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Versão Final

**Qualitative study on definitions of partnered sexual pleasure among
emerging adults**

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De acordo com o Artigo 22º do Decreto-Lei nº 74/2006, de 24 de março, na sua redação atual, e nos termos do artigo 50º do Regulamento Pedagógico da Universidade Lusófona, após apreciação da proposta de nomeação do Júri apresentada pela Comissão Científica da Unidade Orgânica, homologo a constituição do júri para a defesa pública da dissertação de Mestrado em Psicologia Clínica e da Saúde, do(a) candidato(a) **Pedro Rafael Pinto Miranda**, conforme segue:

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- **Arguente:** Prof.ª Doutora Ana Filipa Gordino Beato;
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Resumo

O presente estudo qualitativo investiga as definições e experiências de prazer sexual partilhado entre adultos emergentes em relações comprometidas. Utilizando um estudo transversal, foram recolhidos dados através de um inquérito online anónimo a partir de uma amostra de conveniência de 419 participantes. A análise temática reflexiva foi aplicada para explorar as complexidades do prazer sexual partilhado, revelando três temas principais: experiência partilhada, envolvimento sensorial e emocional, e experiência física. Os participantes enfatizaram a importância da intimidade, confiança e satisfação mútua como elementos centrais para o seu prazer sexual. Os resultados destacam que o prazer sexual é um constructo multidimensional, moldado pela conexão emocional, estimulação sensorial e limites pessoais, muitas vezes transcendendo o ato do orgasmo. Este estudo contribui para o crescente corpo de literatura sobre prazer sexual, discutindo-o como um componente vital do bem-estar e dos direitos humanos. Os resultados têm implicações significativas para a prática clínica, educação sexual e pesquisas futuras sobre a idade adulta emergente e a saúde sexual.

Palavras-Chave: *Adultos emergentes, Prazer Sexual, Definições de prazer sexual, Prazer Sexual Com Parceiro*

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the definitions and experiences of partnered sexual pleasure among emerging adults in committed relationships. Using a cross-sectional design, data was collected through an anonymous online survey from a convenience sample of 419 participants. Thematic analysis was applied to explore the complexities of partnered sexual pleasure, revealing three main themes: shared experience, sensorial and emotional engagement, and physical experience. Participants emphasized the importance of intimacy, trust, and mutual enjoyment as central to their sexual satisfaction. The findings highlight that sexual pleasure is a multidimensional construct shaped by emotional connection, sensory stimulation, and personal boundaries, often transcending the act of orgasm. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on sexual pleasure, discussing it as a vital component of well-being and human rights. The results hold significant implications for clinical practice, sexual education, and future research on emerging adulthood and sexual health.

Keywords: *Emerging Adults, Sexual Pleasure, Definitions of Sexual Pleasure, Partnered Sexual Pleasure*

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Introduction

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood, a period in an individual's life that usually spans between the ages of 18 to 29, has come to be seen as a unique phase characterized by the intense exploration, deepening sense of identity and a gradual shift away from the typical traditional adult responsibilities. Arnett (2023)'s more recent work challenges previous concepts of development that assumed it was easy to transition from being a teen into an adult. Since then, education, the economy and culture have transformed, making this transition independent and complex (Arnett, 2023; Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014). Although these cultural circumstances will vary, there is one thing one will go through while becoming an adult, including experimenting, uncertainty, and constantly seeking one's identity.

This stage of life involves closely tangled experiences such as exploring one's personal interests, dealing with constant life changes and feeling caught between both these periods of adolescence and mature adulthood (Nelson, 2020). This is a life stage when young adults intentionally seek some answers about their personal ambitions, romantic and sexual identities and career paths while also facing the inherent challenges in their relationships, work and academic pursuits at the same time (Nelson, 2020; Benvenuti et al., 2023). The state of being in between these two stages ends up being a double-edged sword, it offers opportunities and possibilities while also bringing along stress and uncertainty, especially for those that lack a strong support network (Nelson, 2020)

A central theme of emerging adulthood is the deep dive into one's sexuality. During this period, many young adults begin to carefully examine their sexual identities, orientations, desires and core values. Some research has consistently shown that sexual experimentation and the seek for independence are both fundamental to building one's identity and gaining crucial relationship skills (Wood et al., 2017; Parmenter, 2022). By navigating their sexual experiences, these emerging adults learn key lessons in communication and emotional intelligence and these lessons are crucial for understanding concepts such as intimacy and pleasure. These personal discoveries aren't independent, they're heavily influenced by the surrounding cultural and social environment the individual is inserted in, which helps shape how sexuality is expressed and understood.

