LEAVING A SEXUALLY COERCIVE DATING PARTNER: A PROSPECTIVE APPLICATION OF THE INVESTMENT MODEL

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In the present study, an investment model framework was applied to identify associations between partner verbal sexual coercion and dating relationship outcomes, including relationship commitment and maintenance. Undergraduate women (N = 180) provided self-report data on investment model variables and verbal sexual coercion within their current relationships and returned 6 to 8 weeks later to report on their relationship status. About 28% of the participants endorsed partner verbal sexual coercion. Women in sexually coercive relationships reported greater investment but did not differ from other women in satisfaction, commitment, or later relationship maintenance. Results revealed indirect effects of partner sexual coercion on relationship commitment through greater perceived investment. Sustaining verbal sexual coercion in ongoing dating relationships may represent a type of relationship investment that indirectly promotes subjective commitment. Additional studies of verbal sexual coercion in committed romantic relationships are needed.

Sexual aggression within committed heterosexual relationships has increasingly been recognized as a legitimate problem worthy of empirical scrutiny (e.g., Basile, 2002). Still, forced sex in the context of a committed heterosexual relationship generally is judged to be less serious than forced sex by a stranger or acquaintance (cf. Monson, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Binderup, 2000). Although both women and men may engage in sexual aggression, rates of victimization among young women perpetrated by men are extremely high. For example, rates as high as 79% of adolescent and college-aged women have reported experiencing unwanted sexual activity, broadly defined, often from boyfriends (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). To date, however, there has been relatively little empirical focus on sexual coercion by boyfriends and the possible effects of such experiences on dating relationship outcomes.

The primary focus of the present research was to identify the associations between male partner verbal sexual coercion and women’s dating relationship outcomes, including subjective commitment and relationship maintenance (stay/leave behaviors) over time. Verbal sexual coercion in committed couples involves pressure from one partner to obtain sex from a disinterested other. Pressure may be exerted through persistent begging, pleading, or, in some cases, verbal bullying. For example, in one study of women who reported verbal sexual coercion on the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), coercive men exerted pressure by inducing guilt, threatening to “go elsewhere,” or otherwise using negative persuasion to challenge the status of the relationship (Livingston, Buddie, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2004). Sexual coercion involving verbal pressure is much more common than coercion involving physical force within romantic relationships (e.g., Basile, 2002; Wilson & Leith, 2001).

Much of the past research focused on verbal sexual coercion has utilized the SES (Koss & Oros, 1982) or items adapted from the SES to assess coercion experiences over one’s lifetime (e.g., Livingston et al., 2004; Zweig, Barber, & Eccles, 1997; Zweig, Crockett, Sayer, & Vicary, 1999). In contrast, in the present research, sexual coercion by a current dating partner was assessed using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), a measure which specifically assesses destructive conflict behaviors between intimate partners. The CTS2 asks respondents about partner sexual coercion involving verbal pressure and physical force. We defined verbal sexual coercion as a positive report that a
dating partner used verbal pressure to obtain sex (broadly defined to include vaginal, anal, or oral sex) in the context of a disagreement when participants did not want sex. Past studies using the CTS2 with college students in dating relationships have reported rates of sexual coercion involving either verbal pressure or physical force ranging from 29% (Hines & Saudino, 2003) to 38% (Katz, Carino, & Hilton, 2002), although to our knowledge, no studies using the CTS2 report rates of verbal sexual coercion separate from the items involving physical force.

Being pressured to participate in unwanted sex may lead to general emotional distress including feelings of victimization, anger, and social isolation (Zweig et al., 1997). Sexual coercion also increases risk for unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, and is associated with low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, social anxiety (Zweig et al., 1997), unassertiveness (Zweig et al., 1999), and negative sexual self-perceptions (Offman & Matheson, 2004). Despite these risks, many women with sexually coercive partners are committed to their relationships, perhaps in part because sexual coercion is more common in long-standing dating couples (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000). Understanding predictors of commitment, then, should provide clues about whether women stay in or leave sexually coercive relationships. One theoretical framework that may be applied here is Rusbult's investment model of commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, 1990, 1983).

