



Manifest Content and Psychodynamic Motives in Sexual Fantasies: A Qualitative Content Analysis of a German-Speaking Sample

Lynn Helen Christien Gaertner, Jule Räuchle, Klaus Michael Reininger & Peer Briken

To cite this article: Lynn Helen Christien Gaertner, Jule Räuchle, Klaus Michael Reininger & Peer Briken (09 Jun 2026): Manifest Content and Psychodynamic Motives in Sexual Fantasies: A Qualitative Content Analysis of a German-Speaking Sample, Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy, DOI: [10.1080/0092623X.2026.2674624](https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2026.2674624)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2026.2674624>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 09 Jun 2026.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 515



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

 OPEN ACCESS



Manifest Content and Psychodynamic Motives in Sexual Fantasies: A Qualitative Content Analysis of a German-Speaking Sample

Lynn Helen Christien Gaertner^a , Jule Räuchle^b , Klaus Michael Reininger^{c,d#} 
and Peer Briken^{a#} 

^aInstitute for Sex Research, Sexual Medicine and Forensic Psychiatry, Center for Psychosocial Medicine, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany; ^bDepartment of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany; ^cDepartment for Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, Center for Internal Medicine, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany; ^dInstitute of Psychotherapy, Center for Psychosocial Medicine, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

Sexual fantasies have long been the subject of treatments and theories, yet empirical studies on their underlying motives are rare. This study analyzed the most arousing sexual fantasies reported by a quota sample of the German-speaking general population ($N=401$, $n=327$ valid fantasies, 18–70 years) using content-structuring qualitative content analysis to categorize and quantify descriptive-manifest acts and psychodynamic-latent motives. Fantasies showed a wide range of practices at the descriptive-manifest level, with over half involving impersonal counterparts (53.5%). Fourteen psychodynamic-latent motives emerged (e.g., *power dynamics, playing with limits, care, objectification, self-actualization*). Self-esteem-enhancing motives were most frequent (59.6%) and defensive processes (e.g., *relativization, avoidance, undoing, distant from the self, distant from sexuality*) appeared in every fourth fantasy (26.9%). Exploratory gender analyses largely reproduce conservative gender norms with women fantasizing more about passivity, affective connection, and playing with limits and men fantasizing more about objectification and omnipotence. Overall, the findings provide initial support that sexual fantasies may symbolically express individual motivational dynamics, including strivings that would be defended against outside the fantasy realm. At the same time, the gender differences point to culturally shaped patterns, underscoring the importance of considering both individual and socio-cultural perspectives when interpreting such narratives.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, sexuality and its relationship to early biography were already at the center of psychoanalytic considerations of the human psyche (Freud, 1905). More recently, however, sexuality seems to have received less attention in general psychoanalytic

CONTACT Lynn Helen Christien Gaertner  l.gaertner@uke.de  Institute for Sex Research, Sexual Medicine and Forensic Psychiatry, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Martinistraße 52, Hamburg 20251, Germany.

[#]Klaus Michael Reininger and Peer Briken share last authorship.

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2026.2674624>.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

discourse as well as clinical practice (Herzog, 2017; Quindeau, 2014). This raises the question of whether this development threatens to lose an essential approach to understanding individual psychodynamics.¹ To address this question, the current study qualitatively investigated whether sexual desire structures, approximated by sexual fantasies, can be empirically understood as an expression of psychodynamics.

Individual sexual desire structures are commonly explored via narratives of sexual fantasies, which are defined as any mental images that are sexually arousing (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). Since they are not limited by physical, social, or legal aspects of reality, they are suggested to reflect the individual structure of desire more clearly than outwardly visible sexual behavior (e.g., Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023; Quindeau, 2014; Stoller, 1979, 2018) and are therefore considered representative of the sexual desire structure in this study.

With a lifetime prevalence of 90%–98%, sexual fantasies can be considered a nearly universal phenomenon (Bondü & Birke, 2021; Kahr, 2007; Lehmiller, 2018; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). Their narratives in broad general population samples have been analyzed predominantly in North-American and British contexts, revealing recurring themes that can be summarized as follows: (1) romance and couple sexuality, (2) exploration, expansion, and aggression, and (3) norms and taboos (Bondü & Birke, 2021; Hartmann, 1989; Joyal et al., 2015; Kahr, 2007; Lehmiller, 2018; Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). More recently, empirical studies have analyzed fantasy checklists rather than individual narratives (e.g., Salvatori et al., 2025; Shekarchi & Nimbi, 2025), focused on specific subgroups such as non-binary people (e.g., Lindley et al., 2022), or on the interplay between deviant sexual fantasies, the urge to act on them, and predictors of the translation of such fantasies into harmful sexual behavior (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Bártová et al., 2021; Birke & Bondü, 2023; Bondü & Birke, 2021; Garant et al., 2025; Rossegger et al., 2021). Other qualitative analyses have referred mainly to small samples from clinical or university contexts (Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023), and broader general population studies from Western European countries such as Germany are lacking.

Beyond prevalence, the origins of sexual fantasy content and what is expressed within them have long puzzled scholars across many fields. Sigmund Freud (1900, 1999) conceptualized fantasies in general as serving conflict-laden libidinal wish fulfillment. Unacceptable desires and aspirations are turned tolerable to consciousness through the mechanisms of dream-work in the form of symbolic design, condensation, and displacement, allowing for compromise-based substitute satisfaction and a reduction of conflict tension (Freud, 1900, 1999). This idea suggests a complex interplay between one's biographic experiences, inner conflict, and (sexual) fantasies.

From today's psychoanalytic perspective, sexual fantasies are more generally understood as processing early, highly affect-laden object relations experiences of both valences (pleasurable or depriving, from aversive to traumatic; Bader, 2003; Kernberg, 1998; Person, 1995; Quindeau, 2014; Schorsch, 1993; Stoller, 1976, 2018). Alongside the reemergence of classic libidinal wishes in fantasies, as suggested by Freud (1900, 1999), idealized early childhood experiences—such as absolute love, security, safety, and connection—are thought to play a central role, as they can be symbolically (re)created and (re)experienced in sexual fantasies (Schorsch, 1993). This ties in with the concept of the central masturbation fantasy, which, as a relatively stable, post-adolescent fantasy, is suggested to contain all regressive satisfactions and sexual identifications (Laufer, 1976).

In addition, Stoller (1975) suggested that traumatic experiences can be symbolically processed in sexual fantasies in such a way that the aversive feelings are transformed into an orgasmic triumph and the negative affects are temporarily mastered. In sum, psychoanalytic accounts view sexual fantasies as shaped by early, affectively intense object-relations experiences and as serving to master conflict-laden, regressive wishes as well as aversive experiences, thereby highlighting their biographical grounding and connection to individual psychodynamics (e.g., Bader, 2003; Kernberg, 1998; Person, 1995; Stoller, 1976, 2018).

In line with these ideas but from a more sexological angle, Money (1986) proposed the concept of “love maps”, describing the relatively stable, individual pattern of what one finds sexually arousing in fantasy but also real-life interactions. He emphasized learning experiences shaped by gender roles, while also acknowledging the impact of emotionally meaningful interactions therein. He focused on the arousal structuring and guiding function for future sexual behavior rather than an intrapsychic management of conflictual, regressive wishes or aversive experiences. Similarly, gender norms and their influence on sexual fantasy formation have been conceptualized by the Sexual Script Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1984), adding a rather sociological perspective on sexual fantasy generation.

Although arising from different theoretical traditions, the fantasy component of love maps (Money, 1986), the idea of gendered Sexual Scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1984), of a central masturbation fantasy (Laufer, 1976) as well as individualized fantasy plots (Stoller, 1976, 2018), closely resemble one another in that they describe a relatively stable, individual structure of sexual arousability. The psychoanalytic perspective uniquely understands this structure as serving psychological homeostasis in that inner, unconscious motives such as indulging in regressive desires or coping with inner conflict and aversive experiences are catered to in sexual fantasies in a symbolized, veiled manner (esp. Stoller, 1976, 2018).

Overall, sexual fantasy content is understood to be closely linked to gender norms as well as to individual, highly affective life experiences and their processing. Sexual fantasies can thus be understood as an expression of what has taken shape within the individual over time, symbolizing both conscious and unconscious motivational drives. Therefore, sexuality is considered a crystallization point of psychodynamics, that is a focal point in which intrapsychic dynamics can take shape and become observable, accessible, and understandable (e.g., Quindeau, 2014).

Aim of this study

This study combined sexological and psychodynamic approaches to answer two research questions: (1) What manifest-descriptive contents of sexual fantasies are reported with what frequency in a broad sample of the German-speaking general population? (2) Which latent motives—as an expression of individual psychodynamics in terms of motivational drives—can be categorized and quantified therein? To this end, we examined the narratives of the individually most arousing sexual fantasies of a German-speaking general population sample using content-structuring qualitative content analysis.

Method

Sample

To be able to qualitatively examine a sample that is sufficiently ecologically valid but also meets economic constraints, we aimed for a sample size of 400. People between the ages of 18 and 70 with at least advanced German language skills were invited to participate in an online survey and were included quoted by gender and age (50% men and 50% women in each of five age groups: 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69 years). Data were collected from a total of 936 participants, 400 of whom discontinued the survey prematurely, mainly due to the open-ended assessment of one’s most arousing sexual fantasy right in the beginning (378). At a Bonferroni-corrected alpha-level of 0.01, dropouts were significantly older than finishers (dropouts: $M=49.7$, $SD=14.6$, finishers: $M=44.4$, $SD=15.0$, $t(787)$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d=-0.358$), they differed significantly in terms of sex assigned at birth (Fisher’s $Z=9.89$, $p = .003$, Cramer’s $V=0.112$, locally significant residuals for male assigned at birth [$z=-3.0$, $p = .004$] and female assigned at birth [$z=2.9$, $p = .004$]), as well as education level ($\chi^2(3) = 12.934$, $p = .005$, Cramer’s $V=0.128$, locally significant residuals for middle track ($z=3.0$, $p = .004$) and academic degree

Table 1. Sample characteristics ($N=401$).

