

## Article

# Sexual Fantasies across Gender and Sexual Orientation in Young Adults: A Multiple Correspondence Analysis

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**Abstract:** Differences in the content of sexual fantasies across gender have been widely documented, while less attention was given to the role of sexual orientation. Previous studies focused on differences in the prevalence of broad themes consisting of sets of contents. The current study aimed to increase the knowledge about sexual fantasies in heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual men and women. A descriptive approach that allows visualizing the patterns of fantasies reported by different groups using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) is presented. A sample of 3136 of young adults, 1754 women (Mage = 22.50, SD = 1.72, range 18–25) and 1382 men (Mage = 22.50, SD = 1.70, range 18–25), completed an online questionnaire assessing the presence of 29 different sexual fantasies. The prevalence of each fantasy among each group is shown. Also, relationships between fantasies and the distribution of groups along the two principal dimensions highlighted by MCA are represented. Heterosexuals women reported fewer fantasies and showed opposite patterns of response compared to heterosexual men. There was a substantial overlapping in the fantasies reported by gay and bisexual men, while responses of lesbian and bisexual women were more differentiated. These results indicate that the content of sexual fantasies varies according to both gender and sexual orientation.

**Keywords:** sexual fantasies; sexual orientation; gender; young adults; multiple correspondence analysis



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## 1. Introduction

Sexual fantasies have been generally defined as sexually arousing mental images or scenarios that can emerge spontaneously (i.e., sexual daydreaming) or be evoked intentionally and consciously manipulated [1,2]. The central role of sexual fantasies in sexual life has been well-established, as they may reflect past experiences and influence future sexual behaviors [2].

It is worth noting that sexual fantasies do not always mirror real sexual desires. For example, although women frequently fantasize about being raped, it does not mean they actually wish to be raped [3,4]. Thus, fantasies remain part of a fictional world governed by the protagonist, who can use them to escape from social and moral constraints [5].

Sexual fantasy is important for sexual well-being and in some cases benefits for both single individuals and partners. For example, dyadic fantasizing is associated with heightened desire and increases engagement in relationship-promoting behaviors [6]. A recent paper exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexuality [7] underlined the role of fantasies to overcome periods of forced separation from steady partners and fulfill sexual pleasure during social isolation. Furthermore, sexual fantasies emerged as a strategy to cope with changes in sexual functioning by older adults [8].

Several tools were created to assess the prevalence, frequency, and content of sexual fantasies. For example, the Sex Fantasy Questionnaire [9] includes 40 items that were

grouped into four main themes: Exploratory, Intimate, Impersonal, Sadoomasochistic. Anzani and Prunas [10] performed a factor analysis of the Sexual Fantasy Questionnaire [11], highlighting nine factors from a list of 62 items. The Erotic Imagery Questionnaire (EIQ) [12] is a questionnaire that assesses sexual fantasies based on five major factors: transgressive theme, emotional-romantic theme, dominance/submission theme, variety of partners, and sexually explicit images. While being useful to describe groups according to broad features, the labels assigned to themes are only partially accurate in describing the content of fantasies. Moreover, when measuring sexual fantasies, it is important to distinguish between the frequency of occurrence [9] from the arousing potential [10,11] and how typical the contents are [12].

Studies employing questionnaires that differ in their questioning approach (despite all declaring to measure sexual fantasies) cannot be easily compared. This picture is even more complicated by the presence of unconventional fantasies, sometimes labeled as “paraphilias” (e.g., voyeurism, frotteurism, fetishism), and considered deviant from the norm, although recent studies showed they are quite common [4,13].

Several gender differences in the prevalence and content of sexual fantasies have been reported in the literature. Men seem to have more fantasies than women [2,5,14], at least during masturbation, while the difference disappears during intercourse and sexual daydreaming [2,15]. Men are more likely to fantasize about explicit images and impersonal relationships [2,5,16], while women tend to focus on emotional, romantic contents [2,11,17,18]. Another widely reported difference concerns the role of the protagonist: on average, men tend to fantasize more about having dominant and active roles while women imagine themselves more as submissive and passive in a scenario in which they play the role of their partner’s object of desire [2,14,16], although this difference cannot be always generalized. However, these results have not always been replicated or showed substantial within-group differences [10,19], indicating that even consolidated sexual scripts are not always reflected by fantasies and could be susceptible to changes.

