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# Sexual Reward in an Intimate Relationship

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**Abstract**

Objectives: This study examined the association between three sexual motivations—rewarding, intimacy, and enhancement—and their relationship to sexual and relationship satisfaction. A novel conceptualization of sexual reward was introduced and tested. Methods: The sample included 675 individuals in steady intimate relationships (12+ months). Participants completed measures assessing sexual motives and satisfaction levels. A newly developed scale for sexual reward motivation was validated. Findings: The rewarding motive was present among many participants, with approximately 10% reporting frequent use. Rewarding was negatively associated with both relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. It also showed a negative correlation with enhancement motivation and no significant correlation with intimacy motivation. Conclusions: While occasional sexual reward may not impact relationship dynamics, frequent use of this motive appears to undermine both sexual and relational well-being. The findings suggest that sexual reward is a distinct and measurable motivation with potential implications for couple dynamics and therapeutic intervention.

**Keywords:** sexual motives; sexual reward; intimate relationship; relationship satisfaction; sexual satisfaction

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## 1. Introduction

Motivation is the force driving human behavior, often categorized as internal or external [1]. In intimate relationships, motivations for sex shape emotional closeness, communication, and overall satisfaction. Traditional frameworks have examined sexual motives through self-focused or relational lenses—such as intimacy, enhancement, or coping [2,3]. However, these frameworks may not fully capture behaviors like intimate relationship sexual reward (IRSR)—the use of sexual activity as a contingent response to a partner's behavior, such as carrying out household chores or providing emotional support [4].

To frame this study conceptually, we draw on Social Exchange Theory [5], which posits that interpersonal interactions are shaped by expectations of rewards and costs. From this perspective, IRSR can be viewed as a strategic form of reciprocity—a relational currency that reinforces specific partner behaviors in exchange not only for sexual intimacy, but also for emotional connection, relational harmony, or instrumental support. This lens helps to illuminate the relational logic underlying IRSR and its potential impact on emotional closeness, mutual expectations, and overall relationship satisfaction.

While IRSR might come across as a kind of give-and-take in relationships, its transactional nature can sometimes hinder intimacy. This contrasts with deeper, intrinsic motives—such as seeking closeness or personal fulfillment—that tend to be linked with higher relationship satisfaction [6,7]. As such, IRSR may reflect a qualitatively distinct motivational strategy—less about spontaneous emotional expression and more about strategic reinforcement of desired partner behavior. Despite its potential significance, IRSR remains an understudied construct within the broader literature on sexual motivation.

There is a growing need to explore how IRSR operates within romantic relationships, particularly in terms of its associations with both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. The absence of dedicated measurement tools for IRSR also presents a barrier to rigorous empirical study. The current research aims to address these gaps by conceptualizing and validating IRSR as a distinct sexual motive, examining its associations with more intrinsic motives such as intimacy and enhancement, and assessing its relationship to sexual and relationship satisfaction.

**Study of Motivations for Sexual Relations**

Sexual motivations are defined as various goals and needs that people seek to fulfill by engaging in sex [2,3]. Cooper et al. [2] described six primary sexual motives: self-enhancement (to experience pleasure and physical satisfaction); intimacy (to achieve intimacy with the partner); self-affirmation (to affirm self-worth); coping (to reduce negative effects, outcomes, or consequences); peer pressure (to gain or maintain approval from a socially significant individual or collective, such as a peer group); and partner approval (to please or appease the partner).

These motivations can be categorized as positive (self-enhancement and intimacy) or negative (self-affirmation, coping, peer pressure, and partner approval [2,6]. They can also be categorized as approach-oriented (to obtain positive outcomes and emotions, such as enhancing intimacy) or avoidance-oriented (to avoid negative outcomes and emotions such as relational conflict [2,6]. Alongside these frameworks, research grounded in attachment theory offers a complementary perspective, suggesting that individuals' attachment styles shape the motives for engaging in sexual activity. For instance, anxiously attached individuals may pursue sex for reassurance or closeness, whereas avoidantly attached individuals may approach it with emotional distance [8].

