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Childhood Sexual Abuse and Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Responses to Partner Touch

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This dyadic study examined how childhood sexual abuse is associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses anticipated in reaction to different types of hypothetical partner touch.

Background: Trauma theories contend that childhood sexual abuse is associated with long-term relational challenges, including difficulties with intimacy and physical touch. Touch plays a central role in fostering connection and well-being in couples, but individuals with a history of childhood sexual abuse and their partner may react differently to touch from a romantic partner.

Method: A convenience sample of 363 couples ($n = 695$ participants) mostly living in Canada completed self-report measures assessing perceptions of sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and behavioral avoidance in response to hypothetical scenarios depicting affectionate, sexual, or no-touch. Actor-partner interdependence models examined the associations between a person's childhood sexual abuse and both partners' responses to touch.

Results: Individuals with higher childhood sexual abuse frequency anticipated greater negative affect and behavioral avoidance in response to hypothetical sexual touch, but lower avoidance in response to hypothetical affectionate touch. In the hypothetical no-touch condition, individuals with higher CSA frequency anticipated higher negative affect and men perceived greater sexual intent. Moreover, partners of individuals with higher CSA frequency reported expecting greater negative affect and perceived greater sexual intent.

Conclusion: Childhood sexual abuse may shape how partners interpret touch, suggesting that while sexual touch may be distressing, affectionate touch could play a role in rebuilding intimacy via lower avoidance.

1 | Introduction

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a prevalent social concern with well-established long-lasting consequences to health and well-being, with some significant gender differences (e.g., women report more internalizing symptoms and men display more externalizing behaviors; Storrie et al. 2023). The prevalence of CSA is estimated at around 19.8% for girls, 6.2% for boys, and 35.6% for gender diverse individuals (i.e., trans men, trans women, and gender fluid/nonconforming individuals) under the age of 18 (Finkelhor et al. 2024). Given that CSA mostly occurs within a trusted relationship and involves sexual acts of betrayal (Finkelhor and Browne 1985; Freyd 1996; Herman 1992), it is thought to subsequently affect adult intimate relationships and sexuality more so than any other form of childhood trauma (Briere and Runtz 1990; Lacelle et al. 2012). Indeed, in line with a life course perspective (Elder 1998), CSA is related to greater difficulties forming and maintaining romantic relationships, such as relationship instability (Larson et al. 2007; Whisman 2006), difficulties with intimacy and trust (Davis and Petretic-Jackson 2000; Vaillancourt-Morel et al. 2019), poorer dyadic adjustment (DiLillo 2001; Vaillancourt-Morel et al. 2015), and intimate partner violence (Godbout et al. 2019). Furthermore, existing research has shown that individuals with a history of CSA, along with their partners, encounter unique sexual challenges in their romantic relationships, marked by higher sexual avoidance and distress and lower sexual function and satisfaction compared to those without a history of CSA (Bergeron et al. 2022; Corsini-Munt et al. 2017; Vaillancourt-Morel et al. 2021; Vaillancourt-Morel et al. 2016). However, limited research has examined potential mechanisms for the negative consequences of CSA on couples' poorer sexual well-being.

Although it has received little scientific attention, physical touch is a key component of romantic and sexual relationships that is theoretically thought to be affected by CSA (Maltz 2002; van der Kolk 2014). Touch fosters physical and affective connection between partners, enhances sexual arousal, facilitates communication, reduces stress, and promotes overall well-being; thus, it is essential for couples' romantic and sexual functioning (Debrot et al. 2013). However, as CSA is related to hypervigilance to trauma-related cues, a heightened sensitivity to threat, and disrupted body boundaries (Gewirtz-Meydan and Godbout 2023), CSA may affect the way a person experiences and reacts to touch, particularly in intimate and sexual contexts that can prompt reminders of the abuse. Understanding how CSA may be related to partners' responses to touch could refine theoretical trauma models by deepening the ways CSA may shape relational and sexual interactions. The present study used a dyadic design to examine whether CSA is related to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to affectionate or sexual touch from a romantic partner compared with a no-touch condition.

1.1 | Touch in Romantic Relationships

Touch is a powerful non-verbal communication tool (Burgoon et al. 1996; Finnegan 2005; Hertenstein 2002) used to express and interpret affective content in interpersonal situations (Schachner et al. 2005). In romantic relationships, touch plays a central role in conveying different messages or eliciting feelings, with the same gesture carrying diverse intentions (Jones and Yarbrough 1985). For example, backrubs or cuddling can be intended to express affection and care, whereas when done with a sexual intention, they may be ways to initiate sexual activity (Gulledge et al. 2003; Hertenstein et al. 2006; Jones and Yarbrough 1985). Touch is common practice in romantic relationships, with 85% of individuals engaging in physical touch with their partners in the last four hours of shared time (Debrot et al. 2014), and has some distinct characteristics, as some areas of the body are usually only touched by one's intimate partner (Suvilehto et al. 2015).

Touch from a romantic partner can evoke variable affective and behavioral responses (Gallace and Spence 2010). The skin being an erogenous zone, it contains receptors that generate context-appropriate responses (Valentini et al. 2008; Weiskrantz and Zhang 1987), such as positive affect, thoughts, and behaviors in response to affectionate touch or negative responses to painful touch (Winkelmann 1959). Overall, being touched in an affectionate way by a partner is associated with a positive affective state, a greater feeling of closeness, a decrease in heart rate, and a higher psychological well-being six months later (Debrot et al. 2013; Triscoli et al. 2017). Therefore, experiencing gentle touch from a partner generally has a soothing effect with positive effects on the relationship and overall well-being (Debrot et al. 2013).

However, individuals can respond to their partner's touch in various ways, encompassing cognitive responses (i.e., intentions inferred from their partner's touch), affective responses (i.e., emotions triggered by their partner's touch), and behavioral responses (i.e., actions that follow the touch; Rancourt et al. 2017). Based on their past distal (e.g., CSA) and proximal (e.g., pain during sex) experiences with touch, some individuals may react to touch that is typically interpreted as affectionate or sexual with negative feelings and avoidant behavioral responses instead of positive affect and a proximity-seeking response. For instance, individuals with greater attachment avoidance, who typically avoid closeness and are excessively self-reliant, are less inclined to touch their romantic partner and report fewer positive feelings about cuddling (Chopik et al. 2014). Moreover, women with self-reported sexual problems, compared to those without, reported higher perceptions of sexual intent, greater negative affect, and greater anticipated behavioral avoidance in response to a hypothetical scenario with sexual touch from a romantic partner, and reported higher negative affect in response to a scenario depicting affectionate touch from a romantic partner when compared with a scenario without touch (Rancourt et al. 2017). These studies suggest that not everyone perceives and experiences touch in the same way, as some individual characteristics may influence response to touch in the context of a romantic relationship.

1.2 | CSA and Touch

At a macro level, the life course perspective contends how early-life experiences can shape individual and relational outcomes across time (Elder 1998). Trauma theories also suggest

that individuals with a CSA history experience touch differently from those without a CSA history (Briere 2002; Finkelhor and Browne 1985; van der Kolk 2014). Specifically, Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) Traumagenic Dynamics Model identifies four core dynamics–betrayal, stigmatization, powerlessness, and traumatic sexualization–that may offer valuable insights into how individuals with a CSA history may experience and react to touch. Betrayal occurs when the abuse involves a trusted figure, undermining the victim's ability to trust others and fostering hypervigilance and difficulty interpreting physical touch. Betrayal might lead to heightened sensitivity to ambiguous cues, making the survivor more likely to misinterpret neutral or even affectionate touch as threatening or intrusive. This can result in feelings of anxiety, discomfort, or confusion in response to a partner's touch, particularly if the intention behind it is unclear. Stigmatization reflects internalized feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness, shaping self-concept and comfort with intimacy. Stigmatization may make it difficult for the survivor to feel comfortable with physical intimacy in sexual contexts, leading to negative emotional responses such as shame, disgust or unworthiness, increasing negative affect or avoidance of touch altogether. Powerlessness arises from the loss of control experienced during the abuse, leading to challenges in asserting boundaries and avoidant behaviors. Powerlessness can manifest as difficulties in establishing and maintaining boundaries in adult relationships. The victims might feel overwhelmed or unable to assert their needs, leading to discomfort with touch that might feel coercive or out of their control. Finally, traumatic sexualization creates distorted associations between sexuality and power, fear, or manipulation, conditioning victims to associate touch with danger or obligation rather than affection. It may cause a distorted reaction to physical intimacy, where individuals with a CSA history might feel that touch is obligatory, threatening, or linked to exploitation, rather than an expression of care or affection. Together, these traumagenic dynamics theoretically highlight the complex and deeply embedded ways in which CSA history may shape an individual's perception of and response to touch within intimate partnerships.