Men are more likely to fantasize about having sex with more than one sexual partner, participating in an orgy, or having group sex [4,5,10,14], but also several fantasies about consensual nonmonogamy [20]. It is also more likely for men to fantasize about their partners being extremely beautiful and attractive [10,11], while women tend to have more sexual fantasies in which they render their bodies attractive to their sexual partners, through clothing or gestures [11].

A considerable number of studies investigated sexual fantasies across sexual orientation [5,21]. The most commonly reported fantasies by gay men include images of sexual anatomy, forced sexual intercourses with men and (forcing or being forced or both), sexual intercourses with a woman, idyllic sexual intercourses with unknown men, group sex, performing and receiving oral sex, anal sex, erotic films, masturbating another man [22]. These studies give us general information about the sexual fantasies of gay men. In early contributions regarding differences between heterosexual and gay men, the idea that males share the same pattern of preferences regardless of their sexual orientation and cultural differences was prevalent [22]. However, more recent papers showed that sexual orientation is often related to differences in the content of sexual fantasies [23].

For example, gay men reported exploratory (e.g., “Participating in an orgy”), intimate (e.g., “Having intercourse with a loved partner”), and impersonal (e.g., “Using objects for stimulation”) sexual fantasies more frequently than heterosexual men while there is no difference in the sadoomasochistic category [24].

A recent Italian study [12] reported that lesbian women have slightly higher rates of transgressive sexual fantasies and lower rates of emotional-romantic ones than heterosexual women; also, gay men fantasized more about the variety of partners, dominance/submission, explicit sexuality themes, and less about transgressive and emotional/romantic themes than heterosexual men [12].

Very few studies included bisexual individuals in their samples. Robinson and Parks [25] did not find significant differences in the sexual fantasies between heterosexual and bisexual women.

Both gay and heterosexual men shared cuckolding fantasies (obtaining sexual arousal from the experience of a romantic partner engaging in sexual activity with someone else), even though the former reported fewer interracial and BDSM themes than the latter [26].

In general, the studies mentioned above describe the different roles of gender and sexual orientation in determining the sexual fantasy's contents. However, in order to highlight differences in the content of sexual fantasies due to gender and sexual orientation, all the groups given by the combination of these two factors should be studied.

The present study aims to integrate previous results, focusing on the association of gender and sexual orientation with the content of arousing sexual fantasies. In particular, the inclusion of bisexual men and women fills a gap in the scientific literature.

Furthermore, a new method of analysis that does not rely on predetermined categories of contents is proposed as a flexible tool to address potential methodological problems in the repeated use of psychometric tools. First, fantasies change over time individually and collectively [27]. Thus, psychometric tools should be adapted according to the object of interest. While the use of standardized questionnaires based on broad themes allows cross-study comparisons, it may not be appropriate to integrate novel tendencies in ongoing research. In this context, the use of flexible tools and an explorative approach supported by qualitative research [28] could be more suitable. Finally, this method allows visualizing the distribution of contents across individuals and groups for a more intuitive comparison across two dimensions of contents.

Thus, a flexible method is proposed to explore patterns of sexual fantasies reported among six different groups given by the combination of gender (men and women) and sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual), using dichotomous questions analyzed using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA).

## 2. Materials and Methods

Data were collected using "Google Forms" through an online questionnaire available from May 2019 to December 2019. Participants were randomly recruited through physical advertising at the university hall, digital advertising on public pages about sexuality on social media (i.e., Instagram, Facebook), and using the snowball sampling technique. All respondents participated in the research on a voluntary basis. Multiple responses were controlled by checking for duplicate personal identification codes formed by the combination of anonymous information.