Demographic specifics		Mean [SD]/ n (%)
Age	18–69	44 [15]
	18–29	81 (20.2)
	30–39	82 (20.4)
	40–49	80 (20)
	50–59	78 (19.5)
	60–69	80 (20)
Sex	female	200 (49.9)
	male	201 (50.1)
	inter	0 (0)
Gender	female	200 (49.9)
	male	198 (49.4)
Sexual Orientation	non-binary	20 (0.7)
	non-heterosexual	67 (16.7)
	heterosexual	329 (82)
	asexual	5 (1.2)
Education ^a	lower-track	49 (12.2)
	middle-track	114 (28.4)
	higher-track	106 (26.4)
	academic degree	132 (32.9)

Notes. n : case number; SD: standard deviation.

^alower track=ongoing school education, no school-leaving qualification, graduation from lower secondary school; middle-track=graduation from general polytechnic secondary school in the former GDR or secondary school without university entrance qualification; higher-track=graduation from upper secondary school with general or specialized university entrance qualification; academic degree=graduation from university, academy, or university of applied sciences.

($z=-3.1$, $p=.002$), while neither gender (Fisher’s $Z=8.082$, $p=.003$, Cramer’s $V=.112$) nor sexual orientations differed between dropouts and finishers ($\chi^2(2)=3.202$, $p=.201$, Cramer’s $V=.064$). To ensure data quality, three attention checks were implemented, and a minimum completion time of 11 minutes was set. Not passing the attention checks or speeding resulted in the person being excluded (119 exclusions due to attention checks, 16 due to falling below minimum completion time). The cleaned sample comprised $N=401$ participants. Demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Procedure

The study was pre-registered in the German Clinical Trials Registry (ID: DRKS00032245) prior to the start of data collection, approved by the Local Psychological Ethics Committee at the Center for Psychosocial Medicine at the UKE (ID: LPEK-0661), and conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki. Recruitment was carried out via the panel service Bilendi. Participants were invited by email to take part in a larger online survey on sexual fantasies. To address and minimize any potential distress due to recalling fantasies, we informed participants about the study topic in advance, emphasized the option to quit at any time, and provided an email address for participants to reach out to if they experienced any issues. Participants provided their written informed consent to participate online and received financial compensation from Bilendi after completing the approximately 25-minute survey. To avoid priming effects, the individually most arousing sexual fantasy was assessed in a free self-report before the quantitative measures that were part of a larger project on sexual fantasies.

Material

Based on the concept of the central masturbation fantasy (Laufer, 1976), participants were asked to describe their most arousing sexual fantasy in at least 150 characters. The instructions (see

online supplemental material A) were developed based on previous qualitative surveys (Goldey et al., 2014; Lindley et al., 2022; Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004) and pre-tested to ensure sufficiently detailed responses and that prompts were perceived as helpful.

Analysis strategy

The sexual fantasies were analyzed according to the principles of content-structuring qualitative content analysis (CSQCA) by Kuckartz (2018). The first and second author acted as coders. In an initial text analysis, the first and second author examined all material, and a formative distinction according to the research questions emerged: a first level of *descriptive-manifest acts* and a second level of *psychodynamic-latent motives*. Descriptive-manifest act categories refer to the explicitly formulated descriptions in the text and were developed solely inductively. Psychodynamic-latent motive categories are more abstract and interpretive, referring to the meaning beyond the text (cf. Lindgren et al., 2020; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). They were developed through a hybrid deductive-inductive approach (Kuckartz, 2018) in which inductively formed categories were refined and grouped against the psychodynamic background of the research team. For each level an initial first main category system was created and iteratively refined during coding to reach an extensive and internally consistent system of categories.

Coding occurred in eight steps. In each step, both coders independently coded a randomly selected subset of fantasies using the current versions of the category systems, with MAXQDA software used to organize the process (version 2024; VERBI Software, 2024). Because the descriptions were brief, both coders defined segment boundaries themselves during coding. After each step, intercoder agreement based on code occurrence within each fantasy was calculated.² Following an iterative qualitative consensus approach (Burla et al., 2008; Kuckartz, 2018; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020), all differences were discussed, resolved to full consensus, and used to further refine the category systems and sharpen category definitions before the next coding step. All changes were applied retroactively to previously coded fantasies³.

Intercoder agreement

In the final coding step ($n=130$, 41.3% of all respondents), after which no further refinements to the category system were made, intercoder agreement was 65.7%. After resolving codes marked as uncertain, agreement increased to 70.0%. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the large number of categories, the rather low frequency of specific codes and a significant proportion of abstract codes focusing on meaning rather than pure description, 70% agreement is substantial (cf. Lindgren et al., 2020; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020), which is echoed by common Kappa benchmarks (Landis & Koch, 1977).⁴ All discrepancies were then discussed and resolved to full consensus (100% agreement), so that all 327 sexual fantasies of the respondents were consensually coded.

Exploratory analyses of gender differences

To explore gender differences in the frequencies of the categories, χ^2 -independence tests or, for frequencies <5, exact Fisher-tests were calculated using SPSS (version 28.0; IBM, 2021). With our sample size ($n=327$), the study had 80% power to detect effects of approximately $V \geq .155$ in 2×2 comparisons (G*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2009). However, given the low frequencies of some categories the statistical power in these cases was reduced as small cell counts reduce the accuracy of the chi square statistics approximation (e.g., McHugh, 2013).

For difference analyses between case groups a conservative multiple comparisons correction was applied using the Bonferroni method as power was not an issue. For the analyses of gender difference, a more liberal correction was performed using the False Discovery Rate according to Benjamini-Hochberg, recommended in exploratory scenarios to avoid an overly conservative balance between Type I and Type II error control as well as an excessive loss of statistical power in

large-scale testing (e.g., Chen et al., 2017). Effect sizes are reported with Cramer's V , with $V = .1$ indicating a small effect, $V = .3$ indicating a medium sized effect, and $V = .5$ indicating a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Case grouping

During our initial review of the material, we found that not all 401 participants reported sexual fantasies that could be categorized in terms of the research questions. We identified three case groups: Non-respondents, pseudo-(non-) respondents, and respondents. Non-respondents ($n=25$, 6.2%) were classified as those participants who stated that they did not have any sexual fantasy activity at the time of the survey. Pseudo-(non-)respondents ($n=49$, 12.2%) were defined as all participants whose descriptions clearly indicated that they had sexual fantasies but avoided or refused to provide explicit details. Ultimately, participants were considered respondents ($n=327$, 81.5%) if their statements explicitly contained at least one sexually arousing detail. The further CSQCA referred to the respondents. Demographic data for the three case groups are shown in Table 2.

At a Bonferroni-corrected α -level of .013, respondents did not differ significantly from non-respondents or pseudo-(non-)respondents in terms of assigned gender ($\chi^2(1) = 5.597$, $p = .018$), age (Tukey-post-hoc-tests: -6.7 , 95% CI $[-13.9; 0.6]$, $p = .079$ and 3.5 , 95% CI $[-1.8; 8.9]$, $p = .269$), gender (Fisher's exact test: $p = .094$), relationship status ($\chi^2(4) = 8.676$, $p = .067$)

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the case groups.

Demographic specifics		<i>n</i> (%)		
		R (<i>n</i> = 327)	PNR (<i>n</i> = 49)	NR (<i>n</i> = 25)
Age	18–29 years	67 (20.1)	11 (22.4)	3 (12.0)
	30–39 years	64 (19.6)	15 (30.6)	3 (12.0)
	40–49 years	69 (21.1)	7 (14.3)	4 (16.0)
	50–59 years	62 (19.0)	13 (26.5)	3 (12.0)
	60–69 years	65 (19.9)	3 (6.1)	12 (48.0)
Sex	Female	166 (50.8)	16 (32.7)	18 (72.0)
	Male	161 (49.2)	33 (67.3)	7 (28.0)
Gender	Female ^a	165 (50.5)	17 (34.7)	18 (72.0)
	Male ^b	159 (48.6)	32 (65.3)	7 (28.0)
	Nonbinary	3 (0.9)	0	0
Sexual orientation	Exclusively homosexual	22 (6.7)	4 (8.2)	1 (4.2)
	Predominantly homosexual	8 (2.4)	1 (2.0)	1 (4.2)
	Bi- or pansexual	22 (6.7)	4 (8.2)	2 (8.3)
	Predominantly heterosexual	37 (11.3)	4 (8.2)	2 (8.3)
	Exclusively heterosexual	235 (71.9)	36 (73.5)	16 (66.7)
	Asexual	3 (0.9)	0	2 (8.3)
	Other	0	0	1 (4.2)
Relationship status	Single ^c	97 (29.7)	11 (22.4)	13 (52.0)
	Monogamous relationship/marriage	203 (62.1)	35 (71.4)	12 (28.0)
	Non-monogamous relationship/marriage	27 (8.3)	3 (6.1)	0
Level of education ^d	No (yet)/general school leaving certificate	41 (12.5)	5 (10.2)	3 (12.0)
	High school diploma	86 (26.3)	15 (30.6)	13 (52.0)
	University entrance qualification	89 (27.2)	11 (22.4)	6 (24.0)
	Academic degree	111 (33.9)	18 (36.7)	3 (12.0)

R: respondents; PNR: pseudo-(non-)respondents; NR: non-respondents.

^aThere are $n=2$ trans women among the respondents and $n = 1$ trans woman among the pseudo-non-respondents.

^bThere is $n=1$ trans man among the respondents.

^cSingle or affair.

^dlower track=ongoing school education, no school-leaving qualification, graduation from lower secondary school; middle-track=graduation from general polytechnic secondary school in the former GDR or secondary school without university entrance qualification; higher-track=graduation from upper secondary school with general or specialized university entrance qualification; academic degree=graduation from university, academy, or university of applied sciences.

or educational level (Fisher's exact test: $p = .140$). However, among the non-respondents, there were significantly more participants with asexual and other sexual orientations compared to the respondents (Fisher's exact test: $p = .008$, $V = 0.248$; small effect according to Cohen, [1988] for sexual orientation globally; locally significant residuals for *asexual* ($z = 3.142$, $p = .001$) and *other* sexual orientations ($z = 3.883$, $p < .001$).

