

Beyond Consent: Arousal and Pleasure in Female Sexual Abuse Survivors

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Abstract:

This exploratory study examines the complex and often misunderstood experiences of arousal and pleasure reported by female survivors of sexual violence. Challenging the simplistic narrative that sexual violence is characterized solely by fear and pain, this paper uses data from an online survey of 27 female survivors. Thematic analysis of frequency data reveals that the majority of respondents reported experiencing physical pleasure (arousal, pleasurable bodily sensations) during abuse, while sexual orgasm and psychological pleasure also occurred.

The data show a disconnect between these involuntary responses and the lack of consent or presence of resistance during the abuse event. These experiences contribute to survivors' shame, guilt, and difficulties in processing the trauma, with implications for long-term psychological and sexual health. The findings underscore that arousal and pleasure are not indicators of consent and highlight the need for trauma-informed support, nuanced public education, and further research into these complex dynamics, including potential perpetrator intent.

Keywords: Sexual Abuse, Trauma, Female Sexuality, Arousal, Pleasure, Consent, Survivors.

1. Introduction

Sexual violence is a pervasive global issue with devastating and long-lasting consequences for survivors, particularly women (Borumandnia et al., 2020; Krug et al., 2002). While the traumatic impacts of sexual abuse, such as fear, pain, and psychological distress, are well-documented, the phenomenology of survivor experience is often more complex than these commonly recognized responses (MacIntosh et al., 2016; Pulverman et al., 2018). A less discussed but crucial aspect of this complexity is the reality that some individuals report experiencing physiological arousal and/or psychological pleasure during incidents of sexual abuse and assault (Levin & van Berlo, 2004; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007).

This challenging dimension of survivor experience is compounded by harmful societal narratives and misconceptions that frequently conflate involuntary bodily responses or subjective feelings with consent (Artime & Peterson, 2015; Gavey, 2005; Hills et al., 2020). This conflation contributes significantly to victim-blaming, internal shame, and self-blame among survivors who experienced these responses, often hindering disclosure and access to support (Artime & Peterson, 2015; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). To address these

issues clearly, it is crucial to distinguish between physiological arousal (an involuntary bodily response to stimulation), psychological pleasure (a subjective positive emotional state), and consent (a voluntary, informed, and ongoing agreement). The presence of arousal or pleasure during a non-consensual act does not indicate consent or diminish the traumatic nature of the abuse.

Building on existing research, this paper aims to explore and better understand the reported experiences of physiological arousal and psychological pleasure among female survivors of sexual abuse. By analyzing survivor accounts, we seek to shed light on the nature of these complex responses and their profound impact on survivors' psychological and sexual health. Ultimately, this understanding is vital for informing more effective and compassionate trauma-informed approaches to education, prevention, and support for those affected by sexual violence.

Specifically, this paper seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the reported experiences of arousal and/or pleasure during sexual abuse among female survivors?
- What are the reported impacts of these experiences on survivors' psychological and sexual health?
- What are the implications for education, prevention, and support?

2. Methods

This exploratory qualitative study draws primarily on data collected through a specific online survey conducted in February 2021 to explore the complex experiences of arousal and pleasure reported by female survivors of sexual abuse. While the existing published literature (as reviewed in the Introduction) provides essential theoretical context and highlights previous findings on involuntary sexual responses and the effects of trauma, the data presented in the Results section of this paper are specifically derived from this targeted online data collection.

2.1. Data Source and Participants

Primary data for this study was collected through an online survey distributed in February 2021 on a publicly accessible forum on the social media platform Reddit. Reddit was selected due to its widespread use and established communities, where individuals often discuss sensitive topics anonymously. The survey was specifically targeted to individuals who self-identified as female survivors of sexual abuse and were willing to share their experiences of arousal and/or pleasure during non-consensual acts. After a screening process, a total of 27 female respondents were selected to participate in this survey (total number of respondents = 35). Due to the anonymous nature of the online forum and survey, detailed demographic information beyond self-identified gender and survivor status was not systematically collected, and participants' experiences are based solely on self-report.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire designed to elicit qualitative descriptions of experiences of physiological arousal and psychological pleasure during sexual abuse. The survey included open-ended questions prompting participants to describe the nature of any arousal or pleasure experienced, the context in which it occurred, and any thoughts or feelings associated with these responses. The online format facilitated participation from a diverse group of survivors while maintaining anonymity.