Inclusion criteria were being 18–25 years old, understanding the Italian language, and having a sexual orientation that was either heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual; an exclusion criterion for the present study was reporting non-binary gender identity. A narrow age range was selected in order to focus on a specific age group as previous literature showed that sexual fantasies change over the lifespan [29]. The survey took about 10 min to complete. Informed consent was obtained from each participant at the beginning of the survey. Ethics approval was obtained by the Ethics Committee of Sigmund Freud University in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013).

The survey included socio-demographic questions about sex assigned at birth, self-perceived gender, age, sexual orientation, nationality, age, educational level, and employment situation.

The sexual orientation of each participant was assessed on a continuum that ranged from 0 ("Exclusively heterosexual") to 6 ("Exclusively homosexual") using the Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale [30]. Specifically, values from 0 to 2 were considered indicators of heterosexuality; values from 4 to 6 were assigned to homosexuality; the value 3 corresponded to bisexuality.

Twenty-nine statements were included in the survey to investigate sexual fantasies. All the statements were introduced by the sentence “I am sexually aroused when I fantasize about . . . ”, then, each fantasy was presented. For example, “I am sexually aroused when I fantasize about being strangled by the partner while having sex”. Participants were instructed to answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.

Sexual fantasies included in the questionnaire were selected from previously used questionnaires and integrated with ad hoc questions. In choosing the questions, we decided to focus more on the object of the fantasy (i.e., activities) rather than on the role of the person fantasizing (e.g., active/passive). For some fantasies, participants could imagine having different roles while keeping the object of the fantasy constant.

The contents of fantasies included in the questionnaire and translated from the original Italian version are listed in Table 1 with the name assigned to correspondent variables. From now on, variable names listed in Table 1 will be used when referring to sexual fantasies.

**Table 1.** Contents of assessed arousing sexual fantasies and assigned variables names.

#	Variable Name	Content of Fantasy
1	AnalGiver	Anal sex as giver (included with strap-on)
2	AnalReceiver	Anal sex as receiver
3	Clergy	Clergymen/women (e.g., priests, nuns etc.)
4	EjaculateOnBody	Ejaculating on my partner’s body or vice versa
5	EjaculateOnFace	Ejaculating on my partner’s face or vice versa
6	Elderly	Having sex with elderly people
7	Frotteur	Rubbing myself against a non-consenting person
8	Hentai	Cartoons with sexual contents (for example, hentai)
9	Hetero	Having sex with a person of a different sex
10	Homo	Having sex with a person of the same sex as myself
11	OralSex	Oral sex (fellatio, cunnilingus)
12	Overweight	Having sex with overweight/obese people
13	Prostitute	Paying a prostitute for sex
14	PublicSex	Having sex in public places (for example parks, toilets, etc.)
15	RomanticSex	Having romantic and intimate sex
16	StrangleMe	Being strangled by the partner while having sex
17	StrangleOther	Strangling the partner while having sex
18	Tattoos	Having sex with someone who has tattoos
19	ToysMasturb	Using sex toys during masturbation
20	ToysSex	Using sex toys during sex
21	TransMe	Having sex while dressed as someone of the opposite sex
22	TransOther	Having sex with someone dressed as someone of the opposite sex
23	TwentyYearsOlder	Having sex with someone at least twenty years older than me
24	TwoOrMore	Having sex with other two or more people at the same time
25	Underweight	Having sex with underweight people
26	Voyeur	Watching someone naked/having sex without them knowing
27	WatchMasturb	Watching someone masturbating
28	WatchWithConsent	Watching someone naked/having sex with their consent
29	WetClothes	Watching someone wearing wet clothes

An explorative approach was adopted to see how gender and sexual orientation influence the prevalence of sexual fantasies. To characterize different groups, not only the presence of specific fantasies was taken into account but also their absence (i.e., whether participants responded ‘Yes’ or ‘No’). MCA is generally used to analyze data sets from surveys. The goal of MCA here is to: (i) identify the associations between different fantasies and highlight the main dimensions given by associated fantasies; (ii) represent groups of individuals according to the pattern of responses (i.e., types of fantasies). The R packages (The R Foundatio: Vienna, Austria) FactoMineR (for the MCA analysis) and factoextra (for data visualization) were used [31].