In addition to these social-cognitive and emotional frameworks, it is also important to consider sexual desire itself as a fundamental drive state that motivates behavior and perception toward the goal of sexual intimacy. Loewenstein [9] highlights how visceral factors like sexual arousal can profoundly alter decision-making, making individuals more focused on immediate gratification and potentially shifting their priorities, judgments, and risk perceptions. This visceral influence underlines how sexual desire operates not only as a goal but also as a motivational force that dynamically shapes cognition and behavior in real time.

Engaging in sex for approach-oriented motives has been found to be positively associated with sexual satisfaction [2,7], sexual desire [7], relationship satisfaction [7,10,11], and personal and interpersonal well-being [6]. In contrast, avoidance-oriented sexual motives have been found to be associated with increased sexual dysfunction and less sexual and relational satisfaction [6,10].

**Rewarding as a Motivation in Intimate Relationships**

Intimate relationship sexual reward (IRSR) introduces a distinct motivational dynamic within romantic relationships—one that may influence partner satisfaction, relationship quality, and sexual experience in ways that diverge from more commonly studied sexual motives. While motivations such as intimacy, enhancement, and coping have been explored

in relation to relationship outcomes [2,3], the specific role of IRSR remains understudied and conceptually underdeveloped.

Preliminary findings suggest that IRSR may operate differently depending on the context and underlying intent. Some research indicates that using sex as a contingent reward may diminish feelings of intimacy and reduce sexual pleasure, particularly when it is perceived as transactional or manipulative [4,12]. However, other studies have highlighted that when IRSR is motivated by a desire to reinforce supportive behaviors or maintain relational harmony, it may contribute positively to the relationship [13]. This ambivalence underscores the complex nature of IRSR as a motivational strategy—it may function as either a relational asset or a risk factor, depending on its alignment with partners' emotional needs and expectations.

Given its controversial and context-dependent nature, IRSR warrants deeper empirical scrutiny. The increasing recognition of this phenomenon in intimate partnerships, alongside its potential to influence core relational dynamics, highlights the urgency of developing a more nuanced understanding. Notably, existing instruments that assess sexual motivation (e.g., [2,3]) do not adequately capture the conditional, behavior-reinforcing aspects of IRSR, limiting researchers' ability to study it systematically. Addressing this gap requires the creation of dedicated tools that reflect the unique dynamics of sexual reward within long-term relationships.

To advance this line of inquiry, the present study seeks to examine the construct of IRSR as a distinct sexual motivation, investigating its associations with both established motives—such as intimacy and enhancement—and relationship outcomes, including sexual and relational satisfaction. We propose that IRSR may reflect a more externally driven, strategic form of motivation that contrasts with the intrinsic, emotionally expressive nature of intimacy and enhancement motives. Accordingly, we hypothesize that (a) IRSR will be negatively correlated with both enhancement and intimacy motivations; and (b) IRSR will be negatively associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction. By testing these relationships, this study aims to deepen theoretical understanding and contribute novel empirical insights into the motivational architecture of sexual behavior in intimate relationships.

Intimate relationship sexual reward introduces a unique dynamic to intimate relationships and may affect partner satisfaction, relationship quality, and sexual performance in ways that differ from other sexual motivations. While the impact of various sexual motivations on partner satisfaction and sexual performance has been studied, the specific effects of using IRSR on these variables remain understudied. The relationship between IRSR and other sexual motivations, such as intimacy and enhancement, is not yet fully understood. Some studies suggest that the use of IRSR may negatively impact intimacy and sexual pleasure [4,12]. However, other research indicates that in certain contexts, rewarding sexual behavior may have positive effects on the relationship, particularly when the rewarding partner's actions are motivated by the needs of the rewarded partner or the relationship as a whole [13,14].

