsuccessful. Nikki gave an example of trying to convince after arousal tactics were unsuccessful: “…he just like starts…touching me…I’m like moving his hand away and like no like leave me alone…And then…he’s always like baby…like come on, just like one time, like I’ll just be really gentle”.

Similarly, those men who did use more severe tactics such as yelling or using physical pressure or force, often did so after less forceful verbal coercion such as guilt or relational pressure or arousal tactics were unsuccessful. Jade explained, “…he’d like take his hand and like
put it here…and I like pushed it away…And then he threatened to go stay at somebody else’s house…and then he started to like yell at me”. However, it was less common for men who used either severe verbal tactics (e.g., yelling) or physical pressure to use more positive verbal tactics like complimenting in the same or different encounters. Likewise, men who used positive verbal tactics such as complimenting were less likely to use yelling or physical pressure or force tactics. Getting angry or yelling always involved negative verbal tactics such as guilt, threats, or relational pressure.

Several of the women also described a very repetitive process where their partner would use the same coercive tactics every time she refused or would stop then start the process over again in the same interaction. Nikki exemplified this when she said, “…when I say no, he’ll like stop, but then in a couple minutes he’ll start again”. In Carly’s experience, her partner would pressure her into small acts at a time and then use her previous compliance to pressure her into increasingly progressive sexual acts: “…eventually I just like caved in like little ways …and…then the next time he’d be like oh like the next step you know”.

Sexual coercion almost always occurred while the couples were in a private bedroom; however, one woman described a situation where her partner was also continually requesting and pressuring her to have sex one night over dinner.

**Theme 2: Subjective Reactions and Emotional Responses to Sexual Coercion**

Sexual coercion was associated with many different subjective reactions and emotional responses for the women in this study. In direct response to their partners’ coercion, the women felt guilty, annoyed, frustrated, angry, hurt, and, in one case, scared. Firstly, almost all of the women experienced guilt or feeling “bad” in direct response to their partner’s sexual coercion. This was particularly true for men’s use of guilt tactics, expressing disappointment or sadness, or
ignoring her. Sometimes this emotional response occurred in addition to general feelings of guilt for not having sex or fulfilling their “duty” as a girlfriend. Nikki described this when she said, “I’ll be like, okay well like he hasn’t seen me in a while, like…I’m here like I should, I’m his girlfriend…that’s what girlfriends and boyfriends do (laughs)...I feel guilty that I am saying no”.

Annoyance and frustration were commonly described as reactions to a partner’s use of guilt or relational pressure, continual attempts to convince, or pouting. Ann was annoyed that her partner would compare their relationship to his friends who were already having sex because his friends “aren’t the ones in the relationship”. Madison was also “annoyed that [her partner] wouldn’t stop” trying to convince her to have sex when she was too tired.

Similarly, some were frustrated that their partners would continue to pressure them after they had indicated that they did not want to have sex. Frustration was particularly common if the women felt their partner did not understand where they were coming from or why they did not want to have sex. For example, the women who wanted to wait until marriage to have sex commonly felt frustrated because their partners either did not understand or were not respectful of those wishes. Ann said, “he knows how I feel about it…It’s really frustrating that he’ll still continue to like pressure me to”.

Although less common, some women felt angry or “ticked off” with their partner for not listening to their declines to have sex, and this response generally occurred when they felt their partner was being selfish or disrespectful of their decision not to have sex. Ashley sometimes got upset because she “didn’t expect that [sex] would be the only thing…on [her partner’s] mind”. Michaela was mad at her partner for being mad that she was not ready to have sex for the first time.
Some also described a more hurt or sad reaction to their partner’s continual verbal pressure to have sex. Catherine, who was not ready to have intercourse for the first time, felt hurt that her partner continued to pressure her until she finally gave in: “…it hurt…he knew that like I didn’t want to do it and that I was basically just doing it for his sake”. Hurt feelings were also sometimes experienced in combination with anger and jealousy, particularly if men used relational pressure. Although Sarah was hurt and angered by her partner’s words, she still felt like she needed to prove herself to him:

...sometimes obviously words hurt. And he’d be like…you’re not the only girl out there or something or how it’s easy to find somebody else, like all these girls want me...And then that would just make me feel sort of...jealous and angry at the same time and that I had to prove a point I guess. (Sarah)

Jade described feeling scared and hopeless during a situation where her partner was getting very angry and yelling at her when she did not want to have sex:

...he was my boyfriend so he was supposed to be like protecting...if my protector can’t even save me from this situation then who will? Like I just felt hopeless. I was terrified, like I was so scared to the point that I thought I was gonna get raped. (Jade)

Sarah, who described a situation where her partner did not listen to her when she said she did not want to have sex and went “on top of [her]” and started kissing her, similarly described feeling “vulnerable” and “smaller than [her partner]”. She felt like she could not “control the situation” by saying no.

Thus, more forceful tactics like yelling and physical force or pressure were generally associated with more negative emotional reactions for the women in this study. Some made a
direct comparison between how they felt after less and more forceful forms of coercion. For instance, Jade was nervous and mildly angry when her partner used less forceful forms of coercion, such as verbal pressure without yelling and touching her, but was scared when he was more forceful. Catherine made a similar comparison. When her partner became angry after she refused sexual activity, it made her “upset and angry”. When he became sad or pouted after her refusal, it made her feel guilty and “made [her] want to want to [have sex]”.

In contrast, however, Sarah, who was one of the few participants to have experienced both physically forceful and verbal forms of sexual coercion, said that she was more hurt by her partner’s use of guilt and relational pressure than when he disregarded her declines and went on top of her to have sex. She explained, “I think definitely like telling me that you could find [sex] someplace else would be the worst situation ‘cause that just hurts you like more on the inside”.

It was also common for the women to worry about their partners’ feelings during a sexually coercive situation. The women were worried that, if they said no, it would hurt his feelings or self-esteem or make him think she was not attracted to him or did not love him. Jennifer was worried about hurting her partner’s feelings and self-esteem: “I just want him to like feel better about himself, ‘cause I feel like it kind of lowers his self-esteem thinking that I don’t wanna have sex”. Michaela was also worried about hurting her partner’s self-esteem and connected this to her own feelings of guilt: “…he thinks like I don’t wanna have like sex with him and maybe that made him feel bad about himself and that’s why I was feeling guilty”. Jessica discussed being worried about making her partner “feel like [she doesn’t] love him or think he’s attractive”. These types of descriptions were often more prominent than descriptions of the women’s own feelings in response to their partners’ coercion.
Theme 3: Interpretations of Sexual Coercion

**Theme 3a: Nonnegative interpretations.** Commonly, the women did not interpret their partner’s coercion as unequivocally negative, but rather minimized, contrasted, and justified the sexually coercive behaviour. In a few cases, sexual coercion was even viewed positively, such as being charming or complimenting. This was generally when the man was persistent, complimented her, made jokes about it, or showed her how turned on he was. Carly gave an example of this when she said, “He was just really persistent, which made it like more attractive”. Jessica felt that it was complimenting when her partner showed her how turned on he was:

> I would feel like more pressure but it’s a different kind of pressure...he seems like he’s really attracted to me right now so maybe I should just go ahead and do it...it’s more of a ...I would like to like thank you (laughs) for being attracted to me so much... (Jessica)

**Theme 3ai: Minimizing sexual coercion.** It was common for the women to minimize their sexually coercive experiences. Some women saw sexual coercion as a normal part of relationships. This was particularly true for less forceful forms of coercion such as verbal pressure, arguments, and arousal tactics. For example, Jessica viewed her partner’s verbal pressure as “just a part of the relationship…an argument that [they] had and [got through]”.

Other women spoke about their sexually coercive experiences as though they were not a big deal. Madison explained that, during times when she was too tired to have sex and just wanted to go to sleep, her partner could say things like “it’ll be fast” to convince her: “I know I won’t fall asleep within 5 minutes anyways (laughs)...So like he...doesn’t touch me or anything,
he’ll just say something [to convince me to have sex] and it’s kinda like, alright (laughs), I’m in! (laughs).

Minimizing often occurred with less forceful coercion that ended in acquiescence, but it was not limited to these kinds of experiences. Carly described a situation where her partner just began having sex with her after she had said she did not want to, yet she did not interpret it as rape, but rather as sex just happening suddenly and that she just did not appreciate it. She said, “I guess he just wanted to be like my first, but I didn’t appreciate that”.

**Theme 3aii: Contrasting sexual coercion.** This theme involved participants contrasting their sexually coercive experiences with something more severe. At times this involved contrasting their partner’s less forceful verbal pressure to yelling or getting angry after they said no. For example, Ann said, “…he doesn’t, like, get angry or anything, he just like, is quiet after and it’s like, I can tell he’s upset about it”. Nikki similarly contrasted her partner’s coercion with something more severe when she said, “…he never threatened me or like really get mad at me…I know he’s annoyed by it…But he’d never really be like…mean to me about it”. Carly contrasted her partner’s use of verbal pressure and guilt with getting angry, which is something she says she would not have accepted:

...he would say stuff like that [verbal persistence and guilt tactics] but he would never like, like call me names or anything and never like really get angry... ‘Cause if someone just like got like mad at me...I would be like who do you think you are (laughs). (Carly)

Others contrasted their coercive experiences such nagging or verbal pressure with physical force. Ann illustrated this when she said, “…he doesn’t like force me or anything, he’ll just like…nag me about it”. Jessica similarly said, “…it’s not like he hit me or did anything
physical. He just would kind of express it in words”. Catherine contrasted her partner’s continuance of sexual activity knowing there was not true consent with physical force: “…he didn’t necessarily like force himself upon me, but umm he knew that there wasn’t really consent. Like I gave it, but not really fully”.

Ashley explained that sometimes her partner did not let her do what she wanted sexually and would just physically move her to do what he wanted, yet she separated this from physical abuse: “…he wouldn’t abuse me, he’d just like…’cause he’s like stronger than I am, right? So like, he would just kind of like…overpower me in a sense and just do whatever he’d like”. These contrasting explanations came independently of asking participants if they had experienced physical or more forceful forms of sexual coercion.

Theme 3a(ii): Justifying sexual coercion. Many of the participants included an explanation or justification along with their descriptions of their partner’s sexual coercion. Some justified sexually coercive behaviour, such as pouting or telling her she’s not fulfilling his needs after she has refused sex, based on their partner’s personality. For example, Jennifer explained that her partner is “the youngest in his family” and is “used to like pouting and getting what he wants”. She explained that this is why he gets really disappointed and pouts when she refuses sex, especially if she agreed to it earlier in the day. Ashley said she is sometimes “okay with it” when her partner tells her she is not fulfilling his needs after she refuses sex because she “[knows] his personality” and that “he would say something like that”.

Others justified their partner’s sexually coercive behaviour based on the situation. For example, Sarah excused her partner’s coercion because he was drunk and “alcohol has an effect to make you…hornier”. Catherine felt that her partner’s pressure was understandable when a limited opportunity for privacy presented itself:
...we were both living at home, like with our parents, so we didn’t have like many opportunities [to have sex]...but then when we went to his cottage in the summer...he just wanted to like every night. And I didn’t necessarily want to. Umm but like I kind of understood...it’s an opportunity, so. (Catherine)

Some participants justified their partner’s coercion based on their own behaviour. For example, Ashley justified her partner’s attempts to convince her and telling her she was “ruining things” after she said no to sex as “reasonable” because she had originally agreed to have sex on their prom night and then changed her mind when the time came.