Unlike previous generations, present emerging adults show an earlier start to their sexual activities well before marriage while also experimenting with various types of relationships, postponing major milestones like moving in together, starting a family or settling into long-term monogamous partnerships (Twenge et al., 2015;). This shift represents a detachment from the conventional, reproduction-focused sexual norms towards models that better emphasize personal choice, pleasure and emotional connection (James-Kangal & Weitbrecht, 2018). Furthermore, the predominant role of digital technology reflected in dating apps, social media and online pornography has vastly transformed young people's views on attractiveness, intimacy, and self-presentation (Tadros et al., 2024). At the same time, modern debates about sexual rights, consent, gender diversity and bodily autonomy have become increasingly influential, which has helped young adults develop a more subtle understanding of what ethical sexual behavior, healthier relationships and overall emotional well-being is (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Herbenick et al., 2010). Despite this, the mix of progressive ideals with enduring conservative values, often rooted in cultural, religious, or familial beliefs can sometimes lead to internal conflict or emotional strain, particularly in environments where thorough sex education is lacking (Moreira et al., 2023).

Despite all the advances regarding sexual autonomy, current research shows that traditional gender norms, social expectations and stigmatization still hold a strong impact on sexual behavior and self-expression (Maas et al., 2015). This can be seen in societal ideas about masculinity that often encourage men to be sexually assertive while also discouraging them from showing vulnerability in their relationships. On the other hand, women are frequently taught to be more accommodating of their partner's needs or to feel ashamed about expressing their own desires. These rooted social norms can ruin genuine self-expression and make it harder for both partners to achieve mutual satisfaction, even in committed relationships (Jones et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2014). This complexity makes emerging adulthood an especially rich period for exploring the dynamics of partnered sexual pleasure.

In addition, this stage of development typically features intensified sexual involvement (Alexander et al., 2015) and a clearer sense of sexual identity and relationship goals. By examining these emerging adult's views and feelings about sexual pleasure, we seek to clarify the complex interplay between individual growth, relational patterns and sociocultural environment, theorizing partnered sexual pleasure as mutually influenced,

dynamic and continually shaped by developmental occurrences, emotional development, and shared societal narratives (McClelland, 2010; Pascoal et al., 2014).

Sexual Pleasure

While sexual pleasure has existed as a core driving force for sexual behavior, it has largely fallen outside the periphery of psychology and public health discourse. Historically, sexuality research has largely focused on preventing risks, reproductive problems, and sexual dysfunctions with little focus on the sensual, emotional, and psychological aspects of sexual encounters. However, over the last ten years, researchers have increasingly recognized sexual pleasure as a central part of individual wellness, intimate relationships and human rights (Ford et al., 2019; Zaneva et al., 2022). The World Health Organization (2002) confirms this approach by positing that sexual health is more than a lack of disease or dysfunction, but a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellness within the sexual experience, thus unambiguously endorsing the right to have enjoyable sexual experiences.

Sexual pleasure can be broadly described as a pleasurable sensory and emotional experience that transpires during sexual intercourse, depending on whether it is perceived by oneself or by another person as pleasurable. Biologically, neuroscience research has made it clear that sexual pleasure is correlated with activation of the brain's reward systems, located in the medial forebrain, similar to food stimulation and social interaction (Berridge & Kringelbach, 2015). With such findings, evidence supports that pleasure plays a primordial role in promoting behaviors related to survival and reproductive relations. Sexual pleasure, however, is not just a product of biological occurrence; it is highly determined by individual meaning, sociocultural contexts, and psychological dynamics. Werner et al., (2023) argues that sexual pleasure is best understood by viewing it as a multidimensional concept that encompasses a combination of physical sensations, emotional closeness, consent, and context-construed meaning.

Sexual Script Theory, first outlined by Gagnon and Simon (1973), is a staple theoretical framework that explains sexual behavior and feeling pleasure. This model suggests that a person learns predetermined *scripts* that provide them with sexual conduct, expected consequences and emotional reactions. These scripts operate on three interconnected levels - cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic - thus shaping different aspects of sexual encounters, such as how pleasure is expressed, felt, and pursued. Later research built on the initial theory

by investigating sexual scripts according to gender, sexual orientation, and cultural context and highlighted that the experience of pleasure cannot be applied across cases but remains deeply embedded in societal significations (Fahs et al., 2018; Wetzel & Sanchez, 2022).

Understanding how pleasure is constructed in given cultural contexts is central to examining the complex interactions between sexual pleasure and dominant gender ideology, as well as between underlying relations of power that shape both availability of sexual pleasure and associated cultural ideals. Drawing on Sara McClelland's (2010) theory of intimate justice, differences in sexual pleasure rely upon cultural belief concerning an individual's right to emotional, physical, and erotic arousal, which, in turn, is influenced by present structures of inequality. An empirical literature exists that demonstrates that women, with members of stigmatized gender categories, are socialized to focus on the pleasure of their partner, hide their own vulnerabilities, or enter forms of relationality that fail to appreciate autonomous agency. The so-called orgasm gap, describing women's drastically reduced reports of orgasm compared to men in heterosexual intercourse, has been well documented across empirical works (Andrejek et al., 2022; Wetzel & Sanchez, 2022;) and theory.