This duality contributes to the controversial nature of IRSR. While it may serve as a mechanism for mutual reinforcement and relational maintenance, it simultaneously carries the risk of introducing elements of conditionality and control that can compromise emotional authenticity and reinforce power asymmetries. As such, IRSR occupies a complex space between expressions of relational support and acts of strategic exchange, raising important questions about the extent to which such motivations foster or undermine genuine intimacy [13].

Given the controversial nature of using IRSR and its potential impacts on partner satisfaction, there is a clear need for further research in this area. The increasing prevalence of this phenomenon in intimate relationships underscores the importance of developing

a more nuanced understanding of its effects and implications. Moreover, the lack of specialized instruments to measure IRSR presents a methodological challenge in this field of study. Existing questionnaires and scales, such as those developed by Cooper et al. [2] and Meston & Buss. [3], do not fully capture the specific dynamics of using IRSR in stable, intimate relationships. This gap highlights the need for the development of more targeted and accurate measurement tools to advance our understanding of this phenomenon.

## 2. The Current Study

While significant progress has been made in understanding sexual motivations and their association with relationship satisfaction, IRSR's specific role remains unexplored. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to test the relationship between IRSR and other sexual motivations, as well as its association with relationship satisfaction. Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

(a) A negative correlation will be found between the sexual reward motivation and both enhancement and intimacy motivations.
(b) A negative correlation will be found between sexual reward motivation and sexual and relationship satisfaction.

## 3. Method

### *3.1. Participants and Procedure*

The sample included 675 men (46%) and women (54%). Inclusion criteria for the study were: being in a relationship with a current partner for at least 12 months and being between the ages of 25 and 50. Most participants were born in Israel (88.3%); the remainder were born in other countries, such as Ethiopia (2.9%). Participants' average age was 38.70 years ($SD$ = 7.03). The sample mainly featured Jewish participants (73.9%). Others were Muslim (14.5%), Druze (7.6%), Christian (2.7%), or another religion (1.3%). The various religiousness levels reported were nonreligious (36.1%), secular traditional (21.3%), religious (18.7%), and ultraorthodox (3.6%). The participants' education levels were as follows: 1.8% reported having fewer than 12 years of schooling; 11.7% reported having a high school education; 48.9% had an undergraduate degree; 31.9% had a graduate degree; and 5.8% had a doctoral degree. Research participants also shared their sexual orientation: 82.8% heterosexual; 5.9% mostly heterosexual; 2% same-sex; 6% mostly same-sex; 0.2% bisexual; 0.2% pansexual; 0.2% asexual; 0.5% unknown; 3.2% other; and 3% did not specify. Most participants were married to their partners (79.3%); 14.7% were unmarried but cohabiting, and 6.1% reported living separately. The average relationship duration in years was 11.35 ($SD$ = 7.52). The average number of children was 2.33 ($SD$ = 1.65). Participants' socioeconomic status tended to be high: 11.6% lower than average, 61% average, and 27.4% higher than average. The characteristics of this sample indicate a middle-to-high socioeconomic status. The Hebrew-language questionnaire was used by 78.5% of the participants; the remainder used the Arabic-language questionnaire.

The sample was recruited through social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram). The survey was available from 1 June to 25 August 2022 and took an average of 10 min to complete. Data collection was conducted using Qualtrics, an online platform chosen for its security features and user-friendly interface. Participants' data were not linked to their recruitment sources, ensuring anonymity. All procedures and instruments were approved by the institutional review board at the authors' university.

Potential participants were invited to click on a survey link to participate in a study on using IRSR, relationship satisfaction, and sexual performance. Upon clicking the link, respondents were directed to a page providing information about the study's purpose, types of questions, and a consent form. This form emphasized that participation was

voluntary, respondents could skip any questions or withdraw at any time, and all responses would remain anonymous.

The first page of the survey also included contact information for the researcher and mental health crisis centers. This information was provided as a precautionary measure in case participants experienced any distress and required mental health assistance during or after completing the survey. It is important to note that participation in the study was not compensated.