Finally, several women justified their partner’s sexual coercion on the basis of male sexual urges. Ashley exemplified this when she said, “I’m always kind of thinking something like okay well he’s a guy and he has these desires...he has his needs”. Jessica similarly illustrated this when she explained her partner’s reaction to when she refused sex: “I know that sometimes he does get frustrated because...he’s a boy (laughs). Definitely wishes that we could have sex like a lot more often than it’s possible”.

**Theme 3b: (Overtly) negative interpretations.** Although typically less prominent than nonnegative interpretations, most of the women interpreted at least some of their partner’s coercion overtly negatively. These negative interpretations included considering their partner’s sexual coercion disrespectful, selfish, immature, a poor way to treat a partner, and controlling. Negative interpretations generally occurred whether or not the coercion led to the intended sexual activity.

Firstly, some of the women interpreted their partner’s coercion as disrespectful to their feelings and reasons for not wanting to have sex, such as being too tired or not feeling well. This was particularly common for the women who wanted to wait to have intercourse for moral or
practical reasons. Ashley did not feel comfortable having sex often because it went against her moral and cultural values that she and her family held and she felt that when her partner pressured her, he was “not really respecting [her] views”. Michaela, who wanted to wait to have sex for the first time because she did not want to get pregnant, also felt that her partner was not respecting her “decision not to wanna have sex” when he got angry after a refusal.

Relatedly, some women saw their partner’s coercion as selfish, inconsiderate, or like he was not seeing her side of things. Sometimes this interpretation occurred in conjunction with the view that he was being disrespectful. For instance, Nikki felt that her partner “wasn’t really understanding where [she] was coming [from]” or respecting her discomfort with having sex during her period. Others felt that their partner was being selfish and not considering their feelings and reasons for not wanting to engage in sexual activity:

*I feel like he, he’s not seeing my side of it, like he’s letting his, the fact that he’s like so horny like (laughs) get in the way like, oh well maybe she did have to like write a whole paper today or like has to wake up at 8 o’clock in the morning...* 

(Jennifer)

Jade felt that it was “very immature” for her partner not to listen to her feelings and become angry when she did not want to have sex.

Sophie described an incident where her partner had taken advantage of her and the situation to “satisfy his own needs”. She had only agreed to kissing and was angry with him when he tried to have sex with her. She felt that she was “not really in the right state of mind” to have sex because she was drunk and because she was still angry about an argument that they had had minutes before. Another woman felt that her partner was being inconsiderate about her feelings and related this with his desire to obtain power over her. Sarah explained: “I would see
that clearly he enjoys like…being superior to his partner. That…at times he didn’t care to listen or …be considerate of your feelings towards [having sex].”

Finally, one participant described her partner’s coercion as a poor way to treat a partner. Although Carly did not interpret her partner’s coercion particularly negatively while she was in the relationship, she later came to understand that it was a poor way to treat her and that men should obtain continuous consent:

...hearing examples of other people that like when boys like don’t pressure...that’s when I kinda realize like oh I didn’t have to be like treated that way...So it’s not that bad until I like compare like other people like my friends being like oh no like if you were to have sex with a guy, I think he should like ask if you’re okay like every three seconds and like you know you really want to and like that’s how it should happen... (Carly)

Overtly negative and nonnegative interpretations were sometimes made in conjunction. For example, though Ashley felt that her partner was being disrespectful of her wishes when he continued to pressure her, she also justified it based on his male “needs”. Though Jennifer felt that her partner was being selfish, she justified it based on his personality. These simultaneous negative and nonnegative interpretations were particularly true for less forceful verbal pressures, such as complimenting tactics. Carly exemplified this when she said, “he’s like oh you can’t wear like a skirt like that and like not expect me to like…want you, which is like nice in like a little way but…also not nice”.

Additionally, nonnegative interpretations were sometimes part of descriptions of later reflections about coercive experiences, in which case interpretations and subjective reactions during the incident were overtly negative. For others, however, negative interpretations were part
of later reflections. Carly, for example, only came to view her partner’s coercion as a poor way to treat her after they had broken up.

**Theme 4: Relational Context within which Sexual Coercion Occurs**

Sexual coercion occurred in a variety of relational contexts including both otherwise “happy” and “healthy” relationships and relationships already experiencing difficulty, including a controlling male partner, a “rocky patch”, and the woman being on the fence about breaking up with her partner or being unsure about whether she was into the relationship anymore. It also occurred in local and long-distance relationships, longer- and shorter-term relationships, and more casual and serious or committed relationships with intense feelings. Some of the women described not seeing their partner as much as they would like, while others saw him almost daily. One participant, Carly, met and dated her partner while she was living abroad for several months.

Some of the women reported having really good communication in their relationship while others reported that they were “not good at [communicating]”. Carly felt that she “[couldn’t communicate too easily ‘cause…[her partner] already had his idea of who he thought [she] was and he was like in love with that”’. Others reported that despite “[communicating] well” with their partner, issues they were facing in the relationship never “[got] better”. Many of the women felt very comfortable with their partner and like they could tell him anything. For example, Jade said, “With him I could talk about anything and everything and we were very open with each other, very comfortable with each other”.

Not only did sexual coercion often occur in otherwise happy and healthy relationships, but also by seemingly otherwise nice men. Although some did reflect on ways their partner treated them poorly, was possessive, or made them feel badly about themselves, most described that their partner treated them “really well” or even “like a queen/princess”. Some of the women
also reflected on how their partner treated them better during the happier times of their relationship compared to when things were rockier or going downhill, which sometimes included increased sexual coercion.

Sexual coercion also occurred for women with varied sexual histories, including having engaged in a range of sexual activities with their partner from kissing only to intercourse, before having intercourse with any partner for the first time, and after years of intercourse and other sexual activities (see Table 1). During the time of their partners’ coercion, several of the women had wanted to wait to have sexual intercourse for moral, religious, or cultural reasons, for practical reasons like not wanting to get pregnant, or because they were not ready.

Sometimes sexual coercion occurred in conjunction with more general, underlying and sometimes unspoken pressure to have sex. This implicit pressure involved knowing: (1) that their partner wanted to have sex often or much more frequently than them, (2) that their partner wanted to have sex for the first time, (3) that it was uncommon for them to be able to see their partner without it leading to sex, or (4) that sex is a requirement to maintain a relationship.

Jessica gave an example of feeling unspoken pressure that sex is a requirement to maintain a relationship: “He’s almost silently forcing me…I feel a need to like satisfy him or whatever, so it’s like a pressure to do that”. She also discussed feeling pressure because her partner wanted to have sex more frequently than she did: “…sometimes I feel like, yeah we should have sex more often but I definitely feel like he’s more…sexually motivated than I am”.

Nikki explained that it was uncommon for her to be able to see her partner without it leading to sex: “…he says…like I wouldn’t even care…if we didn’t [have sex] when I saw you…But like…I know (laughs) that would never happen”. Similarly, some women also described sometimes wanting to engage in sexual activity other than intercourse, but that their
partner always assumed it had to lead to intercourse. For instance, Nikki said, “…he’s like oh like but obviously [kissing] would lead to more”.

**Theme 5: Effects of Sexual Coercion**

**Theme 5a: Effects on relationship.** Sexual coercion had negative effects on some of the women’s relationships. Men’s sexual coercion led to more arguments in some relationships and sometimes made the women view their partner differently. The latter included coming to view their partner as immature, as only in the relationship for sex, as not caring about their feelings, or as enjoying being superior or in control.

For some of the women, continuous pressure to engage in sexual activity (whether or not it ever led to the activity) contributed to an emotional “barrier between [them]” or women’s diminished romantic feelings for their partner. This was particularly true when men continued to pressure or coerce despite knowledge that the women wished to wait until marriage to have sex. For example, Carly described how her partner’s coercion made her feel less close with him and less like she wanted to be intimate with him. Catherine similarly felt that she “couldn’t trust [her partner]” when he continued to pressure her knowing she was not ready to have sex.

Sarah felt as though her partner’s control over their sex life (and relationship in general) made her lose her own role in the relationship. When asked what impact her partner’s sexual pressure had on her relationship, she replied, “Making me feel lesser of like who I am…and losing my role in a relationship…to the point where he was like, the leader…just dominant I guess is how you say it”.

Men’s sexual coercion also negatively affected some of the women’s sex lives. Ann, who wanted to wait until marriage to have sex, sometimes no longer “[looked] forward” to other sexual activity, like kissing, with her partner because she was afraid he was always going to “try
to…convince [her] to [have intercourse]”. Catherine similarly felt that her partner’s pressure to have intercourse made the sexual activity they did engage in “less enjoyable” and loving. She explained, “…it didn’t really help it to be like a fun thing. And it felt less about love or like maybe it was love but tinged with like pressure and guilt and everything”.

Although sexual coercion did not affect most of the women’s commitment to their partners, it did for Jade and Carly. Jade explained that she broke up with her partner three days after his most forceful use of coercion (i.e., getting angry and yelling) and that the two were directly related. Carly, who wanted to wait until marriage to have sex, also felt less committed to her partner when he constantly tried to pressure her into sex:

...it just made me like...take steps back and like...realize that like I didn’t want to be with someone where I’d have to be like oh like it’s night time like that’s what that means...I didn’t wanna have to be like afraid of that or like felt pressure for that or like feel like used for doing sexual activities. So that made me like, yeah definitely like less committed. (Carly)

For others, sexual coercion did not have any effect on their relationship or their general lasting views of their partner. Some felt that their partner’s coercion did not lead to “any negative change in [their] sex life” or that it was just part of “getting more comfortable” with their partner sexually and learning what he likes. Ashley said that “as long as [her partner remained]…the kind of guy that he is” (she saw him as generally a “really great person”), his coercion would not “drastically change” her sexual relationship with him or the way she saw him. She did worry, however, that if she remained “as lenient as [she was] about like what he wants [sexually], then maybe [he would] just always get his way and…always overpower [her] at everything”.
For others still, sexual coercion had a positive, albeit indirect, effect on their relationships. For example, although Jennifer was originally bothered by her partner’s coercion because “it made [her] think he didn’t really care about [her]”, she came to feel closer with him because of a conversation that came from his coercion. She noted that after this conversation she knew they were “on the same page”. Similarly, Jessica felt that her partner’s sexual pressure had not negatively affected their relationship because it was just an argument that they had and got through; she felt “more emotionally connected” with her partner knowing that they got through it.

**Theme 5b: Effects on self.** Sexual coercion also had negative effects on some of the women themselves. For one participant, sexual coercion affected her ability to trust men. After her relationship with her partner, Sarah had a hard time trusting men “emotionally and sexually” and “their intentions”. She linked this directly to her partner’s use of complimenting and sweet-talking in order to have sex with her:

*I don’t trust in their words because of that experience…how he talks and how he says he misses me and oh you’re so pretty and you’re so beautiful and I really feel like you’re the one for me and this and that, so when guys would try to like I guess…date or talk to me after the breakup, it would sort of sound like something like that.* (Sarah)

**Theme 5bi: Internalization.** More commonly, sexual coercion affected how the women felt about themselves. Namely, women internalized their sexually coercive experiences by: (1) questioning their own behaviour or making sexual coercion about themselves, and (2) blaming themselves for its occurrence. Firstly, internalization often involved feeling guilty about not wanting to have sex or worrying that there might be something wrong with them for not wanting
to have sex. Often these types of responses came directly after questions about their reactions to his behaviour and at times continued when I tried to clarify or emphasize what I was asking. For instance, after having described a sexually coercive experience, a couple of women labeled these instances as “times where…[they] don’t always wanna have sex” rather than times that their partner pressured them.