Distinctions only emerge when sexual pleasure is considered with a particular theoretical approach. Intersectionality, a theory developed by Kimberlé (1991), produces an understanding of how discrimination in different forms (racism, sexism, classism, heteronormativity) affects peoples' lived realities. Using this approach in sexology renders an understanding of the obstacles that certain people struggle with to obtain sexual pleasure, autonomy, and security. Different factors such as ethnic identity, disability, body diversity, and sexual orientation are also considered with this approach. For instance, studies with racialized, disabled, queer people often identify certain cultural and structural hurdles that hinder their ability to enjoy sexual pleasure (Thorpe et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2024). Focusing on pleasure, however, changes the discussion from single behaviors to social structures that make certain forms of sexual expression more visible, validated, and safe.

Research in Psychology have indicated that feelings, relationships and thoughts are crucial for sex to be enjoyable. This research indicates that good communication, personal preference, mutual respect and emotional closeness have an impact significantly on enjoyment and overall pleasure (Mallory et al., 2022; Kleinplatz et al., 2018). For most individuals, especially those who are long-time partners, sex is not only physical and an orgasm but also feeling desired, valued, and safe. According to Kleinplatz et al.'s (2018) study, to have the best

sex, being open, being there, feeling trusted and intimate are essential elements which indicates there is a need to move beyond mere performance indicators and embrace wider elements involved through emotional, bodily, and meaningful factors.

At the same time, newer theoretical frameworks have been developed that situate pleasure as a central political and ethical mandate. One of these is Pleasure Activism, developed by Adrienne Brown (2019), where the reclaiming of pleasure by groups that have been historically marginalized exists as an act of resistance and freedom. This view of pleasure sees pleasure not as an act of self-indulgence but as a key practice of justice, healing and community care. It fits with other projects of decolonizing sex education, promoting sex-positivity and recognizing a diversity of intimacy and sexual expressions. For young adults, a group of people that often uses sexual narratives that come from family, religion, peers and media, these frameworks are key tools for critically examining their desires and constructions of pleasure.

Beyond activism, the field of public health has come to further recognize the importance of sexual pleasure in sexual health interventions. Ford et al. (2019) have argued that the omission of sexual pleasure from such programs weakens public health interventions and upholds sexual activity as inherently risky, dangerous or troubling. The inclusion of pleasure in these models maximizes clinical and educational outcomes while promoting the full humanity of sexual relationship participants. This school of thought finds strength from the Declaration of Sexual Pleasure (World Association for Sexual Health, 2019), which states that sexual pleasure is an innate human right. Despite the growing recognition of its importance, many empirical studies have still found challenges in characterizing sexual pleasure with stable and inclusive definitions.

Pascoal, Narciso & Pereira (2014) also noted wide inconsistencies in the operational definition of sexual satisfaction, a concept related to sexual pleasure, in their qualitative study, not including emotional, relational, or sociocultural aspects. There still remains a significant lack of qualitative studies regarding the personal meanings of sexual pleasure, especially in the young-adult group. Scholarly literature generally focuses on the quantitative measures of frequency, satisfaction, or functionality, thus ignoring the rich and complex experiences subjects relate to pleasure in sexual relations. These differences are quite evident in the study of sexual pleasure in the context of partnership, referring to the pleasure gained in consent and relational sexual activity. Partnered sexual pleasure not only includes physical satisfaction but also the relational aspects of trust, mutual vulnerability, communication, and mutual

interaction, which are moderated by numerous factors, including personal histories, perceptions of security, cultural norms, and personal stories.

In spite of a notable growth of research on sexual behavior and satisfaction during recent decades, there still exists a conspicuous lack of studies into the subjective understanding of partnered sexual pleasure, especially that of emerging adults. Much of available research heavily favors quantitative methods, which tend to oversimplify the construct of pleasure as reduced to physiological measures or sexual frequency and do not fully investigate the contextual, relational and affective aspects of experience. On the other hand, qualitative research into sexual pleasure tends to be limited to select populations, namely clinical, LGBTQ+ and older adults, for example, leaving evident gaps with regards to how young adults who are in committed unions perceive dynamics which make for pleasurable sex. This current research seeks to close this gap through the adoption of a qualitative, participant-centered approach to examine how emerging adults conceptualize and experience partnered sexual pleasure. Through its focus upon individual stories and reflexive consideration, this research extends previous understanding of sexual pleasure as a rich, complex phenomenon situated at the intersection of identity, affect, and relational dynamics.

