Is orgasmic meditation a form of sex?

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Abstract

Orgasmic Meditation(OM) is a structured, partnered meditative practice in which one person, who can be any gender, strokes the clitoris of their partner for 15 minutes. As such, it resembles a sexual activity. OM is taught as a practice that is distinct from sex, and we wondered whether people who engage in OM actually maintain that distinction themselves. We conducted an online convenience sample survey including qualitative open-ended text questions and quantitative Likert-style questions that was distributed to email listservs for practitioners of OM. The 30-item questionnaire included questions designed to differentiate the potentially related concepts of OM, seated meditation, fondling, and sex, as bases for comparison. The quantitative results of this mixed method study show that OM practitioners view the practice as significantly more similar to meditation than to sex or fondling. These results were consistent, regardless of whether the question was asked in the positive or negative and whether OM was being compared to one behavior individually or to multiple behaviors at the same time. The distinction between OM and sex/fondling rapidly becomes more pronounced as practitioners complete more OMs. This suggests that the novelty of genital touching in meditation may diminish over time, as practitioners get used to the more alternative point of focus. The results of this study have implications for the practice and how it is approached and regulated.

Introduction

Orgasmic Meditation (OM) is a structured, partnered meditative practice involving manual stimulation of the clitoris. In the 15-minute practice, one person strokes the clitoris of another “with no goal other than to feel the sensation.” (OneTaste, 2019). Even with orgasm in the name, practitioners do not expect or avoid physiological orgasm (for a description of physiological orgasm, see Bhasin & Basson, 2011), but attempt to meet each stroke with full attention and approval. Similar to sitting meditation (see, for example, Kabat-Zinn, 1994), when the attention wanders, OM practitioners - whether they are the person doing the stroking, or the one receiving the stroking - aim to bring their attention back, in this case to the point of contact (between finger and clitoris) and the sensations in their body. The “stroker” is fully clothed and wears disposable gloves, while the “strokee” removes only as much clothing as is necessary. The practice has a strict protocol, referred to as “the container,” which specifies steps, timing, and communication during the OM (<https://tinyurl.com/y6zba6nf>). People who practice OM, regardless of age, sexuality, income, or how they learned to OM, report a number of benefits including relationships, friendships, health, professional life and spiritual life (Millar, 2015).

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People who practice OM also report that the practice can trigger mystical experiences (Siegel & Emmert-Aronson, 2019).

Several of us have had experience practicing OM and subsequently introducing others to the practice and teaching OM. People often ask how OM is different from sex. We acknowledge that this question is valid as both involve genital touching. And even though OM is taught as a practice that is distinct from sex, it is reasonable to ask whether people who engage in the practice actually maintain that distinction themselves.

The definition of what is and is not sex carries with it a variety of personal, scientific, societal, and legal implications and has been the subject of considerable study. Dictionary-based definitions of “sex” are typically vague and reflexive. For example, in the Oxford English Dictionary, “sex” is defined as “sexual activity, including specifically sexual intercourse.” Looking up “sexual” leads to a similarly circular definition, for example: “of, relating to, or associated with sex or the sexes.” (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Research on the topic reveals considerable nuance in how sex is defined and by whom. As Horowitz and Spicer (2013) highlight, “Sexual definitions involve moral, cultural, and identity management dimensions.” Long established Sexual Script Theory holds sexuality as socially constructed and choreographed psychologically by the scripts and meanings attached to various acts by participants (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 1987). In short, there is no universally accepted definition of sex.

Most studies on sex have focused on respondents’ definitions of what “counts” as sex. These studies have revealed a hierarchy in terms of agreement that any particular sexual activity is likely to be viewed as “sex.” Penile-vaginal intercourse is most reliably labelled as “sex,” followed by anal intercourse, oral-genital contact, manual-genital touching, touching the breasts/nipples, followed by kissing (Horowitz & Bedford, 2017). Overall this hierarchy holds across groups, though some variations have been found between specific categories. For example, lesbians are found more likely to consider manual-genital contact “sex” than other groups (Horowitz & Spicer, 2013).

Similar to these studies that seek to determine if an activity “counts” as sex, we explored the question – “Is OM sex?” Specifically, do those who practice OM view the practice as sex? The answer to this question has personal, legal, policy, and programmatic implications for those who practice and teach OM and those in the sexuality and wellness sphere. For comparison, we also asked these participants how they perceive sitting meditation and fondling.