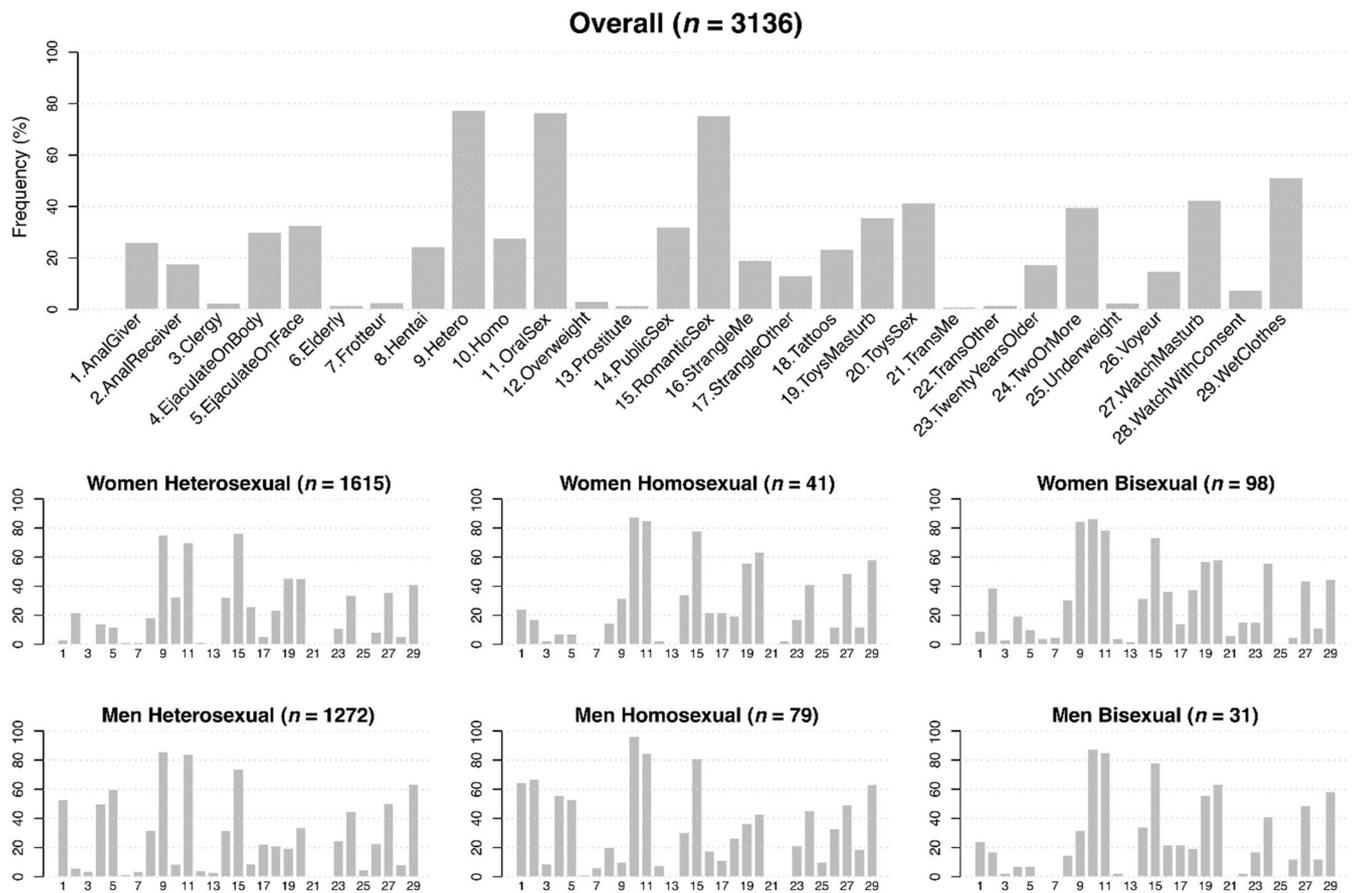
### 3. Results

A total of 3173 people completed the online survey. Of these, 37 participants were excluded because they reported a non-binary gender ( $n = 6$ ) and/or a sexual orientation that was neither heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual ( $n = 36$ ). Therefore, the final sample was composed of 3136 participants, 1754 women (Mage = 22.50, SD = 1.72, range 18–25 years old) and 1382 men (Mage = 22.50, SD = 1.70, range 18–25 years old). According to Kinsey’s scale (Kinsey et al., 1948), 92.07% of the women and 92.04% of the men were heterosexual; 2.34% of the women