Method

Aim of the study and Research Design

The current study aims to explore the definitions of partnered sexual pleasure among emerging adults, based on literature review. To provide an answer to the research question, "How do emerging adults with a committed ongoing relationship define partnered sexual pleasure?" by asking partnered people's perception of partnered sexual pleasure separately. We followed a cross-sectional qualitative exploratory design online.

Procedures

This master's thesis is part of a larger cross-sectional online project about sexual pleasure, a collaboration between the Master's Degree in Sexology at Universidade Lusófona - Centro Universitário de Lisboa, the Portuguese Society for Clinical Sexology (SPSC- Sociedade Portuguesa de Sexologia Clínica) and the Sex Education Museum (MUSEX- Museu Pedagógico do Sexo). After approval of Ethical and Deontological Committee for Scientific Research of the School of Psychology and Life Sciences (CEDIC) of Lusófona University in

Lisbon (Ref. CEDIC-2022-15-07), an anonymous online cross-sectional study was developed that collected both quantitative and qualitative data from a convenience sample.

The representatives of the organizations collaboratively developed a survey protocol aimed at collecting data to diverse research questions linked to the study of sexual pleasure. After a final version was agreed upon, a set of diverse lay people known to the research team revised it to make sure the language and topics were adequate and easy to understand in terms of inclusiveness for all social groups (age, gender identity, literacy), readable, inclusive in its wording and manageable in length. After a general agreement, the final version was put into practice online via a secure platform (Qualtrics). Three categories of data were used in this investigation. Informed consent was included in the first section, and sociodemographic information (such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and type of relationship) was included in the second. "Without romantic relationship/s," "Monogamic," "Consensual Non-Monogamic," "Sporadic Relationships," and "Another option" were the categories used to categorize the relationship arrangement. Qualitative data was gathered in the third section and the participants were questioned about what constitutes partnered sexual pleasure through the following open question: "Based on your personal experience, what is partnered sexual pleasure?"

The host institution granted ethical and deontological appreciation for this research. Every participant gave their informed consent and geolocation data was removed, no IP was stored in the database that is password-protected, and only the research team has access to the data gathered.

Online data were gathered between January and March 2023 following social media promotion of the URL and the use of the "snowball"-like technique, in which users of social media were asked to share the poll with their personal and professional networks. There were no incentives provided to study participants, and they were free to discontinue participation at any time. Since the study was promoted using online newsletters and social media, it is hard to ascertain the compliance rate because it is unknown how many people were reached and read them. The project's inclusion requirements included being above the legal consenting age of eighteen (18), being proficient in Portuguese and having already engaged in partnered sexual activity (i.e., mutual stimulation of the genitalia, oral sex, and other forms of sexual stimulation). We used data from 419 participants with a mean age of 24,33 (SD = 3,02) who reported being in a relationship for the current study. The sample was composed predominantly of women (300; 71.6%), with men representing 100 participants (23.9%) and non-binary

individuals 19 (4.5%). Regarding sexual orientation, heterosexual individuals constituted the majority (245; 58.5%), followed by bisexual (65; 15.5%), gay (22; 5.3%), lesbian (17; 4.1%), queer (12; 2.9%), those without a specific category (32; 7.6%), individuals in questioning (10; 2.4%), and others (15; 3.6%). In terms of education, the participants were generally highly educated: while a minority had completed only compulsory schooling (7 with the 9th grade; 1.7%, and 86 with the 12th grade; 20.5%), 36 (8.6%) reported having a technical or professional degree, 156 (37.2%) held a bachelor's degree, and a significant proportion, 134 (32.0%), reported postgraduate studies. This distribution suggests a relatively young, highly educated sample with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, though with an overrepresentation of women and individuals with higher education levels compared to the general population.

Data Analysis

The data analysis methodology used for this study was reflexive thematic analysis as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2021), with participant responses coded by the author and guided by Professor Patricia M. Pascoal, with assistance from researcher Andreia A. Manão. This analysis method was selected for its effectiveness in shedding light on the participants' experiences, behaviors, and emotions. Its flexibility comes from the absence of a rigid sequence to follow, allowing the researcher to revisit different stages whenever necessary. Furthermore, the method emphasizes the researcher's subjectivity, as the themes are formed based on their perspective and interpretation of the participants' responses.