Methods

We conducted an online convenience sample survey including qualitative open-ended text questions and quantitative Likert-style questions that was distributed to email listservs for practitioners of OM. The 30-item questionnaire was developed through expert consultation (see acknowledgments) and included questions designed to differentiate the potentially related

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concepts of OM, seated meditation, fondling, and sex, as bases for comparison. Questions were designed to explore the similarities and differences between these concepts both in Likert-style questions (results presented herein) and open-ended text (Siegel et. al, Manuscript in Preparation). All study instruments and procedures were approved by the IntegReview Institutional Review Board.

Participants

A total of 414 people initiated the survey. However, the final sample consisted of 220 participants with analyzable data: 139 participants did not fill out any quantitative data; 19 participants indicated they had already filled out this survey; 2 participants indicated they were too young to fill out the survey; 1 participant indicated s/he had never OM'd, 1 participant indicated s/he had never had sex; 16 participants indicated they had never practiced sitting meditation; 16 participants indicated they had no experience with fondling. Inclusion criteria included experience with each of these four behaviors, being 18 years of age or older, and an ability to read and respond in English. There were no exclusion criteria.

Measures

Data were gathered through an online survey administered through Qualtrics. The survey gathered basic demographic information, including age, gender, sexual orientation, and relationships status, qualitative descriptions of OM, meditation, fondling, and sex (e.g., describe OM), qualitative comparisons of OM, meditation, fondling, and sex (e.g., describe how meditation is different from sex), and quantitative comparisons of OM, meditation, fondling, and sex (e.g., Likert-type scales responding to questions such as "OM is like meditation"; or "OM is more like sex than fondling"). This 30-item questionnaire (see Appendix A) was developed through subject-matter expert consultation (a linguist, a human sexuality expert, and the study team).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Survey completers and non-completers were compared to examine potential differences in completion rates. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies were used to describe the data below. We first analyzed the questions comparing OM to another behavior (i.e., OM is like meditation). We utilized one-way ANOVA to examine whether participants differed in their answers across the four behaviors (i.e., do the following answers differ: OM is like meditation, OM is like fondling, OM is like sex). We then utilized paired samples t-tests to make comparisons between pairs of behaviors (i.e., is there a difference between "OM is like meditation" and "OM is like sex?"). Given the large number of comparisons made, alpha was set to .01 to reduce type 1 error.

Results

Respondents

The sample consisted of 220 people, with 108 men, 111 women, and 1 person who identified as transgender. The majority (77%) identified as heterosexual, with 16% identifying as bisexual, 2% as queer, and 4% as other. Respondents represented a wide range of OM experience: 5% had completed 1-10 OMs, 6% 11-50 OMs, 25% 51-250 OMs, 20% 251-500 OMs, and 45% had completed over 501 OMs. 52% of respondents reported being “single” and 48% “partnered.” (Figures 1-4). Demographic variables did not differ between completers and non-completers.

Figure 1: Survey Respondent Demographics

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statement “OM is a form of Meditation.” Participants strongly agreed that OM is not fondling or sex, giving an average likert-type rating of 4.55 and 4.65, respectively. Of note, for all of these individual comparisons – OM is, OM is not, OM is a form of – there was no significant difference between fondling and sex. Only the question “OM feels like” had significant differences between the two, with participants agreeing more with the statement “OM feels like sex” than “OM feels like fondling.”

Participants disagreed most strongly with the statements “OM is Sex,” and “OM is Fondling,” with average ratings of 1.42 and 1.48, respectively (strongly disagree). There was also high disagreement with the statement “OM is not mediation,” with a rating of 1.53. Based on these individual comparisons, we see that participants believe OM is significantly more similar to meditation than to sex or fondling. See Table 1 for full comparisons and significance.

Table 1: Overall Behavioral Comparisons

	Meditation	Fondling	Sex
OM is not	1.53 ^a	4.55 ^b	4.65 ^b
OM is	4.48 ^a	1.48 ^b	1.42 ^b
OM is a form of	4.69 ^a	1.80 ^b	1.75 ^b
OM feels like	4.21 ^a	1.74 ^b	2.13 ^c

Means with different superscripts are significantly different from one another

Likert-type rating from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

18 participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “OM is not sex” or agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “OM is sex.” We explored their demographics to see if there were any significant differences between them and the rest of the study cohort, and found that they were less experienced than the overall responders. [CR9]

In the questions comparing multiple behaviors at a time (e.g., OM is more similar to meditation than sex), over 80% of participants felt that OM was more similar to meditation than sex, and that OM was more similar to meditation than fondling. Only 15% of participants thought that OM was more similar to sex than to meditation.