and 5.72% of the men were homosexual; 5.59% of the women and 2.24% of the men were bisexual. The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents.

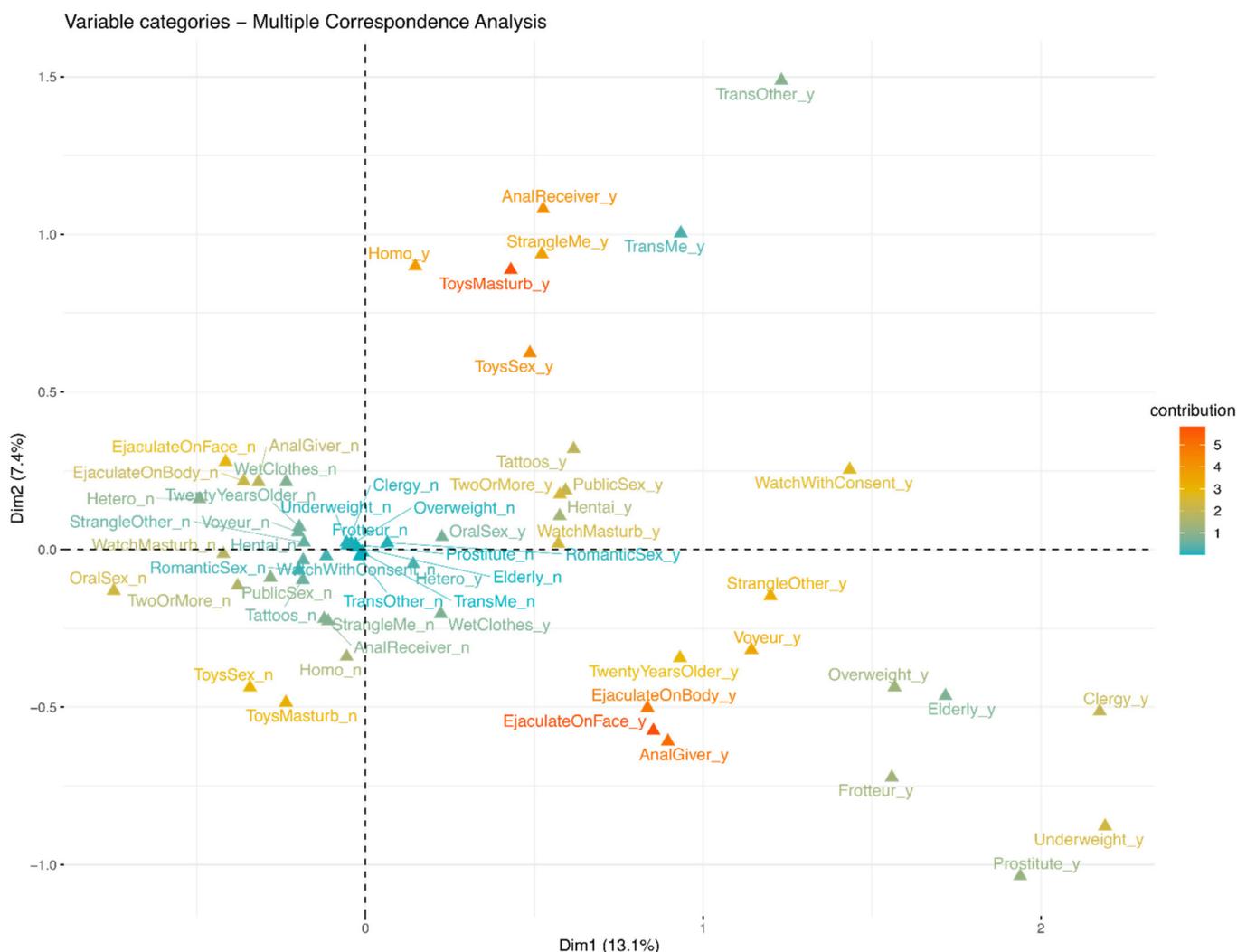
Sociodemographic Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Women	1754	55.9
Heterosexual	1615	51.5
Homosexual	41	1.3
Bisexual	98	3.1
Men	1382	44.1
Heterosexual	1272	40.6
Homosexual	79	2.5
Bisexual	31	1.0
Highest educational level		
Postgraduate degree	836	26.7
Bachelor’s degree	1277	40.7
High school	998	31.8
Middle school	25	0.8
Location		
Northern Italy	1131	36.1
Central Italy	1377	43.9
Southern Italy	628	20.0
Total	3136	100