Category system

The main result of the CSQCA is the qualitative category system that spans two levels: *descriptive-manifest acts* and *psychodynamic-latent motives*. All categories (in italics) are presented below.⁵

Descriptive-manifest actions

The categorization of *descriptive-manifest acts* captures what happens, with whom, where, and how in the sexual fantasies. Table 3 shows the descriptive-manifest categories identified in the respondents' fantasies and their frequencies for the whole sample and Table 4 shows gender-specific results.

We identified five main categories. The first main categories, *participants* and *counterparts*, capture who appears in the fantasies, their characteristics, and their relationship to the person fantasizing. The main category *Self* captures how *respondents* portrayed themselves. In over half of the fantasies, other participants were anonymous, unspecified persons (*placeholders*), while over one-third involved real life persons such as *personal acquaintances* and/or real *partners*. Regarding other's *gender*, 26 respondents deviated from their stated sexual orientation (8.0%); including 15 women (9.1% of all women). The final two main categories, *location* and *manifest sexual practices*, describe the setting and the sexual acts in the fantasy. The latter comprises 16 subcategories and forms the core of descriptive-manifest acts.

We identified a spectrum of manifest sexual practices ranging from the exchange of *tenderness*, manual genital stimulation (*petting*), and self-stimulation (*masturbation*) to various forms of *sex*. These included *vaginal*, *oral*, and *anal penetration* as well as simultaneous penetration (*simultaneous genital stimulation*), penetration in a specific sequence (*alternating genital stimulation*) or in specific, possibly alternating, *positions*. In over a third of all cases, sexualized references were made to *body parts*, i.e., one's own or other people's body parts were perceived as arousing or integrated into sexual acts. Playing with *bodily fluids*, i.e., physical fluids or excretions, also occurred in the respondents' fantasized sexual activities; *ejaculation* and *orgasm* were recorded separately.

One-sixth of the respondents reported that sexual acts in their fantasies involved the *use of violence*. Mild to moderate violence ranged from binding the eyes (*blindfold*) or limbs (*bondage*) to inflicting or suffering *pain*. In addition, nearly half ($n = 22$, 44.9%) of those respondents who reported violence described severe sexualized violence in the form of *coercion*, including persuasion to engage in sexual acts, or *rape*. In some cases, the use of violence in sexual fantasies was indicated with keywords such as "BDSM," but not described in concrete terms, which were summarized in a residual category together with infrequent specific forms of violence such as choking or leaving or sustaining physical marks (*other/unclear*).

The three categories *visual*, *auditory*, and *oral* refer to acts that appealed to the respective sensory modality. In the visual category, *seeing* and *being seen* are understood to have sexual intent, and the auditory category is composed of communicating about sex (*communication*) or *verbally expressing arousal*. Beyond oral sex, the category *oral* here encompasses all acts that involve the lips, tongue, mouth, or throat, e.g., kissing, swallowing or eating.

We categorized objects that are central to the arousal aspect of a fantasy as *props*, e.g., sex toys or certain items of clothing. *Other manifest practices* as residual category included infrequent

Table 3. Frequencies and proportions of descriptive-manifest acts in the respondents' ($n = 327$) sexual fantasies.

Main and subcategories	n (%) [95% CI]
People involved	325 (99.4 [97.8; 99.8])
2	213 (65.1 [59.7; 70.2])
3	50 (15.3 [11.6; 19.7])
≥ 3	41 (12.5 [9.3; 16.5])
X	44 (13.5 [10.2; 17.7])
Self	27 (8.3 [5.6; 11.7])
Identity change	7 (2.1 [1.0; 4.3])
Not actively involved/present	21 (6.4 [4.2; 9.6])
Counterpart(s)	326 (99.7 [98.2; 99.9])
Gender	326 (99.7 [98.2; 99.9])
Female	164 (50.2 [44.5; 56.0])
Male	155 (47.4 [42.4; 52.4])
Unclear/miscellaneous	56 (17.1 [13.4; 21.2])
Age	34 (10.4 [7.3; 14.1])
Young/younger	24 (7.3 [4.8; 11.0])
Old/older	12 (3.7 [2.1; 6.5])
Real	138 (42.2 [36.6; 48.0])
Personal acquaintances	38 (11.6 [8.3; 15.1])
Partners	76 (23.2 [18.8; 28.1])
Famous people	8 (2.4 [1.3; 5.5])
Strangers	31 (9.5 [6.6; 13.1])
Fictional	50 (15.3 [11.6; 19.7])
Placeholder	175 (53.5 [48.1; 58.9])
Location	103 (31.5 [26.3; 37.5])
Private setting	50 (15.3 [11.6; 19.7])
Controlled public	20 (6.1 [3.9; 9.3])
Uncontrolled public	45 (13.8 [10.7; 18.5])
Manifest sexual practices	326 (99.7 [98.2; 99.9])
Body parts	120 (36.7 [32.0; 41.6])
Breasts/Nipples	45 (13.8 [10.7; 18.5])
Buttocks/Anus	23 (7.0 [4.6; 10.5])
Penis/Glans/Testicles	31 (9.5 [6.6; 13.1])
Vulva/Vagina/Clitoris	39 (11.9 [9.6; 17.1])
Throat	10 (3.1 [1.6; 5.2])
Face	7 (2.1 [1.0; 4.3])
Abdomen	5 (1.5 [0.5; 3.5])
Whole body	23 (7.0 [4.6; 10.5])
Other/unclear	14 (4.3 [2.7; 7.2])
Tenderness	82 (25.1 [20.7; 30.0])
Petting	82 (25.1 [20.7; 30.0])
Sex	221 (67.6 [62.3; 72.3])
Vaginal sex/"Sex"	187 (57.2 [51.8; 62.4])
Oral sex	89 (27.2 [22.7; 32.2])
Anal sex	29 (8.9 [6.3; 12.4])
Simultaneous genital stimulation	27 (8.3 [5.7; 11.7])
Alternating genital stimulation	17 (5.2 [3.3; 8.2])
Positions	50 (15.3 [11.6; 19.7])
Masturbation	15 (4.6 [2.8; 7.4])
Body fluids	17 (5.2 [3.3; 8.2])
Ejaculation	21 (6.4 [4.2; 9.6])
Orgasm	80 (24.5 [20.1; 29.3])
Use of force	49 (15.0 [11.5; 19.2])
Pain	14 (4.3 [2.6; 7.1])
Bondage	13 (4.0 [2.3; 6.6])
Blindfold	8 (2.4 [1.3; 5.5])
Coercion	17 (5.2 [3.3; 8.2])
Rape	5 (1.5 [0.5; 3.5])
Other/unclear	18 (5.5 [3.6; 8.6])
Visual	123 (37.6 [32.5; 42.9])
Active/Seeing	96 (29.4 [24.8; 34.5])
Passive/Being seen	51 (15.6 [11.8; 20.1])
Auditory	27 (8.3 [5.6; 11.7])
Communication	12 (3.7 [2.1; 6.5])
Expressing arousal verbally	19 (5.8 [3.8; 9.0])

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Main and subcategories	n (% [95% CI])
Oral	87 (26.6 [21.9; 31.8])
Props	54 (16.5 [12.8; 21.0])
Distant from sexuality	57 (17.4 [13.5; 22.0])
Arousal in reality	37 (11.3 [8.3; 15.1])
No sexual acts	21 (6.4 [4.2; 9.6])
Other manifest practices	90 (27.5 [22.8; 32.8])
Other manifest aspects	10 (3.1 [1.6; 5.2])

Notes. n = number of participants whose fantasy included the respective main or subcategory (single count on all levels: each category was coded at most once per respondent; subcodes are not mutually exclusive so mentions of different subcodes count as one occurrence at the next higher code level); percentages indicate the proportion of respondents in whose fantasies the respective category was present; bold = main category; the indentations of the category labels indicate the first, second, and third level of the category system.

or unspecified practices (e.g., role-playing), while *other manifest aspects* summarized infrequent other manifest aspects, e.g., when respondents described surreal fantasies or their first sexual experience. In a quarter of cases, sexual acts were only hinted at (*distant from sexuality*) or not present at all (*no sexual acts*). Moreover, one out of ten respondents reported what aroused them in real life and lacked the fantasy aspect (*arousal in reality*).

Psychodynamic-latent motives

Psychodynamic-latent motives categorize underlying motivations that become apparent in the manifest actions described. Accordingly, these categories are more abstract and interpretive (cf. Lindgren et al., 2020; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). We identified 14 main categories of psychodynamic-latent motives which are shown in Table 5 with their respective frequencies for the whole sample, and gender-specific results are shown in Table 6.

First, we grouped various themes related to humiliation, submission, and dominance under *power dynamics*. A total of 24 respondents reported actively engaging in some form of humiliation, submission, and/or dominance (7.3%), and 56 reported passively undergoing it (17.1%). As a second main category, we noted sexual fantasies that explored or stretched the limits of what remained just tolerable (*playing with limits*). These limits could involve aggression and consent, bearable pleasure, interpersonal closeness, or the body. The third main theme involved the desire to undo what had happened within the fantasy (*undoing*). This could refer to making amends for boundary violations and aggression, as well as to a perceived contamination (e.g., wiping away bodily fluids).

Fourth, the descriptions revealed various interplays between the *id* and *superego*—that is, between an uninhibited urge for sexual fulfillment, understood psychoanalytically and conceptually in Freud's "id," on the one hand, and the internalized demands of social convention and rationality, Freud's "superego," on the other (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1972). This theme was the third most common and was divided into *succumbing to lust/the id*, which involves giving up control, *disinhibition/letting the id run free*, where control no longer plays a role, and *forbidden pleasure*, where conscious disregard for rules and norms is central.

Fifth, we identified motives related to *care*, i.e., pampering and reducing stress, divided into *caring for someone*, *being cared for*, and *delegating responsibilities*. *Affective connection* played a role in various ways as the sixth theme: Either in fantasizing of loving security (*affective intimacy*), of being completely understood (*[blind] understanding*), of romantic relationships (*being chosen for a committed relationship*), or in the explicit absence of any personal-affective or formal attachment to others (*defense against affective intimacy*). The fantasy of being completely understood and at one with others was also found at the level of the body in the seventh theme, *physical symbiosis/incorporation*, where physical boundaries between people blurred or disappeared.

Table 4. Frequencies and proportions of descriptive-manifest acts in the respondents' ($n=327$) sexual fantasies by gender and results of independence tests.