Some women were more concerned about their not wanting to have sex than about their partner’s coercive behaviour. They were worried that there was something wrong with them for not wanting to have sex as often or for not being ready to have sex for the first time. Catherine gave an example of the latter when she said, “…with all the pressure and the guilt…it felt like there was like something wrong with me…I was worried I was going to be like a 40 year old virgin”. Jessica was worried there was something wrong with her for not wanting to have sex as often as her partner:

_It also like gets to the point where you’re like…is this normal for me to not want to do it as much as you…like should I be feeling a different way? (Later in interview): I feel almost like ashamed or wondering if I, if I should be feeling more towards it or like why am I not wanting to [have sex] all the time._ (Jessica)

Similarly, some described feeling like a “bad girlfriend” or like they were not “sexually pleasing” their partner. Sophie described a situation where she wanted to stop giving her partner oral sex because her friends were downstairs. Although she felt frustrated at first when her partner suggested that she could not stop in the middle of the act, she later felt that “maybe [she] was just being a little bit selfish” and that both partners in a relationship should “want to satisfy each other”.
Sometimes the women acknowledged that they did not approve of their partner’s pressure but also were concerned that they were not doing enough for him. Though Ashley did not approve of her partner telling her that she is “not meeting his…sexual needs” when she refused sex, she still sometimes felt that “maybe [she] should like change in a sense” and do more of what he wants sexually. This type of internalization was more commonly part of women’s later reflections about their partner’s pressure than descriptions of their feelings and interpretations during one specific coercive incident. Moreover, it was generally related to less forceful but persistent verbal pressure and occurred whether or not coerced sexual activity ended up happening.

Secondly, some women blamed themselves for the occurrence of sexual coercion. This type of internalization was different from the others in that the women connected it more directly to their partners’ behaviour. Whereas the former types of internalization involved a reframing of coercion itself, here the coercion or subsequent sexual activity was described as a result of women’s own behaviour. This was similar to some women’s justifications except that self-blame here was not necessarily used to excuse the behaviour. For example, some women viewed their partner’s persistence as being their own fault for not being “more firm” in their refusal.

Others viewed their partner’s persistence as being their own fault for leading him on by engaging in other affectionate or sexual activities. Carly gave an example of this when she said, “…maybe my words and…the fact that like I was kissing him…meant to him that I wanted to…have sex and so…it was my fault…I probably could have made that like more clear and like really adamantly put my foot down”. As related to her justification of her partner’s anger after one refusal, Ashley, in part, blamed herself because she had originally agreed to have sex on their prom night.
Others similarly felt that their partner’s coercion leading to sexual activity (as opposed to his persistence) was their fault for not being firmer in their refusal. In describing a situation where her partner’s verbal pressure and taking advantage of her when she was drunk led to sexual activity, Sophie noted that everyone “gets into situations where they can’t say no or like it’s harder to say no” and “that’s why those things happened”. Carly, who described being raped (though she did not label it as such), suggested that her partner would not have disregarded her refusal and initiated intercourse with her had she been firmer in her decline of his advances. She said, “I’m sure he wouldn’t have done it if I like pushed him away. Like, he was a really like…he was really good, like gentleman and everything, I think”.

The latter type of internalization often occurred despite the fact that many women felt that their partner had understood their refusal to engage in sexual activity. Even after describing that her partner was not really listening to her decline to have sex, Carly still focused on her inability to firmly communicate that she did not want to have sex:

_I don’t think he was really like listening though, like I think he was already like taking his pants off at that point...I was like no like I’m not sure...it was hard...I’m not that confident to like say no to people so I think he may have interpreted that as like I was just nervous to do it and not that like I didn’t want to do it._ (Carly)

Later, Carly described being ashamed that “it had gotten to that point” of having intercourse (despite there not being consent) when it was so important to her to “save [herself]”.

**Theme 5bii: Giving in to sexual coercion.** It was quite common for the women in this study to describe giving in to both direct and indirect pressure to engage in sexual activity in order to maintain relationship harmony or to appease their partner. For some, giving in was associated very directly with men’s coercive tactics, including persistent verbal pressure and
arousal tactics. Madison described giving in because her partner ended up turning her on: “…as soon as he turned me on, I was kinda like ah fuck it (laughs)”. Nikki described giving in because it was “easier to just [have sex] really quick than to like fight him off all night” (i.e., saying no to his persistent requests, verbal pressure, and arousal tactics).

For others, giving in was associated with their desire not to hurt their partner’s feelings. When Jessica’s partner used arousal tactics and pouting, she did not want to make him think she was not attracted to him by continuing to say no: “I really care about this person so I don’t want them to feel like I’m not attracted to them”. Some similarly gave in as a way to make their partner happy or to maintain harmony between them. For example, Ashley sometimes gave in to pressure to try new sexual activities with her partner even if she did not want to because she “[wanted] things to work out between [them]”.

After experiencing a lot of pressure from her partner, Catherine described giving in before she was ready to have sex for the first time because she “didn’t want to lose him”. Carly, who wanted to wait until she was married to have sex, also sometimes gave in to pressured sexual activity to maintain her relationship. She felt she could only “afford” to say no “like one time a week ‘cause it felt like it wasn’t fair”. Although Ann did not give in to her partner’s pressure to have intercourse, she described feeling conflicted. She felt that maybe if she just “[gave] in to that” and had sex with her partner for the first time, he would give her “more attention” and would be more likely to maintain the relationship. Thus, fear of losing a partner was more commonly described as a reason for giving in by women who either were not ready to have sex or who wanted to wait until marriage.

Acquiescence to unwanted sex sometimes occurred in the absence of immediate pressure or coercion (i.e., sexual compliance). Jennifer gave an example of this when she noted, “I’m not
exactly 100 percent into it, but umm like I do it because like it obviously satisfies him”. Some connected this acquiescence directly to their partner’s previous coercion. For example, Jessica gave in to sex in the absence of immediate pressure to “avoid the next morning of [her partner] not being affectionate” because that is what had happened to her the last time she declined sex.

Jessica was the only participant to compare the two experiences of consenting to unwanted sex before an argument took place (sexual compliance) and after an argument from a refusal (sexual coercion). She said that she felt a “sense of empowerment” and “more in control of the situation” if she consented after an argument because she changed her mind and made the conscious decision to consent after having originally said no. In contrast, during situations where she consented to unwanted sex before an argument took place, she felt “defeated” because she was “just doing it to get through it”.

**Theme 6: Interrelatedness of Tactics, Reactions, Interpretations, and Context**

The above themes were dynamically interrelated such that relational context impacted the type and severity of sexual coercion, both of which impacted women’s subjective reactions and interpretations (which were also related to each other), which then impacted sexual coercion’s effects on self and the relationship.

**Impacts of relational context and coercive tactics.** The context of women’s relationships was related to sexual coercion experience, including tactics, interpretations, subjective reactions, and impacts.

**Relational equality.** Some women discussed relational or sexual equality. For example, Jessica said, “…he definitely puts me, if not above himself in decisions, like he definitely considers…how I’ll react to it”. Madison felt that her partner is “definitely the best person in
[their] relationship” because she is “the one that gets… jealous”. Jennifer discussed her partner being considerate both in their sexual and general relationship:

\[\ldots he’s like very generous and he like always thinks of other people before himself. (Later in interview): \ldots he would never like stop [sex] without like me finishing first or like if he does go off first, like he’ll try like we’ll move on to something else to make sure that I like will orgasm too. (Jennifer)\]

These women who discussed relational and sexual equality typically experienced less forceful sexual coercion, such as trying to convince, pouting, and arousal tactics. Relational equality and less forceful coercion also impacted women’s less negative subjective reactions in response to their partner’s coercion. Madison, Jessica, and Jennifer, for example, were generally not particularly upset by their partners’ coercion. Madison illustrated this when she said that she was only “kind of annoyed” one night by her partner’s attempts to convince her to have sex when she did not want to.

These women’s interpretations were also generally less negative. For instance, Madison and Jessica described their partners’ persistent convincing and arousal tactics as though they were mostly unproblematic or normal arguments that couples go through. Madison said that her partner “convinced [her] to have sex mainly ‘cause it’s fun”. Jessica and Jennifer both experienced guilt as a result of their partner’s coercion and sometimes defined coercive experiences as times they did not want to have sex rather than interpreting them as something negative that he did. This internalization may have been related to their experience of less forceful coercion and their perceived relational equality, that is, they want to maintain relationship harmony and balance. Jessica illustrated this when she noted, “I don’t think it’s ever
been where he doesn’t want to [have sex] (laughs) and I want to…which is again adding to the guilt”.

These women’s internalizations and guilt were also functions of their sexual history with their partner. Desire to maintain relationship harmony and to appease their partner were generally expressed by women who were engaged in a sexual relationship with their partner. Internalization further contributed to their maintenance of relationship satisfaction and commitment following coercion. For example, Jennifer interpreted coercive incidents as times she did not want to have sex and she did not feel that the incidents negatively impacted her relationship: “…it hasn’t really affected our relationship…I haven’t lost any like affection or like love for him or anything like that just because of those certain times…like I don’t always wanna have sex”. Jessica similarly explained, “I don’t think I feel differently…it’s not like [the argument when I did not want to have sex] happened and [the relationship] was over because I wouldn’t have sex”.

While the relationship between less negative subjective reactions or interpretations and fewer negative impacts on the relationship was in part influenced by the less forceful coercive tactics that these women experienced, women who were still in their relationships may also have been more likely to attempt to defend their partner. For instance, though Ashley did view her partner’s coercion as disrespectful, she also minimized some of her experiences and seemed to jump to his defense by saying that he was generally a good person and that his coercion did not drastically change this perception of him.

*Relational inequality.* Other women discussed relational inequality or dissatisfaction, including a partner who was clingy, possessive, controlling, or jealous, or sexual inequality or dissatisfaction. For example, Nikki said, “I feel like [sex is] more for him, because I never really
get anything out of it”. Catherine similarly felt that “[her partner] didn’t really care about [her] in [sexual] terms”.

Relational and sexual inequality or dissatisfaction were related to women’s experience of more negative or forceful verbal (e.g., guilt or relational tactics, yelling), forceful physical, or persistent coercion. Both more severe tactics and relational inequality or dissatisfaction impacted women’s more negative interpretations of their partner’s coercion. For instance, Jade was mad because her partner was “causing a scene” when he was yelling at her for not having sex in her residence hall room. Though Nikki experienced less forceful forms of coercion (e.g., compliments, arousal tactics, trying to convince), her partner was very persistent and she felt exasperated by it. Thus, there were more negative reactions when sexual coercion occurred very repeatedly, unless it was a more severe incident (severe verbal or physical), in which case it often only took one time to be interpreted negatively.