The prevalence of fantasies among the overall sample and subgroups is reported in Figure 1. Hetero (77.59%), OralSex (76.62%), and RomanticSex (75.35%) were the most common fantasies, while TransMe (1.00%), Prostitute (1.48%), and Elderly (1.61%) were the less common ones.



**Figure 1.** Prevalence of arousing sexual fantasies in the overall sample and subgroups.

The MCA highlighted the presence of several dimensions given the association of particular fantasies. The first dimension (Dim1) accounted for 13.07% of the total explained variance and was mainly given by the contribution of the following fantasies: EjaculateOnFace, EjaculateOnBody, AnalGiver, Voyeur, StrangleOther. The second dimension (Dim2) accounted for 7.40% of the total explained variance and was mainly given by the contribution of the following fantasies: ToysMasturb, Homo, AnalReceiver, StrangleMe, ToysSex. Taken together, the first and the second dimension explained 20.46% of the total variance. From the third dimension onward, the proportion of explained variation reached a plateau, and dimensions were formed by very infrequent fantasies (i.e., Dim3: Elderly, Overweight; Dim4: TransMe, TransOther) with high specificity. For these reasons, the subsequent analyses and graphical representations focused on the combination of the first two dimensions only. Figure 2 shows a geometrical representation of responses where spatially closer responses are more strongly associated with individual patterns of responses. Here, positive (variables ending with “\_y”) and negative (variables ending with “\_n”) responses are plotted in opposite quadrants, to the right and the left of the plot origin, respectively. The color of each fantasy indicates its percentage contribution to the two dimensions.