To ensure that various populations could complete the survey, it was distributed in Israel's two main languages, Hebrew and Arabic [15]. The recruitment of Arabs and Ethiopians to participate in a study about sex and sexuality would be quite difficult because these two specific groups tend to be typified to a greater extent by conservatism or traditionalism than other groups in Israel. Given the sensitivity of this subject matter in conservative communities, recruiting these groups was conducted via the personal contacts of two members of the research team, who forwarded the questionnaire link to their acquaintances (snowball sampling) [16].

To address potential differences between sub-samples, we conducted sensitivity analyses comparing key dependent variables across social media-recruited and snowball-recruited participants. Results indicated no significant differences between these groups on any dependent variables. Furthermore, no participants were directly related to or close personal acquaintances of the researchers. Participants were not informed about the study hypotheses, and recruitment materials provided only general information about the topic.

### *3.2. Measures*

Relationship satisfaction was determined using the single-item Relationship Assessment Scale [17], which evaluates participants' relationship satisfaction levels (i.e., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?"). Participants indicated their answers on a 5-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied; 5 = very satisfied). Participants were asked to refer to the past year. Sexual satisfaction was determined using the single-item scale developed by Mark et al. [18] to assess sexual satisfaction levels ("Overall, how sexually satisfied have you been with your partner?"). Participants indicated their answers on a 5-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied; 5 = very satisfied). Participants were asked to refer to the past year.

#### 3.2.1. Intimacy and Enhancement as Motivations for Sex

These motivations were measured via two of the six subscales of the Sexual Motivation Scale developed by Cooper et al. [2]. This scale measures motivations or reasons for having sex. Intimacy and enhancement, two motivations of focus in the current study, have positive consequences for the partner relationship, including the sexual relationship. In the present study, the introductory comments for the positive motivation questions were: "This part of the questionnaire deals with different reasons for having sex with a partner. Mark how often you have sex for each of the reasons listed below." As in the original measure, the intimacy motivation measure included five items, such as "I had sex to increase the intimacy between me and my partner." The enhancement motivation measure included four items, such as "I had sex because it feels good." The statements were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always/always). In the present study, the reliability of the intimacy motivation measure was excellent (Cronbach's a = 0.93). The reliability of the enhancement motivation measure was good (Cronbach's a = 0.89). New variables were encoded based on the research participants' responses, one for the intimacy motivation and one for the enhancement motivation, according to the average of their measurement items.

#### 3.2.2. IRSR Scale

The Intimate Relationship Sexual Reward Scale was developed through a multi-stage research process, designed to ensure its validity and reliability as a research tool. The research team comprised two social workers (one with expertise in sexuality treatment and the other a clinically qualified therapist) and a specialist nurse in the field of sexuality. The development process began with a comprehensive literature review, examining existing questionnaires on sexual motives among partners. Following this review, the research team met to discuss the findings and selected nine items from the Sexual Motivation Scale questionnaire [2]. Several questions from Meston & Buss. [3] were added, resulting in a total of 11 questions. These questions underwent initial validation through translation and re-translation [19].

An expert committee was then formed, including the research team and additional field experts (two clinical social workers, two clinical psychologists, a psychiatrist, and a psychotherapist; nine members in total). The committee approved all selected questions and proposed additional items. Each team member independently generated 5–10 items, which were then reviewed collectively. Four questions with similar content were reworded and approved by the committee. To check the clarity and wording of the questions, 16 graduate students (eight each from clinical psychology and social work departments) provided feedback on the clarity, phrasing, and legitimacy of the questions. The IRSRS was revised based on this feedback.