2.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the 27 survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process involved reading and re-reading the responses to become familiar with the data, generating initial codes related to descriptions of arousal, pleasure, the context of the experience, and the subsequent emotional and psychological impacts. Codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the participants' reported experiences and addressed the research questions. Themes were defined and named to reflect the key patterns identified across the data set.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of sexual trauma, ethical considerations were paramount. Participation in the online survey was entirely voluntary and anonymous. No personally identifiable information was collected. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that their responses would be used for research purposes. The use of publicly accessible online forums for recruitment and data collection aligns with ethical guidelines for research involving sensitive topics where anonymity is crucial for participant safety and comfort (Singer et al., 2014). Ethical principles regarding the handling of sensitive data were followed throughout the research process.

3. Results

A study of online survey responses from 27 women who had experienced sexual abuse found that their experiences with arousal and pleasure during and after the abuse were different and complicated. The frequency data provides quantitative insight into how often these responses occurred in this sample. This quantitative data goes along with the qualitative themes that would be derived from open-ended responses. The open-ended questions or responses are not included here or in the data analysis below. They may be used for future analysis.

3.1. Reported Experiences of Arousal and Pleasure

Participants reported varying frequencies of experiencing physical and psychological responses during the abuse event. As shown in Table 1, the experience of physical pleasure (arousal, pleasant bodily feelings) during the abuse was reported by a majority of

respondents, with 9 (33.3%) reporting it "Sometimes," 6 (22.2%) "Usually," and 3 (11.1%) "Always." Only 4 (14.8%) reported "Never" experiencing physical pleasure during the abuse.

In addition, experiencing a sexual orgasm during the abuse event was reported by a significant portion of the sample, with 4 (14.8%) reporting it "Sometimes," 4 (14.8%) "Usually," and 3 (11.1%) "Always." While 8 (29.6%) reported "Never," the fact that over 40% of the sample reported experiencing orgasm at some frequency highlights that this response, while challenging to comprehend in the context of trauma, is not necessarily rare or unusual in these circumstances. Notably, 5 participants did not answer this question, suggesting potential difficulty or reluctance to report on this specific experience.

Psychological pleasure (positive emotional state) during the abuse event was also reported, though less frequently than physical pleasure or orgasm frequency. 4 (14.8%) reported it "Sometimes," 3 (11.1%) "Usually," and 2 (7.4%) "Always." A larger group (13, or 48.1%) reported "Never" experiencing psychological pleasure during the abuse.

Table 1: Reported Frequency of Experiences During and After Abuse (N=27)

Nr	Question	Never	Seldom (1%- 20%)	Sometime s (20%- 60%)	Usually (60%- 90%)	Always (90%- 100%)	No answe r
1	Physical pleasure (arousal, feelings) during abuse	4 (14.8)	4 (14.8)	9 (33.3)	6 (22.2)	3 (11.1)	1 (3.7)
2	Sexual orgasm during abuse	8 (29.6)	3 (11.1)	4 (14.8)	4 (14.8)	3 (11.1)	5 (18.5)
3	Physical pleasure (arousal, feelings) after abuse	14 (51.9)	4 (14.8)	4 (14.8)	2 (7.4)	2 (7.4)	1 (3.7)
4	Psychological pleasure (positive emotional state) during abuse	13 (48.1)	3 (11.1)	4 (14.8)	3 (11.1)	2 (7.4)	2 (7.4)

5	Psychological pleasure (positive emotional state) after abuse	19 (70.4)	5 (18.5)	2 (7.4)	1 (3.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
6	Feeling consent to the abuse	4 (14.8)	5 (18.5)	8 (29.6)	5 (18.5)	3 (11.1)	2 (7.4)
7	Saying no or doing something to make it stop	13 (48.1)	4 (14.8)	6 (22.2)	2 (7.4)	1 (3.7)	1 (3.7)

Experiences of pleasure after the abuse event were reported less frequently than during the event. Physical pleasure after the abuse was reported as "Never" by the majority (14, or 51.9%). Similarly, psychological pleasure after the abuse was reported as "Never" by an even larger majority (19, or 70.4%).