The researcher plays an active role, with opportunities to express creativity by developing themes and narratives grounded in the collected data. Rather than simply describing the information, these themes offer an interpretation that leads to a deeper and richer understanding. A reflective thematic analysis enables the identification of patterns that reveal commonalities in the participants' practices and perspectives, facilitating a more detailed understanding of the concept being studied. This process involved conducting the research in an inductive, experiential, and reflexive manner. The inductive approach means that no pre-existing theoretical framework was used for coding or theme creation, with the researcher starting by engaging deeply with the data. The experiential approach focuses on understanding the participants' experiences and exploring the subjective meanings they attribute to them. The reflexive approach involves the researcher reflecting on their own values and interactions with the data, shaping the final analysis accordingly (Braun & Clark, 2021). What sets Reflexive

Thematic Analysis (RTA) apart is its clear, step-by-step structure paired with a strong emphasis on flexibility, reflexivity, and methodological rigor. The approach follows six key phases: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming them, and (6) writing the final report. This structured process reduces ambiguity and enhances the trustworthiness and consistency of qualitative research, addressing the shortcomings of earlier, less defined approaches. Previous versions of thematic analysis often lacked transparency, leading to inconsistent use. Braun and Clarke's model addresses these issues by offering a clear yet adaptable framework that improves the coherence and credibility of qualitative work. Crucially, their approach acknowledges the researcher's active role in interpreting and constructing themes, which is an important shift from older models that viewed themes as simply emerging from the data.

To begin with, we read the answers several times to become familiar with them and to understand them. Second, we generated codes according to each response's content. Finally, to improve coding speed and guarantee code consistency, we created a coding scheme. Initially, the codes were semantic, but as the replies became more explicit and detailed, the codes were put together based on a latent meaning.

After grouping the codes forming clusters that have somewhat of a latent common theme, the thematically analysis of the content of these clusters was initiated, catering to each individual code created inside these clusters, to fully understand all the different dimensions on self-reported sexual pleasure and the different angles and experience people reported in their answers. The main goal for this analysis is to understand all the nuances of partnered sexual pleasure, giving each code its independent importance, as opposed to focusing on the codes that were reported in greater numbers. This approach to the data allows us a broader understanding of all the different criteria, preferences, subtleties and uniqueness of the partnered sexual experience.

Results

From the reflective analysis of the collected data, three main themes were actively constructed through analysis: (1) Shared experience, (2) Sensorial and emotional experience, (3) Body experience. Each theme includes several sub-themes, as we can see in Fig. 1.

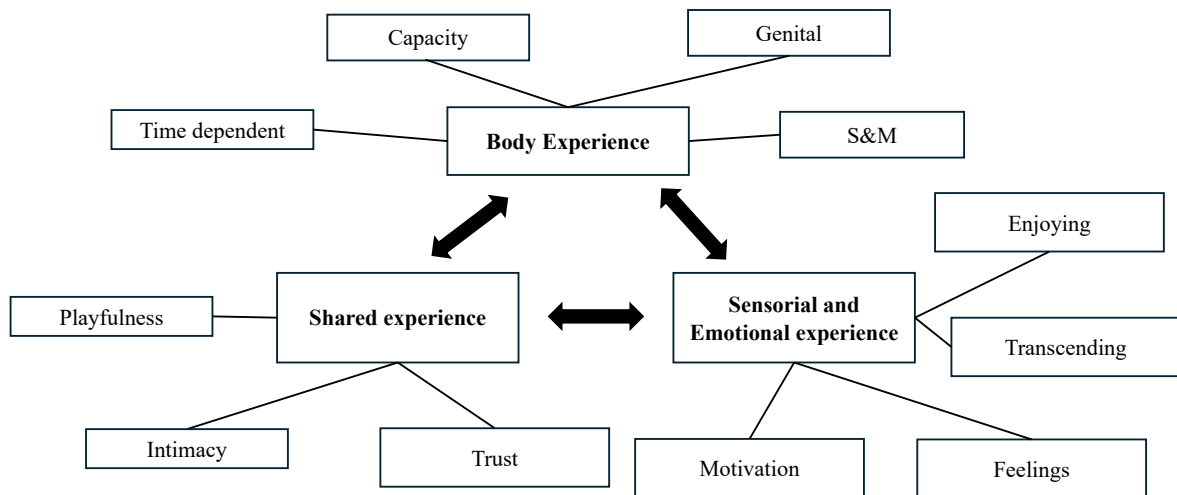


Figure 1. Conceptual Thematic Map

Theme 1: Shared experience

The themes describe aspects that participants identified as defining elements of sexual pleasure. The theme "Shared experience" includes three subthemes: Playfulness (1), Intimacy (2), and Trust (3).

Playfulness

Participants highlighted that playfulness contributes to greater sexual pleasure in partnerships, noting that seduction, flirting, teasing, and having fun enhance the sexual pleasure experience. Additionally, an adventurous spirit and engaging in innovative sexual experiences were also identified by participants as elements that intensify sexual pleasure: *"It's good to have pleasurable sexual experiences that allow us to think outside the box and play"* (Participant 36). Other participants added that mutual discovery, pleasure discovery, and discovering the other's body are also key aspects of a pleasurable experience. Some participants expressed feelings of joy when experiencing erotic entertainment: *"Sexual pleasure means fun"* (Participant 518). Other participants further emphasized feelings of excitement stemming from sexual teasing:

"The pleasure that comes when there is previous excitement in a flirt."