With respect to relational context, Catherine internalized her partner’s pressure more because he already made her feel bad about herself. She explained, “…he didn’t make me feel awesome about myself in general, so…with the not having sex with him on top of that, like I just felt like just, I couldn’t do anything right”.

Ashley was experiencing relational difficulty and felt that her partner was not putting enough effort into the relationship. This impacted her interpretation of her partner’s coercion. This was illustrated when she explained that if her partner could tell her that she does not “fulfill [his] desires” when she refuses sex, then “[she] could say the same thing” when he physically moves her to do what he wants sexually.

Nikki and Jade both described how their partners were becoming jealous and possessive/clinging, including wanting her to “spend every moment with him”. Both women also
viewed their partner’s coercion as a form of control. Sarah made a direct connection between her partner’s physical and negative verbal sexual pressure and his general desire to maintain control and superiority over her. She first described feeling like “he had more power over [her]” in their relationship. Then later, reflecting on his coercion, she said, “…I would see that clearly he enjoys like…being superior to his partner”.

Some of these women’s more negative interpretations contributed to their emotional reactions. For instance, Jade felt scared and hopeless during a severe verbally coercive incident and this was related to her connection of the incident to rape: “I just felt hopeless…I was so scared to the point that I thought I was gonna get raped…I was angry and disappointed”. Sarah and Nikki were both angry after coercive incidents and this was related to their interpretations that their partners were being selfish and not listening to them and, in Sarah’s case, physically disregarding her refusals. Nikki said, “I was really mad that night, like he was just being really selfish”. Sarah said, “I’m angry and I want you to…get off of…being on top of me…I was bothered by the fact that he wasn’t listening and he didn’t care that that’s what, like how I felt”.

Those women who were in unequal or dissatisfying relationships and in turn experienced more severe coercion and held more negative interpretations (e.g., Jade, Sarah, Nikki), were also more negatively impacted by sexual coercion. Although Jade and Sarah had been experiencing relational difficulty outside of sexual coercion (e.g., not “feeling it” anymore, partner possessiveness or control), both related their decision to break up with their partner as at least in part due to sexually coercive incidents that they viewed as controlling:

*I didn’t want to be with somebody that would keep trying to initiate something that I didn’t want. Especially when it is a…physical aspect…It’s like, I want to do this to you, well no I don’t want you to do that to me.* (Jade)
Unlike most of the other women who did not connect their partner’s coercion with controlling behaviour, Jade and Sarah’s lasting views of their partner shifted following severe coercive incidents. Sarah said that she “just looked at [her partner] differently” after he became coercive. Nikki was still in the relationship but was highly considering ending it after experiencing very persistent (but not forceful) pressure to both see him and have sex often. She was constantly pressured by her partner to revolve her life around him and to have sex with him and she felt that this was not healthy for a relationship.

Nikki and Jade were also very aware of the direct connection between their relationship satisfaction and their experience of sexual coercion. They described a “circle” whereby relationship difficulty, such as arguments and not “feeling it for him” anymore led them to “not want to have sex more”, which led to more pressure into having sex from their partner, which further reduced their feelings about the relationship and their desire to have sex.

For some women, the association between interpretation and effect on relationship may have worked in the opposite direction. Although Carly did lose commitment to her partner because of his coercion, she also came to interpret her partner’s coercion more negatively only after she had been out of the relationship and compared it to her friends’ sexual relationships. Thus, being out of the relationship may have allowed women to view coercion more negatively or objectively.

**Sexual opportunity.** While implicit, underlying pressure was experienced to some degree by most of the women, it was particularly salient for women in relationships where there was limited opportunity for sex. These included relationships where one or both partners were still living with their parents and long distance relationships:
…in my head it’s like a pressure like okay but if it doesn’t happen today then I’m leaving tomorrow so I won’t get to see you for two weeks and then it’s like, okay maybe I should just [have sex]. (Jessica)

In these types of relationships, men also often used this limited opportunity as a guilt tactic. Furthermore, implicit pressure contributed to some women’s interpretations of their partner’s coercion. Women who already felt unspoken, underlying pressure during limited opportunities or who understood where their partner was coming from when he used this as a guilt or convincing tactic sometimes justified their partner’s coercion or did not blame him. Nikki demonstrated this when she said, “…on one hand like I understood, like we hadn’t seen each other in like two weeks”.

**Sexual history.** For one of the women, her partner’s coercive tactics changed after she had sex with him for the first time. When Catherine was not ready to have sex for the first time, her partner would often get angry and use relational pressure such as saying “you’ll do this if you love me”. However, after she began having sex with him, other pressure continued when she did not want to have sex, such as appealing to limited opportunity and trying to convince. She was also more upset by his use of guilt tactics and relational pressure. Although she did not approve of his tactics after she became sexual with him, she “understood” where he was coming from.

**Impacts of situational context.** The situational context in which sexual coercion occurred also impacted women’s interpretations. Namely, women’s reasons for not wanting to engage in sex were related to their interpretations of coercion. For example, Madison, Jennifer, and Jessica were coerced during times that they were too tired to have sex. They typically discussed the coercion as though it was not a big deal or just a normal argument. There were also times where some women were “on the fence” about having sex and knew that “when [they
started] doing it [they would] feel more like [they wanted] to”. This sentiment was related to women’s less negative reactions to their partner’s coercion. For example, in explaining a situation where her partner was trying to convince her to have sex, Madison said, “I want to but your mom is right there…As soon as he turned me on, I was kinda like ah fuck it”. Being on the fence about having sex was also related to sexual coercion having fewer negative effects on women’s relationships.

In contrast, stronger or more emotionally charged reasons for not wanting to have sex led to more negative reactions to coercion. For instance, Nikki felt her partner’s coercion was more disrespectful during a time she was uncomfortable having sex. She explained, “…this wasn’t just like me being like tired or something, like this was just me like straight up being uncomfortable with [having vaginal sex during my period], that I wanted him to just like…respect that a bit more”.

Similarly, those who had wanted to wait to have sexual intercourse for moral, religious, or cultural reasons, for practical reasons like not wanting to get pregnant, or because they were not ready, often felt that their partner’s coercion was disrespectful. Whether or not sexual coercion led to the intended sexual activity also influenced interpretations for one woman, but only as related to her desire to wait until marriage to have sex. Carly viewed one experience in which her partner’s coercion did not lead to his intended sexual activity positively compared to experiences that did: “…he was pushing for more but…I just liked that it actually didn’t move…past kissing…So like, that was like a positive time…it like turned into something positive”.
Analysis Summary and Conclusion

The present interpretative phenomenological analysis focused on women’s experiences with sexual coercion in intimate relationships with men, including how women experience, interpret, and become impacted by sexual coercion. The following themes were developed based on the emergent data:

1. Sexual Coercion Tactics. The women in the current study experienced a range of sexually coercive tactics in their relationships, from positive, negative, and neutral verbal tactics to using mild or strong physical pressure or force. It was common for the women to experience a number of different coercive tactics during and across encounters.

2. Subjective Reactions and Emotional Responses to Sexual Coercion. There were many negative emotions associated with experiencing sexual coercion, including feeling guilty, annoyed, frustrated, angry, hurt, and scared. More forceful tactics like yelling and physical force or pressure were generally associated with more negative emotional reactions.

3. Interpretations of Sexual Coercion. Commonly, the women did not interpret their partner’s coercion particularly or overtly negatively, but rather minimized, contrasted, and justified the sexually coercive behaviour. In a few cases, sexual coercion was even viewed positively. However, most of the women interpreted at least some of their partner’s coercion overtly negatively, including considering it disrespectful, selfish, immature, a poor way to treat a partner, and controlling.

4. Relational Context within which Sexual Coercion Occurs. Sexual coercion occurred in a variety of relational contexts including both otherwise happy and healthy relationships.
and relationships already experiencing difficulty, local and long-distance relationships, longer- and shorter-term relationships, and more casual and serious relationships.

5. Effects of Sexual Coercion. Sexual coercion had negative effects on some of the women’s relationships, sex lives, and relationship commitment. For others, sexual coercion did not have any effect on their relationship or their general lasting views of their partner or even had a positive indirect effect. Sexual coercion also negatively affected some of the women themselves, including decreasing their trust in men, changing how they felt about themselves, and contributing to their acquiescence to unwanted sex.

6. Interrelatedness of Tactics, Reactions, Interpretations, & Context. There was a very dynamic interrelatedness between the above themes such that relational context impacted the type and severity of sexual coercion, both of which impacted women’s subjective reactions and interpretations, which then impacted sexual coercion’s effects on self and the relationship.

Chapter Five: Critical Analysis and Discussion

Sexual Coercion

Although some researchers suggest that the cultural gender script is beginning to move in the direction of valuing greater sexual agency for women in mixed-sex relationships (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; McCormick, 2010; Simms & Byers, 2013), the current study shows that sexual coercion is still a common experience for women. Prescreen data found that 32.24% of women had at least one experience with sexual coercion in their most recent past or present relationship. In heterosexual relationships, men are traditionally more assertive and more commonly initiate sexual activity whereas women act as gatekeepers determining when to
engage in sexual activity (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Ehrmann, 1959; Hird & Jackson, 2001). This gendered pattern persists to a large extent today (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2013; Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, Lachowsky, & Undergraduate Research Group in Sexuality, 2014; see Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012 for a review). Previous consensual sex among intimate partners may create assumptions of future consent or obligation to continue to engage in further sexual relations (Ewoldt et al., 2000; Lazar, 2010; Shotland & Goodstein, 1992), which may be implicated in women's increased experience of sexual coercion in intimate relationships.

The sexually coercive tactics that the women described in the current study that their partners used against them were diverse and generally match past literature (e.g., Faulkner et al., 2008; Glenn & Byers, 2009; Hartwick et al., 2007; Katz & Tirone, 2009; Raghavan et al., 2014). Results from the prescreen also support the finding that men more commonly use verbal and psychological pressure and manipulation to acquire sex in established intimate relationships than physical force (Abbey et al., 2004; Ramisetty-Mikler et al., 2007; Salwen & O’Leary, 2013). This may be because partners can obtain sex from an unwilling partner without using more forceful tactics (Abbey et al., 2004).

The current qualitative analysis also sheds light on patterns in the use of sexual coercion in intimate relationships and how various tactics are experienced differently. It was common for the women to experience a number of different coercive tactics during and across encounters. When one tactic was unsuccessful, some men were very persistent or escalated to more severe tactics. Although men often used several tactics, it was less common for the same man to use both forceful verbal or physical tactics and more positive verbal tactics, such as complimenting, in the same or different encounters. Relationship history and context also played a role in the
types of coercive tactics men used, such that women in relationships marked by equality typically experienced less forceful coercion (e.g., trying to convince and pouting) compared to women in relationships marked by male possessiveness or jealousy who often experienced more severe and/or persistent coercion (e.g., guilt tactics, yelling, using physical force).

Two coercive tactics experienced in the current study have tended to be neglected in many quantitative measures. First, arousal tactics was a particularly common form of sexual coercion among intimate partners in the current sample who had a history of consensual sex. Past research has found that about 45% of women have reported having experienced one or more forms of sexual arousal tactics after having indicated refusal to sexual advances in a committed romantic heterosexual relationship (Katz & Tirone, 2010) and 73% by any male since age 16 (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). Thus, it may be highly important to include arousal tactics in attempts to measure sexual coercion prevalence rates among intimate partners.