An initial pilot of the IRSRS was conducted with a diverse group of 50 people, including Muslim and Christian participants from the Arab sector, as well as secular, Haredi, and Ethiopian Jewish participants. This pilot group was equally divided between men and women across all categories. The pilot tested the clarity of questions and identified any technical or logical issues in the questionnaire. In the present study, the reliability of the IRSRS was found to be excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.97$). A new variable was computed based on the average of the measure's items. The variable's validation findings are presented in the Section 4.

### *3.3. Data Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted in three main phases. First, we examined the factorial structure of the questionnaire items using exploratory factor analysis with principal component extraction and promax rotation, as the hypothesized factors were expected to be correlated. Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, and the scree plot was used to help determine the number of factors. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency of each factor. A constrained one-factor solution was also tested to examine overall scale reliability.

In the second phase, we assessed the prevalence of IRSR, intimacy, and enhancement motivations in sexual relationships. These variables were encoded using a conservative method based on the maximum value across factor items, and frequency distributions were calculated for each. The third phase involved Pearson correlation analyses to examine the associations between the three factors (IRSR, intimacy, and enhancement) and measures of relational and sexual satisfaction. Finally, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test for the main and interaction effects of respondent gender and questionnaire language (Hebrew or Arabic) on IRSR frequency. Post hoc comparisons were conducted to explore significant effects. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS (version 27), with the significance threshold set at $p < 0.05$.

## 4. Results

### *4.1. Phase 1: Testing Factorial Structure*

The factorial structure of the questionnaire items was tested using factor analysis with principal component extraction and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. In this analysis, an eigenvalue greater than 1 was the criterion for factor extraction. This criterion yielded three factors (reward, intimacy, and enhancement). This solution was not consistent with the scree plot, whose elbow point indicated four factors (eigenvalue = 0.47). Although the scree plot suggested a possible fourth factor, this solution was not retained. The fourth component explained minimal additional variance, and its eigenvalue fell well below the commonly accepted threshold of 1. Exploratory analysis of the four-factor solution revealed that the reward factor appeared to split into two sub-factors: one focused on past-oriented actions (e.g., receiving rewards) and one on future-oriented goals (e.g., aiming to obtain something). However, these two components were strongly correlated and conceptually overlapping, lacking sufficient theoretical distinction. Furthermore, the three-factor solution showed cleaner item loadings, improved parsimony, and better interpretability. Therefore, the three-factor model was retained as the most theoretically coherent and statistically robust representation of the IRSR structure.

In this case, there was no change in the intimacy and enhancement factors. However, the reward factor was split into two factors. One factor included statements oriented to the past (reward): "I had sex to praise him/her for things he/she had already done for me"; "I had sex because I already got what I wanted from him/her"; and "I had sex as gratitude for what he/she had already done for me (such as, for example, bought me something I wanted, did the shopping, tidied the house)" (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$). A second factor included statements with a future orientation (investment): "I had sex because I thought it would be beneficial for me later (for example, he/she would help me with the housework or give me things I need)"; "I had sex because I hoped that my partner would do me a favor (for example buy me something I want, or make time for me to do things I like)"; and "Because after having sex he/she is more sensitive and open to the things I want" (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.80$). The model fit was evaluated using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), with an observed value of SRMR = 0.05, which meets our a priori cut-off of SRMR < 0.08, indicating an acceptable model fit. Table 1 presents the analysis results and descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation for each item). The bottom of the table presents the reliability for each factor (Cronbach's $\alpha$).

**Table 1.** Factor loadings and descriptive statistics of 15 items on intimacy, enhancement, and IRSR among partner sexual relationships.