The investment model suggests that decisions to maintain a relationship (stay/leave behaviors) are most strongly predicted by subjective commitment (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Subjective commitment involves both thoughts (e.g., a future-oriented perspective) and feelings (e.g., obligation, contentment) about relationship maintenance (Fehr, 1985) and is determined by satisfaction, investments, and alternatives to a relationship. Specifically, individuals tend to be more committed to and thus more likely to maintain their relationships to the extent that they are satisfied, have invested heavily, and have less appealing alternatives (Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult & Bynum, 1993). Satisfaction involves a general positive evaluation of a relationship that instills a desire for togetherness. Investments refer to personal resources (e.g., time, effort) that have been allocated to the relationship and that will be lost if the relationship ends. Alternatives refer to the perceived desirability of being in the next best available alternative relationship or situation compared to the present relationship. Greater investment and poorer alternatives increase the costs of ending a relationship. Although these constructs are interrelated, each is presumed to uniquely contribute to subjective commitment and to stay/leave relationship decisions.

The investment model has extensive support in general samples of married and dating couples (Le & Agnew, 2003) and also has been applied to the stay/leave behaviors of women experiencing physical violence in committed relationships. For example, battered women who returned to violent partners felt more committed, believed they had made more irretrievable investments, and perceived poorer quality alternatives than women who left their partners (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). In dating samples, young adults’ intentions to maintain a relationship with a physically violent partner are positively related to investment (Choice & Lamke, 1999; Lo & Sporakowski, 1989) and general sentiments about the relationship (Lo & Sporakowski, 1989). In a retrospective study of women who had experienced dating partner violence, those who maintained their relationships reported more general relationship satisfaction than women who had left their partners (Truman-Schram, Cann, Callhoun, & Vanwallendael, 2000). Because investment model constructs have predicted relationship outcomes among women experiencing physical violence, we expected that these constructs also may predict commitment to and maintenance of sexually coercive relationships.

In addition, we hoped to characterize the relationships of women in sexually coercive relationships using investment model constructs. In past research, many women who experienced some form of coerced sex from a sexual partner felt resentful, mistrusting, or otherwise believed that the experience negatively impacted their relationship (Livingston et al., 2004; see also Zweig et al., 1999). Thus, it was expected that women with sexually coercive partners would report less general relationship satisfaction than women who did not report partner coercion.

Subjective investment may also be affected by partner sexual coercion. According to the investment model, people in committed relationships often forgo individual preferences for the larger good of the relationship (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003). This type of sacrifice may apply to sexual interactions in some couples. For example, O’Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) reported that many college students have participated in unwanted sex to benefit the relationship without being pressured by partners to do so. Women who have unwanted sex due to partner verbal coercion similarly may interpret their experience of sex as a personal sacrifice or act of obligation that appeased their coercive partner. Accordingly, we expected that women who reported partner sexual coercion would endorse having made greater relationship investments than other women.

In the present study, we used the investment model to predict dating women’s relationship outcomes. Further, we tested whether partner verbal sexual coercion impacts investment model variables, thereby affecting relationship commitment (assessed concurrently at Time 1) and relationship maintenance (assessed 6 to 8 weeks later at Time 2). Based on the investment model, we predicted that higher satisfaction, more investments, and poorer quality alternatives at Time 1 would be related to higher subjective commitment. Higher Time 1 commitment, in turn, was expected to predict continued relationship maintenance at Time 2. Based on past research, we hypothesized that women with sexually coercive partners would report less...
relationship satisfaction and greater subjective investment than women without sexually coercive partners. Because partner verbal sexual coercion was hypothesized to reduce satisfaction but increase investment, indirect effects of coercion on relationship commitment through satisfaction and investment were expected. Finally, we expected that women who expressed lower relationship commitment at Time 1 would be more likely to end their relationships by Time 2.

