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Mestrado de Psicologia Clínica e da Saúde

**QUALITATIVE STUDY ON DEFINITIONS OF SOLITARY
SEXUAL PLEASURE AMONG EMERGING ADULTS,
ADULTS AND SENIORS**

Dissertação de Mestrado apresentada a provas públicas para a obtenção do grau de
mestre em Psicologia Clínica e da Saúde, orientada pela Professora Doutora Patrícia
Pascoal

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Universidade Lusófona - Centro Universitário de Lisboa

Escola de Psicologia e Ciências da Vida

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Versão Final

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Resumo

Este estudo qualitativo explora como o prazer sexual solitário é definido e experienciado por adultos emergentes, adultos e seniores. O objetivo foi compreender como a idade, as normas sociais e as experiências individuais moldam as atitudes e os comportamentos relacionados com a atividade sexual solitária. Um total de 1.844 participantes portugueses, com idades entre 18 e 83 ($M_{idade} = 40.62$; $DP = 12.28$), respondeu a um questionário online com uma questão aberta sobre as suas definições de prazer sexual solitário. Analisaram-se os dados através de uma análise temática reflexiva.

Três temas principais foram identificados: (1) Realização Pessoal, incluindo empoderamento, consciência corporal e bem-estar; (2) Necessidade Básica, que descreve a masturbação como necessidade natural, estratégia de coping ou substituto de sexo com parceiro, frequentemente acompanhada de sentimentos de culpa ou ambivalência; e (3) Estratégias, relacionadas com contextos, técnicas e uso de auxiliares para potenciar o prazer. Embora todos os grupos etários tenham referido autonomia e autoconhecimento, participantes mais jovens enfatizaram a exploração e identidade, enquanto os mais velhos salientaram bem-estar e compensação pela ausência de parceiro.

Os resultados sugerem que o prazer sexual solitário é simultaneamente fonte de empoderamento e mecanismo de coping, refletindo um papel duplo de libertação e gestão emocional. Estes resultados reforçam a importância de reconhecer a masturbação como dimensão relevante da saúde e do bem-estar sexual e indicam que a educação sexual e a prática clínica devem abordar as experiências solitárias de forma inclusiva, reduzindo o estigma e promovendo a autonomia sexual ao longo da vida.

Palavras-chave: *Prazer sexual; prazer sexual solitário; adultos emergentes; adultos; seniores.*

Abstract

This qualitative study explored how solitary sexual pleasure is defined and experienced among emerging adults, adults and seniors. The aim was to understand how age, social norms, and individual experiences shape attitudes and behaviors toward solitary sexual activity. A total of 1,844 Portuguese participants ages 18 to 83 ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.62$, $SD = 12.28$) responded to an online survey that included an open-ended question about their definitions of solitary sexual pleasure. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Three overarching themes were identified: (1) Personal Fulfillment, including empowerment, body awareness, and well-being; (2) Basic Necessity, encompassing masturbation as a natural need, coping strategy, or substitute for partnered sex, often accompanied by guilt or ambivalence; and (3) Strategies, highlighting environments, techniques, and use of sexual aids to enhance pleasure. Although all age groups mentioned aspects of autonomy and self-knowledge, younger participants emphasized exploration and identity, whereas older participants emphasized well-being and compensation for partner absence.

Findings indicate that solitary sexual pleasure is both a source of personal empowerment and a coping mechanism, reflecting its dual role as liberation and regulation. These results underscore the need to recognize masturbation as a relevant dimension of sexual health and well-being and suggest that sexual education and clinical practice should address solitary sexual experiences more inclusively, reducing stigma and promoting sexual autonomy across the lifespan.

Key Words: *Sexual pleasure; solitary sexual pleasure; emerging adults; adults; seniors.*

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Introduction

In the field of human sexuality, the exploration of solitary sexual pleasure is a topic that is often overlooked because it can be surrounded by sensitivity, stigma, and misunderstanding (Aneja et al., 2015; Lidster & Horsburgh, 1994; Tiefer, 1998). This dissertation aims to shed light on the psychological experience of solitary sexual activity and the experiences of emerging adults, adults and seniors who engage in it. In addition, there is the objective to gain a deeper understanding of how the various historical contexts may have shaped how people perceive and experience sexual pleasure, acknowledging the answers from people from different age groups.

What is sexual pleasure?

The term *pleasure* originates from the Latin word *placeo*, -ere, which means “to please, give pleasure or be approved”. According to Collins Dictionary, the experience of pleasure is characterized by positive feelings such as happiness, satisfaction, or enjoyment. It is typically associated with an overall sense of well-being and can significantly contribute to a person's quality of life.