Most scales measuring sexual coercion victimization experience do not include arousal tactics, including the Sexual Experiences Survey-Short Form Victimization (Koss et al., 2007) used in the current study. There are some notable exceptions, however. For example, Struckman-Johnson et al.’s (2003) postrefusal sexual persistence questionnaire and Mathes and McCoy’s (2011) Victim of Sexual Coercion Scale both include items about continual sexual touching, exposing one’s genitals, or removing one’s own or one’s partner’s clothing in order to coerce someone into sexual activity (although the latter scale does not specify that the acts are meant to sexually arouse). One reason for this lack of inclusion may lie in some researchers’ (e.g., Camilleri, Quinsey, & Tapscott, 2009) differentiation between sexual coaxing and sexual coercion, where sexual coaxing is defined as involving use of benign, seductive tactics.
A second tactic that was experienced by several women in the current study that has been neglected in some quantitative measures of sexual coercion is simply ignoring or disregarding a refusal and initiating sexual activity. This neglect exists despite similar evidence for this tactic in some other qualitative research (e.g., Harned, 2005). Some women may not view this tactic as forceful if the man does not use any additional force than he would during consensual sex. Thus, surveys that ask only about physical force (e.g., in the SES: “using force, for example holding me down with their body weight, pinning my arms, or having a weapon”) may not capture women with these types of experiences.

Sexual coercion is typically defined (including in the current research) to include sexual advances or pressure that occur without consent or after an initial refusal. Although this makes an important theoretical distinction from instances of consent to unwanted sex in the absence of immediate pressure, in reality, the lines may be blurrier. In the current study, some women did not clearly distinguish between times that their partner wanted or requested sex but did not persist after a refusal and sexual coercion. They also did not always clearly distinguish sexual coercion from compliance to unwanted sex in the absence of immediate pressure. Although these distinctions are theoretically important in order to compare prevalence rates and experiences across research, the actual experience may be similar or difficult for participants to untangle.

**Interpretation of Sexual Coercion**

Some women in the current study interpreted their partner’s sexually coercive tactics negatively, including being disrespectful of their feelings or decisions, immature, selfish, inconsiderate, and controlling; however, many saw it as mostly unproblematic and were not particularly troubled by it. It was common for them to minimize, contrast, and justify their partner’s sexually coercive behaviour. These interpretations were particularly true for verbal
tactics but sometimes included physical tactics, like continual attempts to sexually arouse by touching or kissing, and disregarding a refusal and initiating sex.

Although women in the current study found repeated arousal tactics to be annoying and disrespectful, some also found them to be complimenting or effective (and unproblematic) at changing their mind about having sex. This was particularly true for relationships that appeared more egalitarian. Persistence during the same incident or over time often wearied women into submission and led to more negative interpretations, regardless of the severity of the coercive tactics. Severe verbal (e.g., yelling) and severe physical (e.g., physical pressure or harm) tactics were generally viewed and experienced more negatively; however, there were some notable results to the contrary. One participant’s description of a rape was strikingly similar to her and others’ descriptions of coercion that were clearly not rape. Carly’s partner ignored her refusals and initiated intercourse with her, yet she was no more troubled in her description of the incident than her or others’ descriptions of verbal coercion. This may relate to the lack of clear physical violence (or even clear pressure) in her experience. Another participant, Sarah, felt that her partner’s use of relational pressure (e.g., saying that she was not pleasing him and that he could get sex elsewhere) was more hurtful than when he used his stature to have sex with her when she did not want to.

This is in line with some research on intimate partner violence that has found that psychological abuse may be more harmful to women than physical abuse. For example, female victims object to psychological abuse more than physical abuse and report that it has greater long-term damage (e.g., Abrahams, 2010; Follingstad et al., 1990). Psychological abuse is also a stronger predictor than physical abuse of PTSD and depression symptomology (Arias & Pape, 1999; Pico-Alfonso, 2005; Lacey et al., 2013). Current findings suggest that the context of the
relationship may be more important than the coercive or abusive tactics in determining women’s reactions and the negative effects of partner violence. Experiencing sexual coercion in an abusive or less egalitarian relationship may be a stronger predictor of negative interpretations and impacts than the coercive tactics themselves. Thus, there is great need to examine context when measuring sexual coercion victimization.

Results support feminist theory that views sexual coercion as being consistent with traditional gender roles and normalized in heterosexual dating culture. Traditional sexual scripts often depict men as sexual aggressors and women as resistors (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which may act to normalize and perpetuate male sexual violence against women. Previous empirical research has similarly found that many women report expecting to experience sexual coercion in a dating situation, despite their rejection of coercive behaviour (Cook, 1995; Morry & Winkler, 2001). Like other forms of male domination and violence, sexual coercion may act to maintain power differentials between men and women (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Radical feminists have critiqued heterosexuality as the “linchpin of gender inequality” (MacKinnon 1989, p.113) and inherently linked to women’s oppression (e.g., Dworkin, 1987; MacKinnon, 1987). Thus, discourses around rape are interlinked with discourses about heterosexual sex, such that (conceptualization of) sexual victimization exists on a continuum of normative heterosexuality defined by patriarchal ideologies (e.g., Gavey, 2005; MacKinnon, 1983; MacKinnon, 1987).

Women’s interpretations of their partners’ sexual coercion in the current study support theory and research that suggest that women are less likely to acknowledge an experience as rape when the perpetrator is an intimate partner and may have a harder time articulating a sexually coercive experience that does not involve physical force (e.g., Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Burt, 1980; Burt & Estep, 1981; Estrich, 1987; Kahn et al., 2003). For instance, similar to the current
study, Harned (2005) found that women sometimes minimized their unwanted, coerced sexual experiences, including “it was no big deal”, “no serious harm was done”, and “typical boy–girl relations” (p. 394). Women in the current study who were no longer dating their partner also sometimes held more negative interpretations of his coercion. This may be because it is easier to define a situation as violent after a relationship has ended because their identities as a couple are no longer interdependent (Chung, 2005).

Kroger and Wood (1998) used the concept of interpretive repertoires in their discourse analysis on women’s descriptions of rape by dates or acquaintances. Interpretive repertoires are resources including terms and tropes influenced by language and culture that speakers use to construct the nature and meaning of phenomena (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Kroger and Wood suggested that the women in their study had trouble making sense of these experiences because they did not fit either dominant repertoires of rape (e.g., the man was not a stranger and the rape was not violent) or dates (e.g., the man’s lack of consideration and failure to acknowledge her refusal).

The woman in the current study who did experience what would be legally defined as rape may have had similar difficulty articulating and understanding her experience because it did not fit either the dominant definition of rape as violent and perpetrated by a stranger or of a typical intimate/romantic relationship. Furthermore, given that the term “date rape” is in common use today, some women may not view their relationships as dates. Because of these dominant definitions, some women may also not have even had the language to articulate and understand their experiences with other forms of sexual assault or coercion. This was made particularly clear when the women did not know what to call their experiences and made contradictory interpretations. Making both negative and nonnegative interpretations was
particularly common in descriptions of less forceful verbal coercion. Examples included interpreting coercion as being complimenting but disrespectful of wishes, being selfish but just his personality, and being disrespectful but at least not physically violent. Thus, the women often had mixed feelings about their partner’s coercion or were unsure about how to feel.

In contrast to repertoires on rape and on intimate partnerships, women’s experiences did fit dominant repertoires of heterosexual sex where men want sex more and act as the initiators of sex and women act as gatekeepers (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Ehrmann, 1959; Hird & Jackson, 2001; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Masters et al., 2013; Sakaluk et al., 2014; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). These repertoires allowed the women in the current study to justify their partner’s coercion based on male sexual urges, for example. The women may also have attempted to distance their experiences from dominant conceptions of rape or sexual assault by minimizing and contrasting their partner’s coercion (e.g., conscious or unconscious use of disclaimers such as “it’s not like he hit me”). Gavey (1992) similarly suggested that some women in her study did not say “no” in fear that their refusal would have had no effect and what followed would have been construed as rape. Some researchers have suggested that women minimize unwanted sexual experiences so as to avoid the personal and social consequences associated with their victimization, including isolation, stigmatization, blame, and loss of control over the situation (Brown, 2013; Harned, 2005; Koss & Cleveland, 1997).

The finding that many women saw sexual coercion, especially less forceful verbal, as mostly unproblematic and were not particularly troubled by it should not be taken to mean that the behaviour is unproblematic. From a critical feminist perspective, these interpretations may reflect the regulating influence of dominant patriarchal discourses on women’s own discourses and experiences. Many researchers have argued that women’s descriptions and experiences of
rape are constrained by dominant patriarchal discourses that act to reinforce gendered power relations (e.g., Gavey, 1992; 2005; Weiss, 2009; Womersley & Maw, 2009). Others have gone so far as to suggest that dominant discourses of rape and heterosexuality can render women “unrapeable” (e.g., Russell, 1982).

Women’s own interpretations and descriptions of their sexually victimizing experiences found in the current study may both reflect and be constrained by contemporary rape culture that denies and trivializes sexual assault, blames women for their victimization, and justifies men’s perpetration (e.g., Burkett et al., 2009; Burt, 1980; Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds, & Gidycz, 2011; Herman, 1988; Weiss, 2009). Rather than addressing men’s sexual violence, it is minimized and justified (e.g., the common phrase “boys will be boys”) or women are blamed because of their own behaviour or the clothing they wear. Thus both rape and rape culture act to control women.

Other forms of violence against women further contribute to rape culture and the control of women. It is no coincidence that women’s own interpretations match tactics that abusive men use to control their partners, including minimizing (e.g., making light of abuse), denying (e.g., saying abuse did not happen), and blaming (e.g., shifting responsibility to the victim; Duluth Power and Control Wheel in Pence & Paymar, 1990, 1993). Women’s justification and self-blame in the current study were sometimes directly linked to the coercive tactics their partners used. For example, self-blame sometimes stemmed from their partner’s use of relational pressure or guilt tactics. Similarly, women’s own justifications were sometimes linked to their partner’s verbal tactics, such as when men tried to convince them to have sex based on a limited opportunity and they justified the pressure because it was a limited opportunity.
Emotional Reactions to Sexual Coercion

Many of the women described ways that their partner’s coercive tactics were successful at soliciting the desired emotion; however not all of the women made this connection. For instance, while some women labelled their partner’s guilt tactics as such, others did not describe their guilt as a response that their partner was deliberately trying to solicit. Others felt annoyed, frustrated, angry, and saddened by their partner’s coercion. These reactions generally match those found by Livingston et al. (2004) and speak to the potential harmfulness of less forceful coercion in the absence of physical coercion, especially when it occurs repeatedly in an intimate relationship.

Fear was only reported by one woman about her partner’s anger and yelling and was associated with a fear of being raped. This participant did not identify her actual experience as rape, presumably because her partner’s coercion did not lead to sex and because he was not physically forceful; however, she was the only woman to use the word “rape” at all in her interview. It may be that those who understand their experience as more closely tied to rape experience stronger emotional reactions. This participant also expressed that she was scared because her boyfriend was supposed to be her protector rather than her attacker. Thus, her experience did not fit her repertoire of a boyfriend, but fit more closely with her repertoire of rape. Conversely, it may be that those who experience stronger, more negative emotional reactions will be more likely to tie their experience to rape or sexual victimization.