A central tenet of the life course perspective approach, the principle of linked lives, highlights how individuals' trajectories are interconnected, particularly within romantic relationships (Elder 1998). The impact of CSA may thus also extend beyond the victim, affecting their romantic partners. Dyadic data directly captures the interdependence between partners to explore how CSA may be associated with their own and their partner's anticipated reactions to touch. The Couple Adaptation to Traumatic Stress model (CATS; Goff and Smith 2005) theorizes how traumatic stress shapes couple dynamics, highlighting partners' adaptation processes. This model suggests that partners of trauma victims may also experience difficulties with touch due to secondary traumatic stress and trauma-related relational dynamics. While some studies indicate that partners of individuals with a CSA history report higher levels of psychological distress and sexual difficulties compared to those without a CSA history (Vaillancourt-Morel et al. 2024), empirical evidence remains limited. Theoretically, partners may feel helpless or uncertain about how to provide support while also grappling with their own emotional responses to the complexities of the relationship. These dynamics may create a cycle of misunderstanding and emotional distance, further complicating intimacy.

While to our knowledge no studies have specifically examined the responses of individuals with a CSA history and their partner to partner touch, a study among 92 adults showed that participants who experienced childhood maltreatment, including CSA, tend to prefer greater interpersonal distances, exhibit neural flight responses to rapid touch, and derive less comfort from affective touch compared to those without such history (Maier et al. 2020). In a study among 165 adults who were sexually abused as children, victims of incest, a particularly insidious form of CSA that often blurs the lines between affection and abuse, reported more problems with touch, with no significant differences between women and men (Easton et al. 2011). Furthermore, among a sample of 531 female students, greater history of childhood maltreatment (including but not restricted to CSA) was related to higher disrupted body boundaries (Talmon and Ginzburg 2017). Individuals with a disrupted sense of body boundaries may have trouble identifying their bodily sensations, and hence express those boundaries with either apathy or exaggerated sensitivity that can evoke a feeling of threat (Schmidt et al. 1997; Streeck-Fischer and van der Kolk 2000). Taken together, these studies suggest that individuals with a CSA history may interpret touch differently because of the four core traumagenic dynamics (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). However, although theoretically relevant and in line with related past empirical findings, how individuals with a history of CSA and their partners react to affectionate and sexual touch remains unexamined.

1.3 | The Current Study

The overall aim of this study was to examine whether the frequency of a person's CSA is related to their own and their partner's cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses anticipated in reaction to affectionate and sexual hypothetical partner touch compared with a control condition including no-touch. As relationship length is associated with various relationship and sexual outcomes, including relationship satisfaction, commitment, sexual frequency, and desire (Buhler et al. 2021; Freeman et al. 2023; Schröder and Schmiedeberg 2015), which may all be related to how partners react to touch, we controlled for relationship length in all analyses.

1.3.1 | Objective 1: Main Effects of CSA Frequency

The first objective was to examine the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's perceived sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and anticipated behavioral avoidance in response to hypothetical scripts depicting common partner interactions.

Hypothesis 1a. *In line with Finkelhor and Browne's* (1985) *Traumagenic Dynamics Model, we hypothesized that overall (i.e., for all conditions combined) a person's CSA frequency would be related to their own greater perception of their partner's sexual intent, and greater anticipated negative affect and behavioral avoidance.*

Hypothesis 1b. *In line with the life course perspective approach* (Elder 1998) *and the CATS model* (Goff and Smith 2005),

TABLE 1 | Sociodemographic characteristics of the total sample ($N = 695$).

Variables	M	SD
Age ($n = 695$)	32.81	9.00
Relationship length (years; $n = 363$ couples)	7.60	7.16
	N	**%**
Gender ($n = 695$)		
Cisgender man	313	45.0
Cisgender woman	357	51.4
Sex/gender diverse[a]	23	3.3
Couple type ($n = 363$ couples)		
Mixed-sex/gender couple	292	80.4
Same-sex/gender couple	20	5.5
Sexual diversity couple	19	5.2
Education level ($n = 695$)		
High school or less	64	9.2
Vocational training	73	10.5
College	175	25.2
University	365	52.5
Occupation ($n = 695$)		
Working full or part-time	484	69.6
Student	121	17.4
On parental leave	32	4.6
Unemployed	11	1.6
Homemaker	16	2.3
Retired	7	1.0
Country of residence ($n = 695$)		
Canada	688	99.0
United States	3	0.4
Asia	1	0.1
Europe	3	0.4
Ethnic/racial background ($n = 695$)		
Arab	12	1.7
Black	8	1.2
Caribbean	4	0.6
Central Asian	1	0.1
East Asian	11	1.6
South Asian	6	0.9
Southeast Asian	6	0.9
West Asian	2	0.3
Indigenous	13	1.9
Latin American	7	1.0
White	639	91.9
Other[b]	5	0.7
Annual income ($n = 695$)		
Below CAN$19,999	115	16.5
CAN$20,000–39,999	138	19.9
CAN$40,000–59,999	177	25.5
CAN$60,000–79,999	129	18.6
CAN$80,000–99,999	61	8.8
Over CAN$100,000	74	10.6
Sexual orientation ($n = 695$)		
Heterosexual	496	71.4
Gay or lesbian	32	4.6
Mostly heterosexual with some same-gender attraction	51	7.3
Mostly gay or lesbian with some other-gender attraction	3	0.4
Bisexual	54	7.8
Pansexual	22	3.2
Asexual	6	0.9
Queer	11	1.6
Other[c]	20	2.9
Childhood sexual abuse ($n = 695$)	164	23.6

[a]Trans men, trans women, non-binary, indigenous or another cultural gender minority identity, gender, or gender not listed.
[b]Other includes participants who identified as having a mixed ethnic/racial background.
[c]Other includes participants reporting not knowing yet, currently questioning their sexual orientation, or having a sexual orientation not listed.

we expected that a person's CSA frequency would be related to their partner's greater perceived sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and behavioral avoidance.

1.3.2 | Objective 2: Moderating Role of Type of Hypothetical Partner Touch

The second objective was to examine whether the type of touch described in the vignettes (i.e., affectionate vs. sexual vs. no-touch) moderated the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's perceptions of sexual intent, anticipated affective responses, and behavioral avoidance.

Hypothesis 2a. *We hypothesized that a person's CSA frequency would be related to their own greater perceptions of their partner's*

sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and behavioral avoidance in response to hypothetical affectionate and sexual partner touch, but not in the no-touch condition.

Exploratory hypothesis 2b. *As no study has specifically examined the reaction of partners to touch, the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their partner's perceived sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and behavioral avoidance to the different types of touch were examined in an exploratory manner.*

1.3.3 | Objective 3: Gender Differences

The third objective was to examine whether gender moderated the associations identified in the first two objectives.