Main and Sub categories	Women ($n=165$)	Men ($n=159$)	χ^2_{a}	p value ^b	Cramer's V^c
	n (%) [95% CI])	n (%) [95% CI])			
People involved	164 (99.4 [97.1; 99.9])	158 (99.4 [96.4; 99.9])	0.001	1	0.002
2	121 (73.3 [66.0; 79.8])	91 (57.2 [49.4; 64.8])	9.28	.002*	0.169
3	22 (13.3 [9.0; 18.9])	27 (17 [11.8; 23.7])	0.839	.438	0.051
≥ 3	21 (12.7 [8.6; 18.2])	19 (11.9 [7.7; 18.0])	0.045	.867	0.012
X	17 (10.3 [6.5; 15.7])	26 (16.4 [11.3; 22.9])	2.574	.14	0.089
Self	17 (10.3 [6.5; 15.7])	9 (5.7 [3.0; 10.5])	2.365	.153	0.085
Identity change	6 (3.6 [1.7; 7.7])	0 (0 [0.0; 2.3])		.03	0.135
Not actively involved/present	11 (6.7 [3.7; 11.6])	9 (5.7 [3.0; 10.5])	0.142	.819	0.021
Counterpart(s)	164 (99.4 [97.1; 99.9])	159 (100 [97.7; 100.0])	0.967	1	0.055
Gender	164 (99.4 [97.1; 99.9])	159 (100 [97.7; 100.0])	0.967	1	0.055
Female	32 (19.4 [14.0; 26.0])	130 (81.8 [74.9; 87.0])	125.981	<.001*	0.624
Male	130 (78.8 [71.9; 84.3])	24 (15.1 [10.2; 21.7])	131.719	<.001*	0.638
Unclear/miscellaneous	35 (21.2 [15.7; 28.1])	20 (12.6 [8.2; 18.8])	4.282	.054	0.115
Age	12 (7.3 [4.2; 12.3])	21 (13.2 [8.8; 19.3])	3.118	.098	0.098
Young/younger	6 (3.6 [1.7; 7.7])	17 (10.7 [6.8; 16.6])	6.112	.017	0.137
Old/older	6 (3.6 [1.7; 7.7])	6 (3.8 [1.7; 8.2])	0.004	1	0.004
Real	80 (48.5 [41.0; 56.1])	57 (35.8 [28.7; 43.5])	5.297	.025	0.128
Personal acquaintances	16 (9.7 [6.0; 15.2])	22 (13.8 [9.3; 20.0])	1.34	.301	0.064
Partners	46 (27.9 [21.6; 35.2])	30 (18.9 [13.6; 25.7])	3.662	.066	0.106
Famous people	5 (3.0 [1.3; 6.9])	3 (1.9 [0.6; 5.4])		.724	0.037
Strangers	21 (12.7 [8.5; 18.7])	9 (5.7 [3.0; 10.5])	4.813	.035	0.122
Fictional	30 (18.2 [13.1; 24.8])	19 (11.9 [7.7; 17.9])	2.45	.124	0.087
Placeholder	78 (47.3 [39.8; 54.9])	94 (59.1 [51.3; 66.4])	4.563	.035	0.119
Location	60 (36.4 [29.4; 43.9])	40 (25.2 [19.1; 32.5])	4.766	.031	0.121
Private setting	31 (18.8 [13.6; 25.4])	18 (11.3 [7.2; 17.2])	3.517	.065	0.104
Controlled public	12 (7.3 [4.2; 12.3])	8 (5 [2.6; 9.5])	0.702	.491	0.047
Uncontrolled public	26 (15.8 [11.0; 22.1])	16 (10.1 [6.3; 15.8])	2.327	.139	0.085
Manifest sexual practices	164 (99.4 [96.6; 99.9])	159 (100 [97.7; 100.0])	0.967	1	0.055
Body parts	44 (26.7 [20.5; 33.9])	62 (39 [31.6; 46.9])	5.59	.024	0.131
Breasts/Nipples	13 (7.9 [4.7; 13.0])	30 (18.9 [13.6; 25.7])	8.495	.005	0.162
Buttocks/Anus	9 (5.5 [2.9; 10.0])	13 (8.2 [4.8; 13.6])	0.948	.381	0.054
Penis/Glans/Testicles	13 (7.9 [4.7; 13.0])	17 (10.7 [6.8; 16.6])	0.763	.445	0.049
Vulva/Vagina/Clitoris	18 (10.9 [7.0; 16.6])	19 (11.9 [7.7; 17.9])	0.087	.862	0.016
Throat	8 (4.8 [2.5; 9.3])	2 (1.3 [0.3; 4.5])		.105	0.104
Face	0 (0 [0.0; 2.3])	7 (4.4 [2.2; 8.8])		.006	0.151
Abdomen	3 (1.8 [0.6; 5.2])	1 (0.6 [0.1; 3.5])		.623	0.054
Whole body	15 (9.1 [5.6; 14.4])	7 (4.4 [2.2; 8.8])	2.812	.122	0.093
Other/unclear	11 (6.7 [3.8; 11.6])	3 (1.9 [0.6; 5.4])			
Tenderness	50 (30.3 [23.9; 37.7])	32 (20.1 [14.6; 26.9])	4.437	.041	0.117
Petting	47 (28.5 [22.4; 35.5])	33 (20.8 [15.2; 27.6])	2.602	.122	0.090
Sex	116 (70.3 [63.0; 76.7])	109 (68.6 [61.0; 75.2])	0.117	.809	0.019
Vaginal sex/"Sex"	97 (58.8 [51.4; 65.9])	88 (55.3 [47.5; 62.8])	0.392	.575	0.035
Oral sex	35 (21.2 [15.7; 28.1])	53 (33.3 [26.3; 41.1])	6.013	.017	0.136
Anal sex	9 (5.5 [2.9; 10.0])	19 (11.9 [7.7; 17.9])	4.327	.047	0.116
Simultaneous genital stimulation	14 (8.5 [5.1; 13.8])	12 (7.5 [4.3; 12.7])	0.096	.839	0.017
Alternating genital stimulation	2 (1.2 [0.3; 4.3])	14 (8.8 [5.3; 14.3])		.002*	0.175
Positions	16 (9.7 [6.0; 15.2])	32 (20.1 [14.6; 26.9])	6.978	.012	0.147
Masturbation	10 (6.1 [3.3; 11.0])	5 (3.1 [1.3; 7.1])	1.559	.292	0.069
Body fluids	4 (2.4 [0.9; 6.0])	13 (8.2 [4.8; 13.6])		.024	0.129
Ejaculation	7 (4.2 [2.1; 8.3])	13 (8.2 [4.8; 13.6])	2.163	.169	0.082
Orgasm	44 (26.7 [20.5; 33.9])	35 (22 [16.2; 29.1])	0.951	.366	0.054
Use of force	30 (18.2 [13.1; 24.8])	18 (11.3 [7.1; 17.2])	3.02	.088	0.097
Pain	8 (4.8 [2.5; 9.3])	6 (3.8 [1.7; 8.2])	0.226	.786	0.026
Bondage	11 (6.7 [3.8; 11.6])	2 (1.3 [0.3; 4.6])		.02	0.138
Blindfold	4 (2.4 [0.9; 6.0])	3 (1.9 [0.6; 5.4])		1	0.019
Coercion	10 (6.1 [3.3; 11.0])	7 (4.4 [2.2; 8.8])	0.448	.621	0.037
Rape	4 (2.4 [0.9; 6.0])	0 (0 [0.0; 2.3])		.123	0.110
Other/unclear	9 (5.5 [2.9; 10.0])	9 (5.7 [3.0; 10.5])			
Visual	56 (33.9 [27.2; 41.5])	64 (40.3 [32.9; 48.1])	1.383	.252	0.065
Active/Seeing	36 (21.8 [16.2; 28.7])	57 (35.8 [28.7; 43.5])	7.789	.007	0.155
Passive/Being seen	33 (20 [14.6; 26.7])	17 (10.7 [6.8; 16.6])	5.376	.022	0.129

(Continued)

Table 4. Continued.

Main and Sub categories	Women (n = 165)	Men (n = 159)	χ^2_{a}	p value ^b	Cramer's V ^c
	n (% [95% CI])	n (% [95% CI])			
Auditory	16 (9.7 [6.1; 15.2])	10 (6.3 [3.4; 11.1])	1.274	.309	0.063
Communication	6 (3.6 [1.7; 7.7])	5 (3.1 [1.3; 7.1])	0.06	1	0.014
Expressing arousal verbally	11 (6.7 [3.8; 11.6])	8 (5 [2.6; 9.5])	0.392	.639	0.035
Oral	48 (29.1 [22.7; 36.4])	39 (24.5 [18.4; 31.8])	0.858	.382	0.051
Props	22 (13.3 [9.0; 19.4])	30 (18.9 [13.6; 25.7])	1.841	.226	0.075
Distant from sexuality	31 (18.8 [13.6; 25.5])	26 (16.4 [11.4; 23.0])	0.331	.662	0.032
Arousal in reality	15 (9.1 [5.6; 14.4])	22 (13.8 [9.3; 20.0])	1.803	.222	0.075
No sexual acts	4 (2.4 [0.9; 6.1])	17 (10.7 [6.8; 16.6])		.003*	0.168
Other manifest practices	39 (23.6 [17.8; 30.7])	51 (32.1 [25.4; 39.6])			
Other manifest aspects	7 (4.2 [2.1; 8.5])	3 (1.9 [0.6; 5.4])			

Notes. n = number of participants whose fantasy included the respective main or subcategory (single count on all levels; each category was coded at most once per respondent; subcodes are not mutually exclusive so mentions of different subcodes count as one occurrence at the next higher code level); percentages indicate the proportion of respondents in whose fantasies the respective category was present; CI: Wilson confidence intervall; bold = main category; the indentations of the category labels indicate the first, second, and third level of the category system.

* = significant.

^ablank for Fisher's exact test if a cell contained <5 observations.

^btwo-tailed test; significance level corrected for multiple testing using the false discovery rate according to Benjamini-Hochberg.

^ceffect size.