That more negative emotions were associated with more negative interpretations suggests that there could be negative and unwanted consequences to promoting women’s negative interpretations of sexual coercion. For example, anger and disgust have been implicated in the development of posttraumatic stress symptomology among female victims of sexual and

**Sexual Coercion and Relational Context**

Although results suggest that there is no standard, cookie-cutter relational context in which sexual coercion occurs, there may be factors that contribute to the likelihood of coercion and women’s general feelings of pressure in intimate relationships. Knowing one’s partner wants to have sex often or for the first time or that sex is a requirement to maintain a relationship may contribute to women’s feelings of pressure, even in the absence of direct coercion. Distance or infrequent chances to see one another may also influence women’s feelings of pressure and the occurrence of overt pressure to engage in sexual activity when they do finally see their partner. Similar to the current study, women in Gavey’s (1992) study reported sex being an assumed part of dates among partners with limited privacy or time together.

It may also be particularly common for women who want to wait to have sex for religious or practical reasons to experience pressure or coercion from their partner. Although research has found high rates of sexual coercion among adolescent girls (e.g., Poitras & Lavoie, 1995; Silverman et al., 2001; Ybarra, Strasburger, & Mitchell, 2014), most has not examined the context in which it occurred, including whether the girl had previously had intercourse with the perpetrator and whether she intended to wait to have sex.

Results from the current study suggest that wishing to wait to have sex or not being ready to have sex does impact the experience of sexual coercion for some women. Some women also described a cycle whereby relationship dissatisfaction led them to not want to have sex anymore,
which led to more pressure into having sex from their partner\textsuperscript{4}, which further reduced their feelings about the relationship and their desire to have sex. Sexual satisfaction is known to be associated with relationship satisfaction and stability among heterosexual couples (e.g., Byers, 2005; Byers, Demmons, & Lawrance, 1998; Holmberg, Blair, & Phillips, 2010; Pinney, Gerrard, & Denney, 1987; Sprecher, 2002); however, the direction and mechanism of this association is not well understood. Byers (2005) suggests that the relation may work in both directions: for some individuals, low sexual satisfaction may represent another relational issue added to the “overall decline in relationship satisfaction” and, for others, higher relationship satisfaction may increase sexual satisfaction (p. 117). The current study provides some support for the prediction that sexual and relationship satisfaction may be cyclical and work in both directions.

There was also evidence that relational context influences women’s interpretations of and reactions to their partner’s coercion. Perceived relational equality was often related to less negative reactions and interpretations while perceived relational inequality was often related to more negative interpretations. The latter was particularly true when women connected their partner’s coercion to his desire to maintain control over her. These interpretations further impacted sexual coercion’s effects on women’s relationships. Unlike most of the women who did not view their partner’s coercion as a form of control, those who did often ended their relationships.

When women are happy in their relationships, it is possible that they want to justify their partner’s coercion or frame it in a less negative light. It is also possible that women who view their relationship as more egalitarian and based on mutual respect and sexual autonomy may have a harder time reconciling their partner’s coercion with their positive view of the

\textsuperscript{4} Participants themselves made this connection. It is not to say that unwillingness should lead to sexual coercion, but rather that it does for some women.
relationship. Thus, they may disregard their partner’s coercion or reframe it as unproblematic. Alternatively, the same sexually coercive tactics may be experienced and defined very differently depending on the context of the relationship. The current research provides some support for the idea that women who view their relationship as more egalitarian may experience certain less forceful tactics (e.g., arousal tactics and trying to convince) merely as ways to encourage sexual intimacy. This might be particularly true when women are already on the fence about having sex or if they too engage in similar coercive or convincing behaviours for the same reason (though there was no evidence for the latter). In this sense, sexual coercion may not be victimizing at all in these types of relationships.

**Effects of Sexual Coercion**

Sexual coercion contributed to women’s giving in to unwanted sex in order to maintain relationship harmony or to appease their partner. Sometimes this acquiescence occurred in the absence of immediate pressure or coercion (i.e., sexual compliance) but was often in order to avoid an argument or losing their partner’s affection. The women also often internalized their partner’s sexual coercion, feeling guilty about not wanting sex as much as their partner and worrying about pleasing him, thus contributing to their acquiescence to unwanted sex. Women gave in to unwanted sex both in the presence and absence of immediate pressure. Sexual compliance has been linked to prior sexual coercion experience (Katz & Tirone, 2010), which acts to undermine or hinder women’s sense of control and assertiveness in expressing their own desires (Offman & Matheson, 2004). In Edwards et al.’s (2014) study, women often discussed giving in to sexual coercion in conjunction with concerns about maintaining the relationship.

In the current study, women often considered their partner’s feelings as more important than their own. These results are no surprise given past theoretical and empirical work on
traditional gender scripts that suggest that (1) men’s sexual pleasure supersedes women’s (e.g., Hird & Jackson, 2001; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013), (2) women are responsible for maintaining romantic relationships beyond their own self-interest (e.g., Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998), and (3) women must satisfy male sexual needs including submitting to advances to adhere to their “role” in a relationships and having sex in order to signify her love (e.g., Chung, 2005; Faulkner et al., 2008; Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Smith, 1998). Women’s guilt and internalization may also be a consequence of dominant, male-defined conceptions of sexual function that (1) pathologize women’s sexual desire and response, including low sexual desire prior to sexual activity and arousal (e.g., Basson, 2005; Basson et al., 2003; Jutel, 2010; Meana, 2010); and (2) ignore social and psychological contributors of women’s sexual problems (Williams, 2001).

Sexual coercion may both reflect and perpetuate these traditional views. Women may learn that their refusals are not taken seriously and to ignore or not prioritize their own sexual and nonsexual desires. Acquiescence to unwanted sex in the presence or absence of immediate pressure may be a reflection of disciplinary power that acts to regulate women’s behaviour so that direct force or violence are not necessary to maintain power relations favouring men’s sexual desires (e.g., Gavey, 1992). Indeed, one participant in the current study felt more in control and empowered when she consented to unwanted sex after an argument or coercion took place compared to consenting in the absence of immediate pressure because it allowed her to make the conscious decision to change her mind.

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Ronson, Milhausen, & Wood, 2012), many women in the current study were not particularly troubled by their feelings of obligation to have sex and viewed it as a natural way to maintain relationship harmony. However, these untroubled views may be a result of gendered power relations that women are themselves incapable of
seeing. Theory and evidence suggest that women may not distinguish between consent and nonconsent or connect the two to their own desire, particularly given that sex is traditionally defined as something men do to women (e.g., Gavey, 1992; MacKinnon, 1983). There was also evidence in the current study that internal feelings of pressure contributed to less negative interpretations of men’s coercion and decreased negative impacts. The current and past studies (e.g., Edwards et al., 2014; Hird & Jackson, 2001) have also associated not agreeing to sex with fear of losing a partner. This may be particularly true for adolescents and young women who wish to wait until marriage to have sexual intercourse.

Virginity scripts and obligation scripts both act to define and constrain women’s sexuality. Virginity scripts include placing high value on virginity, viewing virginity as a gift to give to a man, and transgressions from gendered sexual expectations leading to a woman’s bad sexual reputation (Carpenter, 2005; Kelly, 2010; Kirkman et al., 1998). Obligation scripts include the need to accommodate the male sex drive and women’s responsibility to maintain romantic relationships (e.g., Fasula, Carry, & Miller, 2014; Kirkman et al., 1998; Schlenker et al., 1998). Women who adhere to both might be particularly conflicted in their roles. In addition, the dichotomy of these scripts suggests that once virginity is “lost” or sex is initiated in a relationship, one moves straight to sexual obligation. This is evidenced in the current study by one participant who felt this obligation and like it was only fair to refuse sexual activity once in a while after she initially had (coerced) intercourse.

For many women in the current study, sexual coercion had negative consequences, including leading to arguments or causing women to view their partner as immature, as only in the relationship for sex, as not caring about their feelings, or as enjoying being superior or in control. Continuous pressure to engage in sexual activity also contributed to emotional barriers
or women’s diminished romantic feelings for their partner. Men’s sexual coercion also made sexual activity less enjoyable and loving for some women. Some women felt less committed or broke up with their partner because of sexual coercion or consistent pressure. Finally, one woman felt that her partner’s coercion led to her mistrust of men. Livingston et al. (2004) found similar negative impacts of verbal coercion, including feeling angry or resentful of him or that they could not trust him, breaking up with him, and (less commonly) long-term depression or anxiety, or making her insecure or cautious about dating.

Other women did not believe that sexual coercion had negatively impacted their relationships, sex lives, commitment, or their general lasting views of their partner. Some even felt that sexual coercion had a positive, albeit indirect, effect on their relationships because of a conversation that came from it. Livingston et al. (2004) also found that relationships improved for a small minority of women in their sample following a verbally coercive incident. Women with no sexual precedence, where partners were more likely friends, acquaintances, or first dates, were more likely to report negative impacts on the relationship than women with sexual precedence. Women with sexual precedence were more likely to report no consequences than women without sexual precedence. Established relationships marked by commitment and investment may be less vulnerable to negative impacts of sexual coercion. Women’s lasting views of intimate partners may also be less hampered by sexually coercive incidents. Alternatively, women in longer-standing intimate relationships may be more likely to minimize or justify their partner’s coercive behaviour, especially if it does not match how he typically treats her.

Katz et al. (2006) similarly found no significant difference in relationship commitment (i.e., those who stayed in their relationship and those who did not) or relationship satisfaction for
verbally coerced and noncoerced women. They suggest that partner verbal coercion may actually promote relationship commitment by promoting relationship investment. Women interpret sexually coercive experiences as personal sacrifice or an obligation to appease their partner. The current research may shed more light on this relationship. Women’s interpretations of their partner’s coercion may influence later relationship satisfaction and commitment. Women who interpreted their partner’s coercion as a natural part of relationships, as complimenting, or as justified generally maintained relationship satisfaction and commitment. Katz et al. (2006) suggest that feelings of obligation or internal pressure may also “buffer” satisfaction. Women in the current study who felt an obligation to have sex or who internalized their partner’s coercion (e.g., worried that they should want sex more often) sometimes understood where their partner’s pressure was coming from and did not blame him.

Labeling Sexually Victimizing Experiences

Previous research suggests several factors contributing to women’s likelihood of labeling their sexually victimizing experiences. Women who label their experience rape generally know their assailant less well or have a lower level of intimacy, experience more forceful tactics, and have stronger negative emotional reactions (e.g., sadness, confusion) compared to women who do not label their experience rape (Koss, 1985; Kahn et al., 2003; Littleton & Henderson, 2009).

Harned’s (2005) qualitative analysis found several reasons for why women label their experiences with dating partners as sexual abuse or assault. These included: issues of consent, such as sexual activity occurred without consent or after refusal, there was physical force or resistance, there was pressure or manipulation, or the woman was intoxicated; and emotional or physical harm, such as how it made them feel about themselves and how it impacted future relationships. Quite often this labeling did not occur immediately but rather was a gradual
process. Women who did not label their experiences as sexual abuse or assault reported reasons such as giving consent (albeit coerced or intoxicated), not giving a clear refusal, blaming herself or believing the partner did not realize the activity was unwanted, caring about the partner, no physical force or the incident did not involve completed intercourse, the incident was not a big deal, the incident did not cause serious harm or reflected normal heterosexual behaviour, and being uncertain how to label the incident.