Intimacy

Participants emphasized that intimacy, partnership, and bonding are key aspects of sexual pleasure, with the feeling of connection and commitment also being mentioned. A sense of mutuality and care was also frequently highlighted by our participants as fundamental for partnered sexual pleasure. Some participants described a connection with their partner as vital, pointing out that: *“For me, sexual pleasure requires a strong connection between me and the person I’m with”* (Participant 81).

Participants also expressed the importance of feeling cared for or taking care of their partner, along with mutual affection, which enhanced their sense of pleasure: *“It’s about having time for each other, for caresses”* (Participant 558). In addition to emotional connection, physical touch played a significant role. The sensation of skin-on-skin contact and feeling wanted by each other was mentioned as important to feeling sexual pleasure: *“I rarely have orgasms with penetration, but I feel satisfied with the union of our bodies”* (Participant 623).

Additionally, several participants noted that sexual pleasure was heightened by a strong sense of partnership and commitment, often finding that intimacy with a partner was more satisfying than casual encounters:

“Sexual pleasure to me is the well-being that comes from intimate contact with a person” (Participant 393).

Safe Space

Participants referred that trust and a safe space are fundamental for experiencing partnered sexual pleasure. A sense of safety and respect were frequently mentioned as crucial elements, with participants noting that: *“Sexual pleasure is respect”* (Participant 172).

Other participants emphasized that feeling comfortable with their partner, without the presence of taboos or prejudice, was essential for allowing exploration and openness during sexual experiences: *“I live it freely, healthily, and without taboos or prejudice”* (Participant 739). Additionally, the ability to explore boundaries while also finding mutual limits was another key theme, as participants described how trust enabled them to engage in deeper, more meaningful experiences:

“I need to feel safe with the person I’m relating to” (Participant 523).

Theme 2: Sensorial and Emotional experience

The theme "Sensorial and Emotional experience" includes four subthemes: Enjoying (1) Feelings (2) Transcending (3) and Motivation (4).

Enjoying

Participants noted the importance of experiencing moments that are enjoyable both emotionally and physically. Many referred to the pleasure derived from physical sensations, describing it as key to their experience of sexual satisfaction: "*I associate sexual pleasure with the pleasure of the body*" (Participant 44). Additionally, several participants linked sexual pleasure to self-esteem, noting that feeling good about oneself contributes to a heightened sense of enjoyment during sexual activities: "*It's a way to boost our self-esteem*" (Participant 593).

The overall state of being and mind during sexual experiences was also emphasized. Participants pointed out that achieving a state of relaxation and mental well-being significantly influenced their partnered sexual pleasure:

"For me, it's also a state of being" (Participant 44).

Feelings

Participants emphasized both positive and negative emotional states, highlighting how these emotions can shape their experiences. Some participants described feelings of empowerment and accomplishment, noting that sexual pleasure can provide a sense of fulfillment: "*It's a unique sensation of pleasure that completes me as a human being and connects me to my partner*" (Participant 323).

However, some participants mentioned experiencing negative emotional states, such as dissatisfaction, which can detract from an overall partnered sexual pleasure experience: "*In most of my experiences, I didn't feel pleasure*" (Participant 149).

Additionally, a few participants discussed how sexual pleasure could sometimes feel obsessive or even addictive, indicating that these strong emotional responses played a complex role in their experiences:

"It's addictive, obsessive" (Participant 622).

Transcending

Participants emphasized the idea of transcending typical sexual experiences, often describing moments where they felt a loss of control, which heightened their pleasure: "I usually feel more pleasure the more I am able to lose control and a certain self-awareness" (Participant 643). Some participants also spoke of self-discovery and the challenge of pushing

boundaries as key elements that enhanced their experiences, suggesting that these moments contributed to personal growth and deeper satisfaction: *“It’s the exploration of the physical body for self-knowledge”* (Participant 787).

Interestingly, many participants highlighted that orgasm was not always necessary for fulfillment, and in some cases, the experience of going beyond the orgasm was more meaningful:

“It doesn’t necessarily have to end in an orgasm, because the pleasure is in the whole situation itself. Many times, I experience so much pleasure throughout the act that I’m not even bothered if I don’t have an orgasm” (Participant 827).

Motivation

The idea of sexual pleasure was described as a necessity and an essential aspect of human life: *“I feel like it’s a basic need, an essential good”* (Participant 8).

Additionally, some participants linked sexual pleasure to affirmations of manhood, suggesting that their experiences reinforced their sense of masculinity:

“In my case, it’s also [...] an affirmation of my virility” (Participant 745).