Exploratory hypothesis 3. *Given that previous research has found only small gender differences in CSA outcomes and no gender differences related to touch, differences between women and men were examined in an exploratory manner.*

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants

A convenience sample of 695 adults (363 couples) mostly living in Canada was recruited through online advertisements on social networks (e.g., Facebook and Instagram). Detailed sociodemographic characteristics are reported in Table 1 and are presented only to offer a descriptive overview of the sample. Only relationship length was included as a covariate in all analyses. Participants were on average 32.81 years old and had been in their relationship for 7.60 years. The sample included slightly more cisgender women (51.4%) than cisgender men (45.0%), with 3.3% identifying as gender diverse. Most participants identified as heterosexual (71.4%), though a range of diverse sexual orientations were represented, including gay or lesbian, bisexual, mostly heterosexual with some same-gender attraction, mostly gay or lesbian with some other-gender attraction, pansexual, asexual, queer, and others. Most participants lived in Canada (99.0%), held a post-secondary degree (77.7% college or university degree), and were working full or part-time (69.6%). Most participants identified as White (91.9%), with the remainder representing various other ethnic/racial backgrounds.

2.2 | Procedure

Data were collected online as part of a larger Canadian research project, the Calypso project, advertised as a survey on perceptions and attitudes among couples and their contribution to the sexual and relational well-being of each partner. Recruitment occurred from January to August of 2022. To be eligible, both partners had to be 18 years of age and living together for at least 6 months. Interested participants completed a short eligibility survey, and partners were contacted by a research assistant for a brief telephone interview. Eligible couples were then randomized to one of the three hypothetical conditions—affectionate touch, sexual touch, or no-touch—which designated which version of the partner interaction vignettes participants would read (see Section 2.3: *Experimental Manipulation*). Each partner in eligible couples independently received a unique hyperlink sent to their personal email address. They individually accessed a secure online platform (Qualtrics) to complete the consent form and self-report questionnaires. If one partner had not completed the survey after three email reminders (i.e., within 2 weeks), a research assistant followed up with a phone call to confirm their participation. Partners were required to complete the survey within approximately 4 weeks of each other. Three simple attention-testing questions were distributed within the survey, and data of participants failing at least two out of three of these questions were removed. Each participant received a CAN$10 financial compensation after completing the survey. All procedures were approved by the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières Institutional Review Board.

Of the 1072 interested couples, 690 did not give their contact information, could not be reached, were not eligible, or one or both partners were not interested in participating. Of the remaining 382 eligible couples ($n = 764$ participants), 60 participants dropped out before starting the survey, and 9 participants failed two out of three attention-testing questions, resulting in a final sample of 695 participants. These participants comprised 363 couples, including 31 couples where only one partner participated and 332 couples where both partners participated. Missing data from non-participating partners were handled using the full information maximum likelihood (FIML) method.

2.3 | Experimental Manipulation

The vignettes used in this study were developed and validated by Rancourt et al. (2017) and depicted three scenarios describing three different interactions between romantic partners: (1) leaving an event together, (2) getting dressed for a special event, and (3) waking up together in the morning. For each scenario, the description of hypothetical partner touch was manipulated to represent three different conditions, the affectionate touch condition, the sexual touch condition and the no-touch condition. The touch condition was randomly assigned to each couple after eligibility. For all vignettes, the pronouns used to refer to the participant and to their partner were modified according to the participants' preferences (i.e., he/him, she/her, and they/them). Scenarios refer to the general context of the interaction between partners (e.g., leaving an event), whereas vignettes refer to the different hypothetical touch conditions within each scenario (e.g., the sexual touch condition of the leaving an event scenario). Couples were assigned randomly to one of three conditions: affectionate touch, sexual touch, or no-touch and both partners within a given couple received the same condition. In each condition, they were presented with the three scenarios (leaving an event together, getting dressed for a special occasion, and waking up together in the morning), and were asked to respond to related questions. For example, a couple assigned to the sexual touch condition had to read three vignettes, each depicting a scenario involving sexual touch. For instance, in leaving an event together scenario, a sexual touch would involve one partner sliding their hands down to the other's buttocks, whereas an affectionate touch would involve one partner putting their hands around the other's waist. In the no-touch scenario, the same scene was depicted, but without any physical contact

between the partners. The detailed text of each scenario and vignette are reported in Rancourt et al. (2017). The pilot study by Rancourt et al. (2017) showed that these scenarios had high external validity and significant differences in the expected direction for sexual and affectionate intent reports between the three touch conditions (i.e., the sexual touch condition was rated as most sexual, and the affectionate touch condition was rated as most affectionate, relative to the other conditions; Rancourt et al. 2017). Rancourt et al. (2017) also showed that participants reported high scores on a validity check assessing the degree to which participants could easily imagine this scenario occurring in their current relationship (M = 17.66 to 19.20 out of 21).

2.4 | Measures

2.4.1 | Relationship Length

Relationship length was assessed by asking participants to indicate the number of years and months they had been in their current romantic relationship.

2.4.2 | CSA

The five-item CSA subscale of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein and Fink 1998; Bernstein et al. 2003) was used to assess sexual abuse in childhood. CSA refers to any sexual contact or conduct between a child and an older person (e.g., *Someone tried to touch me in a sexual way or tried to make me touch them*). Participants rated the frequency with which these experiences took place over the entire growing up period on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never true*) to 5 (*very often true*). Items were summed, and total scores ranged from 5 to 25 with higher scores indicating higher frequency of CSA. The CTQ shows good internal consistency, including for the CSA subscale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$ to 0.95), good temporal stability over a 2- to 6-month period ($r = 0.79$ to 0.95), and good convergent validity with a structured trauma interview (Bernstein et al. 1994; Bernstein et al. 2003; Paquette et al. 2004). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

2.4.3 | Perceived Sexual Intent

Perceptions of the partner's sexual intent in each scenario was assessed with three items (Rancourt et al. 2017): "In this scenario, I would think that my partner is: (1) trying to initiate sexual activity with me; (2) interested in having sexual intercourse with me; (3) trying to show he/she/they is/are sexually interested in me." Participants responded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). All participants completed these three items for each scenario. For each vignette, the three items were summed to create scenario-specific scores which were then summed to create a composite score ranging from 9 to 63 with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of sexual intent across scenarios. These items show good internal consistency for each scenario (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$ to 0.97; Rancourt et al. 2017) and perceived partner sexual intent was significantly correlated across the three scenarios ($r = 0.50$ to 0.56; Rancourt et al. 2017). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for each scenario was 0.96 and the perceived partner sexual intent was significantly correlated across the three scenarios ($r = 0.52$ to 0.57).

2.4.4 | Anticipated Negative Affect

Anticipated negative affect in each scenario was assessed with three items (Rancourt et al. 2017): "In this scenario, I would feel: (1) distressed; (2) guilty; (3) nervous." These items were selected from the three-item negative affect subscale of the Sexual Activity and Affect Questionnaire (i.e., nervous; Nelson and Purdon 2011), the Profile of Mood States (i.e., guilty; Shacham 1983), and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (i.e., distressed; Watson et al. 1988). Participants responded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). All participants completed these three items for each scenario. For each vignette, the three items were summed to create scenario-specific scores which were then summed to create a composite score ranging from 9 to 63, with higher scores indicating higher anticipated negative affect across scenarios. These items show good internal consistency for each scenario (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$ to 0.93; Rancourt et al. 2017) and anticipated negative affect was significantly correlated across the three scenarios ($r = 0.72$ to 0.80; Rancourt et al. 2017). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for each scenario was 0.78 and anticipated negative affect was significantly correlated across the three scenarios ($r = 0.52$ to 0.69).