| Statement | Reward | Intimacy | Enhancement | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I had sex because I'd already gotten what I wanted from him/her. | 0.836 | 0.029 | 0.018 | 3.63 | 1.03 |
| I had sex because I thought it would be beneficial for me later (e.g., he/she would help me with the housework or give me things I need). | 0.805 | −0.014 | −0.194 | 3.60 | 1.06 |
| I had sex as gratitude for what he/she had already done for me (e.g., bought me something I want, did the shopping, tidied the house). | 0.805 | 0.001 | −0.025 | 3.72 | 1.05 |
| I had sex because I hoped my partner would do me a favor (e.g., buy me something I want, or make time for me to do the things I like). | 0.781 | 0.030 | −0.185 | 3.58 | 1.01 |
| Because after having sex, he/she is more sensitive and open to the things I want. | 0.739 | 0.072 | −0.055 | 3.82 | 0.95 |
| I had sex to thank him for things he had already done for me. | 0.735 | 0.039 | −0.051 | 3.81 | 0.88 |
| I had sex to get closer to my partner. | 0.064 | 0.876 | 0.100 | 4.13 | 0.87 |
| I had sex to feel emotionally closer. | 0.042 | 0.869 | 0.123 | 3.63 | 0.97 |
| I had sex to make an emotional connection. | 0.021 | 0.850 | 0.186 | 3.36 | 1.09 |
| I had sex to become more intimate with my partner. | 0.079 | 0.771 | 0.126 | 1.50 | 0.78 |
| I had sex to express love. | −0.033 | 0.693 | 0.211 | 1.40 | 0.73 |
| I had sex because I felt horny. | −0.115 | 0.022 | 0.821 | 1.54 | 0.75 |
| I had sex because it feels good. | −0.171 | 0.146 | 0.795 | 1.29 | 0.66 |
| I had sex for excitement. | −0.106 | 0.329 | 0.748 | 1.70 | 0.98 |
| I had sex for the thrill of it. | 0.002 | 0.406 | 0.662 | 1.76 | 0.87 |

**Table 1.** *Cont.*

| Statement | Reward | Intimacy | Enhancement | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cronbach's α | 0.87 | 0.89 | 0.81 | | |
| Reward | | | | 1.53 | 0.62 |
| Intimacy | | | | 3.67 | 0.85 |
| Enhancement | | | | 3.73 | 0.76 |

Note. The factor analysis featured principal component extraction and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. Three factors were extracted based on an eigenvalue > 1.00. Four factors were extracted based on the scree plot elbow point (eigenvalue = 0.47).

The overall analysis of the three factors indicated that one factor consisted of items that reflect reward. For example, the first two items were "I had sex because I already got what I wanted from him/her" and "I had sex because I thought it would be beneficial for me later." The second factor consisted of the items that reflect intimacy. For example, the first two items were "I had sex to get closer to my partner" and "I had sex to feel emotionally closer." Finally, the third factor consisted of items that reflect enhancement; for example, "I had sex because I felt horny" and "I had sex because it feels good."

All loadings were good (>0.65). The reliability of the first factor was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$; six items), as was the reliability of the second factor (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$; five items) and third factor (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$; four items). When the analysis was constrained to one factor, the loadings were also good (factor loading > 0.50) and the reliability was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$; 15 items).

### *4.2. Phase 2: Testing Prevalence*

Three variables were encoded to test the prevalence of reward, intimacy, and enhancement in sexual relations. A conservative encoding method was used. The calculation was based on the maximum value of all factor items. Table 2 presents the variable distribution prevalence.

**Table 2.** Prevalence of the factors.

| | Reward | Intimacy | Enhancement |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Never happened | 37.1% | 0.6% | 0.1% |
| 2. Almost never happened | 25.7% | 1.0% | 1.5% |
| 3. Sometimes happened | 27.7% | 18.7% | 12.9% |
| 4. Often happened | 7.4% | 38.5% | 39.4% |
| 5. Almost always happened | 2.1% | 41.2% | 46.1% |

The table indicates that 62.8% of research participants indicated infrequently engaging in sex to reward their partner in the last year (almost never or rarely). Still, 27.7% reported engaging in sex to reward their partner sometimes, and 9.5% reported doing so frequently (often or almost always) in the last year. The table also indicates that only 1.6% of the research participants indicated infrequently engaging in sexually rewarding activities. Most (79.7%) reported engaging in sex to reward their partner frequently (often or almost always), and 18.7% reported doing so sometimes in the last year. The table also indicates that only 1.6% of the research participants indicated infrequently engaging in sex for enhancement. Most (85.5%) reported engaging in sex for enhancement frequently (often or almost always), and 12.9% reported doing so sometimes in the last year. These findings indicate that engaging in sex for intimacy and enhancement was more common than engaging in sex to reward their partner.