Orchowski, Untied, and Gidycz (2013) extended previous research on labeling to examine factors associated with labeling a wider range of sexual victimization as “not victimization”, “serious miscommunication”, or “sexual assault, date rape, rape, or crime”. They found similar results to previous research. While most women did not identify as victims, 38% labeled their experience as a “serious miscommunication” and this was related to greater acquaintance with the perpetrator, higher behavioural self-blame, and victim substance use during the incident.

None of the women in the current study labeled their experiences as rape, sexual assault, or sexual abuse, including the woman whose experience was clearly rape. The only woman who described being afraid that she was going to be raped experienced more verbally forceful coercion. The women typically used words such as pressure, trying to convince or insist, taking advantage, or doing things without full consent. These match some of the alternative labels found by Harned (2005) and ambiguous descriptions of sexual assault found by Edwards et al. (2014), including “[he] did it anyway” and “went in without my consent”.

The current study contributes some new insights about potential reasons for why women may not label or define their experiences as sexual assault, abuse, or victimization. Consistent with previous research, many women minimized their experiences (e.g., not a big deal, natural
part of relationships), ended up consenting to unwanted sexual activity, blamed themselves for not giving a clear refusal, feared hurting their partner’s feelings, and did not incur serious harm or emotional reactions. These were particularly true for women who saw their relationships as otherwise happy and healthy. Thus, the current research demonstrates the influence of relational context on women’s interpretations and labeling. The women who were more upset by their partner’s coercion (often marked by severe verbal pressure or physical pressure/force) were also the ones who viewed and labeled their partner’s coercion as a form of control. That most women did not believe that sexual coercion had negatively impacted them may also have hindered their labeling. Conversely, it may be that those who did not label or view their experiences as a form of sexual abuse or victimization had fewer or less severe negative consequences and reactions.

Challenging dominant discourses and encouraging the labeling of sexually victimizing experiences may help raise awareness about sexual violence against women; however, research on the consequences of labeling for individual women has been mixed and has typically focused on rape and sexual assault. Labeling has been associated with both positive outcomes such as less distress and better coping (Clements & Ogle, 2009), and negative outcomes such as more negative emotions and increased PTSD (Kahn & Mathie, 2000; Layman, Gidycz, & Lynn, 1996). Other researchers suggest that labeling is irrelevant to the experience of negative outcomes (e.g., Harned, 2004; Koss, 1985) or that women cope best by labeling an experience rape in some situations (e.g., awakening to a man performing sexual acts on her) but by labeling an experience something other than rape in other situations (e.g., being unable to resist due to intoxication; Kahn et al., 2003). Littleton and Henderson (2009) found that, while victims who labeled their experience as rape reported more PTSD symptomology than those who did not, labelling did not add to the prediction of PTSD above assault violence, which was greater for victims who did
label. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2011) found that for women who felt guilty for having sex during a coercive incident, labeling the incident as rape was liberating. Other women felt that labeling would have made them feel less in control and less able to avoid a similar situation in the future.

There is also conflicting evidence with respect to levels of self-blame among women who do and do not label an experience rape (e.g., Bondurant, 2001; Pitts & Schwartz, 1993). Assailant blame may be more strongly connected to labeling than self-blame. Kahn et al. (2003) found that most women did not mention self-blame but that women who labeled their experience rape were more likely than women who did not to blame their assailant (explicitly mentioned or implied). Importantly, self-blame may exacerbate other negative effects, such as PTSD and poorer recovery (Frazier, 2003; Koss et al., 2002; Najdowski & Ullman, 2009). As this research has focused primarily on self-blame and rape, very little is known about the impact of labeling other types of sexual coercion.

Self-blame or internalization in the current study involved women blaming their partner’s persistence or their experiences of completed coerced intercourse on their own behaviour or lack of a firm refusal. It also involved worrying that there might be something wrong with them for not wanting to have sex and worrying that they were not sexually pleasing their partner. Self-blame was particularly evident for one participant who had wanted to wait until marriage to have intercourse. For her, self-blame led to feelings of shame for “allowing” her partner to have sex with her following a refusal. She also came to understand her partner’s pressure as an unacceptable way to treat a partner only after having reflected on the incident, though she never came to label it as rape or sexual abuse/assault. Livingston et al. (2004) similarly found that
women with no sexual precedence were more likely to blame themselves for an unwanted sexual experience.

Self-blame was also generally associated with less forceful coercion in the current study and not incidents involving physical force or yelling (though Carly’s partner ignored her refusal and had sex with her). Thus, coercive tactics and relational context and intimacy acted as moderating factors between labeling and self-blame and other negative consequences. Burkett and Hamilton (2012) suggest that women’s adherence to the view that it is a woman’s responsibility to assertively communicate her sexual choices influences their view that nonphysical pressure and coercion do not constitute a violation of sexual autonomy.

There is a longstanding debate as to whether verbal sexual coercion constitutes sexual abuse or assault (e.g., Carlin, 1998; Gavey, 1992; MacKinnon, 1989; Young, 2003) and sexually victimized women themselves vary in their perspectives (e.g., Harned, 2005). Like Harned (2005), I have examined sexual victimization on a continuum, enabling me to examine the complexity of how women interpret and define a wide range of unwanted sexual experiences.

Encouraging the labeling of this range of sexually victimizing experiences as abusive or assaultive, or acknowledging that their experiences existed on a continuum of sexual victimization, may highlight the ubiquitous nature of sexual violence against women and help women as a group; however, it may contribute to increased negative emotional reactions for some individual women. Despite some potential negative outcomes, some suggest that if women do not recognize their experiences as sexual abuse or assault, they may not seek treatment or be able to prevent revictimization (Layman et al., 1996; Littleton, Axsom, & Grills-Taquechel, 2009; Pitts & Schwartz, 1993). Additionally, labeling or recognizing sexual assault or abuse may help women to better understand their experiences. When women in the current study labeled
their experiences as something their partner did (e.g., pressuring her), they sometimes held more negative interpretations and were able to more clearly articulate what had happened. Jade’s description of fearing rape when her partner was yelling at her after she refused sex is one example. In contrast, women who struggled to label or identify certain experiences sometimes held less negative interpretations and had a harder time articulating what had happened; for example, Carly’s description of sex just “happening” after she refused.

**Applications for the Present Findings**

Understanding how sexual coercion is actually experienced and interpreted by women can help inform outreach, counselling, and prevention/intervention initiatives and sexual health research. Firstly, campaigns and outreach that define rape as violent and traumatic may not reach women who do not view their experiences as such. Such programs should be adapted to reach and meet the needs of women with all kinds of subjective experiences and interpretations, including women who do not define their experiences as a form of victimization.

The current findings can inform therapy for women who have experienced sexual victimization in their intimate relationships with men. Assumptions that sexual coercion is necessarily traumatic may hinder the therapist–client relationship and rapport. Furthermore, practitioners should be sensitive to the dynamic relationship between relational context, subjective reactions and interpretations, and coercive tactics. Practitioners should also be cognizant of the power relations embedded in heterosexuality and sexual communication that women themselves may be unaware of.

The current findings may also help inform knowledge translation and community engagement initiatives. Findings suggest that sexual victimization, particularly in intimate relationships, is often rendered invisible even to those who experience it. Thus, campaigns might
attempt to address how and why sexual violence against women can appear invisible and innocuous. Narrow dominant definitions of sexual assault and rape could be broken down in order to promote increased labeling. This is not straightforward, however, in that current findings suggest that the same sexually coercive tactics may be experienced and defined very differently depending on the context of the relationship. Sexual coercion may not be victimizing at all in relationships marked by equality and a mutual attempt to promote intimacy. Thus, campaigns that label all persuasive behaviours as victimizing might marginalize some women.

The push towards promoting sexual agency and mutual respect might be one solution. For example, “yes means yes” and “consent is sexy” campaigns have recently emerged. Moving beyond the traditional “no means no” view of consent, these campaigns suggest that only a clear, ongoing “yes” is consent. They also attempt to counter the shaming of women’s sexuality and promote active and continuous consent between partners. Examples include Friedman and Valenti’s (2008) “Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape” book and corresponding blog site; Project Respect’s yesmeansyes.com; and the Consent is Sexy campaign and blog site. However, these campaigns are not without flaw. As the current study confirms, there are many reasons why women say yes, including current or previous sexual coercion.

Furthermore, findings suggest that many women “give in” to unwanted sex in both the presence and absence of immediate pressure and that each is often related to fear of hurting a partner’s feelings, losing a partner, or wishing to satisfy a partner. This has important implications for empowerment-based sexual assault risk reduction or prevention programming for women. These programs are incomplete without education on healthy sexuality and sexual communication. The Sexual Assault Resistance Education (SARE) program for university
women is one example of sexual assault prevention programming that includes a session on positive sexuality (e.g., Senn et al., 2013). In addition to teaching women how to assess, acknowledge, and defend against acquaintance sexual assault, the SARE program includes a session aimed at teaching women to understand and communicate their own sexual needs. The addition of this session was shown to have unique benefits with respect to women’s perception of risk (Senn, Gee, & Thake, 2011).

Lastly, results are important for informing sexual health research and initiatives. An understanding of gender relations and how they relate to sexual coercion and sexual communication can help improve sexual relationships for both men and women.

Analysis Reflections and Implications

It is problematic that, to this day, women’s voices and experiences are often left out of conversations about issues that pertain directly to them. For this reason, I began this research with the intention of using a more traditional empathic interpretive approach to IPA where authority is given to women’s voices and their words are taken to reflect their experience. However, it became clear throughout the interviews that many women were not particularly troubled by their partner’s sexually coercive behaviour. I did not wish to promote the idea that, if women are not troubled by their partner’s coercion, it is necessarily unproblematic behaviour. It then became important to me to also contribute a deeper, more critical look at why women might have experienced and perceived their partner’s coercion in the way that they did, including the influence of embedded power relations that are often rendered invisible. In this way, language was viewed more as socially constructed and as constructing versions of women’s realities.

I believe that the addition of a more suspicious or critical interpretation of the data contributes a better picture of the complexity of women’s experiences. While the combination of
my two levels of interpretation are potentially conflicting on an epistemological level, a more nuanced understanding of women’s experiences is crucial if this research is to inform future prevention initiatives.

**Conclusions**

A focus on the lived experience of sexual coercion within intimate relationships and the meaning that women place on these experiences greatly contributes to our understanding of how women interpret and live with various forms of sexual coercion. Thus, this research adds women’s voices and perspectives to the body of knowledge that already exists and contributes a deeper critical examination of the complexities of sexually coercive experiences and the relational contexts in which they occur. Understanding how sexual coercion is actually experienced and interpreted by women is important for informing outreach, counselling, and prevention/intervention initiatives and sexual health research.