In the predominantly external (*overemphasizing appearance*) or inanimate-object-like representation of persons (*using others/being used as an object*), we saw types of *objectification* as the eighth theme. Ninth, we identified *self-esteem* motives as the most common topic. These included actions that serve to create, strengthen, or maintain a positive sense of self and were subdivided into *being the object of desire/cause of arousal*, *omnipotence*, and *bathing in reflected glory*, e.g., when interactions with special people were described.

We combined fantasies that extend beyond previous personal experiences or that modify real sexual encounters into the tenth theme of *self-actualization/individuation*. *Agency*, classified as the eleventh theme, refers to the extent to which the fantasizer controls and shapes events in terms of agentic activity (*active role*), passivity (*passive role*), or a balanced *interplay* between the fantasizer and other parties.

In addition, we identified defensive processes: These took the form of *relativization*, i.e., a subsequent limitation or mitigation of what had been described previously, or *avoidance*, e.g., through empty statements or gaps in the information provided. Additionally, a significant number of respondents used impersonal formulations (e.g., “one” instead of “I”) distancing themselves from their fantasy (*distant from the self*). Overall, a quarter of the respondents (n = 108, 26.9%) exhibited one of the categories that can be understood as defensive processes (*relativization*, *avoidance*, *undoing*, *distant from the self*, *distant from sexuality*, *no sexual acts*).

Differences by gender

Given the extensive category systems and some low-frequency categories, some exploratory tests of independence between men and women are underpowered and should be interpreted cautiously. However, results suggest that, for the descriptive-manifest categories, women fantasized significantly more often about two people involved and *male counterpart(s)*, while men fantasized significantly more often about *female counterpart(s)*, *alternating genital stimulation*, and *no sexual acts*. Within the psychodynamic-latent motives, women fantasized significantly more often about *playing with limits*, *affective connection*, *being the object of desire/cause of arousal*, and taking a *passive role*, while men fantasized significantly more often about *actively caring* for someone, embodying *omnipotence*, put significantly more *overemphasis* on *appearance*, showed significantly more often signs of *objectification* in their fantasies and chose significantly more often descriptions *distant from the self*. Detailed results of the independence tests are presented in Tables 4 and 6.

Table 5. Frequencies and proportions of psychodynamic-latent motives in the respondents' ($n = 327$) sexual fantasies.

Main and sub categories	n (%) [95% CI]
Power dynamics	84 (25.7 [21.1; 31.0])
Humiliation	38 (11.6 [8.5; 15.6])
Active/Humiliate	15 (4.6 [2.8; 7.5])
Passive/Being humiliated	16 (4.9 [3.1; 8.0])
Direction unclear	10 (3.1 [1.7; 5.6])
Submission	79 (24.2 [19.8; 29.3])
Active/Dominate	10 (3.1 [1.7; 5.6])
Active/Subjugate	11 (3.4 [1.9; 5.9])
Passive/Being dominated	19 (5.8 [3.7; 9.0])
Passive/Being subjugated	28 (8.6 [6.0; 12.1])
Subjugating oneself	11 (3.4 [1.9; 5.9])
Direction unclear	7 (2.1 [1.0; 4.3])
Playing with limits	74 (22.6 [18.3; 27.8])
Undoing	25 (7.6 [5.2; 11.1])
Id and superego	184 (56.3 [50.8; 61.6])
Succumbing to pleasure/the id	104 (31.8 [26.8; 37.2])
Disinhibition/letting the id run free	54 (16.5 [12.8; 20.9])
Forbidden pleasure	82 (25.1 [20.7; 30.3])
Care	104 (31.8 [26.8; 37.2])
Active/Caring	32 (9.8 [7.0; 13.4])
Passive/Being cared for	82 (25.1 [20.7; 30.3])
Delegating responsibility	15 (4.6 [2.8; 7.5])
Affective connection	125 (38.2 [33.0; 43.6])
Affective intimacy	84 (25.7 [21.1; 31.0])
(Blind) understanding/Feeling seen	36 (11.0 [8.0; 15.0])
Being chosen for a committed relationship	10 (3.1 [1.7; 5.6])
Defense against affective intimacy	30 (9.2 [6.5; 13.0])
Physical symbiosis/incorporation	55 (16.8 [13.1; 21.2])
Objectification	78 (23.9 [19.6; 29.1])
Overemphasizing appearance	45 (13.8 [10.4; 18.1])
Using others/being used as an object	38 (11.6 [8.5; 15.6])
Self-esteem	195 (59.6 [54.2; 64.8])
Being the object of desire/cause of arousal	143 (43.7 [38.4; 49.1])
Omnipotence	35 (10.7 [7.8; 14.6])
Bathing in reflected glory	66 (20.2 [16.2; 25.0])
Self-actualization/individuation	93 (28.4 [23.7; 33.8])
Agency	189 (57.8 [52.4; 63.0])
Active role	38 (11.6 [8.5; 15.6])
Passive role	112 (34.3 [29.3; 39.8])
Interplay	44 (13.5 [10.2; 17.8])
Relativization	27 (8.3 [5.8; 11.9])
Avoidance	46 (14.1 [10.7; 18.5])
Distant from the self	55 (16.8 [13.1; 21.2])
Other latent themes	25 (7.6 [5.2; 11.1])

Notes: n = number of participants whose fantasy included the respective main or subcategory (single count on all levels: each category was coded at most once per respondent; subcodes are not mutually exclusive so mentions of different subcodes count as one occurrence at the next higher code level); percentages indicate the proportion of respondents in whose fantasies the respective category was present; CI: Wilson confidence interval; bold = main category; the indentations of the category labels indicate the first, second, and third level of the category system.

Discussion

We analyzed and described the individually most arousing sexual fantasies in a demographically broad sample of the German-speaking general population. Next to an extensive descriptive categorization of sexual acts, we found 14 psychodynamic-latent motives.

Case grouping

Participants with asexual and other sexual orientations were significantly more often part of the non-respondents than the respondents. This aligns with previous research on asexuality that found a significantly reduced prevalence of sexual fantasies (e.g., Yule et al., 2014, 2017).

Table 6. Frequencies and proportions of psychodynamic-latent motives in the respondents' ($n = 327$) sexual fantasies by gender and results of independence tests.

Main and subcategories	Women ($n = 165$) n (%) [95% CI]	Men ($n = 159$) n (%) [95% CI]	$\chi^2_{(a)}$	p value ^b	Cramer's V ^c
Power dynamics					
Humiliation	48 (29.1 [22.7; 36.4])	35 (22 [16.2; 29.1])	2.129	.162	0.081
Active/Humiliate	14 (8.5 [5.1; 13.8])	23 (14.5 [9.9; 20.7])	2.863	.115	0.094
Passive/Being humiliated	4 (2.4 [0.9; 6.1])	11 (6.9 [3.9; 12.0])		.066	0.107
Direction unclear	7 (4.2 [2.1; 8.5])	8 (5 [2.6; 9.5])	0.114	.796	0.019
Submission	4 (2.4 [0.9; 6.1])	6 (3.8 [1.7; 8.2])		.536	0.039
Active/Dominate	47 (28.5 [22.2; 35.6])	31 (19.5 [14.0; 26.4])	3.579	.069	0.105
Active/Subjugate	1 (0.6 [0.1; 3.5])	9 (5.7 [3.0; 10.5])		.057	0.146
Passive/Being dominated	6 (3.6 [1.7; 7.7])	5 (3.1 [1.3; 7.1])	0.06	1	0.014
Passive/Being subjugated	14 (8.5 [5.1; 13.8])	5 (3.1 [1.3; 7.1])	4.183	.057	0.114
Subjugating oneself	20 (12.1 [7.9; 18.0])	7 (4.4 [2.2; 8.8])	6.315	.015	0.140
Direction unclear	5 (3 [1.3; 7.1])	6 (3.8 [1.7; 8.2])		.536	0.039
	6 (3.6 [1.7; 7.7])	1 (0.6 [0.1; 3.5])	.121	.121	0.103
Playing with limits			8.29	.005*	0.160
Undoing	48 (29.1 [22.7; 36.4])	25 (15.7 [10.8; 22.1])	3.883	.061	0.109
Id and superego	93 (56.4 [48.7; 63.7])	89 (56 [48.2; 63.6])	0.005	1	0.004
Succumbing to pleasure/the id	57 (34.5 [27.7; 41.9])	45 (28.3 [21.8; 35.7])	1.463	.234	0.067
Disinhibition/letting the id run free	25 (15.2 [10.5; 21.5])	28 (17.6 [12.4; 24.3])	0.358	.653	0.033
Forbidden pleasure	36 (21.8 [16.2; 28.7])	44 (27.7 [21.4; 35.0])	1.493	.247	0.068
Care	55 (33.3 [26.6; 40.8])	48 (30.2 [23.7; 37.6])	0.369	.553	0.034
Active/Caring	9 (5.5 [2.9; 10.0])	23 (14.5 [9.9; 20.7])	7.386	.008*	0.151
Passive/Being cared for	47 (28.5 [22.2; 35.6])	35 (22 [16.2; 29.1])	1.794	.202	0.074
Delegating responsibility	11 (6.7 [3.8; 11.6])	3 (1.9 [0.6; 5.4])		.053	0.118
Affective connection	78 (47.3 [39.8; 54.9])	47 (29.6 [23.1; 37.0])	10.721	.001*	0.182
Affective intimacy	53 (32.1 [25.4; 39.6])	31 (19.5 [14.0; 26.4])	6.72	.011	0.144
(Blind) understanding/Feeling seen	22 (13.3 [9.0; 19.4])	14 (8.8 [5.3; 14.3])	1.681	.219	0.072
Being chosen for a committed relationship	5 (3 [1.3; 7.1])	5 (3.1 [1.3; 7.1])	0.004	1	0.004
Defense against affective intimacy	19 (11.5 [7.4; 17.4])	11 (6.9 [3.9; 12.0])	2.037	.181	0.079
Physical symbiosis/incorporation	24 (14.5 [9.9; 20.7])	30 (18.9 [13.6; 25.7])	1.089	.371	0.058
Objectification	23 (13.9 [9.5; 20.1])	53 (33.3 [26.6; 40.8])	16.963	<.001*	0.229
Overemphasizing appearance	7 (4.2 [2.1; 8.5])	36 (22.6 [16.8; 29.7])	23.815	<.001*	0.271
Using others/being used as object	18 (10.9 [7.0; 16.6])	19 (11.9 [7.7; 17.9])	0.087	.862	0.016
Self-esteem	105 (63.6 [55.9; 70.7])	88 (55.3 [47.5; 62.8])	2.311	.142	0.084
Being the object of desire/cause of arousal	87 (52.7 [45.1; 60.1])	54 (34.0 [27.2; 41.4])	11.6	.001*	0.189
Omnipotence	10 (6.1 [3.4; 11.1])	25 (15.7 [10.8; 22.1])	7.846	.007*	0.156
Bathing in reflected glory	31 (18.8 [13.6; 25.5])	34 (21.4 [15.9; 28.3])	0.34	.581	0.032
Self-actualization/individuation	52 (31.5 [25.0; 38.7])	41 (25.8 [20.2; 32.3])	1.299	.271	0.063
Agency	105 (63.6 [55.9; 70.7])	83 (52.2 [44.4; 59.8])	4.347	.043	0.116
Active role	13 (7.9 [4.7; 13.0])	25 (15.7 [10.8; 22.1])	4.813	.037	0.122
Passive role	74 (44.8 [37.4; 52.4])	37 (23.3 [17.5; 30.4])	16.74	<.001*	0.227
Interplay	20 (12.1 [7.9; 18.0])	23 (14.5 [9.9; 20.7])	0.387	.624	0.035

(Continued)

Table 6. Continued.