**METHOD**

**Participants and Procedure**

Female introductory psychology students at a state university in the Pacific Northwest (N = 180) were recruited through a psychology department human subjects pool. Eligible participants were age 18 or older and involved in an ongoing heterosexual dating relationship. Over half were in their first year of college. The sample of participants averaged 19 years of age (SD = 1.41, range 18 to 26). Most self-identified as Caucasian (84%); others identified as African American (4%), Asian American (4%), Hispanic (2%), and other ethnic identities (6%). The mean length of dating relationships was 9.91 months (SD = 5.80, range 1 to 24). Paper-and-pencil surveys were administered to small groups on campus. Participants provided informed consent and were seated separately from other participants to ensure privacy when completing the self-report measures described below.

The Time 2 follow-up period was scheduled between 6 to 8 weeks after Time 1. At Time 2, 95% (n = 172) of the sample returned to the same setting in small groups to report on their dating relationship status. At that time, a full debriefing was provided. Participants received credit toward fulfilling a departmental research requirement after each data collection period. Two-tailed comparisons suggested no demographic differences across study completers (n = 172) and noncompleters (n = 8), although noncompleters endorsed significantly less Time 1 relationship satisfaction (M = 26.57) than completers (M = 34.83), F(1, 178) = 8.13, p < .01.

**Measures**

**Sexual coercion.** Sexual coercion from one’s current dating partner was assessed with the 7-item sexual coercion subscale of the CTS2 (Straus et al., 1996). All questions pertained to partner acts of coercion (verbal or physical) leading to either “sex” or “anal or oral sex” in the context of a disagreement over the past year. Items were classified as moderate (e.g., “My partner insisted on sex when I did not want to but did not use force”) or severe (e.g., “My partner used force, like hitting, holding down, or using a weapon, to make me have sex”).

**Physical violence.** The 12-item physical assault scale was an index of physical violence from one’s current dating partner in the context of a disagreement over the past year. Representative moderate and severe items include “My partner threw something at me that could hurt” and “My partner slammed me against a wall,” respectively. Each CTS2 item was rated on a 6-point scale consisting of 0 (never), 1 (once), 2 (twice), 3 (3 to 5 times), 4 (6 to 10 times), 5 (11 to 20 times), and 6 (more than 20 times). Each scale was scored by summing the midpoints of each category of response (e.g., because 3 = 3 to 5 times, a 3 was coded as a 4, and because 4 = 6 to 10 times, a 4 was coded as an 8). An additional response option was 7 (not in the past year but it did happen before), which was coded as a 1. Responses were summed such that higher scores on each scale indicated more frequent partner use of sexual coercion or physical violence. The CTS2 is considered to be a valid measure of the frequency of behaviorally specific aggressive acts by intimate partners (Straus, 2004).

**Subjective commitment.** Subjective commitment was measured with two separate scales. The Billingham and Sack (1987) single-item scale asked the respondent to pick one of seven levels of commitment across low (e.g., “casual dating, little emotional attachment”), moderate (e.g., “someone with whom you are in love”), and high (e.g., “someone to whom you are engaged”) levels. Russet’s (1983) global commitment measure consists of four items: “How likely is it that you will end your relationship in the near future?” “To what extent are you ‘attached’ to your partner?” and “To what extent are you committed to your relationship?” which were responded to on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely). The fourth question was “For what length of time would you like your relationship to last?” with responses ranging from 1 (week or so) to 9 (lifetime). Responses were averaged such that higher scores reflected greater commitment. Possible scores ranged from 1 to 9. The internal consistency estimate (Cronbach’s α) in the present sample was .82. The intercorrelation between these two scales was r(179) = .76, p < .001; scores on each scale were standardized and averaged to form a single index of commitment to avoid redundancy in multivariate analyses.