2.4.5 | Anticipated Behavioral Avoidance

Anticipated behavioral avoidance in each scenario was assessed with three items (Rancourt et al. 2017): "In this scenario, I would respond to my partner by: (1) physically withdrawing from him/her/them; (2) trying to shift the focus or change the topic; (3) trying to find a way to end the interaction." Participants responded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). All participants completed these three items for each scenario. For each vignette, the three items were summed to create scenario-specific scores which were then summed to create a composite score ranging from 9 to 63 with higher scores indicating greater avoidance across scenarios. These items show good internal consistency for each scenario (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$ to 0.95; Rancourt et al. 2017) and anticipated behavioral avoidance was significantly correlated across the three scenarios ($r = 0.58$ to 0.63; Rancourt et al. 2017). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for each scenario was 0.92 and the anticipated behavioral avoidance was significantly correlated across the three scenarios ($r = 0.45$ to 0.60).

2.5 | Statistical Analyses

Descriptive correlation analyses were computed using SPSS 29. M*plus* version 8.10 (Muthén and Muthén 2017) was then used to test the study's hypotheses. As preliminary analyses, one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare the means of study variables across hypothetical touch conditions. For objective 1, we examined the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's perceived sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and behavioral avoidance

in three independent actor-partner interdependence models (APIM) within a path analysis framework (Kenny et al. 2006) controlling for touch condition (dummy coded with the no-touch condition as the reference category) and relationship length. Specifically, these models allow us to examine the main association between a person's CSA frequency (i.e., individual-level independent variable) and their own and their partner's perceived sexual intent (Model 1), anticipated negative affect (Model 2), and anticipated behavioral avoidance (Model 3) across all touch conditions (i.e., all individual-level dependent variables) in three separate models including touch condition and relationship length as couple-level control variables as well as covariances between independent variables and between partners' dependent variables. A visual representation of the model for negative affect, as an example, is depicted in Figure 1.

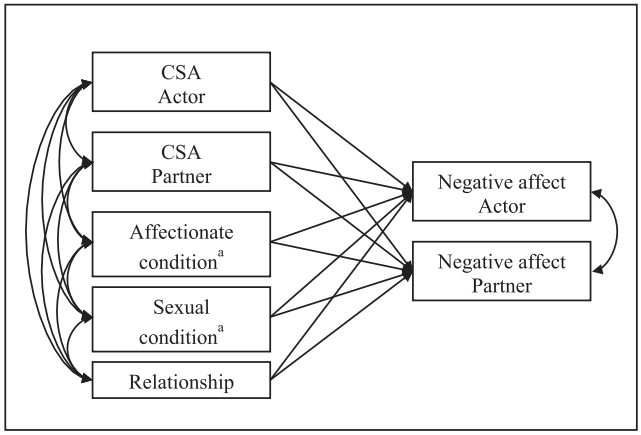

FIGURE 1 | Visual representation for the association between childhood sexual abuse and negative affect. [a]The no-touch condition is the reference category for these dummy-coded touch condition variables.

Then, for objective 2, we examined the potential moderating role of touch condition in the associations between the frequency of a person's CSA history and their own and their partner's perceived sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and behavioral avoidance by adding into the three APIMs the interactions between each partner's CSA and the two dummy-coded touch condition variables with the control condition as the reference category. Relationship length was included as a couple-level covariate. We ran separate APIMs for each outcome. A visual representation of the model for negative affect is depicted in Figure 2. Simple slope tests were used to report the association for each touch condition when an interaction term was significant. These models allowed us to examine if the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's outcomes is different between touch conditions.

Overall, we chose the APIM over other dyadic analytical models because it accounts for the interdependence between partners and is specifically designed to disentangle the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own outcomes (actor effects), controlling for partner effects, as well as the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their partner's outcomes (partner effects), controlling for actor effects (Kenny et al. 2006). As this sample included both mixed-gender and sexual or sex/gender-diverse couples, no variable could distinguish all partners within all dyads; thus, couples were conceptually considered indistinguishable, with each partner being randomly assigned to "partner 1" and "partner 2" and equality constraints were added on all parameters between partners (i.e., variances, means, intercepts, actor effects, and partner effects; Kashy et al. 2008). All models were estimated using the robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLR). Missing data ranged from 0.0% for CSA to 0.6% for perceived partner sexual intent, negative affect, and behavioral avoidance and were handled using the full information maximum likelihood (FIML)

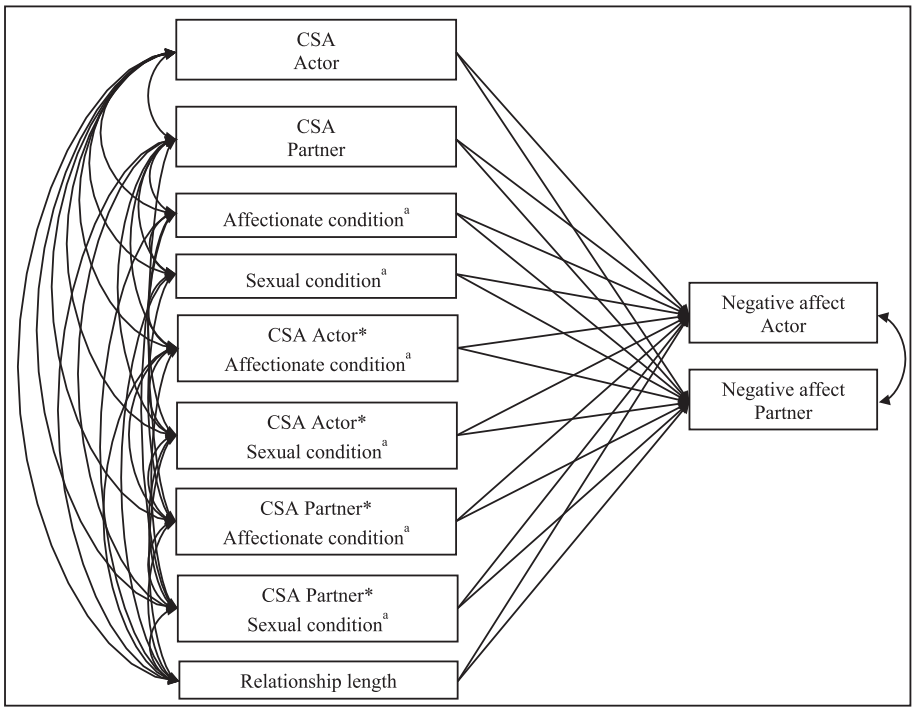

FIGURE 2 | Visual representation for the moderating role of touch condition in the association between childhood sexual abuse and negative affect avoidance. [a]The no-touch condition is the reference category for these dummy-coded touch condition variables.

TABLE 2 | Descriptive statistics and correlations between childhood sexual abuse, perceived sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and anticipated behavioral avoidance.

	Total sample ($N=695$)	Affectionate touch ($n=226$)	No-touch ($n=235$)	Sexual touch ($n=232$)					
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD	M (SD)	*F* value[a]	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Childhood sexual abuse	6.47 (3.63)	6.46 (3.54)	6.34 (3.36)	6.60 (3.99)	0.32	**0.03**	0.03	0.19***	0.14***
2. Perceived sexual intent	35.34 (14.56)	$38.59\ (12.21)_{a}$	$24.39\ (12.00)_{b}$	$43.29\ (12.16)_{c}$	153.82***	0.06	**0.43****	0.18***	0.24***
3. Negative affect	12.28 (6.53)	11.67 (4.97)	$12.25\ (7.03)_{a}$	12.90 (7.27)	2.03	0.08*	0.06	**0.21****	0.80***
4. Behavioral avoidance	13.15 (7.82)	$12.93\ (6.89)_{a,b}$	$12.36\ (7.50)_{a}$	$14.16\ (8.84)_{b}$	3.27*	0.01	0.10**	0.15***	**0.09***
5. Relationship length[b]	7.60 (7.16)	$8.80\ (8.53)_{a}$	$6.73\ (5.37)_{b}$	$7.28\ (7.16)_{b}$	5.20**	−0.02	0.18***	0.01	0.02

Note: *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.
[a]Results of an ANOVA comparing means between hypothetical touch conditions. Means with different subscript letters across hypothetical touch conditions are significantly different at $p<0.05$.
[b]Relationship length is the only couple-level variable. Correlations presented above the diagonal represent actor associations, correlations along the diagonal in bold represent between partners correlations, and correlations below the diagonal represent partner associations.

method. Based on preestablished guidelines, overall model fit was tested considering several fit indices: the chi-square statistic (non-statistically significant value), the comparative fit index (CFI; CFI ≥ 0.95 for good, ≥ 0.90 for acceptable), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; RMSEA; ≤ 0.05 for good, ≤ 0.08 for adequate) and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR; SRMR ≤ 0.08 for good).