Sexual pleasure is characterized by “The physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from solitary or shared erotic experiences, including thoughts, dreams, and autoeroticism. Self-determination, consent, safety, privacy, confidence, and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations are key enabling factors for pleasure to contribute to sexual health and well-being” (Global Advisory Board, 2016).

As previously stated, there are two categories of sexual experiences referred to in the literature: partnered and solitary¹ (Goldey et al., 2016). Partnered experiences can occur with a partner, regardless of the relationship structure (i.e., single, married, etc.). Solitary experiences, on the other hand, can be engaged in alone, without needing another person. Examples of solitary experiences include masturbation and fantasies.

According to Abramson & Pinkerton (2002, pp.8), “sexual pleasure consists of those positively valued feelings induced by sexual stimuli. Notice that this conceptualization encompasses a broad range of sexual pleasure experiences, from the soothing sensations of sensual massage to the explosion of feeling that accompanies orgasm”. It is worth noting that while sexual pleasure and orgasm are often used

¹ Eventhough masturbation can be mutual or solitary, the word “masturbation” is usually used as a synonym of solitary sexual activity. Throughout this work we will use masturbation to refer to solitary sexual activity/pleasure.

interchangeably, they are not the same thing, even though the orgasm can be embodied in the experience of sexual pleasure, physically and emotionally (Opperman et al., 2014).

The experience of sexual pleasure has been scarcely defined and existing definitions have emphasized that it is composed of elements that include cognitive, emotional, and physical components (Boul et al., 2009; Goldey et al., 2016). It is a difficult concept to describe because the elements mentioned can vary from person to person and can be influenced by cultural norms, gender, and context (De La Garza-Mercer, 2006). Simplifying the definition, we can describe sexual pleasure as a positive physical and emotional experience that results from stimulation of the genitals and other erogenous zones, without forgetting the subjectivity of the experience (De La Garza-Mercer, 2006). Elements such as the age of the person, self-esteem, sexual autonomy, and self-efficacy are associated with better outcomes of sexual pleasure in women (Reis et al., 2021).

Definitions of sexual pleasure encompass two central concepts: *unifaceted* or *multifaceted*. This means that sexual pleasure can either have only one source (i.e., unifaceted, the sensations felt during the sexual experience leading up to orgasm) or have more than one source (i.e., multifaceted, the sexual experience can result from different stimuli, as in cognitive and emotional components combined with the physical related aspects). Pleasure can also be conceptualized as a *trait* (i.e., to enjoy an experience, one must be able to allow oneself to do so) and as a *state* (i.e., a momentary or contextual experience, the internal state of satisfaction derived from the sexual activity). This shows that sexual pleasure goes beyond the orgasm and arousal factors included in previous definitions, demonstrating the need to better understand the complexity of this concept and aspects such as cultural context and life experiences, and how they can explain the subjectivity of individuals' perceptions of sexual pleasure (Werner et al., 2023).

This study is grounded in the biopsychosocial perspective of sexual pleasure, which considers the interaction between biological, psychological, and social influences on sexual experience (Laan et al., 2021). From this viewpoint, sexual pleasure is not merely a physical response, but a complex phenomenon shaped by individual emotional states, personal histories, cultural norms, and relational dynamics. This framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of how people construct meanings around sexual pleasure and why these meanings may vary across developmental stages and social contexts. This framework may help to identify the specificities of solitary sexual pleasure.

Solitary sexual pleasure refers to engaging in sexual activities alone, with solitary sexual behaviors such as masturbation, and sexual fantasies (Goldey et al., 2016; Rye & Meaney, 2007). These examples are considered pleasure-oriented activities that can be enjoyed alone and do not require a partner, regardless of one's relationship status, providing individuals with control over their pleasure (Rye & Meaney, 2007). There is a need to enhance the absence of a partner since the focus of this study is the individual experience (i.e., solitary masturbation, also usually just referred to as masturbation) and not mutual masturbation, which can be done in the presence of a partner.

The question of why people masturbate can have a multitude of potential explanations. As posited by Rowland and colleagues (2020), the primary motivations for women to engage in masturbation are the pursuit of sexual pleasure, the alleviation of stress, and the reduction of sexual tension. Besides the motives mentioned above, a study conducted by Herbenick and colleagues (2023) confirmed that the most common reason was to get sexual pleasure and added that people have the intention to relax, fall asleep, and self-exploration (i.e., for both men and women, with no significant differences). The authors also discovered that the absence of a sexual partner can contribute to people's decision to masturbate. This finding suggests a less individualistic perspective on this subject and presents a compensatory view as an alternative. The compensatory model provides an explanation for the act of masturbating as an alternative or substitute for partnered sexual activity when it is not available (Regnerus et al., 2017).