Findings suggest that women often do not challenge less forceful forms of sexual coercion, but rather see them as normal and expected within dating relationships. This is not without consequence as many women internalize sexual coercion. Encouraging women to view their experiences on a spectrum of sexual victimization may help challenge men’s use of sexual coercion and could lead to better and more empowered sexual experiences for women. Nevertheless, researchers and practitioners should be sympathetic and open to women’s varied interpretations and subjective reactions to sexual coercion so that no experience is oppressed.
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### Table 1

*Interview Participants’ Sexual Histories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual activity with any past/present partner(s)</th>
<th>Number of participants who engaged in activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kissing</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual touching</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral sex</td>
<td>11 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anal sex</td>
<td>1 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaginal sex</td>
<td>9 (75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual activity with most recent partner</th>
<th>Number of participants who engaged in activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kissing</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual touching</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral sex</td>
<td>11 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anal sex</td>
<td>1 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaginal sex</td>
<td>9 (75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Interview Participants’ Sexually Coercive Victimization Experience (from prescreen)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Coercive Experience</th>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Frequency Per Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Sexual Touching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Verbal pressure and relational threats</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Verbal criticism and anger</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage when drunk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threats of physical harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Physical force or harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Oral Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Verbal pressure and relational threats</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Verbal criticism and anger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage when drunk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threats of physical harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Physical force or harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Vaginal Penetration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Verbal pressure and relational threats</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Verbal criticism and anger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage when drunk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threats of physical harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Physical force or harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Anal Penetration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Verbal pressure and relational threats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Verbal criticism and anger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage when drunk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threats of physical harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Physical force or harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Attempted Oral Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Verbal pressure and relational threats</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Verbal criticism and anger</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage when drunk</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threats of physical harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Physical force or harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Attempted Vaginal Penetration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Verbal pressure and relational threats</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Verbal criticism and anger</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage when drunk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threats of physical harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Physical force or harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Attempted Anal Penetration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Verbal pressure and relational threats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Verbal criticism and anger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage when drunk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threats of physical harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Physical force or harm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 3 indicates response option “3+” in the SES questionnaire.
Table 3

*Interview Participants’ Sexually Coercive Victimization Experience (from interview)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Coercion</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Less Forceful Verbal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Complimenting attractiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sweet talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appealing to women’s desire for closeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making jokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jokes about consent or women’s decline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Guilt/relational pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threatening to break up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implying that he could easily get sex elsewhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saying they had not seen each other/had sex in a long time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saying that all his friends were having sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implying that she must not love him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparing their frequency of sex to other couples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telling her she does not fulfill his sexual needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implying he loves her so much so she should return the affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pointing out everything he has done for her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angrily mocking her choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Nagging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continually asking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trying to convince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saying that no one can hear them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reminding her how good it feels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saying that he will be quick or gentle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Requesting small acts at a time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telling her she cannot stop a sexual act once started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pouting or expressing disappointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ignoring her or being quiet after her refusal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>More Forceful Verbal</strong></td>
<td>Becoming angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yelling and/or arguing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Less Forceful Physical</strong></td>
<td>Attempting to sexually arouse her by continuing to touch her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Showing how aroused he is by pressing his body into hers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>More Forceful Physical</strong></td>
<td>Disregarding refusal and initiating/continuing sexual activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using physical pressure or force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using strength or stature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>Taking advantage when drunk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

*Interview Participants’ Relational Statuses and Sexual Coercion Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Relational Status (Still in relationship with partner?)</th>
<th>Types of coercion discussed in interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Less &amp; more forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jade</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Less &amp; more forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less &amp; more forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less &amp; more forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less forceful physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaela</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Less forceful verbal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A: Initial Online Screening Question

*Note:* This question appeared first on the online survey. Only those participants who chose “yes” were permitted to view the remainder of the online survey. Those who chose “no” were directed to the following message:

Sorry, you do not meet the requirements for participation in this study. You will not be permitted to continue with the survey. Please contact the researchers, Nicole Jeffrey (njeffrey@uoguelph.ca) or Dr. Paula Barata (pbarata@uoguelph.ca; 519-824-4120 ext. 56562), if you have any questions.

In order to take part in this survey you must meet the eligibility criteria.

Are ALL of the following statements TRUE?

(select "yes" only if ALL of the statements are true; select "no" if one or more of the statements are false)

- I am a female University of Guelph student.
- My most recent dating relationship was with a man.
- My most recent dating relationship was exclusive/monogamous.
- My most recent dating relationship occurred at least partially within the past year.
- My most recent dating relationship lasted at least 3 months.

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
Appendix B: Background Questionnaire

1. How old are you?
   I am _____________ years old.

2. What sexual orientation do you most identify with?
   ______________________________________

3. Which of the following BEST describes your ethnic background?
   - Aboriginal/First Nations/Métis
   - White/European
   - Black/African/Caribbean
   - Southeast Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, etc.)
   - Arab (Saudi Arabian, Palestinian, Iraqi, etc.)
   - South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Sri Lankan, etc.)
   - Latin American (e.g., Costa Rican, Guatemalan, Brazilian, Colombian, etc.)
   - West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghani, etc.)
   - Other (please specify): _________________________________

4. What is your current year of study?
   - First year
   - Second year
   - Third year
   - Fourth year
   - Other _____________________

5. Are you a:
   - Part-time student
   - Full-time student

6. What is your current major? _______________________________

7. How many exclusive (dating only one person at a time), committed intimate/romantic relationships have you been in?
   - 1 to 2
   - 3 to 4
   - 5 to 6
   - 7 or more

8. Which of the following sexual activities have you ever engaged in? (choose all that apply)
   - Kissing
   - Sexual touching
   - Oral sex
   - Anal sex/penetration
   - Vaginal sex/penetration
9. With how many different people have you ever had sexual intercourse (vaginal-penile penetration)? ____________________________
Appendix C: Prescreen Questionnaire

You will not be able to save and continue the survey later; the survey must be completed in one sitting or you will have to start over.

Please answer the following questions about your **most recent past or present relationship** that was:

- With a man
- Exclusive/Monogamous
- Occurred at least partially within the past year
- Lasted at least 3 months

For the purposes of this survey, a “relationship” is considered a committed intimate/romantic relationship with only one person. It is not necessary that you still be in a relationship with this man, as long as you were in the PAST YEAR and the relationship lasted at least 3 months.

1. Length of the relationship with this partner:
   _______________ months and _______________ years.

2. Were you living with this partner?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Other: _______________

3. What was the status of your relationship with this partner?
   a. In a committed intimate/romantic relationship with only this person
   b. Married
   c. Engaged

4. Which of the following sexual activities have you ever engaged in with this partner?
   (choose all that apply)
   a. Kissing
   b. Sexual touching
   c. Oral sex
   d. Anal sex/penetration
   e. Vaginal sex/penetration

5. Are you still in a relationship with this partner?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Other: _______________

PLEASE READ CAREFULLY

The following questions concern sexual experiences that you may have had that were unwanted. We know that these are personal questions, so we do not ask your name or other identifying
information. Your information is completely confidential. We hope that this helps you to feel comfortable answering each question honestly. Check the box showing the number of times each experience has happened to you. If several experiences occurred on the same occasion—for example, if one night someone told you some lies and had sex with you when you were drunk, you would check both boxes a and c. The past 12 months refers to the past year going back from today.

**IMPORTANT**: Even though the following questions say “a man” and “someone”, please answer only about the same relationship/partner that you answered the previous questions about.

i.e., your most recent past or present relationship that was:
- With a man
- Exclusive/Monogamous
- Occurred at least partially within the past year
- Lasted at least 3 months

If you feel uncomfortable answering these questions at any time, you may click “withdraw from study” at the bottom of the page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Experiences</th>
<th>How many times in the past 12 months?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Someone fondled, kissed, or rubbed up against the private areas of my body (lips, breast/chest, crotch or butt) or removed some of my clothes without my consent (but did not attempt sexual penetration) by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn’t want to.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Showing displeasure, criticizing my sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force, after I said I didn’t want to.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threatening to physically harm me or someone close to me.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Using force, for example holding me down with their body weight, pinning my arms, or having a weapon.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Someone had oral sex with me or made me have oral sex with them without my consent by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn’t want to.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Showing displeasure, criticizing my sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force, after I said I didn’t want to.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Threatening to physically harm me or someone close to me.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Using force, for example holding me down with their body weight,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
pinning my arms, or having a weapon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. <strong>A man put his penis into my vagina, or someone inserted fingers or objects without my consent by:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>c. Taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Threatening to physically harm me or someone close to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Using force, for example holding me down with their body weight, pinning my arms, or having a weapon.</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. <strong>A man put his penis into my butt, or someone inserted fingers or objects without my consent by:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn’t want to.</td>
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<tr>
<th>5. <strong>Even though it didn’t happen, someone TRIED to have oral sex with me, or make me have oral sex with them without my consent by:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn’t want to.</td>
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<th>6. <strong>Even though it didn’t happen, a man TRIED to put his penis into my vagina, or someone tried to stick in fingers or objects without my consent by:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>was happening.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>d. Threatening to physically harm me or someone close to me.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>e. Using force, for example holding me down with their body weight, pinning my arms, or having a weapon.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. Even though it didn’t happen, a man TRIED to put his penis into my butt, or someone tried to stick in objects or fingers without my consent by:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn’t want to.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>b. Showing displeasure, criticizing my sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force, after I said I didn’t want to.</strong></td>
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Appendix D: Interview Guide

Initial Instructions:

This interview will be focused on your most recent past or present relationship with a man that lasted at least 3 months that occurred within the past year. This should be the same man you answered the online survey about earlier. I am interested in both positive and negative experiences and reactions associated with the things we will be talking about. Please answer as openly and honestly as possible.

Questions:

(1) Can you please describe your relationship with this man in detail?
   Probes:
   a. Are you still in a romantic relationship with him?
   b. How did/do you feel about this partner?
   c. How did/do you feel about the relationship itself?
   d. How did/does this partner treat you in general?
   e. How committed are/were you to the relationship and why?
   f. Describe your sexual relationship with this partner.

(2) Can you please describe a time when your partner wanted you to engage in sexual activity with him when you did not want to?
   Note: If necessary, ask question again differently:
   What about a time when your partner kept trying even though you did not want to?
   Probes:
   a. What was happening prior to the incident?
   b. What did your partner do that informed you that he wanted to engage in sexual activity?
   c. What, if anything, did you do to inform your partner that you did not want to engage in sexual activity?
   d. How did your partner react to that?
   e. What were you thinking and feeling during all of this?
   f. How were you behaving during all of this?

Note: The following question will depend on their response to question (2).

(3) Can you please describe a time when your partner wanted you to engage in sexual activity with him when you did not want to [by physically pressuring or harming you or otherwise taking advantage of you] or [through nonphysical means]?
   Probes:
   a. What was happening prior to the incident?
   b. What did your partner do that informed you that he wanted to engage in sexual activity?
   c. What, if anything, did you do to inform your partner that you did not want to engage in sexual activity?
   d. How did your partner react to that?
   e. What were you thinking and feeling during all of this?
f. How were you behaving during all of this?

(4) Can you please describe how this/these and other similar incidents affected you and your relationship with this man?
   Probes:
   a. How did it affect your sexual relationship with this partner?
   b. How did it affect how you feel/felt about this partner?
   c. How did it affect how you feel/felt about the relationship itself?
   d. How did it affect your commitment to this relationship?

(5) This concludes the questions that I have for you, but I would like to give you the chance to discuss anything you think this interview might have missed or anything else you would like me to know.