Finally, for objective 3, we examined whether gender (0 = men and 1 = women) moderated the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's perceived sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and behavioral avoidance by including the interaction terms between a person's CSA frequency and their own gender in all models from Objective 1 and Objective 2. For the models related to Objective 2, all potential two-way and three-way interactions between CSA, the two dummy-coded touch conditions, and gender were included. Simple slope tests were used to report the association for women and men when the association between the interaction and an outcome was significant. Although efforts were made to include as many gender-diverse participants as possible, the limited sample size ($n=23$) prevented us from including these participants in the gender difference analyses.

3 | Results

3.1 | Preliminary Analyses

Using the recommended cut-off score for "low to moderate" frequency (6/25 for CSA; Bernstein and Fink 1998), 23.6% ($n=164$) of our sample reported CSA. Thus, for 40.2% of couples ($n=146$) at least one partner reported CSA and for 5.0% of couples ($n=18$), both partners reported CSA. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of CSA, perceived partner sexual intent, negative affect, behavioral avoidance, and relationship length by touch condition and for the whole sample as well as actor and partner bivariate correlations among all study variables are shown in Table 2. Results of one-way ANOVAs comparing study variables across hypothetical touch conditions are also reported in Table 2 and showed that CSA frequency and anticipated negative affect did not significantly differ across hypothetical touch conditions. Perceived sexual intent was significantly higher in the sexual touch condition than in both the affectionate and no-touch conditions, and significantly higher in the affectionate condition than in the no-touch condition. Anticipated behavioral avoidance was significantly higher in the sexual touch condition compared to the no-touch condition. Relationship length was significantly higher in the affectionate touch condition than in the sexual and no-touch conditions, justifying its inclusion as a control variable in all models.

Correlations showed that the frequency of a person's CSA was related to their own higher anticipated negative affect ($r=0.19$, $p<0.001$) and behavioral avoidance ($r=0.14$, $p<0.001$), but was not significantly related to their own perceived partner sexual intent ($r=0.03$, $p=0.479$). A person's CSA frequency was also related to their partner's anticipated lower negative affect ($r=-0.08$, $p=0.047$), whereas it was not significantly related to their partner's perceived partner sexual intent ($r=0.06$, $p=0.113$) nor their partner's anticipated behavioral avoidance ($r=0.01$, $p=0.749$).

3.2 | Main Effect of CSA on Perceived Sexual Intent, Anticipated Negative Affect, and Anticipated Behavioral Avoidance

Our first objective was to examine whether the frequency of a person's CSA was related to their own and their partner's perceived partner sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and anticipated behavioral avoidance in response to hypothetical partner interactions controlling for touch condition and relationship length. Results of the APIM for perceived partner sexual intent are presented in Table 3 and showed good fit indices, $\chi^2(12)=9.83$, $p=0.631$; RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI[0.00, 0.05]; CFI = 1.00; SRMR = 0.05. Results showed that a person's CSA

TABLE 3 | Associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's perceived sexual intent.

	Actor effect			Partner effect		
Model 1: Perceived sexual intent	***b* (SE)**	***p***	**β**	***b* (SE)**	***p***	**β**
Main effect						
Intercept	**20.92 (1.54)**	**<0.001**				
CSA	0.05 (0.12)	0.674	0.01	0.18 (0.12)	0.142	0.05
Affectionate condition	**13.55 (1.20)**	**<0.001**	**0.44**			
Sexual condition	**18.67 (1.18)**	**<0.001**	**0.61**			
Relationship length	**0.30 (0.06)**	**<0.001**	**0.14**			
Moderating role of touch condition						
Intercept	**15.67 (2.30)**	**<0.001**				
CSA	0.31 (0.20)	0.126	0.08	**0.75 (0.20)**	**<0.001**	**0.19**
Affectionate condition	**21.26 (3.10)**	**<0.001**	**0.68**			
Sexual condition	**25.97 (3.28)**	**<0.001**	**0.84**			
CSA*Affectionate condition	−0.28 (0.29)	0.324	−0.07	**−0.93 (0.27)**	**0.001**	**−0.23**
CSA*Sexual condition	−0.43 (0.29)	0.145	−0.11	**−0.72 (0.28)**	**0.010**	**−0.19**
Relationship length	**0.30 (0.06)**	**<0.001**	**0.15**			
Simple slopes for significant interactions						
Affectionate condition				−0.18 (0.18)	0.322	−0.05
No-touch condition				**0.75 (0.20)**	**<0.001**	**0.19**
Sexual condition				0.03 (0.20)	0.863	0.01

Note: Relationship length is the only couple-level variable. Coefficients in bold are significant at $p < 0.05$.
Abbreviation: CSA, childhood sexual abuse.

frequency was not significantly related to their own or their partner's perceived partner sexual intent. Results of the APIM for anticipated negative affect are presented in Table 4 and showed good fit indices, $\chi^2(12) = 9.30$, $p = 0.677$; RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI[0.00, 0.04]; CFI = 1.00; SRMR = 0.06. Results showed that a person's CSA frequency was significantly related to their own higher anticipated negative affect across all touch conditions, with a small effect size, whereas it was not significantly related to their partner's anticipated negative affect. Results of the APIM for anticipated behavioral avoidance are presented in Table 5. Overall, the fit indices were considered acceptable, $\chi^2(12) = 14.39$, $p = 0.277$; RMSEA = 0.02, 90% CI[0.00, 0.06]; CFI = 0.82; SRMR = 0.07. While the CFI was slightly below the 0.90 threshold, this was largely attributable to the equality constraints imposed between the randomly assigned "partner 1" and "partner 2" to model indistinguishable dyads. Results showed that the frequency of a person's CSA was significantly related to their own higher expected behavioral avoidance across all touch conditions, with a small effect size, whereas it was not significantly related to their partner's expected behavioral avoidance. In sum, individuals with higher CSA frequency anticipated greater negative affect and greater avoidance behaviors towards their partner in hypothetical partner interactions, regardless of the level of touch.

Results of moderation analysis showed that the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's perceived sexual intent, anticipated negative affect, and behavioral avoidance did not significantly differ between women and men as all interactions were statistically non-significant ($p > 0.088$). Thus, only the models including all participants and without the gender moderation are presented.

3.3 | Moderating Role of Touch Condition in the Effect of CSA on Perceived Sexual Intent, Anticipated Negative Affect, and Anticipated Behavioral Avoidance

Our second objective was to examine whether hypothetical touch conditions moderated the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's perceived partner sexual intent and anticipated negative affect and behavioral avoidance controlling for relationship length. Results of the APIM including the moderating role of hypothetical touch condition for perceived partner sexual intent are presented in Table 3 and showed good fit indices, $\chi^2(32) = 23.75$, $p = 0.853$; RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI[0.00, 0.02]; CFI = 1.00; SRMR = 0.04. Results showed that the association between a person's CSA and their own perceived partner sexual intent was not significantly different between hypothetical touch conditions. The association between a person's CSA and their partner's perceived sexual intent was significantly different between touch conditions as the interactions between

TABLE 4 | Associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's anticipated negative affect.