### *4.3. Phase 3: Testing Correlations*

At this stage, we examined the correlations between the three factors of the measure (rewarding, intimacy, and enhancement); total score of relational and sexual satisfaction;

separate scores (one item for relationship satisfaction, one item for sexual satisfaction, one item on sex drive, one item on sexual arousal levels, and two items on level of satisfaction with personal and partner's sexual functioning); and a unified measure for criterion validity (all six items). Table 3 shows the correlations between the IRSR total score and the total scores of the other key study variables. The correlation between rewarding and intimacy motivation was low and nonsignificant. However, there was a significant negative correlation between rewarding and enhancement motivation, $r_{(673)} = -0.198$, $p < 0.001$, suggesting that higher rewarding motivation is associated with lower enhancement motivation. Therefore, our first hypothesis was partially supported. Additionally, rewarding motivation was significantly negatively correlated with both relationship satisfaction, $r_{(673)} = -0.246$, $p < 0.001$, and sexual satisfaction, $r_{(673)} = -0.221$, $p < 0.001$. This indicates that higher levels of rewarding motivation are associated with lower relationship and sexual satisfaction.

**Table 3.** Correlations between the IRSR total score and the total scores of the other key study variables.

| | **Reward** |
|---|---|
| Intimacy | 0.057 |
| Enhancement | −0.198 * |
| Relationship satisfaction | −0.246 * |
| Sexual satisfaction | −0.221 * |

* $p < 0.001$.

Finally, the effect of the respondent's gender and the questionnaire's language (Hebrew or Arabic) on the frequency of rewarding was also examined, using a two-factor analysis of variance test. The test showed that only the main effect of respondents' gender had a significant effect on the frequency of rewarding, $F$ (1, 673) = 13, 31, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.019$. Sexual reward was significantly higher among women ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.76$) than men ($M = 1.41$, $SD = 0.87$) ($p < 0.001$). The language of the questionnaire and the interaction between the respondent's gender and language were not significant.

## 5. Discussion

In the current study, we examined the concept of sexual reward as a motivation for sexual intercourse. The use of sexual reward can be defined as engaging in sex to reward a partner for something they have done or will do [3,20]. The purpose of the study was to examine the construct of IRSR as a distinct sexual motivation, investigating its associations with both established motives—such as intimacy and enhancement—and relationship outcomes, including sexual and relational satisfaction. The findings provide preliminary evidence for the measure's reliability and construct validity and suggest potential theoretical and practical relevance for understanding dynamics in intimate relationships.

Our findings indicate that approximately two-thirds of the participants reported experiencing this motivation in their sexual relationship during the past 12 months. About one-tenth cited rewarding as a frequent motivation. Hence, reward appears to be a notable factor in sexual decision-making, raising important questions about its relational impact. However, the prevalence of this motivation was still lower than that of intimacy and enhancement motivations [21]. The findings indicate that rewarding is negatively correlated with enhancement and uncorrelated with intimacy. This raises theoretical questions: what underlies the negative association between rewarding and enhancement, and why is there no observed link between rewarding and intimacy, even though intimacy is typically associated with enhancement? Sexual motivations aimed at something other than sexual gratification, such as rewarding, stipulate that sex be perceived as part of an exchange, whereas motivations aimed at sexual gratification, such as enhancement, perceive sex as the

goal. This may also explain the lack of correlation between reward and intimacy. Intimacy is a more complex motivation than enhancement. It is primarily directed at the partner's emotional and physical closeness, simultaneously involving the pleasure of both partners, with sex serving as a means and a dyadic goal. This suggests that for some individuals, sex tends to be the goal, whereas for others, it is a means to an end. These are opposite tendencies, one promoting a positive association with reward and the other promoting a negative one. The opposing tendencies cancel each other in intimacy and rewarding associations. This explanation of the relationship between sexual motivations explored in this study provides a foundation for an alternative approach in this type of research. Instead of or alongside a traditional examination of motivations, their components can be studied. For example, to what extent is sex focused on the needs of the research participant, their partner, or their relationship? To what extent is sex viewed as a means or an end?