**Relationship maintenance.** This variable, also known as stay/leave behavior, was coded as a categorical variable. Respondents indicated their current relationship status at Time 2 by choosing one of the following statements: (a) “I am involved in the same dating relationship since the first time I participated in this study (about 6-8 weeks ago)” or (b) “I am no longer involved in the same dating relationship since the first time I participated in this study (about 6-8 weeks ago).” When respondents chose the latter, they were asked to indicate who had initiated the breakup. Possible responses were self, partner, or mutual decision. Women who had initiated breakups or who were part of a mutual decision to end the relationship were classified as “leavers.”

Theoretical constructs drawn from the investment
model included measures of global relationship satisfaction, subjective investment, and quality of alternatives to the relationship.

**Relationship satisfaction.** This variable was assessed with the Quality of Marriage Index-Revised (QMI-R; Norton, 1983) with questions made applicable to dating rather than marital relationships. A representative item is “We have a good relationship.” Participants answer six items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very strong disagreement) to 7 (very strong agreement). Responses were summed with possible scores ranging from 6 to 42. Higher scores indicate greater satisfaction. The QMI is brief, but correlates well with the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), two longer scales commonly used to assess general relationship quality (Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994). The QMI-R has been shown to be a valid measure of dating relationship quality (e.g., Katz, Anderson, & Beach, 1997). In the present study, Cronbach’s α was .93.

**Investment.** Investment was assessed using the 26-item Investment Scale designed by Lund (1985). Using a 9-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 (invested nothing) to 9 (invested a great deal), participants indicated the magnitude of subjective investment of irretrievable effort, resources, and sacrifice into their current dating relationship. A representative item is “Integrating your partner into your family (such as introducing them, arranging shared social activities, or revealing your feelings and plans).” Responses were summed with possible scores ranging from 26 to 234. Higher scores reflected greater investment. Cronbach’s α was .94 in the present study.

**Alternatives.** This variable was assessed with three general items from Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow’s (1986) scale. A representative item is “Generally speaking, how appealing are your alternatives (a different relationship or spending time without a romantic relationship)?” Possible responses to each item ranged from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely). Participants’ responses were averaged. Possible scores range from 1 to 9, with higher scores reflecting more favorable perceived alternatives. In the present study, Cronbach’s α was .87.

Finally, participants responded to a number of single items that assessed demographic and relationship characteristics, including age, year in school, race/ethnicity, length of dating relationship (in months), and whether they had previously engaged in sexual activities with their current dating partner.

**RESULTS**

The majority of participants (71%, n = 128) did not report experiencing any partner sexual coercion in their present dating relationships, although 52 women (29% of the entire sample) endorsed one or more acts of current dating partner sexual coercion on the CTS2. Severe sexual coercion as classified by the CTS2 (involving threats of or actual physical force) was endorsed by three women. Because our focus in the present study was on partner verbal sexual coercion, these three women were dropped from further analyses, resulting in a final sample of 177 women, 28% (n = 49) of whom reported one or more acts of partner verbal sexual coercion.

Within the verbal sexual coercion subgroup, the average sexual coercion score was 10.16 (SD = 12.86); 13 women reported one episode of partner verbal sexual coercion, 9 women reported two episodes, and the remainder reported three or more episodes. Two participants were classified as outliers because of extreme scores (i.e., greater than two standard deviations above the subgroup mean). Because the verbal sexual coercion variable was positively skewed across the entire sample and because even one episode of partner verbal sexual coercion would seem to be an influential relational event, the sexual coercion variable was treated as a dichotomous variable (0 = absent, 1 = present) in subsequent analyses.