	Actor effect			Partner effect		
Model 2: Negative affect	***b* (SE)**	***p***	**β**	***b* (SE)**	***p***	**β**
Main effect						
Intercept	**9.27 (1.01)**	**<0.001**				
CSA	**0.33 (0.13)**	**0.009**	**0.18**	0.12 (0.08)	0.134	0.07
Affectionate condition	−0.65 (0.65)	0.317	−0.05			
Sexual condition	0.51 (0.69)	0.460	0.04			
Relationship length	0.02 (0.03)	0.508	0.02			
Moderating role of touch condition						
Intercept	**6.94 (2.16)**	**0.001**				
CSA	**0.37 (0.18)**	**0.034**	**0.21**	**0.45 (0.21)**	**0.028**	**0.25**
Affectionate condition	**5.26 (2.33)**	**0.024**	**0.38**			
Sexual condition	1.74 (2.70)	0.520	0.13			
CSA*Affectionate condition	**−0.43 (0.19)**	**0.021**	**−0.24**	**−0.50 (0.22)**	**0.022**	**−0.28**
CSA*Sexual condition	0.20 (0.29)	0.494	0.12	−0.40 (0.23)	0.084	−0.24
Relationship length	0.01 (0.03)	0.637	0.02			
Simple slopes for significant interactions						
Affectionate condition	−0.06 (0.07)	0.372	−0.03	−0.04 (0.07)	0.509	−0.03
No-touch condition	**0.37 (0.18)**	**0.034**	**0.21**	**0.45 (0.21)**	**0.028**	**0.25**
Sexual condition	**0.57 (0.23)**	**0.015**	**0.32**	0.05 (0.10)	0.599	0.03

Note: Relationship length is the only couple-level variable. Coefficients in bold are significant at $p < 0.05$.
Abbreviation: CSA, childhood sexual abuse.

CSA and the dummy-coded touch conditions were significant. Simple slope tests are depicted in Figure 3 and indicated that a person's CSA frequency was significantly related to their partner's perceiving greater sexual intent in the hypothetical no-touch condition, with a small effect size, whereas this association was nonsignificant in the affectionate and sexual conditions.

Results of moderation analysis showed that the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their partner's perceived sexual intent between hypothetical touch conditions did not significantly differ between women and men as the three-way interactions were statistically non-significant ($p > 0.459$). However, the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own perceived sexual intent between hypothetical touch conditions was significantly different between women and men with a significant three-way interaction: $b = 1.02$ (0.50), $p = 0.043$. Simple slope tests are depicted in Figure 4 and indicated that a man's CSA frequency was significantly related to their own perceiving greater sexual intent in the no-touch condition, with a small effect size, whereas this association was nonsignificant in all conditions for women and in the affectionate and sexual conditions for men.

Results of the APIM including the moderator role of hypothetical touch condition for anticipated negative affect are presented in Table 4 and showed good fit indices, $\chi^2(32) = 24.32$, $p = 0.833$; RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI[0.00, 0.02]; CFI = 1.00; SRMR = 0.05. Results showed that the association between a person's CSA frequency and their own anticipated negative affect was significantly different between hypothetical touch conditions. Simple slope tests, depicted in Panel A of Figure 5, indicated that a person's CSA frequency was significantly related to their own greater expected negative affect in the hypothetical no-touch and the sexual conditions, with a small effect size, whereas this association was nonsignificant in the affectionate condition. The interaction between a person's CSA frequency and their partner's expected negative affect was also significantly different between hypothetical touch conditions. Simple slope tests, depicted in Panel B of Figure 5, indicated that the frequency of a person's CSA was significantly related to their partner's greater anticipated negative affect in the hypothetical no-touch condition, but not in the affectionate and sexual conditions.

Results of moderation analysis showed that the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's anticipated negative affect between hypothetical touch conditions did not significantly differ between women and men as the three-way interactions were statistically non-significant ($p > 0.365$). Thus, only the models including all participants and without the gender moderation is presented.

Results of the APIM including the moderating role of hypothetical touch conditions for behavioral avoidance are presented in

TABLE 5 | Associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's anticipated behavioral avoidance.

	Actor effect			Partner effect		
Model 3: Behavioral avoidance	***b* (SE)**	***p***	**β**	***b* (SE)**	***p***	**β**
Main effect						
Intercept	**10.17 (1.06)**	**<0.001**				
CSA	**0.31 (0.13)**	**0.016**	**0.14**	0.01 (0.09)	0.948	0.003
Affectionate condition	0.50 (0.72)	0.486	0.03			
Sexual condition	**1.70 (0.79)**	**0.033**	**0.10**			
Relationship length	0.03 (0.04)	0.445	0.03			
Moderating role of touch condition						
Intercept	**8.30 (2.28)**	**<0.001**				
CSA	0.35 (0.19)	0.069	0.16	0.27 (0.22)	0.233	0.12
Affectionate condition	**6.21 (2.44)**	**0.011**	**0.37**			
Sexual condition	1.91 (2.88)	0.508	0.12			
CSA*Affectionate condition	**−0.53 (0.21)**	**0.010**	**−0.25**	−0.36 (0.24)	0.135	−0.17
CSA*Sexual condition	0.26 (0.31)	0.390	0.13	−0.31 (0.26)	0.231	−0.15
Relationship length	0.02 (0.04)	0.566	0.02			
Simple slopes for significant interactions						
Affectionate condition	**−0.18 (0.07)**	**0.013**	**−0.08**			
No-touch condition	0.35 (0.19)	0.069	0.16			
Sexual condition	**0.61 (0.24)**	**0.009**	**0.29**			

Note: Relationship length is the only couple-level variable. Coefficients in bold are significant at $p < 0.05$.
Abbreviation: CSA, childhood sexual abuse.

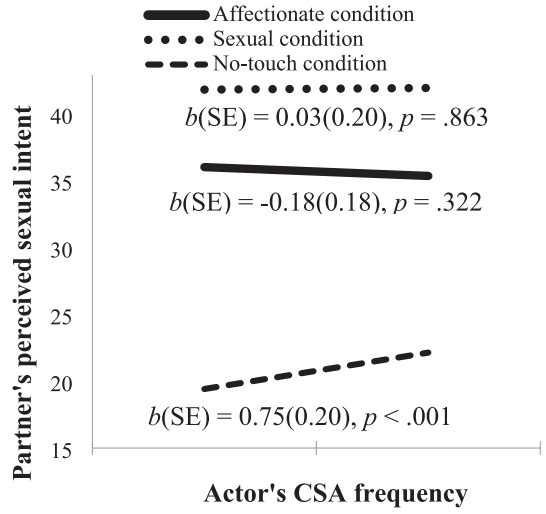

FIGURE 3 | Simple slopes for the effect of a person's childhood sexual abuse frequency on their partner's perceived sexual intent between hypothetical touch conditions.

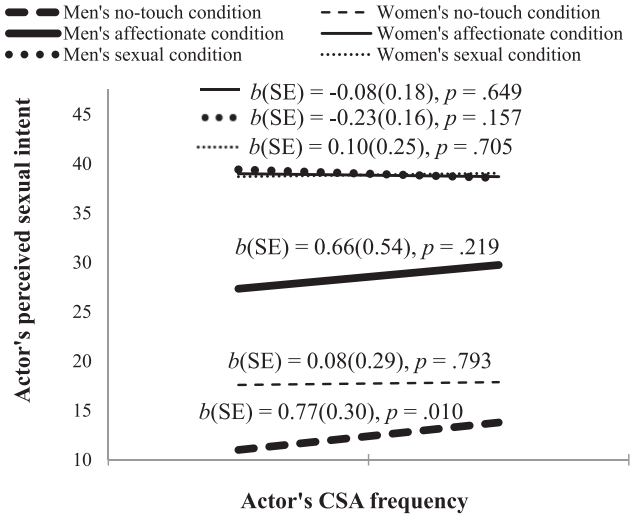

FIGURE 4 | Simple slopes for the effect of a person's childhood sexual abuse frequency on their own perceived sexual intent between hypothetical touch conditions and women and men.