Main and subcategories	Women (<i>n</i> = 165)		Men (<i>n</i> = 159)		χ ^{2a}	<i>p</i> value ^b	Cramer's V ^c
	<i>n</i> (%)	[95% CI]	<i>n</i> (%)	[95% CI]			
Relativization	9	(5.5 [2.9; 10.0])	18	(11.3 [7.1; 17.2])	3.648	.07	0.106
Avoidance	20	(12.1 [7.9; 18.0])	25	(15.7 [10.8; 22.1])	0.878	.422	0.052
Distant from the self	19	(11.5 [7.4; 17.4])	36	(22.6 [16.8; 29.7])	7.112	.008*	0.148
Other latent themes	15	(9.1 [5.6; 14.4])	10	(6.3 [3.4; 11.1])			

Notes: *n* = number of participants whose fantasy included the respective main or subcategory (single count on all levels; each category was coded at most once per respondent; subcodes are not mutually exclusive so mentions of different subcodes count as one occurrence at the next higher code level); percentages indicate the proportion of respondents in whose fantasies the respective category was present; CI: Wilson confidence interval; bold = main category; the indentations of the category labels indicate the first, second, and third level of the category system.

* = significant.

^ablank for Fisher's exact test if a cell contained <5 observations.

^btwo-tailed test; significance level corrected for multiple testing using the false discovery rate according to Benjamini-Hochberg.

^ceffect size.

Descriptive-manifest acts

In terms of the number and description of people involved in the fantasies, similar categories and frequencies emerged as in the narratives of a Canadian general-population sample (Joyal et al., 2015). However, sexual fantasies most frequently involved anonymous individuals with minimal characteristics (*placeholders*); more frequently than real people such as *partners* or *personal acquaintances*. In line with this, latent romantic themes (*affective connection*) were in fourth place among the most common motives. These results contrast with much of the previous fantasy research from broad general-population samples, in which couple sexuality (with current, former, or imagined partners) and romance are considered the most popular (Bondü & Birke, 2021; Hartmann, 1989; Kahr, 2007; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995).

Since women in our gender-balanced sample fantasized significantly more often about *affective connection*, this difference may be an effect of the overrepresentation of young women in previous studies. Our results are more in line with gender-balanced samples such as those used by Joyal et al. (2015) and Lehmler (2018), whose broad US sample showed that the topics of passion, romance, and physical-emotional intimacy were recurring, but only ranked sixth in frequency. It is also likely to be decisive whether the most arousing sexual fantasy is recorded as narratives or whether the occurrence of predefined fantasies is recorded using a questionnaire. The latter leads to significantly higher prevalences for different content and asks more about the spectrum of arousal than the most arousing content.

Expansive-exploratory behaviors were common in our sample and align with previous studies (Joyal et al., 2015; Lehmler, 2018; Lehmler & Gormezano, 2023; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). However, while group sex was the most frequent fantasy mentioned in a large US-sample (Lehmler, 2018), most fantasies in our sample involved two people. Moreover, gender analyses revealed a predominance of two-person constellations among women and alternating genital stimulation in men. With the US being more conservative in their attitudes toward sexuality than Germany (e.g., Pew Research Center & Global Attitudes Project, 2011), this most likely reflects a sampling effect with Lehmler (2018) having recruited an above average liberal, sex-positive sample via e.g. social media.

In terms of manifest practices, vaginal intercourse was by far the most frequently described sexual act. At just under 1/3, oral sex was also particularly frequent but occurred less often in the central sexual fantasy than in questionnaire surveys assessing whether one has ever fantasized about the respective act (e.g., men: 88%, women 79%; Joyal et al., 2015). This pattern was similar for anal sex, which occurred in 9% of central sexual fantasies (cf. men: 64%, women: 33% questionnaire based prevalences; Joyal et al., 2015). Acts such as urinating on partners or being urinated on (under *bodily fluids*) rarely appeared in open fantasy reports, while fetishism (under *props*) and voyeurism/exhibitionism in the broader definition of *seeing* and *being seen* occurred more frequently, which is in line with previous work underlining that very few fantasies are unusual (e.g., Joyal et al., 2015).

In line with previous work, pushing the boundaries of one's own sexual orientation or identity (cf. Kahr, 2007; Lehmler, 2018) also occurred in our sample. For example, one in ten women deviated from their stated sexual orientation in their fantasies. This supports the hypothesis that sexual fantasies do not necessarily correspond to actual behavior and provide a space for desires and interests that may sometimes strive more, sometimes less for real-life enactment, and thus may serve other functions than informing about behavioral preferences.

In line with recent findings (Bondü & Birke, 2021), aggressive practices ranged from mild, potentially consensual *use of force* to seriously violent, non-consensual practices, with *coercion* being the most frequently mentioned form in the most arousing sexual fantasy. Overall, the *use of force* was rather rare (15%) in comparison to previous findings in questionnaire studies (e.g. Bondü & Birke, 2021), suggesting that aggressive sexual fantasies have widespread arousal potential (cf. Bondü & Birke, 2021) but occur less frequently in the individually most arousing sexual fantasy. On a descriptive-manifest level, no significant

gender differences were found, although, for example, no men reported a rape fantasy compared to four women and one non-binary person, which is consistent with the finding that rape fantasies from the victim's perspective are reported significantly more often by women (Bondü & Birke, 2021). The lack of significance here may be due to the low prevalence and thus lack of statistical power.

Gender analyses also revealed that men reported significantly more frequently no sexual acts than women. Given the robust finding that men fantasize more (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995), this result can be understood as an indication of disclosure avoidance.

Psychodynamic-latent motives

The analysis of sexual fantasies at a latent, psychodynamic motivational level, resulted in a system of 14 main categories. A key finding is that the majority of fantasies are marked by self-esteem topics (approx. 60%). This seems surprising in light of previous work in which romantic themes were highlighted and more central (Hartmann, 1989; Kahr, 2007; Lehmiller, 2018; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). However, being worthy of being truly desired can certainly be understood as being related to the wish to be loved and accepted in one's innermost being, which can be understood as a fundamental motive of romantic love.

Although the fantasies in our sample appear highly individualized and diverse, as depicted by the variety of content and motives identified, the gender specific patterns suggest that they also reflect internalized cultural narratives: Women fantasized significantly more often about *being the object of desire* and took on a *passive role* significantly more often, while men fantasized significantly more often about *omnipotence*. These patterns can be understood best as indicating prevailing patriarchal gendered sexual scripts, that are conceptualized as internalized roadmaps that delineate what a culture defines as appropriate or acceptable, and that position women within a receptive, desired, passively conquered role and men as active initiators and active conquerors (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). Our results also support Money's (1986) idea of love maps, conceptualizing sexual behavior—including fantasies—as shaped by interpersonal experiences and socio-cultural influences such as gender norms. However, next to classic and social learning experiences, both theories do not conceptualize the mechanisms through which specific experiences transform into specific fantasy content.

Here, the psychodynamic perspective comes into play, from which men's omnipotent fantasies may not only be interpreted as facilitating complying with their culturally expected confident, active role, but also as buffering psychologically against narcissistic injuries stemming from rejection and failure. The significantly more frequent *objectification* and *overemphasizing appearance* in men's fantasies could similarly reflect a denial of their partner's (predominantly female) own will, thereby reducing the possibility of being rejected or a potential sense of guilt.

Script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1984) and the theory of love maps (Money, 1986) complement such psychoanalytic perspectives on intrapsychic mechanisms with a conceptualization of implicit social norms permeating into fantasy realms. Our results also mainly align with previous empirical research that found more passivity, the wish to being desired, and more emotional-romantic content in women's fantasies, while men's fantasies contained more visual aspects and a more active role in Western as well as, more recently, middle eastern countries (e.g., Bogaert et al., 2015; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995; Shekarchi & Nimbi, 2025; Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004). They underline that even though fantasies could be unrestrained, they also are informed by implicit normative expectations. Importantly though, social desirability and the wish to align with gender norms in the context of the study may have also influenced responses here.

Against this backdrop, it is also unsurprising that a sense of security and romantic love was fantasized significantly more often about by women. Next to aligning with gender norms, this finding also resonates with theoretical and empirical work showing that women's sexual desire

is strongly influenced by affective closeness in partnerships (e.g., Basson, 2002; Krasnow & Maglio, 2021; Leiblum, 2002).

We also observed topics with high frequency that can be conceptualized as repeating classic, early libidinal relationship experiences in line with Schorsch's (1993) considerations: *physical symbiosis/incorporation*, *passive care*, the dissolution of space and time, norms, and control in fantasies of *disinhibition* and *succumbing to lust*. These frequent motives, support the idea of reactivated and symbolized regressive longings for past perfection before individuation, for care and the abandonment of developed normative self-control. Previous work supports this idea as well by having frequently found an abolition of norms and taboos in sexual fantasies (e.g., Kahr, 2007; Lehmler, 2018).