3.2. Consent and Resistance

The data also highlight the crucial disconnect between reported experiences of arousal/pleasure and the presence of consent. While a significant number of participants reported physical pleasure (Question 1), the frequency of "feeling consent to the abuse event" (Question 6) was distributed across the scale, with 4 (14.8%) reporting "Never" feeling consent and 8 (29.6%) reporting it "Sometimes." This quantitative finding supports the qualitative theme of a fundamental disconnect between involuntary physical/psychological responses and the absence of consent. The fact that some abusers may intentionally aim to elicit these responses in victims further complicates this dynamic, highlighting the manipulative nature of sexual violence and the clear separation between a victim's bodily reaction and their will.

Furthermore, the data indicates that the experience of arousal/pleasure did not necessarily preclude resistance. While 13 (48.1%) reported "Never" saying no or trying to stop, a substantial number (14, or 51.8%) reported doing so at various frequencies ("Seldom," "Sometimes," "Usually," "Always") (Question 7). This suggests that even when experiencing unwanted physical or psychological responses, survivors may still engage in acts of resistance.

3.3. Impact on Survivors

While the frequency data does not directly capture the qualitative themes of shame, guilt, or long-term impacts on sexual health (Themes 4, 5, and 6 from the outline), the high prevalence of reported physical pleasure and the occurrence of orgasm during abuse (Questions 1 and 2) among this sample underscores the potential for these complex and often distressing experiences to contribute significantly to those impacts. The data on pleasure after the abuse (Questions 3 and 5) showing a decrease in frequency suggests that

any immediate or short-term positive feelings are not sustained and may be replaced by the longer-term psychological consequences of the trauma. These findings point to the likelihood of profound internal conflict for survivors grappling with bodily responses that contradict their traumatic experience, potentially leading to lasting difficulties with sexual identity, intimacy, and overall sexual well-being.

4. Discussion

The findings from this exploratory study, utilizing data from female survivors of sexual abuse who responded to an online survey, underscore the critical need to move "beyond consent" in our understanding of sexual trauma. The data, particularly the reported frequencies of physical pleasure and, to a lesser extent, psychological pleasure during the abuse event, challenge the simplistic yet pervasive narrative that sexual violence is solely characterized by fear and pain. While this narrative is true for many survivors, our results suggest that a significant portion of this sample experienced complex, unwanted physical and psychological responses during non-consensual acts.

The relatively high frequency of reported physical pleasure (arousal, pleasant bodily feelings) during the abuse (over 66% reporting it "Sometimes" or more) aligns with existing literature highlighting the involuntary nature of physiological sexual responses (Levin & van Berlo, 2004). The body's capacity for arousal is a complex physiological process that can occur independently of subjective desire or consent, triggered by physical stimulation regardless of context. The occurrence of orgasm in a significant portion of our sample, while potentially less frequent than physical pleasure, further emphasizes that these involuntary peak responses are not strange or unusual in the context of sexual abuse dynamics. The lower frequency of reported sexual orgasm during abuse in our sample, compared to physical pleasure, might reflect that orgasm is a more complex response, potentially requiring a greater threshold of stimulation or a different interplay of physiological and psychological factors that are less likely to be met during a traumatic event.

The reported experiences of psychological pleasure during the abuse, though less frequent than physical pleasure, are particularly challenging and warrant deeper exploration. These findings resonate with qualitative research suggesting that grooming, manipulation, and the provision of perceived positive elements by perpetrators (such as affection or material rewards) can complicate the survivor's emotional experience and create confusing feelings (Pulverman et al., 2018).