Additionally, the Incentive Motivation Theory suggests that sexual desire and pleasure can result from the interaction between internal states (e.g., emotional or hormonal) and external factors (e.g., erotic stimuli, context (Blumenstock et al., 2023). This perspective shifts the focus from a purely drive-based understanding to a more context-sensitive view of solitary sexual pleasure. It provides a useful framework for exploring how individuals construct meaning around solitary sexual pleasure.

The perspectives and motivations for masturbation resonate with broader discussions on how people define and experience solitary sexual pleasure, as can be seen on various studies that explore the concept across different populations. For instance, our literature review highlights definitions of sexual pleasure in individuals' experiences, including experiences of populations whose sexualities were historically minimized.

A study with Black women (Thorpe et al., 2022) on their definitions and feelings associated with sexual pleasure, highlighted the importance of their sex-positive

experiences, including mental, emotional, and physical components to reach the peak of pleasure they desire and feel. This study sheds light on the fact that racial and gender stereotypes have often deprived them of sexual pleasure in the past. What stands out is how this study challenges the one-dimensional view of Black women's sexuality that has been prevalent in society for decades. It underscores the need to create spaces where Black women can live free from the distortions imposed by racism and sexism. Something to think about when reading this article is how external prejudices and factors can influence individuals' intimate and personal experiences, potentially affecting their perceptions and interactions.

Goldey and colleagues (2016) researched the definitions of queer people and heterosexual women regarding solitary and partnered sexual pleasure. They found that these concepts are multifaceted and, besides having aspects in common, are distinct from one another (i.e., partnered pleasure characterized by trust in the partner and solitary pleasure marked by autonomy). The definitions given by the participants can be similar but varied according to the relationship status of the person and characteristics like their sexual orientation and age. This study challenges the tendency to universalize sexual experiences, demonstrating instead that pleasure is contextual and personal. It shows how important it is to recognize that sexual pleasure should be understood as a spectrum shaped by internal and external factors, such as autonomy, trust, and individual identity. As Thorpe and colleagues' (2022) study, this study raises awareness of how people's reality and identity influence how they perceive their intimate experiences.

There has been an interest in exploring gender-based differences in sexual experiences (Laan et al., 2021). This study emphasizes the importance of incorporating sexual pleasure in sexual education programs, which have traditionally focused solely on reproductive aspects. This approach would facilitate the promotion of sexual pleasure for all genders, contributing to equal sexual development and challenging cultural beliefs that perpetuate gender differences in sexual experiences. By addressing the gender disparities, identified in the societal discourse (i.e., the stigmatization of sexual pleasure as a taboo and its association with shame and guilt), it can be a step ahead for sexual health and respectful sexual experiences. Furthermore, it can dismantle and improve unequal power dynamics in sexual relationships, eliminating the notion that sexual pleasure is primarily male-centered. This approach also has the potential to pave the way for new expectations and enhance the well-being of individuals across gender lines.

A study conducted by Manão and colleagues (2023) aimed to investigate how LGB+ individuals who perceive themselves as having a sexual problem define solitary and partnered sexual pleasure. The study offers insight into the individual and subjective perspectives on sexual pleasure, irrespective of whether these align with diagnostic criteria. This allows a more expansive conceptualization of sexual distress, thereby facilitating access to assistance, regardless of whether an individual has received a diagnosis. The study revealed that solitary sexual pleasure has both positive aspects, such as self-development and stress relief, and negative aspects, such as shame and guilt. It is important to acknowledge that factors beyond an individual's sexual experiences (i.e., shameful emotion associated with sexual orientation) may influence their solitary sexual experiences. These findings prompt reflection on the ways in which social stigma and internalized oppression converge and manifest in such intimate aspects of someone's life, affecting their ability to experience sexual pleasure without feelings of guilt or fear. It is important to understand sexual pleasure, particularly within marginalized communities. Doing so can improve the development of safer environments and spaces (e.g., medical or societal contexts) where people can express and explore their sexuality without the burden of external judgment.

The literature indicates that the experience of sexual pleasure is subject to variation according to each person's context. These examples illustrate the diversity of factors that contribute to the individuality of the concept of solitary sexual pleasure, including racial/ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientation, gender differences, and each person's medical condition. Investigating this complex subject is essential for attaining a more profound comprehension of its diverse manifestations. Additionally, it is worthy of examination considering its intersections with numerous domains within our lives, including those pertaining to psychological and health-related aspects.