The findings indicate that reward motivation is negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, including sexual satisfaction. Why does this motivation damage the relationship? Vannier and O'Sullivan [13] argued that infrequent sexual rewards may be beneficial for the relationship, but if used frequently, they may become a transactional and alienating experience.

The partners' status is unequal when one partner is motivated by rewards. The rewarding partner gives, and the rewarded partner receives. Accordingly, sexual relations in this case may create balance in the relationship or interfere with and damage the relationship. For example, the sexual needs of the rewarding partner might be disregarded, and the realization of the rewarded partner's sexual needs might be conditional. This forms an imbalance that may damage the quality of the partner's relationship and the partner's satisfaction.

*Research Limitations and Recommendations*

The current study examined sexual rewarding motivation within the context of long-term intimate relationships lasting at least 12 months. While this focus enhances ecological validity by grounding the findings in a stable relational setting, it also limits the generalizability of results to other relationship types or broader sociocultural settings. Furthermore, the sample consisted of individuals from a Westernized, liberalizing society, situated between traditional conservatism and egalitarian values. As such, the findings should be interpreted within this specific sociocultural framework.

In addition to these conceptual limitations, several methodological concerns must be addressed. First, the sampling method combined participants recruited via social media platforms with others recruited through snowball sampling from the researchers' personal networks. This approach introduces potential biases and raises concerns regarding sample heterogeneity and participants' familiarity with the study's aims. Future studies should implement more standardized and anonymous sampling strategies and examine whether responses differ across recruitment sources. Second, the item phrasing occasionally included grammatical errors (e.g., "me and my partner") or lacked gender-neutral language (e.g., "he had already done"), which may have caused confusion or reduced clarity. These issues should be addressed through refinement and revalidation of the instrument before future use.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a useful foundation for exploring sexually rewarding motivation within long-term relationships. Future research should further investigate this construct across diverse relationship types, cultures, and motivational combinations, using improved methodological rigor and broader sampling frames. 5.2. Implications for Intervention and Therapy

As shown in previous studies and supported by the current findings, engaging in sexual activity primarily for the purpose of rewarding a partner can impact the well-being of both individuals in the relationship. When this motivation is occasional and accompanied by other positive motivations—such as intimacy or mutual pleasure—it is less likely to harm the relationship and may even strengthen it.

However, when sexual reward becomes frequent and is not accompanied by other constructive motivations, it can lead to an imbalanced dynamic. In such cases, the rewarding partner may suppress their own sexual needs to fulfill those of their partner, creating a conditional, transactional sexual relationship. This imbalance can be detrimental to both partners. Sexual rewarding motivation emphasizes the give-and-take component of consensual sexual relations between intimate partners. In principle, it is part of all motivations for consensual sexual relations between intimate partners. Its high significance for research and practice lies in its potential to disrupt the preconditions of a proper dyadic relationship. In some cases, this motivation may promote dynamics such as disregard for a partner's needs, self-cancelation, or feelings of humiliation and disrespect [13]. While occasional use may serve some relational purpose, frequent reliance on this motivation may foster dynamics that strain the relationship and potentially do more harm than good [22].

Considering that women reported using this motivation more frequently, it is important to consider the potential gendered power dynamics involved. The use of sex as an exchange form may reflect societal patterns in which women are expected to manage emotional and relational responsibilities, potentially reinforcing power imbalances.

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