Our data quantitatively reinforces the fundamental disconnect between these reported responses and the presence of consent. The varying frequencies of "feeling consent" among participants, including those who reported physical pleasure, strongly support the argument that arousal and pleasure are not proxies for consent (Artime & Peterson, 2015; Gavey, 2005). This disconnect is made even more disturbing by the reality that some abusers may intentionally aim to elicit these responses in victims, using the victim's involuntary bodily reactions as a tool for control or justification. This highlights the manipulative and harmful nature of sexual violence and firmly establishes the clear separation between a victim's bodily reaction and their will. The fact that a substantial number of participants also reported resisting the abuse, even when experiencing

unwanted physical or psychological responses, further underscores this point. Survivor resistance can take many forms, and the absence of overt physical struggle does not equate to consent, particularly when considering the paralyzing effects of fear or trauma responses (Levin & van Berlo, 2004).

The implications of these findings for survivors are profound. Experiencing involuntary arousal or unexpected pleasure during abuse can lead to intense feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame, as survivors may internalize these responses as a personal failing or as somehow indicating complicity in the abuse. These feelings can significantly hinder a survivor's ability to label the experience as abuse, seek support, or disclose the trauma to others due to fear of not being believed or being judged (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). The data showing a sharp decline in reported physical and psychological pleasure *after* the abuse event further suggests that any immediate or short-term positive feelings are quickly overshadowed by the traumatic impact, leaving survivors to grapple with complex and often distressing internal experiences. These unresolved feelings can contribute to long-term impacts on sexual identity, the ability to form healthy intimate relationships, and ongoing sexual health difficulties (Pulverman et al., 2018).

These results highlight critical implications for trauma-informed support and education. Support services and therapists must be equipped to acknowledge and validate the full spectrum of survivor experiences, including those involving involuntary arousal or unwanted pleasure, without judgment. Creating safe and non-judgmental spaces where survivors can openly discuss these complex feelings is essential for healing. Furthermore, public education and prevention efforts must explicitly address the distinction between consent, arousal, and pleasure. Clear messaging that physiological responses do not equal consent is vital to combat harmful myths, reduce victim-blaming, and empower individuals to understand that their bodily reactions during a non-consensual act do not invalidate their experience of abuse.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

5.1. Summary of Findings

This exploratory study, drawing on the self-reported experiences of female survivors of sexual abuse, reinforces the critical need to look "beyond consent" when understanding the multifaceted impacts of sexual trauma. Our findings indicate that experiencing involuntary physical pleasure (arousal, pleasant bodily feelings) during abuse is not uncommon, and while less frequent, psychological pleasure can also occur. These responses do not equate to consent, a distinction underscored by the varying reports of feeling consent and the presence of resistance among participants. These complex and often unwanted responses contribute significantly to survivor shame, guilt, and difficulties in processing the trauma, with reported instances of pleasure significantly decreasing after the abuse event.

5.2. Implications

The results highlight the urgent need for greater awareness and understanding of these complex survivor experiences within clinical practice, support services, and public discourse. Acknowledging that arousal and pleasure can occur during sexual abuse without

implying consent is vital for providing trauma-informed support that validates the survivor's experience and reduces self-blame. We call for the widespread adoption of educational initiatives that clearly and unequivocally distinguish between consent, physiological arousal, and psychological pleasure to dismantle harmful myths and foster a more compassionate societal response to sexual violence.

The Open Sexual Trauma Research Group (OSTRG) is dedicated to continuing research in this critical area and stands as a resource for survivors seeking understanding and professionals seeking knowledge. We believe that open discussion and rigorous investigation are essential steps towards supporting healing.

5.3. Future Research

This study, while shedding light on a crucial aspect of survivor experience, is exploratory in nature and based on a small online sample. Future research is essential to build upon these findings. More extensive qualitative studies are needed to delve deeper into the nuances of survivor experiences, including the specific contexts, types of abuse, and individual factors that may influence the occurrence of arousal and pleasure. Quantitative studies with larger and more diverse samples are necessary to estimate the prevalence of these experiences more broadly and to explore correlations with long-term psychological and sexual health outcomes. Specifically, further research is needed to understand the dynamics of perpetrator intent and whether abusers actively seek to elicit pleasure or orgasm in victims. Research on the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions specifically designed to address the shame and guilt associated with these complex responses is also a critical area for future investigation. OSTRG is committed to pursuing these and other research questions to enhance our understanding and improve support for survivors of sexual trauma.

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