Table 4 and showed good fit indices, $\chi^2(32) = 27.44$, $p = 0.697$; RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI[0.00, 0.03]; CFI = 1.00; SRMR = 0.05. Results showed that the association between a person's CSA frequency and their own expected behavioral avoidance was significantly different between touch conditions. Simple slope tests, depicted in Figure 6, indicated that the association between a persons' CSA frequency and their own anticipated behavioral avoidance was positive and significant in the sexual condition, negative and significant in the affectionate condition, with small effect sizes, and non-significant in the no-touch

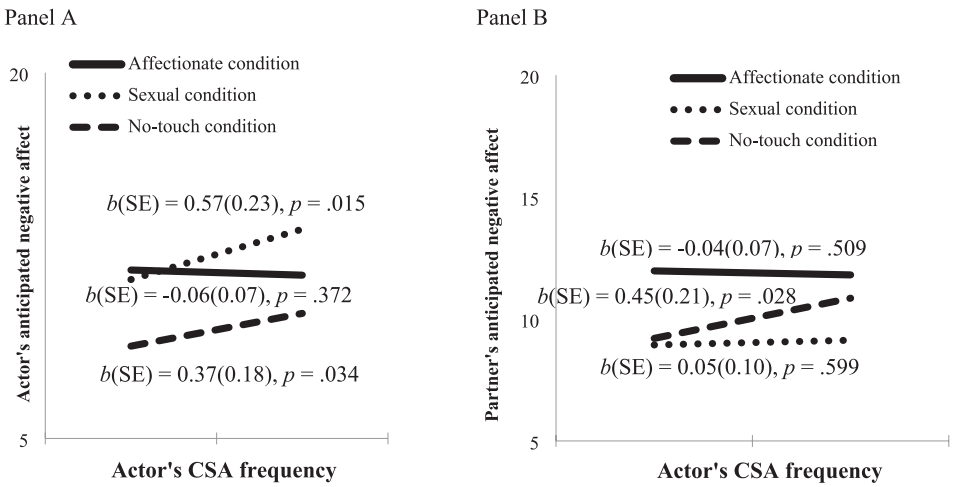

FIGURE 5 | Simple slopes for the effect of a person's childhood sexual abuse frequency on their own (Panel A) and their partner's (Panel B) anticipated negative affect between hypothetical touch conditions.

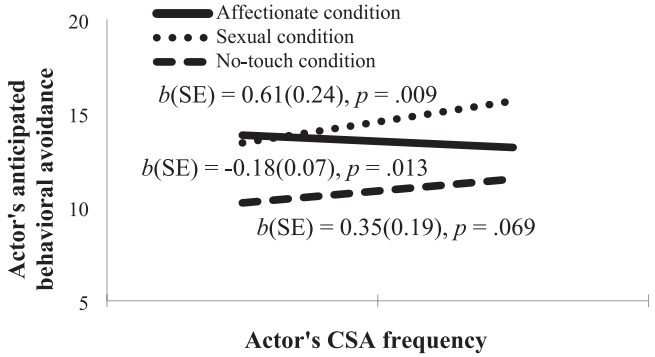

FIGURE 6 | Simple slopes for the effect of a person's childhood sexual abuse frequency on their own anticipated behavioral avoidance between hypothetical touch conditions.

condition. The association between a persons' CSA and their partner's anticipated behavioral avoidance was not significantly different between touch conditions.

Results of moderation analysis showed that the associations between a person's CSA frequency and their own and their partner's anticipated behavioral avoidance between hypothetical touch conditions did not significantly differ between women and men as the three-way interactions were statistically nonsignificant ($p > 0.241$). Thus, only the models including all participants and without the gender moderation is presented.

4 | Discussion

The present study used a dyadic design to examine the associations between the frequency of a person's CSA and their own and their partner's anticipated perceived sexual intent, negative affect, and behavioral avoidance in response to hypothetical scenarios depicting partner interactions related to touch. Findings showed that individuals with higher CSA frequency anticipated greater negative affect in the sexual and no-touch conditions, greater anticipated behavioral avoidance in the sexual condition, lower anticipated behavioral avoidance in the affectionate condition, and, for men only, greater perceived sexual intent in the no-touch condition. Moreover, partners of individuals with higher CSA frequency anticipated greater perceived sexual intent and greater negative affect in the no-touch condition. All effect sizes were small. This study enhances understanding of the ways that individuals with higher CSA frequency and their partners may experience and react to touch in romantic relationships—a central aspect of intimate relationships that plays a major role in sexual intimacy and couples' dynamics.

4.1 | CSA Frequency and Responses in the Hypothetical Sexual Touch Condition

Results showed that a person's CSA frequency was significantly related to their own greater anticipated negative affect and behavioral avoidance in response to hypothetical scenarios in the sexual condition. In line with a life course framework (Elder 1998), these anticipated responses to touch likely reflect enduring patterns rooted in early adverse experiences, supporting how childhood trauma may continue to influence relational dynamics over time. This result aligns with previous research showing that individuals with a CSA history often struggle with touch and experience emotions like fear and guilt during sexual interactions (Easton et al. 2011; Gewirtz-Meydan and Godbout 2023; Gewirtz-Meydan and Lassri 2023). Individuals with a CSA history report higher sexual distress, which increases over time in romantic relationships (Stephenson et al. 2012; Vaillancourt-Morel et al. 2021). Sexual distress, characterized by anxiety and frustration related to sexuality, corresponds with our findings of expecting to feel higher negative affect in a partner interaction involving sexual touch. Individuals with a CSA history often feel shame in situations reminiscent of their abuse, including touch (Riley 2020), and are less likely to view sexual stimuli positively (Meston and Heiman 2000). Consequently, sexual touch may evoke aversion, disgust, and discomfort, leading to behavioral avoidance of sexual contexts (Gewirtz-Meydan and Lassri 2023).

These findings can be understood through the lens of trauma theories (Briere 2002; Finkelhor and Browne 1985; van der

Kolk 2014). Finkelhor and Browne's Traumagenic Dynamics Model (1985) posits that CSA creates distorted emotional and cognitive schemas, including betrayal, powerlessness, stigmatization, and traumatic sexualization, which may manifest in adulthood as heightened sensitivity to perceived threats during interactions reminiscent of the abuse, such as sexual touch. For instance, stigmatization related to the abuse can make it difficult for the victim to feel comfortable during sexual touch leading to negative emotional responses such as shame, disgust, increasing emotional distress, and avoidance of touch altogether. Furthermore, theoretically, individuals with a CSA history may develop conditioned associations between touch and danger, leading to emotional dysregulation and avoidance behaviors (van der Kolk 2014). The heightened anticipated negative affect and avoidance we observed may then reflect these conditioned responses, where sexual touch triggers memories or sensations related to the traumatic experience (Riley 2020). Individuals with a CSA history may associate this type of touch with the abuse, triggering an avoidance response to protect themselves from the negative emotions it may elicit.