As can be seen in Table 1, two-tailed comparisons revealed no significant demographic differences between

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<tr>
<th>Demographic and Relationship Characteristics as a Function of Partner Verbal Sexual Coercion Status (N = 177)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partner Sexual Coercion</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Entire sample</strong> (N = 177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (M, SD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race (% Caucasian)</td>
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<tr>
<td>% first-year college students</td>
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<td>Relationship duration in months (M, SD)</td>
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<td>Sexual activity with partner (% yes)</td>
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<td>CTS2 physical violence (M, SD)</td>
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groups of women who did and did not report partner verbal sexual coercion. Although fewer sexually coerced women tended to self-identify as freshman compared to noncoerced women, this difference was not statistically significant. In addition, there were nonsignificant associations between sexual coercion status and both history of sexual activity with partners and relationship duration. About 25% of women in the sample \( (n = 44) \) endorsed partner physical violence, with a modal report of one episode. Mean scores for partner physical violence did not significantly differ as a function of partner verbal sexual coercion status.

Investment model comparisons are reported in Table 2. As expected, women with sexually coercive partners endorsed significantly greater subjective investment in their dating relationships than women without sexually coercive partners, \( p = .03 \). Contrary to expectations, women with sexually coercive partners did not report significantly less relationship satisfaction than other women. There were no significant group differences in perceived alternatives or for either measure of subjective commitment.

Intercorrelations among investment model variables and the presence or absence of partner verbal sexual coercion are provided in Table 3. As shown, investment model variables at Time 1 were significantly interrelated, but not so highly as to indicate redundancy. Partner physical violence was not significantly associated with any of the investment model variables.

Overall, 25% \( (n = 43) \) of the 169 study completers included in the sample reported that their dating relationships had ended by Time 2. Of these, 81% \( (n = 35) \) were classified as leavers because they reported either having initiated the breakup or mutually ending their dating relationships. Those who maintained their relationships were classified as stayers \( (n = 126) \). The eight women who reported that their partners had initiated their breakup were excluded from longitudinal analyses. Leavers did not differ from stayers on any demographic variables or presence of partner verbal sexual coercion, \( \chi^2(1, 161) = 0.70, ns \). Among those who stayed, 27% \( (n = 34) \) reported sexual coercion; among those who left, 20% \( (n = 7) \) reported sexual coercion.

As would be expected based on investment model predictions, women who had ended their relationships by Time 2 had endorsed significantly less Time 1 satisfaction \( (M = 30.31) \) than those who stayed \( (M = 36.60) \), \( t(159) = -4.84, p < .001 \). Leavers also had endorsed less Time 1 investment \( (M = 137.63) \) than stayers \( (M = 166.47) \), \( t(159) = -3.95, p < .001 \), and better Time 1 alternatives to the relationship \( (M = 4.05 \text{ for stayers, } M = 2.69 \text{ for leavers}) \), \( t(159) = 3.96, p < .001 \). Finally, those who left also had

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entire sample ( (N = 177) )</th>
<th>Absent ( (n = 128) )</th>
<th>Present ( (n = 49) )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>34.72 (7.46)</td>
<td>35.22 (6.91)</td>
<td>33.43 (8.69)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>158.87 (40.39)</td>
<td>154.63 (42.70)</td>
<td>169.94 (31.40)</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives</td>
<td>3.00 (1.87)</td>
<td>2.89 (1.83)</td>
<td>3.28 (1.96)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (Billingham &amp; Sack)</td>
<td>4.50 (1.77)</td>
<td>4.42 (1.84)</td>
<td>4.69 (1.57)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (Rusbult)</td>
<td>7.35 (1.56)</td>
<td>7.94 (1.37)</td>
<td>7.34 (1.54)</td>
<td>ns</td>
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**Note.** Means (and standard deviations) are presented.

### Table 3

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<th>3.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Satisfaction</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.47***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Investment</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Alternatives</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.58***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Commitment(^a)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td>.72***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.56***</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Sexual Coercion(^b)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.17***</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Physical Violence</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Commitment scores were standardized composites of scales by Rusbult (1983) and Billingham and Sack (1987).

\(^b\)Partner verbal sexual coercion was a dichotomous variable \( (0 = \text{absent, } 1 = \text{present}) \).