The data was even more conclusive for fondling, where 80.9% of participants thought fondling was more like sex than meditation and only 6.4% thought it was more like meditation than sex. See table 2 for full comparisons.

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Table 2: Comparisons among Behaviors

	Average	Percent Agree or Strongly Agree
OM is more like meditation than sex	4.36	80.5%
OM is more like sex than meditation	1.90	15.5%
OM is more like fondling than sex	2.64	32.7%
OM is more like sex than fondling	2.24	20.0%
OM is more like fondling than meditation	1.96	18.2%
OM is more like meditation than fondling	4.28	80.5%
Fondling is more like meditation than sex	1.67	6.4%
Fondling is more like sex than meditation	4.30	80.9%

Sub-analyses by demographic

Gender and sexual orientation

Based on our data, women tended to be more certain that OM was meditation and not sex than men. Bisexual participants were also more convinced than heterosexual participants in their views that OM was meditation and not sex. Interestingly, bisexual women had the most extreme views on OM being meditation and not sex. We had small n for queer and other sexual orientation so cannot draw conclusions about these subgroups.

Level of OM experience.

Participants with fewer OMs found OM to be less dissimilar from sex and fondling than participants with more OM experience. While the majority of participants found OM to be more similar to meditation than to sex, these results were more pronounced with more experience. The effect of OM experience was most marked within the first 50 OMs, and virtually disappeared after that. See table 3 and Figure 2 for results stratified by OM experience.

Age

The vast majority of the comparisons were non-significant. However, respondents did differ ($p < .01$) by age in their response to OM is a form of sex, with 30-44-year-olds disagreeing more strongly than other age groups.

Relationship

Like age, most of these comparisons were non-significant, although partnered respondents agreed more strongly than single participants that OM is not fondling.

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Table 3: Results stratified by OM experience

1-10 OMs				Question	Average
	Meditation	Fondling	Sex		
OM is not	2.20	3.80	4.00	OM is more like meditation than sex	3.00
OM is	3.60	2.40	2.20	OM is more like sex than meditation	3.10
OM is a form of	3.80	2.90	2.80	OM is more like fondling than sex	2.90
OM feels like	3.40	2.60	2.90	OM is more like sex than fondling	2.90
				OM is more like fondling than meditation	3.40
				OM is more like meditation than fondling	3.40
				Fondling is more like meditation than sex	1.70
				Fondling is more like sex than meditation	3.90
11-50 OMs				Question	Average
	Meditation	Fondling	Sex		
OM is not	2.14	3.43	3.86	OM is more like meditation than sex	3.64
OM is	4.07	2.43	2.57	OM is more like sex than meditation	2.79
OM is a form of	4.43	3.29	2.71	OM is more like fondling than sex	3.86
OM feels like	3.36	2.43	2.57	OM is more like sex than fondling	2.21
				OM is more like fondling than meditation	3.21
				OM is more like meditation than fondling	2.86
				Fondling is more like meditation than sex	1.93
				Fondling is more like sex than meditation	4.07
51-250 OMs				Question	Average
	Meditation	Fondling	Sex		
OM is not	1.63	4.59	4.63	OM is more like meditation than sex	4.34
OM is	4.41	1.39	1.39	OM is more like sex than meditation	1.79
OM is a form of	4.70	1.61	1.94	OM is more like fondling than sex	2.64
OM feels like	4.30	1.72	1.96	OM is more like sex than fondling	2.19
				OM is more like fondling than meditation	2.08
				OM is more like meditation than fondling	4.23
				Fondling is more like meditation than sex	1.60
				Fondling is more like sex than meditation	4.15
251-500 OMs				Question	Average
	Meditation	Fondling	Sex		
OM is not	1.40	4.71	4.64	OM is more like meditation than sex	4.64
OM is	4.58	1.40	1.33	OM is more like sex than meditation	1.67
OM is a form of	4.77	1.76	1.43	OM is more like fondling than sex	2.68
OM feels like	4.23	1.74	1.90	OM is more like sex than fondling	1.85
				OM is more like fondling than meditation	1.78
				OM is more like meditation than fondling	4.32
				Fondling is more like meditation than sex	1.66

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Fondling is more like sex than meditation 4.20