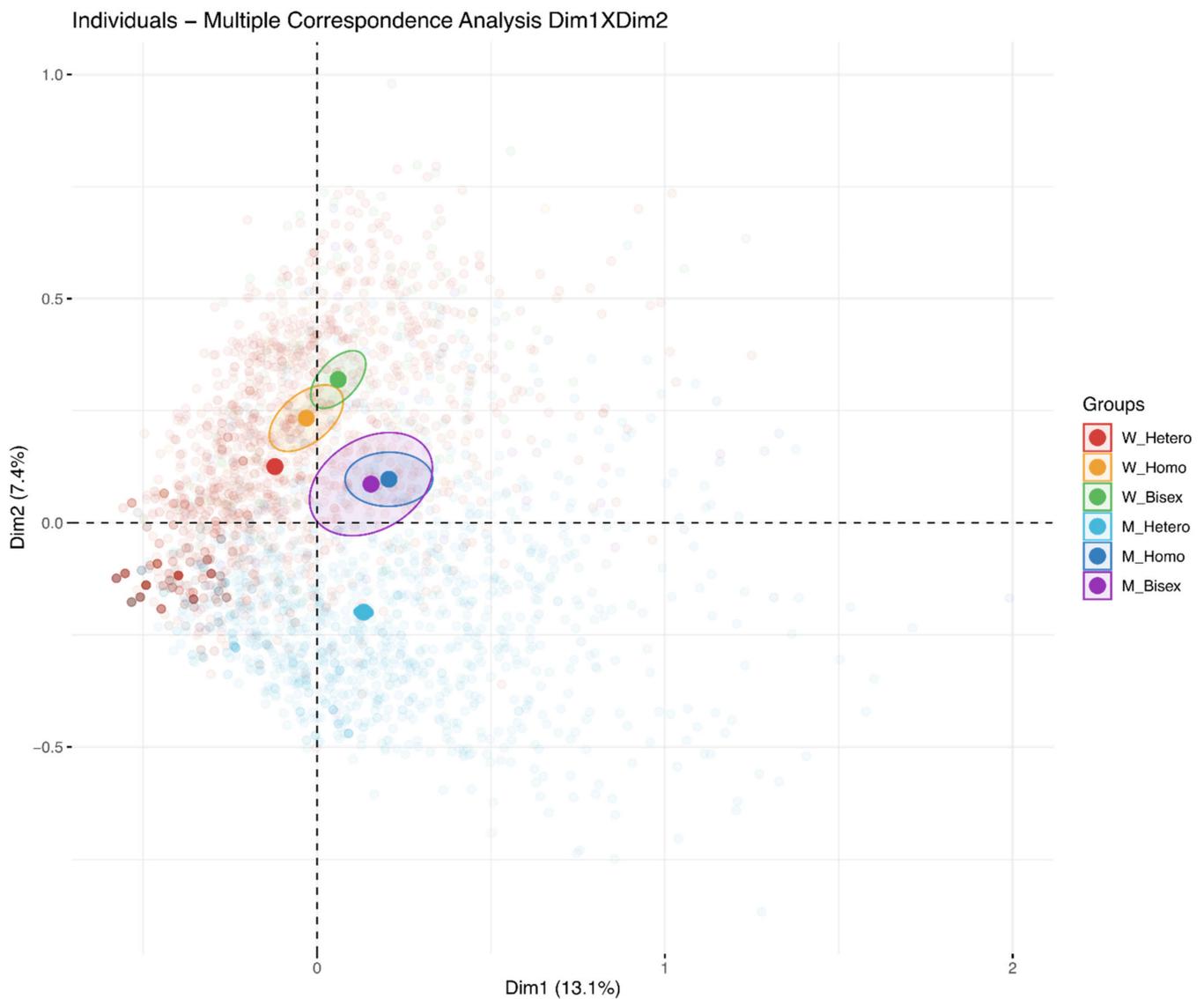


**Figure 2.** Contribution of positive and negative responses to the Multiple Correspondence Analysis principal dimensions. The names of the items correspond to those indicated in Table 1. Items ending with “y” correspond to positive answers while items ending with “n” correspond to negative answers. Warmer colours indicate stronger contribution of those items to each of the two dimensions represented on the cartesian plane.

Figure 3 shows a geometrical representation of individuals and groups based on gender and sexual orientation along the two main dimensions Dim1 and Dim2. By looking at this figure, it is possible to describe groups according to their patterns of responses.

Heterosexual men and women being in opposite quadrants reflect opposite tendencies in their sexual fantasies: men were more likely represented by Dim1 (e.g., fantasizing more about giving anal sex, ejaculate on partner’s body and face, strangle the partner and voyeurism) while less by Dim2 (e.g., having sex and masturbating using sex toys, having sex with someone of the same sex, receiving anal sex, being strangled by the partner); women were more likely represented by Dim2 than Dim1.

The distribution of homosexual and bisexual men shows that they share a very similar fantasy pattern, although, given the relatively smaller size of these two groups (particularly for bisexual men), their representation is less robust. Interestingly, we do not observe the same overlapping for lesbian and bisexual women, with bisexual women being the most represented group by Dim2 while lesbian women share similarities with both bisexual and heterosexual women. In general, heterosexual men appear to be relatively isolated from the other groups, being the only group negatively represented along with Dim 2, while heterosexual women reported higher rates of negative responses for the emerged fantasies.