Theme 3: Body Experience

The theme "Body Experience" includes four subthemes: Capacity (1), Genital (2), S&M (3) and Time Dependent (4).

Capacity

Participants shed light on the importance of physical indicators and sensory stimuli in enhancing their experiences: *“The sexual pleasure that comes from being with another person is incomparable, the pleasures obtained are unattainable in any other way. The sensations it provokes — the warmth, the shivers, the touch, the smell — all of that is pleasure”* (Participant 163).

Physical attraction and desire were also frequently mentioned as key elements that heightened the capacity for sexual pleasure, with participants emphasizing the role of these factors in driving their experiences:

“Pleasure can happen in the simple feeling of desire” (Participant 273).

Genital

It was mentioned that sexual pleasure is often derived from direct genital stimulation, emphasizing the importance of physical contact: “It’s feeling pleasure from the stimulation of my erogenous zones and genitals” (Participant 597).

Some participants also stressed the significance of direct sexual contact and penetration, describing these experiences as central to their sense of sexual satisfaction:

“For me, penetration makes sense, and I enjoy experiencing it” (Participant 355). ~

S&M

Experiences of being restrained were reported, which some found heightened their sexual pleasure: “I love being tied up and feeling the rope pass across my skin” (Participant 174). Others mentioned the enjoyment of domination or being dominated, emphasizing the importance of mutual consent and trust in these interactions: “During sex, I feel a lot of pleasure when I’m being dominated” (Participant 214).

Consensual physical violence was also discussed by some participants as an element that added intensity to their sexual experiences, while others mentioned massages as a pleasurable form of physical stimulation:

“Besides acts of moderate physical punishment (spanking, handcuffs, or any object considered appropriate by those involved), with consent” (Participant 372).

Time Dependent

Some of the participants noted that longer sexual encounters contributed to a heightened sense of satisfaction: “Time is the key to pleasure for me” (Participant 484). Others highlighted the importance of high frequency in maintaining sexual pleasure and fulfillment, with frequent sexual interactions enhancing their overall experience:

“The frequency of sexual relations is also very important” (Participant 453).

Discussion

The current study focused on the perceptions and experiences of sexual pleasure in emerging adults in committed relationships, highlighting its complex and multidimensional nature under the effects of emotional, physical, and relational aspects. Following reflexive thematic analysis as the methodological approach, the study captured three major themes of Shared Experience, Sensorial and Emotional Experience, and Body Experience, and explored the dynamic in the understanding, pursuit, and negotiation of pleasure in the context of intimate adult relationships.

These findings support the vast literature that defines sexual pleasure as more than mere physiological or genital activity (Werner et al., 2023; Kleinplatz et al., 2018). Participants emphasized multiple times the role of intimacy, emotional connection, mutual affection, and trust-building in being central to their definitions of pleasure. This view is supported by McClelland's (2010) theory of intimate justice, which argues that pleasures are inextricably bound to one's sense of being entitled to emotional and erotic fulfillment, constructed by larger society, including gender relations, power, and cultural norms.

The Shared Experience motif, including elements of play, intimacy and trust, supports the premise that sexual satisfaction in a relationship is co-created. Mutual exploration and emotional connection by the participants reinforce the Sexual Script Theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973), especially at the interpersonal realm, where mutual expectations, frank communication, and emotional investment structure the interaction. In many occasions, participants emphasized the presence of a safe setting, a sense of exploration and freedom from judgmental conditions in which the cultivation of pleasure can thrive. These findings align with the political and ethical underpinnings of pleasure as advanced by pleasure activism (Brown, 2019), in which a sense of safety, respect, and recognition are seen as essential to the pursuit of delight, especially for those that have experienced marginality.

In the category of Sensory and Emotional Experience, the subjects expressed that pleasure is a deep sense of embodiment, emotional balance, and psychological conditions characterized by feelings of desirability or self-transcendence. These accounts question extant goal-driven models of sexuality centered on maximizing orgasm as the peak of sexual activity (Andrejek et al., 2022), thus promoting a more dynamic model of satisfaction that is founded on emotional consciousness and cognitive coherence. This view is supported by current

research regarding sexual health and education models that promote reframing the accomplishment in sexual encounters, emphasizing instead the need for communication, reciprocal engagement and general wellness (Ford et al., 2019; Zaneva et al., 2022).

It's relevant to point out that many of the participants defined sexual pleasure as a basic need or correlated it to the conceptions of masculinity, thus supporting Maslow's (1943) portrayal of sexual desire as a basic human need. These reports highlight the cultural constructs of norms of masculinity that shape men's perception and expression of their sexual desires as well as the social acceptance of these events. This phenomenon reflects the need for a gender analysis in combination with the prevailing heteronormative discourse that emphasizes masculine sexual satisfaction and disregards the various constructions of sexual pleasure to be held by different individuals, such as women and the LGBTQ+ community (Fahs et al., 2018; Wetzel & Sanchez, 2022).

