

Clarifying the Role of Anxiety in College Men's Perpetration of Sexual Aggression Specific Objectives

Sexual aggression (nonconsensual sexual contact or penetration through verbal coercion, pressure, or manipulation; threat of harm; incapacitation; or physical force) is a substantial public health concern in the United States (U.S.), with roughly half of adult women and nearly one third of adult men in the U.S. reporting some history of sexual aggression victimization (Basile et al., 2022). Considering the significant negative consequences for the physical, mental, and behavioral health and of victims of sexual aggression, this constitutes a significant public health burden (Alexander & Miller, 2022; Spencer et al., 2024). Though people of all genders can be victims and perpetrators, men constitute the largest group of perpetrators of sexual aggression (Basile et al., 2022; Krahe & Berger, 2013).

Despite considerable scholarship surrounding sexual aggression perpetration, research suggests that the current repertoire of primary prevention interventions is insufficient (Porat et al., 2024). Authors of a 2024 meta-analysis suggested that one reason for this may be an overemphasis on interventions aiming to change attitudes and beliefs and insufficient emphasis on interventions targeting specific behavioral change (Porat et al., 2024). Development of prevention interventions for behaviors as covert as sexual aggression presents a thorny dilemma. One possible inroad involves heightened attention to the affective states that may facilitate or create the conditions conducive for sexual perpetration.

A surprising body of literature demonstrates a link between anxiety and various aggressive behaviors. A smaller portion of this literature emphasizes perpetrator anxiety as a predictor of *sexual* aggression specifically (Barbaro et al., 2016; Calzada et al., 2011; Carvalho et al., 2013; Vicaro-Molina et al., 2025). However, this literature is quite disparate, as the domains of anxiety examined exist in siloed veins of research. Given the need for improved approaches to primary prevention of sexual aggression on college campuses and the robust nature of the empirical evidence surrounding therapeutic approaches for addressing anxiety, clarifying the nature of the relationship between various forms of anxiety and sexual perpetration would be valuable for illuminating novel strategies in prevention, allowing for interventions that simultaneously address college men's mental health concerns and reduce their likelihood of perpetration.

Data from national surveys suggest that rates of anxiety are climbing in US populations, particularly among college age adults (ages 18-25; Goodwin et al., 2020). Findings about anxiety as a contributor to risk for sexual perpetration are mixed, relatively few, and dispersed across types of anxiety. Furthermore, despite research linking negative-emotion impulsivity to sexual aggression (e.g., Dixon et al., 2016), few studies have examined the potential mediating role of this variable in the relationship between anxiety and sexual perpetration. As such, the present study aims to examine the following exploratory research questions (RQs) in hopes of clarifying the potential for applying evidence-based interventions for anxiety within sexual aggression prevention programming.: RQ1: Are social anxiety, sexual performance anxiety, attachment anxiety, masculinity discrepancy stress, and trait anxiety correlated with college men's perpetration of sexual aggression? RQ2: Are these anxiety variables independently associated with sexual perpetration when controlling for each other? RQ3: Does negative urgency impulsivity statistically mediate the relationship between any or all forms of anxiety and sexual perpetration?

Research Design Pilot. Because I am comparing multiple kinds of anxiety against one another, assuring that the measures of anxiety measure something independent of one another and capture the intended construct in my sample is necessary for assuring validity. For each validated measure of anxiety,

I have identified an additional measure to help establish relative convergent validity against the other anxiety constructs examined. Because all are anxiety measures, moderate intercorrelation is anticipated, however measures are selected based on their conceptual likelihood of demonstrating a significantly *higher* correlation with their respective converging anxieties relative to other anxiety measures included here. A pilot study to test the validity of the anxiety measures will be conducted with 200 college men recruited via Academic Prolific, an online platform. The pilot will be administered to individuals of the same demographic group as main study participants; men ages 18-30 who self-identify as heterosexual, self-identify as college or university students, and currently reside in the US. Pilot participants will be paid \$2 for a roughly 10-minute survey .

Survey administration. We will recruit 1,200 college men via online recruitment platforms Academic Prolific and Cloud Research. Participants will be paid \$5 for completing a 25-minute survey. Participants will complete a survey comprised of the following validated measures as well as a brief demographics questionnaire: The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; measure of social anxiety; Mattick & Clarke, 1998), the Erectile Performance Anxiety Inventory (EPAI; measure of sexual performance anxiety; Telch & Pujols, 2013), Experiences in Close Relationships Survey-Short Form (ECR-S; measure of attachment anxiety; Wei et al., 2007), Masculine Role Discrepancy and Discrepancy Stress Scale (MRDDS; measure of masculine discrepancy stress; Reidy et al., 2014), State Trait Anxiety Inventory-Trait subscale (STAI-T; measure of trait anxiety Spielberger, et al., 1970), Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-Impulse Control Difficulties Subscale (DERS-Impulse; measure of negative urgency impulsivity; Gratz & Roemer, 2004), Sexual Experiences Survey-Short Form Perpetration (SES-SFP; measure of perpetration history; Koss et al., 2007), and the Sexual Initiation Strategies Scale (SISS; measure of perpetration history; Peterson, 2023). Two perpetration measures will be used in the interest of capturing a broad range of perpetration behaviors. Perpetration will be scored in a binary fashion such that men who endorsed any history of perpetration on either measure will be coded as having perpetrated sexual aggression.

Analyses. All analyses will be run using IBM SPSS (Version 28). To test RQ1, I will first run point biserial correlations to determine the extent to which each anxiety variable is independently related to sexual perpetration. Variables that achieve a significance of $p \leq .05$ will be considered statistically significant.

To test RQ2, all anxiety variables will be entered into a simultaneous logistic regression with sexual perpetration as the criterion variable. To avoid issues of multicollinearity, any anxiety variables with very high bivariate correlations between them (i.e., $r > .7$) will be entered into separate regressions with the other anxiety variables to explore how, if at all, the overall model changes for each type of anxiety.

To test RQ3, mediation analyses will examine impulsivity as a mediator and will be conducted using the PROCESS Macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2023). All anxieties that are independently associated with perpetration of sexual aggression will be tested as predictor variables with impulsivity as the mediator and sexual perpetration as the criterion variable.

Timeline (start time can be adjusted depending on timeline of funding distribution):

March-April 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create survey design on Qualtrics• Submit for IRB approval• Load money onto Prolific Academic and Cloud Research recruitment platform (takes some time for funds to become accessible)
May-June 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brief validity pilot data collection via Prolific• Pilot data cleaning and analysis• Minor adjustments to main survey (if needed)• Data collection for main survey via Prolific and Cloud Research
July –September 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data cleaning and analyses
October –December 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write-up and prepare for dissemination
January 2026 – March 2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dissemination via manuscript submission (at least 2 expected) and presentations to other researchers and practitioners

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