500+ OMs				Question	Average
	Meditation	Fondling	Sex		
OM is not	1.37	4.70	4.84	OM is more like meditation than sex	4.49
OM is	4.63	1.34	1.23	OM is more like sex than meditation	1.80
OM is a form of	4.77	1.59	1.54	OM is more like fondling than sex	2.41
OM feels like	4.35	1.56	2.18	OM is more like sex than fondling	2.37
				OM is more like fondling than meditation	1.64
				OM is more like meditation than fondling	4.59
				Fondling is more like meditation than sex	1.66
				Fondling is more like sex than meditation	4.49

Figure 2: OM is More Like Meditation than Sex by Experience Level (1 strongly disagree, 5 strongly agree)

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Discussion

This is the first study of its kind on the topic of Orgasmic Meditation and how practitioners perceive this practice. There is little research on Orgasmic Meditation in general, and this study helps place it in the larger context of meditation and sexuality, two fields with much ongoing research. The quantitative results of this mixed method study show that OM practitioners view the practice as significantly more similar to meditation than to sex or fondling. These results were consistent, regardless of whether the question was asked in the positive or negative (i.e. disagreeing with the question OM is sex, agreeing with the question OM is not sex) – and whether OM was being compared to one behavior individually or to multiple behaviors at the same time.

The results of this study also show that the distinction between OM and sex/fondling rapidly becomes more pronounced as practitioners complete more OM. This suggests that the novelty of genital touching in meditation may diminish over time, as practitioners get used to the more alternative point of focus. If OM is viewed differently by different groups of practitioners, there may be programmatic and policy implications in the management of OM instruction. For example, if new OM practitioners are more likely to conflate OM and sex, there is a heightened likelihood of unintended outcomes related to sexual stigma, trauma, or perceived sexual harassment at that stage. Such sexuality-related side-effects should be addressed in the instruction and in communications with participants, and additional supports may be necessary

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to help new practitioners navigate these complexities until they are clear on the practice and how to internalize their experiences.

In addition, of the gender and sexual orientation combinations with large enough sample sizes to study, bisexual women viewed the practice as most different from sex/fondling. This was surprising because of the scientific research showing that lesbians were more likely to classify manual-genital contact as sex. The finding suggests that the context highly impacts how an act of a sexual nature is perceived. The same physical behavior that in the bedroom may be considered sex, is considered meditation in the container of a practice setting. The fact that this subgroup was more adamant that the practice is not sex highlights how much the intention behind the act makes a difference. That is, the practice is not differentiated from sex because of the actual physical action, but because of the intention behind it.

Future Research

Given the fact that OM involves genital stroking, it is therefore interesting to ask the question why the response to the survey is so clear. One possibility is that there are certain aspects of the practice itself that clearly divides it from sex and fondling. For example, the stroker in OM is fully clothed and wears gloves. There is no eye gazing or kissing. Practitioners generally do the practice away from their beds, usually on the floor with meditation and other cushions that do not resemble bed pillows. Practitioners are also taught that if the practice stirs desires for sex, that they complete the practice and put away the practice supplies before deciding whether to have sex. If practitioners follow this guidance, then OM will effectively be separated from sex or from activities that might lead to sex.

It is also important to note that OM is not the only practice that confounds the traditional conceptualizations of sex and meditation. Tantra, for example, seeks to use sexual energy to reach a meditative state (Nagaraj 2013). It would be interesting to know how practitioners of tantra would respond to a similar survey.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. As with any convenience sample survey, the respondents may not accurately represent the entire community of OM practitioners. Furthermore, the study was promoted by OneTaste, and so practitioners who are happy with OneTaste as a company might have been more likely to respond. OneTaste explicitly teaches that OM is not sex, so it is possible that respondents are reporting what they've learned, rather than what they believe. No race, class, or geographic location data was collected, and thus we cannot account for differences across these demographic factors.

Conclusions

The results of this study have implications for the practice and how it is approached and regulated. As previous studies have shown, sociocultural and historical context play a large role in what constitutes sex. In the wake of current public controversy over sex and consent, a practice whose practitioners report benefits in relationships, friendships, health, professional life and spiritual life (Millar, 2015), has teachings around sexuality and consent, and yet is rated as

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clearly distinct from sex, has clear benefits and a role in the broader conversation of health, wellness, and positive sexuality.

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Competing Interests

VS and BEA receive compensation from the Institute of OM Foundation, a nonprofit that supports research on Orgasmic Meditation. VS, BEA, and CR have been trained to teach Orgasmic Meditation.

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