The third theme, Body Experience, refers to the somatic aspects of pleasure, including genitality, sensual excitement, BDSM, and considerations of duration. While it is perhaps the most traditionally "sexual" of the themes, participants spoke about these events using psychological frameworks, including testimony from respondents detailing consensual domination, in which trust and communication were presented as preconditions to the initiation of the acts, and interpretations in line with up-to-date research on kink that place these acts in a context of exploration, and affective intimacy (Labrecque et al., 2021). In addition, the frequency and duration of sexual acts analysis was found to indicate that while there were participants who place a high value on frequency, others value both frequency and the quality and intensity of the experiences, and thus a more nuanced, more personalized view of pleasure arises. This theme, as the previous ones, is a representation of a complete account of pleasure that integrates different elements and emphasizes distinctions on the part of the individuals.

Participants from both groups rejected prescriptive or reductionist conceptions of sexual satisfaction. Instead, they reported experiences that highlighted the complex dynamics between identity, desire, and relational circumstances. These findings are a relevant case of emerging adulthood, a development stage that is marked by experimentation, identity exploration and changing relation norms (Arnett, 2023; Nelson, 2020). As a result, for young people at this stage, sexual satisfaction in a relationship may become severed from its contextual anchors; they are in the process of building relationships at the same time as they are assessing their values and beliefs about intimacy and satisfaction. These findings also

highlight the need for broader and integrated theories of sexual education and counseling that can adequately deal with the complex dimensions of sexual pleasure. Educational frameworks that address only the prevention of risk or that deal with biological mechanisms do not account for the lived realities of young people, who strongly evaluate emotional security, intimacy, and self-knowledge as essential elements of sexual health (Pascoal et al., 2014; Herbenick et al., 2010).

In addition, the qualitative richness of the data gathered from participants is important in filling the gap in academic scholarship regarding the experience of sexual pleasure during young adulthood. A big part of the existing body of literature relies heavily on quantitative methods, often reducing the complexity of such experiences to the level of frequency measures or satisfaction indicators. By putting the value of personal accounts into perspective, this study points to the value of qualitative methodology in capturing the heterogeneity of the experience of human sexuality. Overall, we present a new qualitative study of sexual pleasure experiences in romantic relationships among young adults by acknowledging that orgasms and pleasure are not absolute, homogeneous experiences but are born of a synthesis of emotional openness, bodily presence, and mutual intimacy. Finally, this study promotes a paradigmatic shift in methodological process and professional procedure, suggesting a reconstruction of sexual activity from a one-time event to an embodied relational process, a space of potential, and an opportunity for the negotiation of personal and interpersonal meaning.

Limitations

As with any research study, there are some present limitations. These findings are based on self-report from one particular group of participants, so they may only be generalizable to only a portion of the overall population's experience. A study with more participants and a range of different life stages and backgrounds would be relevant as well as an examination of sexual orientation, culture, and gender would allow us a better insight into the impact of these factors on the experience of sexual pleasure.

Conclusion

Young adulthood is a developmental stage marked by a sequence of changes in which individuals continue their identity development, adopt new roles and experience a range of relationships, including romantic and sexual. This study explored how those in committed relationships perceived and described their experiences of sexual pleasure in relation to their

partners. A close reading of the stories told by the participants identified three major themes: Shared Experience, Sensory and Emotional Experience, and Physical Experience.

The identified themes point to the fact that the physiological sensations, emotional connection and shared delight offer a much more complex experience of sexual enjoyment beyond physical activities. The findings demonstrate that factors such as intimacy, trust, and emotional engagement play a universal role in augmenting the pleasure of sexual activity, defying the explanation that the enjoyment is based solely on physical attraction or sensual experience. Several participants noted that playfulness, affection, and trust in their partner added a richness to their experience, both during the act itself but also in the overall setting of their long-term relationship.

The main implication of this study is that many of the participants put the process of building and creating a connection ahead of the attainment of orgasm itself. This implies that sexual satisfaction is more related to the entire experience as opposed to reaching an orgasm alone. These have important implications for the practices of both clinical therapy and sexual education by promoting sex therapists and sexual education instructors into realizing that sexual satisfaction includes both the physical elements and the interpersonal connection established, leading them to be better prepared in helping adolescents develop healthier and stronger relationships.

The findings in this study are consistent with the perspective expressed by the World Health Organization that sexual health is more than just the biological aspect but is inextricably tied to emotional, psychological, and social health. Acknowledging pleasure as an integral aspect of sexual interactions in relations increases the understanding of a holistic approach to achieving a truly healthy sexual life.

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