4.2 | CSA Frequency and Responses in the Hypothetical Affectionate Touch Condition

Results indicated that a person's CSA frequency was related to their own lower anticipated behavioral avoidance in the hypothetical affectionate touch condition. The lower expected avoidance of affectionate touch aligns with previous research demonstrating that affectionate touch is associated with greater relational and personal well-being (Debrot et al. 2021; Jakubiak and Feeney 2017). From a theoretical perspective, CSA survivors may struggle with internalized shame and negative self-perceptions related to their abuse, making affectionate touch a safer, non-sexualized way to experience closeness compared to sexualized touch (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). Thus, affectionate touch may not activate the traumagenic core dynamics (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). Our results extend trauma theoretical models by showing that even individuals with higher CSA frequency, who tend to avoid touch and claim not to like it (Easton et al. 2011), may still benefit specifically from affectionate touch. In a qualitative study, women with a CSA history reported enjoying affectionate physical touch, such as hugs, cuddles, kisses, back rubs, playful touches, and caressing (Riley 2020). Some of these women even reported that they preferred such touches to sexual intimacy and that these touches made them feel safe. As affectionate touch is intended to express affection, feelings of love, and care (Floyd 2006), it may be perceived as less threatening and potentially less triggering than sexual touch, leading to less avoidance in individuals with a CSA history.

4.3 | CSA Frequency and Responses in the Hypothetical No-Touch Condition

Results showed that a person's CSA frequency was significantly related to their own greater expected negative affect and, for men only, with greater perceived sexual intent in the hypothetical no-touch condition. This finding may be attributed to the inherent ambiguity of the no-touch scenarios, which included phrases potentially interpreted as having sexual connotations (e.g., "partner tells you that they had a great time with your friends, but can't wait to get home"). Theoretically, within the betrayal and powerlessness dynamics, individuals with a CSA history may experience heightened hypervigilance and difficulty interpreting ambiguous relational cues, leading to higher distress in no-touch scenarios (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). Additionally, the traumatic sexualization dynamic may condition men to associate ambiguous relational cues with sexuality, which aligns with past results suggesting that men with a CSA history are more likely report compulsive sexual behaviors rather than avoidance (Aaron 2012; Finkelhor and Browne 1985). Thus, in the absence of physical touch to provide context, individuals with higher CSA frequency may struggle to interpret the meaning of the no-touch statements. This difficulty in interpretation could stem from the complex and often ambiguous nature of CSA experiences, leading victims to project their past trauma, and their related traumagenic dynamics, onto current ambiguous situations. The observed response aligns with the concept of hypervigilance, a common trait among trauma victims, characterized by an increased sensitivity to potentially threatening or uncomfortable situations (Briere 2002; van der Kolk 2014). These findings further support the life courses perspective, which contends that individual developmental trajectories shaped by early trauma may alter the perception of relational cues (Elder 1998). To our knowledge, this is the first study to suggest that for individuals with higher CSA frequency, even scenarios without overt physical touch may trigger fear and anxiety and for men, be perceived as sexual.

4.4 | Partners' Reaction to Hypothetical Touch

Results indicated that a person's CSA frequency was significantly associated with their partner's perceiving greater sexual intent and expected greater negative affect in the no-touch condition. The partner effects are consistent with the life course perspective's principle of linked lives (Elder 1998), as they illustrate how one partner's early adverse experiences, such as CSA, can reverberate through the couple's current relational functioning, shaping not only their own relational trajectory but also their partner's anticipated emotional and behavioral responses. The observed partner effects in the hypothetical no-touch condition are also consistent with studies indicating that partners of CSA victims struggle to assert their own emotional, relational, and physical needs (Vaillancourt Morel et al. 2019). Issues such as refraining from touch, infrequent intercourse, sexual withdrawal, and difficulties during sexual activity are common concerns in couples where one partner has a CSA, leading partners to feel rejected and hurt (Chauncey 1994; Gewirtz-Meydan 2022). Moreover, in line with the CATS model (Goff and Smith 2005), partners may develop secondary traumatic stress, becoming hypervigilant to the survivor's emotional and physical cues while suppressing their own needs to avoid triggering distress. The absence of overt physical cues in the hypothetical no-touch condition may exacerbate anxiety in partners of CSA victims as they attempt to discern whether their partner desires sexual intimacy. Consequently, while the no-touch scenario may appear neutral on the surface, for partners of individuals with a CSA history, it may represent a particularly sensitive and complex context to navigate.

4.5 | Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the representativeness of our sample, composed of mostly white educated young adults, and the generalizability of our results may be limited by our convenience sample of participants recruited through advertisements on social media where self-selection biases may occur. Second, the cross-sectional design of this study limits the possibility of drawing causal conclusions. Third, while using hypothetical scenarios allows for greater control and experimental manipulation, it may not fully capture the complexities of real-life interactions and emotional responses. Daily diaries and ecological momentary assessment could help capture actual experiences and responses to partner's touch. Fourth, couples were assigned to only one condition, a within-subject design would represent a significant burden for participants that could detect the differences between scenarios but would have greater statistical power. Fifth, other factors not assessed in this study may play an important role in explaining responses to partner's touch (e.g., level of sexual desire, relationship quality, attachment style, and body image). For instance, individuals with lower sexual desire may respond similarly to CSA victims, anticipating negative affect and avoidance when touched by their partner.

4.6 | Clinical Implications

The findings highlight the importance of a trauma-informed clinical approach that involves partners to help individuals with a CSA history and their partners manage these complex emotional responses, particularly in sexual contexts, while recognizing that affectionate touch may be perceived more positively and even be beneficial. Clinicians may explore clients' comfort levels with various forms of physical affection (consider using body maps; Zoldbrod 2015), and encourage positive experiences with non-sexual, affectionate touch. For individuals with a CSA history who struggle with sexual touch, a gradual exposure technique could be employed (such as sensate focus that is modified by trauma theories; Almås and Benestad 2021; Cohn 2016; Weiner 2022). Clinicians can also assist couples in improving communication skills to express needs and intentions more clearly during couple interactions with or without touch, reducing anxiety and ambiguity in intimate interactions.

4.7 | Research Implications

The present study contributes to trauma theories by advancing our understanding of how CSA is related to both individual and partner responses to hypothetical touch in romantic relationships. Our results support and extend Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) Traumagenic Dynamics Model, suggesting that the trauma-related dynamics may also shape how CSA victims anticipate their experience and respond to touch in intimate relationships. However, unlike traditional trauma frameworks that broadly associate CSA with discomfort in physical interactions (Easton et al. 2011), our results suggest that touch should not be treated as a singular, undifferentiated construct in trauma models. Instead, the context and perceived intent of touch should be considered. Notably, affectionate hypothetical touch was associated with lower anticipated avoidance, suggesting that specific forms of partner touch may foster resilience and emotional connection, rather than exclusively triggering distress and avoidance. Moreover, responses to ambiguous hypothetical no-touch scenarios suggest that trauma-related dynamics may emerge in both partners, even in the absence of physical contact, potentially due to hypervigilance and difficulties in interpreting relational cues. Finally, our results align with the CATS model (Goff and Smith 2005), showing that CSA's effects may extend to romantic partners. Partners of CSA victims may experience secondary traumatic stress, becoming hypervigilant to relational cues in ways that shape their expected emotional and cognitive responses in interactions without physical touch. Overall, these results reinforce the idea that CSA has systemic effects on intimate relationships beyond sexuality alone.

4.8 | Conclusion

This study examined the associations between CSA frequency and anticipated responses to different types of partner's hypothetical touch (i.e., affectionate, sexual, and no-touch) in a dyadic sample of couples. The results suggest that CSA frequency was related to higher expected negative affect and behavioral avoidance when touch involves a sexual connotation, which was not the case for hypothetical affectionate touch. Furthermore, both individuals with higher CSA frequency and their partners expected higher negative affect in the no-touch condition, suggesting that associated consequences of CSA—such as avoiding sexuality and the accompanying communication—may hinder the couple's ability to navigate ambiguous relationship interactions. Finally, a person' CSA frequency was related to men's and their partner's, regardless of their gender, perceiving greater sexual intent. Such findings underscore the importance of explicit communication between partners with CSA history, with affectionate touch serving as a potential starting point for building intimacy and trust in their intimate relationships.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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