In a psychodynamically more mature sense, the expansive power of libido was also used for self-development and self-actualization, as we observed in line with previous research (e.g., Gromus, 1993; Lehmler, 2018). Here, fantasy seems to provide potential for orientation and growth—to fantasize theoretically means to be able to symbolize, so that unconscious motives may develop from latency, take on psychological meaning, and can potentially be verbalized and integrated (Bion, 1970).

For one-fifth of the participants, it was neither disinhibition nor dissolution that was attractive, but rather *playing with limits*: Based on the concept of limit consent (Saketopoulou, 2019), playing with the state of overwhelm holds an exciting and transformative potential in which what is familiar and safe is risked and something new and unknown can take shape. Women fantasize about this topic significantly more often, which may reflect a closer link between boundaries and sexual arousal, potentially shaped by a greater risk of boundary violations they face in heterosexual encounters due to physical asymmetries. This may also help explain the more frequent fantasies about affective intimacy in the sense of needed trust among women.

Playing with limits simultaneously touches on the transition to aggressive, intrusive content. Aggressive tendencies were evident in the fantasies of a quarter of the respondents. The breadth of the main category of *power dynamics* in its subtle differentiations, e.g., between *submission*, *dominance*, and *self-submission*, can, following Kernberg (2012), be conceptualized as a reflection of the diverse degrees and forms of integration of aggression into the libido. The frequency of aggressive content is consistent with the open-answer-format findings of Joyal et al. (2015), while lagging significantly behind the American sample of Lehmler (2018). In this more liberal, sex-positive sample, BDSM themes were the second most frequent content in openly described fantasies.

Moreover, most studies describe in a gender-role conforming way that women preferred submission and men generally preferred dominance in sexual fantasies (e.g., Joyal et al., 2015; Kahr, 2007; Lehmler, 2018; Lehmler & Gormezano, 2023; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). While the frequencies of the main category of *submission* are distributed in line with these previous findings, the gender differences are not significant. This most likely is due to the comparatively low frequency of power dynamics in the individually most arousing sexual fantasy of a sample from the general population and a corresponding lack of statistical power.

Some fantasies involved actively *undoing* power dynamics or boundary violations, and such content was often softened or concealed by *relativization*, *avoidance* or the use of self-distancing language. This can be understood as a way of dealing with guilt or shame when aggressive strivings come into conflict with internalized or socially prescribed norms. Prior research has shown similar self-distancing mechanisms, for example in the use of disclaimers or irony to navigate morally ambivalent sexual themes (e.g., Korobov, 2009).

From a psychodynamic perspective, these processes illustrate the defensive work of the psychic organism, balancing competing motives (Arbeitskreis, 2024). The fact that we were able to systematically capture such defensive processes, supports the idea that sexual fantasies might provide access to motives and impulses that are difficult to acknowledge outside of the fantasy realms.

This finding also provides tentative evidence that talking about sexual fantasies can offer valuable insights into an individual's psychodynamics, which seems particularly useful in clinical settings (cf. Gaertner et al., 2025).

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

To the best of our knowledge, this study was the first to systematically assess the most arousing sexual fantasy in a broad sample from the German-speaking general population in an open-ended response format and to categorize the content on a descriptive-manifest and a psychodynamic-latent level using content-structuring qualitative content analysis. Descriptive-manifest content largely coincides with the results of previous, predominantly North American studies. The systematic recording of psychodynamic-latent motives provides initial tentative evidence for the psychoanalytic idea that the content of the most arousing sexual fantasy can be systematically understood as a symbolically condensed field of internalized relationships between the self, others, and society, with multiple regulatory functions. Yet, various limitations must be taken into account.

First, this sample is an online quota sample of German-speaking panelists, which carries the risk of self-selection bias (Newman et al., 2021) and reduces its generalizability to the general population and other cultural contexts. Self-selected participants typically differ from the general population in various dimensions such as attitude toward the subject of the study (Elston, 2021; Matthiesen et al., 2021), which may also have influenced the sexual fantasies reported. Accordingly, dropouts of the survey were significantly older, significantly more often female assigned at birth, and better educated, suggesting a lower interest in studies on sexual fantasies for older people and women. This aligns with previous studies showing that sexual fantasies tend to decline with age (Kolodziejczak et al., 2019; Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023) and are slightly more common in men (Joyal et al., 2015; Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023). Also, it suggests a rather high cognitive demand of our survey which might be reduced in interview studies. Though most of the manifest-descriptive content aligns with findings from North-American studies, future research into fantasies in different cultural contexts might help better understand the influence of, for example, gender norms.

Moreover, the frequent discontinuation of the survey in view of the open-ended question about the most arousing sexual fantasy as well as some participants actively refusing to report their fantasy suggests that selection was based on shame and might have biased results to be less taboo and more socially acceptable. However, the measures taken to normalize and reduce shame, as well as the reference to data protection, seem to have made honest answers more likely, as evidenced by the sometimes highly taboo content of the reported fantasies. Moreover, unlike in-person or telephone interview studies, anonymous online participation itself already offers a shame-reducing space in which an honest description of the most arousing fantasies is more likely (cf. Joyal & Carpentier, 2017). Future work should implement a brief question for participants who discontinue the survey, asking for their reasons for dropping out to better be able to evaluate potential biases.

Second, the inclusion of prompts in the instructions may have unintentionally biased participants' responses. To reduce this risk, the prompts were formulated to avoid confirmation bias by offering both *if yes* and *if no* options. Targeting four important aspects (who is present, what happens, where it takes place, and in what context) they were intended to help participants add relevant details to their fantasy. Prompts were provided only after the initial response, and responses before and after prompting were saved separately. We also emphasized that additional details should be provided only if they were essential to the fantasy's arousing nature. Of the 337 respondents, 106 added details after receiving the prompts. In most cases this included details of the description of people, settings or actions, and not a change of the whole scene, so that we believe the risk of bias was minimal.

Third, the large number of main and subcategories made the coding process time-consuming, and some categories occurred only rarely, leaving some exploratory gender analyses underpowered and limiting their informativeness. Combined with the sample size and the binary coding of variables, this also resulted in low statistical power for correlation analyses, which were therefore discarded. However, as the primary goal of this study was to systematically capture and map the complexity of descriptive-manifest acts and psychodynamic-latent motives, the extensive category system was necessary to achieve sufficient conceptual depth. Using AI-based automated theme mapping and automated coding could help not only to examine and validate the category system developed here, but also to enable the coding of larger samples that allow more reliable quantitative analyses. By providing the necessary computational capacity, this approach could also make it possible to conduct and analyze in depth, in person interviews on sexual fantasies as well as individual psychodynamics (e.g., OPD-interviews [Arbeitskreis OPD [Working Group OPD], 2024]), thereby enabling subsequent quantitative correlational analyses in a mixed-methods approach.

Conclusion

This study used CSQCA to examine narratives of individually most arousing sexual fantasies. By categorizing descriptive-manifest acts, a comprehensive descriptive account of the most arousing sexual fantasies of a broad, German-speaking general population sample has been achieved. In addition, psychodynamic-latent motives could be categorized. These results provide initial empirical support for the psychoanalytic idea that sexual fantasy scripts can reflect underlying motivational strivings. The defensive processes observed convey that sexual fantasies may provide easier access to otherwise intolerable impulses highlighting their potential value for understanding individual (unconscious) psychodynamics, which seems especially relevant in clinical settings. At the same time, the gender differences suggest that gendered sexuality norms also shape fantasy content, highlighting the value of considering individual as well as broader socio-cultural perspectives when interpreting sexual fantasy narratives.

Notes

1. Psychodynamics refer to everything that affects our psyche on a conscious, but above all, unconscious level (Arbeitsgruppe OPD [Working Group OPD], 2024).
2. This method was chosen because no random correction was needed given the freely defined segments and the number of codes (see Rädiker and Kuckartz, 2019), and because code frequency per fantasy was irrelevant to our research question.
3. Post-hoc query matrices underline the internal consistency of the final category systems and can be found in the [online supplemental materials B](#).
4. Applying random-corrected Kappa's benchmarks to inter-coder agreement percentages seems justified here, as random agreement is highly unlikely given the free segmentation, the many codes per fantasy, and the large number of categories. Thus, Kappa's randomness correction should not substantially affect percentage agreement (cf. Kuckartz, 2018, pp. 210, 217; Kuckartz and Radiker, 2023).
5. The extensive coding manual, including category definitions, indicators and examples for coding can be found in the [online supplementary materials C](#). Case studies further illustrating the coding process are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgements

This analysis is based in part on the findings of an unpublished master's thesis (Jule Räuchle, University of Potsdam, 2025), which was supervised by Lynn Gärtner and revised as well as expanded for this publication.

Authors contributions

CRedit: **Lynn Helen Christien Gaertner**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review &

editing; **Jule Räuchle**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Klaus Michael Reininger**: Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Peer Briken**: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Köhler-Stiftung under Grant [S0112/10276/2022].

ORCID

Lynn Helen Christien Gaertner  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-1734-7698>

Jule Räuchle  <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-5837-7580>

Klaus Michael Reininger  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6671-0465>

Peer Briken  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1360-014X>

Data availability statement

Anonymized data, materials, and code can be made available upon reasonable request for up to 10 years after publication.