\( ^* p < .05, ^{*}* p < .01, ^{*}{**} p < .001. \)
reported less Time 1 commitment than stayers on the Rusbult (1983) commitment scale, \( t(159) = -6.42, p < .001 \) \((M = 6.11 \text{ for leavers}, M = 7.79 \text{ for stayers})\) and on the Billingham and Sack (1987) single-item measure of commitment, \( t(159) = -6.98, p < .001 \) \((M = 2.94 \text{ for leavers}, M = 5.00 \text{ for stayers})\).

A path analysis was conducted to test the effects of partner verbal sexual coercion status (0 = absent, 1 = present) and investment model variables on subjective commitment at Time 1 and stay/leave behaviors (0 = leave, 1 = stay) at Time 2. These paths are shown in Figure 1. Beta weights were derived from multiple regression equations. As can be seen, partner verbal sexual coercion was significantly related to greater investment but not to Time 1 satisfaction or alternatives. In addition, consistent with investment model predictions, greater general relationship satisfaction \((\beta = .30, p < .001)\), greater subjective investment \((\beta = .52, p < .001)\), and less general alternatives \((\beta = - .15, p < .01)\) each predicted greater concurrent commitment, overall model, \( F(4, 171) = 77.35, p < .001, \) adjusted \( R^2 = .64 \). Further, only Time 1 commitment was a significant negative predictor of Time 2 leave behaviors \((\beta = - .52, p < .001)\), overall model, \( F(5, 154) = 10.57, p < .001, \) adjusted \( R^2 = .24 \).

The coefficients for the indirect effects of partner verbal sexual coercion status on relationship outcomes were obtained by multiplying the standardized coefficients of the intermediate paths (e.g., Alwin & Hauser, 1975; MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). The indirect effect of sexual coercion on commitment via investment was .09, whereas the indirect effect of sexual coercion on stay/leave behaviors via investment and commitment was only .04. The indirect path between sexual coercion and commitment via investment was evaluated using Sobel’s test (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2003) and found to be significant, \( z = 2.26, p < .03 \). As expected, these findings indicated that partner verbal coercion was associated with greater objective investment; greater investment, in turn, was associated with increased subjective commitment.

![Fig. 1. Direct paths between partner verbal sexual coercion status, investment model variables, concurrent commitment, and later relationship dissolution. (**p < .01. ***p < .001.**)](image)
reported partner sexual coercion, which is similar to rates reported in other studies of college dating relationships using the CTS2 (Hines & Saudino, 2003). Interestingly, although some research suggests that sexual coercion is more common in longer dating relationships (Jackson et al., 2000), we found only a trend for partner sexual coercion to be more common in relationships of longer duration. It is possible that there was limited power to detect differences in relationship duration given that many of the relationships in our sample were relatively brief. Finally, although some studies have reported that sexual coercion and physical violence from partners may co-occur (e.g., Katz et al., 2002), we found no association between partner physical violence and verbal sexual coercion in ongoing dating relationships. Accordingly, the effect of partner verbal sexual coercion on relationship outcomes could not be accounted for by concurrent physical violence. The association between sexual coercion and physical violence may be stronger when sexual coercion is defined in terms of physically coercive tactics (e.g., force or threats of force) rather than psychological pressure or manipulation.

Partner verbal sexual coercion was not directly related to measures of subjective commitment or to the likelihood of ending the relationship by 6 to 8 weeks later. In fact, dating relationships in the present study were quite stable, as about 74% of the sample reported relationship maintenance at Time 2. The most robust prospective predictor of later relationship maintenance was subjective commitment, which was indirectly associated with partner verbal sexual coercion via investment. Taken together, these results suggest that we must identify predictors of subjective commitment to explain stay/leave behaviors among women who sustain partner sexual coercion. To understand subjective commitment, future research should identify specific predictors of perceived investment. Investment might be affected by individual methods of coping and the individual consequences of partner verbal sexual coercion. For example, to the degree that sexually coerced women exert effort to cope with their coercion experiences, interpret such experiences as sacrifices made for the good of the relationship, or both, their level of investment may work against ending the relationship because these irretrievable investments would be lost.