**Figure 3.** Individuals and groups along the MCA principal dimensions. The figure shows a geometrical representation of individuals (semitransparent dots) and groups (solid dots) along principal MCA dimensions. Ellipses represent the 95% confidence interval for each group. W\_Hetero = heterosexual women; W\_Homo = homosexual women/lesbians; W\_Bisex = bisexual women; M\_Hetero = heterosexual men; M\_Homo = homosexual men; M\_Bisex = bisexual men.

#### 4. Discussion

The present paper aimed to explore arousing sexual fantasies among men and women according to their sexual orientation. MCA allowed to observe what fantasies were more strongly associated with each other and highlighted two principal dimensions subsequently used to characterize groups.

Some of these associations show commonalities with previously observed themes, while other relationships were less predictable. At a first look, Dim1 and Dim2 may resemble themes and roles conceptualized by previous studies [14,16]. In particular, fantasies of dominance/activeness (represented by Dim1) have been mainly reported by heterosexual men, while fantasies of submission/passiveness (represented by Dim2) characterize women [2,14,16].

However, some fantasies positively contributing to Dim1 and Dim2 elude this simple categorization. For example, fantasizing about masturbation with sex toys (ToysMasturb) has not been typically associated with submission/passiveness themes although it has been previously reported by Lehmilller [32].

Regarding heterosexual women, it is possible to note that they reported less arousing contents than any other group, as previous studies observed [2,5,14]. This result might indicate that they have fewer sexual fantasies in general or that the content of their fantasies was poorly represented by the items used in this study. Furthermore, young female adults could have less diverse sexual interests than older women. In addition, Italian women might have a narrower sexual interest compared with women from other countries [33].

Interestingly, in the present study, all groups reported similar rates of fantasies with romantic contents, in contrast with previous studies reporting higher rates of emotional-romantic contents among heterosexual women than heterosexual men [2,11,17,18,28] and lesbian women [12].

Some limitations can be acknowledged in the present study. Firstly, the use of random online recruitment of participants resulted in considerably different sizes of subgroups within the sample. In particular, homosexuals and bisexuals were less represented than heterosexuals, making the assumptions about their results less robust. Secondly, the choice of the fantasies included in the survey, although based on previous research, was arbitrary; other authors could include different fantasies in their study. However, despite constituting a potential problem for cross-study comparisons, the approach employed here showed the advantages of applying a flexible method of analysis (namely, MCA) without relying on broad constructs/categories (for example, "intimate", "sadosomachistic" etc.). Finally, this was a convenience sample recruited through social media advertising, therefore, our findings may not generalize to all young adults.

## 5. Conclusions

Research about the influence of both gender and sexual orientation is limited, outdated, or employed relatively small samples. Furthermore, past studies tended to compare groups according to the prevalence of broad categories of fantasies (i.e., themes), assuming that each fantasy belongs exclusively to a theme. The risk of using a priori categories is to mask the association between single fantasies belonging to different categories. The current paper showed that it is possible to characterize groups in terms of fantasies patterns while preserving the value of single fantasies. Besides, graphical representations derived by MCA can be useful to observe relationships between different fantasies and intragroup variability.

Some results were coherent with previous studies while others were not, thus, underlining the importance of conducting systematic research to capture potential changes over time linked to sociocultural factors. Future studies should also focus on sexual and gender minorities as they may present significant differences compared to the rest of the population [10,28,34]. Besides, while the present study focused on two principal dimensions, more than two dimensions could be taken into account to represent a higher amount of variability within the sample.

Future surveys on this topic could benefit from the collection of additional information regarding sexual behaviour and/or relationships in order to better describe the sample and seek for interesting correlations between fantasies and behaviours; in the present survey, a parsimonious number of question has been preferred in order to reduce the time of completion and to achieve a greater number of respondents.

In conclusion, the study of sexual fantasies is relevant for multiple reasons linked to sexual well-being. For example, imagery-based techniques are widely used in sex therapy to enhance sexuality and overcome sexual difficulties and dysfunctions. Thus, the contribution of psychological research to the knowledge on this topic is crucial for promoting sexual health.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data available on request.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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