References

- Allen, A., Katsikitis, M., Millea, P., & McKillop, N. (2020). Psychological interventions for sexual fantasies and implications for sexual violence: A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 55, 101465. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101465>
- Arbeitskreis OPD. (2024). *OPD-3-Operationalisierte Psychodynamische Diagnostik: Das Manual für Diagnostik und Therapieplanung [OPD-3-Operationalized psychodynamic diagnostic: The manual for diagnostics and therapy planning]*. Hogrefe AG.
- Bader, M. J. (2003). *Arousal: The secret logic of sexual fantasies*. Macmillan.
- Bártová, K., Androvičová, R., Krejčová, L., Weiss, P., & Klapilová, K. (2021). The prevalence of paraphilic interests in the Czech population: Preference, arousal, the use of pornography, fantasy, and behavior. *Journal of Sex Research*, 58(1), 86–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1707468>
- Basson, R. (2002). Women's sexual desire-disordered or misunderstood? *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 28(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00926230252851168>
- Bion, W.R. (Ed.). (1970). *Attention and Interpretation: A scientific approach to insight in psychoanalysis and groups* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Birke, J., & Bondü, R. (2023). From fantasy to reality: self-reported aggression-related sexual fantasies predict sexually sadistic behavior beyond indirect and direct measures of sexual preference. *Journal of Sex Research*, 60(4), 558–573. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-023-02782-5>
- Bogaert, A. F., Visser, B. A., & Pozzebon, J. A. (2015). Gender differences in object of desire self-consciousness sexual fantasies. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44(8), 2299–2310. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0456-2>
- Bondü, R., & Birke, J. B. (2021). Aggression-related sexual fantasies: Prevalence rates, sex differences, and links with personality, attitudes, and behavior. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 18(8), 1383–1397. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsxm.2021.06.006>
- Burla, L., Knierim, B., Barth, J., Liewald, K., Duetz, M., & Abel, T. (2008). From text to codings: intercoder reliability assessment in qualitative content analysis. *Nursing Research*, 57(2), 113–117. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NNR.0000313482.33917.7d>
- Chen, S. Y., Feng, Z., & Yi, X. (2017). A general introduction to adjustment for multiple comparisons. *Journal of Thoracic Disease*, 9(6), 1725–1729. <https://doi.org/10.21037/jtd.2017.05.34>
- Cohen, J. (1988). The effect size. In *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (pp. 77–83). Routledge.
- Elston, D. M. (2021). Participation bias, self-selection bias, and response bias. *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2021.06.025>

- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Buchner, A., & Lang, A.-G. (2009). **G*Power 3.1** [Computer software]. <https://www.gpower.hhu.de/>
- Freud, S. (1900). *Die Traumdeutung* [The interpretation of dreams]. Franz Deuticke.
- Freud, S. (1905). *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* [Three essays on the theory of sexuality]. Franz Deuticke.
- Freud, S. (1999). Der Dichter und das Phantasieren (1908) [The poet and the fantasy]. In *Gesammelte Werke: Werke aus den Jahren 1906-1909* (Vol. 7). Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Gaertner, L. H. C., Reiningger, K. M., & Briken, P. (2025). Sexual fantasies as unique pathway to understanding psychodynamics – do our theories pass the empirical test? *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, 39(3), 188–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02668734.2025.2543865>
- Garant, E., Proulx, J., & Seto, M. C. (2025). Forbidden fantasies: A qualitative exploration of the content of sexual fantasies of adults reporting sexual attraction to minors. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 51(4), 348–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2025.2479729>
- Goldey, K. L., Avery, L. R., & van Anders, S. M. (2014). Sexual fantasies and gender/sex: A multimethod approach with quantitative content analysis and hormonal responses. *Journal of Sex Research*, 51(8), 917–931. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2013.798611>
- Gromus, B. (1993). *Weibliche Phantasien und Sexualität*. Quintessenz-Verlag.
- Hartmann, U. (1989). *Inhalte und Funktionen sexueller Phantasien: Ergebnisse einer Panel-Studie an Männern und Frauen*. Enke.
- Herzog, D. (2017). *Cold war Freud: Psychoanalysis in an age of catastrophes*. Cambridge University Press.
- IBM. (2021). SPSS statistics (version 28.0) [Software]. <https://www.ibm.com/de-de>
- Joyal, C. C., & Carpentier, J. (2017). The prevalence of paraphilic interests and behaviors in the general population: A provincial survey. *Journal of Sex Research*, 54(2), 161–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1139034>
- Joyal, C. C., Cossette, A., & Lapierre, V. (2015). What exactly is an unusual sexual fantasy? *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 12(2), 328–340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsm.12734>
- Kahr, B. (2007). *Sex and the psyche: Revealing the true nature of our secret fantasies from the largest ever survey of its kind*. Penguin.
- Kernberg, O. F. (1998). *Love relations: Normality and pathology*. Yale University Press.
- Kernberg, O. F. (2012). *The inseparable nature of love and aggression: Clinical and theoretical perspectives*. American Psychiatric Pub.
- Kolodziejczak, K., Rosada, A., Drewelies, J., Düzel, S., Eibich, P., Tegeler, C., Wagner, G. G., Beier, K. M., Ram, N., Demuth, I., Steinhagen-Thiessen, E., & Gerstorf, D. (2019). Sexual activity, sexual thoughts, and intimacy among older adults: Links with physical health and psychosocial resources for successful aging. *Psychology and Aging*, 34(3), 389–404. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000347>
- Korobov, N. (2009). Expanding hegemonic masculinity: The use of irony in young men's stories about romantic experiences. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 3(4), 286–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988308319952>
- Krasnow, S. S., & Maglio, A.-S. (2021). Female sexual desire: what helps, what hinders, and what women want. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 36(4), 318–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2019.1626011>
- Kuckartz, U. (2018). *Qualitative inhaltsanalyse: Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. Beltz Juventa.
- Kuckartz U. Radiker S. 2023. Qualitative content analysis: Methods, practice and software. SAGE Publications.
- Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, 33(1), 159–174. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2529310>
- Laplanche, J., & Pontalis, J.-B. (1972). *Das Wörterbuch der Psychoanalyse* [The dictionary of psychoanalysis]. Suhrkamp.
- Laufer, M. (1976). The central masturbation fantasy, the final sexual organization, and adolescence. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 31(1), 297–316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00797308.1976.11822319>
- Lehmiller, J. J. (2018). *Tell me what you want*. Da Capo Press.
- Lehmiller, J. J., & Gormezano, A. M. (2023). Sexual fantasy research: A contemporary review. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 49, 101496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101496>
- Leiblum, S. R. (2002). Reconsidering gender differences in sexual desire: An update. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 17(1), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681990220108027>
- Leitenberg, H., & Henning, K. (1995). Sexual fantasy. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 469–496. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.469>
- Lindgren, B.-M., Lundman, B., & Graneheim, U. H. (2020). Abstraction and interpretation during the qualitative content analysis process. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 108, 103632. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2020.103632>
- Lindley, L. M., Anzani, A., Prunas, A., & Galupo, M. P. (2022). Sexual fantasy across gender identity: A qualitative investigation of differences between cisgender and non-binary people's imagery. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 37(2), 157–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2020.1716966>
- Matthiesen, S., Pietras, L., Bode, H., Cholmakow-Bodechtel, C., Cerwenka, S., Pfister, M., von Rüden, U., Steinacker, G., Wiessner, C., Briken, P., & Dekker, A. (2021). Methodology of the German national sex survey–GeSiD (German health and sexuality survey). *Journal of Sex Research*, 58(8), 1008–1018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2021.1875188>

- McHugh, M. L. (2013). The chi-square test of independence. *Biochemia medica*, 23(2), 143-149. <https://doi.org/10.11613/BM.2013.018> 23894860
- Money, J. (1986). *Lovemaps: Clinical concepts of sexual/erotic health and pathology, paraphilia, and gender transposition of childhood, adolescence, and maturity*. Ardent Media.
- Newman, A., Bavik, Y. L., Mount, M., & Shao, B. (2021). Data collection via online platforms: Challenges and recommendations for future research. *Applied Psychology*, 70(3), 1380-1402. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12302>
- O'Connor, C., & Joffe, H. (2020). Inter-coder reliability in qualitative research: Debates and practical guidelines. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1609406919899220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919899220>
- Person, E. S. (1995). *By force of fantasy: How we make our lives*. Basic Books.
- Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Project. (2011). *The American-Western European values gap*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2011/11/17/the-american-western-european-values-gap/>
- Quindeau, I. (2014). *Sexualität [Sexuality]*. Psychosozial-Verlag.
- Rädiker S.Kuckartz U. 2019. *Analyse qualitativer Daten mit MAXQDA*. Springer VS.
- Rossegger, A., Bartels, R. M., Endrass, J., Borchard, B., & Singh, J. P. (2021). High risk sexual fantasies and sexual offending: An overview of fundamentals and interventions. *Sexual Offending: Theory, Research, and Prevention*, 16, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.5964/sotrap.5291>
- Saketopoulou, A. (2019). The draw to overwhelm: Consent, risk, and the retranslation of enigma. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 67(1), 133-167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003065119830088>
- Salvatori, G., Amoroso, M., Fantacci, F., Giunti, D., Olmi, A., Borrello, L., & Antonelli, P. (2025). To do or not to do: a study about sexual fantasies in an Italian sample. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 40(1), 195-212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2024.2308055>
- Schorsch E. 1993. Die Stellung der Sexualität in der psychischen Organisation der Menschen. Sigusch G. S. V. Perversion. Liebe., Gewalt. Aufsätze zur Psychopathologie und Sozialpsychologie der Sexualität 1967-1991. 37-42. Ferdinand Enke Verlag.
- Shekarchi, R., & Nimbi, F. M. (2025). Exploring sexual desire and fantasies: a cross-sectional online study on gender differences on Iranian adults. *Sexual Health*, 22(2), SH24179. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SH24179>
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (1984). Sexual scripts. *Society*, 22(1), 53-60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02701260>
- Stoller, R. J. (1975). *Perversion: The erotic form of hatred*. Routledge.
- Stoller, R. J. (1976). Sexual excitement. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 33(8), 899-909. <https://doi.org/10.1001/arch-psyc.1976.01770080017001>
- Stoller, R. J. (1979). *Dynamics of erotic life*. Pantheon.
- Stoller, R. J. (2018). *Sweet dreams: Erotic plots*. Routledge.
- VERBI Software. (2024). MAXQDA (Version 2024) [Software]. <https://www.maxqda.com/de/produkte/maxqda>
- Yule, M. A., Brotto, L. A., & Gorzalka, B. B. (2014). Sexual fantasy and masturbation among asexual individuals. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 23(2), 89-95. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.240>
- Yule, M. A., Brotto, L. A., & Gorzalka, B. B. (2017). Sexual fantasy and masturbation among asexual individuals: An in-depth exploration. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46(1), 311-328. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0870-8>
- Zurbriggen, E. L., & Yost, M. R. (2004). Power, desire, and pleasure in sexual fantasies. *Journal of Sex Research*, 41(3), 288-300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490409552236>