Predictions based on the investment model were supported in the present study. As noted previously, the investment model has enjoyed widespread support in tests within both general samples of couples (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003) and samples in which individuals are physically abused by partners (e.g., Truman-Schram et al., 2000). However, additional conceptual frameworks should be developed and tested. For example, additional research may focus on learned helplessness as related to emotional responses to partner sexual coercion (e.g., Zweb et al., 1997, 1999). More generally, partner maltreatment, including verbal abuse, could jeopardize women's emotional health by increasing symptoms of traumatic stress (Arias & Pape, 1999; Vitanza, Vogel, & Marshall, 1995) and depression (Katz & Arias, 1999; Vitanza et al., 1995). Accordingly, it may be expected that even primarily nonphysical forms of partner maltreatment, including verbal sexual coercion, could interfere with women's capacities to end abusive relationships (Lerner & Kennedy, 2000). Studies documenting whether and under what conditions partner verbal sexual coercion affects emotional well-being and subsequent relationship outcomes are needed.

Responses to sexual coercion within ongoing relationships also may be affected by cognitive dissonance. Researchers who have studied physical aggression in dating couples have suggested that individuals committed to violent partners may ask themselves, “How can I be so committed to a person who engages in highly unacceptable behaviors against me?” (Mills & Malley-Morrison, 1998, p. 694). A similar process could apply to individuals committed to partners who engage in verbal sexual coercion, which is an important direction for future research. To reduce dissonance, one can explain sexually coercive partner behaviors as due to either (a) factors internal to the partner, leading to reduced commitment and relationship termination or (b) factors external to the partner (situational, self, or both), leading to stable or increased commitment and relationship maintenance. It is possible that in at least some cases, verbal sexual coercion within an ongoing relationship is explained to oneself as an obligation or part of having a romantic relationship (situational attribution). Such methods of dissonance reduction could account for the lack of direct association between sustaining verbal sexual coercion and commitment observed in the present study.

Limitations of the present research should be acknowledged. Because most of the relationships in the present sample were stable through Time 2, our statistical power in predicting stay/leave behaviors was limited. In addition, the present study relied on a convenience sample of young women in college; findings may not generalize to more diverse samples of people in sexually coercive relationships. At the same time, college student women are especially at risk for sexual victimization (Smith et al., 2003) and therefore constitute an important population for study. Third, past history of sexual victimization was not assessed or controlled for in the present analysis, which is another limitation of our study. Sexually revictimized women tend to have more interpersonal difficulties, including negative expectations about their partners, than other women (Clasen, Palesh, & Aggarwal, 2005). Participants with previous histories of sexual coercion or rape who also experienced coercion within their current relationships could have been, at a minimum, less satisfied with their relationships than women without past histories of unwanted sex. Fourth, our single-item index of women's experience of sexual activities with their partners was general, endorsed by almost every participant, and did not specifically address whether the couple had previously engaged in consensual sex. Women who share a history of consensual sex with
partners may be at greater risk for partner sexual coercion because partners may perceive that their “rights” are abridged when women do not subsequently consent to sex (Livingston et al., 2004).

To our knowledge, these data provide the first application of the investment model to women experiencing sexual coercion and the first prospective test of social psychological predictors of dissolution of a sexually coercive dating relationship. Future studies that employ a longer follow-up duration and that monitor continued relationship dissolution would be valuable. As a group, women in sexually coercive relationships did not differ from other women in subjective commitment to dating partners or in stay/leave decision making. At the same time, indirect effects of coercion on relationship commitment through increases in perceived investment were observed. Sustaining verbal sexual coercion from partners may represent a type of self-sacrifice in some dating relationships. These findings warrant replication in future research and underscore the need for additional studies of coerced sexual experiences involving verbal pressure within committed romantic relationships.

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