While previous studies have explored solitary sexual pleasure among specific groups – e.g., women (Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Goldey et al., 2016), queer individuals (Manão et al., 2023), and Black women (Thorpe et al., 2022) – few have addressed how definitions of pleasure vary across age groups. This gap justifies the present study's focus on the different age groups' differences in solitary sexual pleasure.

Relevance of sexual pleasure to sexual health and well-being in general

Sexual health is not just the lack of a disease or dysfunction, but mainly “(...) a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; (...) Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected, and fulfilled.” (World Health Organization, 2010).

Sexual rights refer to the extension of the already existing human rights to sexuality. They promote the protection of individuals to express their sexuality, enjoy sexual health, and ultimately safeguard against discrimination (World Health Organization, 2010).

Not long ago, sexual health was monitored through statistics on contraceptive use, abortion, teenage pregnancy, etc., and only recently have researchers acknowledged that sexual pleasure constitutes a significant aspect of both sexual health and rights (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Higgins & Hirsch, 2007). This means that sexual pleasure is not only an outcome of sexual health but also the result of how the person’s sexual rights are respected and protected.

Sexual pleasure is an essential right linked to well-being, as the rights ensure that the experience is safe and positive for those who experience it, either with someone else or alone (Global Advisory Board, 2016; Gruskin et al., 2019).

These three concepts are interrelated to achieve a positive sexual experience (Gruskin et al., 2019).

Age groups

According to the WHO (World Health Organization) (2019), the adult age group ranges from 18 to 64 and seniors are people above 65 years old. However, for the purpose of this study, we used Arnett’s (2023) criteria to differentiate the emerging adults’ group, considering the fundamental role sexuality plays in this age group. Subsequently, keeping in line with WHO (World Health Organization) guidelines, we defined adults group considering ages 30 to 64, and seniors were categorized as over 65 years old (WHO, n.d.).

While studies often focus on the experience of solitary sexual pleasure in specific age groups individually, the current study qualitatively compares sexual pleasure across the different age groups mentioned above, which can be important to understand how the

sexual behaviors and perceptions of sexual pleasure diverge or converge when comparing the groups. Contextual factors, such as historical contexts in which people grew up, aging and psychosexual development across life can also influence their sexual pleasure and, more specifically, masturbation.

Emerging adulthood

Considering the definitions presented earlier and the importance of a person's satisfaction when it comes to sexual pleasure to their overall well-being, when searching for definitions of solitary sexual pleasure among emerging adults, very little information was found about this specific population.

The decision to focus on this age group, rather than solely adults, is particularly pertinent given that this period is typified by the transition from adolescence to adulthood (late teens to mid-twenties), ages 18 to 29 (Arnett, 2023). This specific age group, which did not exist in the recent past due to the changes in the pattern of life in industrialized societies, is referred to as “emerging adults” (Arnett, 2007). Emerging adulthood can be conceptualized not only as a transition but also as “(...) a period of development (...)” (Arnett, 2007), in which the person undergoes a series of cognitive, familial, friendship, romantic, and professional changes. It is also a time during which emerging adults begin to explore and perceive themselves as sexual beings (Foust et al., 2022).

As a period of significant developmental changes in a person's life, Arnett (2004), described it as the “(...) *age of identity explorations*, the *age of instability*, the *self-focused age* (...)”, which may explain the higher prevalence of later marriages, premarital sex, masturbation, and so forth, as well as the prejudice attached to these behaviors in the present day (Izdebski & Wąż, 2020).

The interest in collecting the definitions of solitary sexual pleasure among emerging adults stems from a new perspective on how to achieve sexual pleasure, the self-discovery of sexual preferences, and a less structured (i.e., compared to the past) way of life that is becoming increasingly common in contemporary society.

Adults and Seniors

The study of solitary sexual pleasure has been conducted among adults, with most of the research concentrating on the frequency and level of satisfaction achieved (Fischer & Træen, 2022). Nevertheless, a limitation of this approach is that the individual narrative

and perspective of each participant are not fully valued, as the use of surveys and questionnaires constrains the possibility for individuals to share their subjective experiences.

Including the age group of seniors was a valuable addition to this study, as it enhanced the richness of the data and its interpretation. Masturbation in this age group is often viewed with a certain degree of stigma, which has resulted in relatively limited research, particularly in the qualitative realm (Fischer et al., 2021).

Aim of the study

This study employed a cross-sectional qualitative exploratory design, utilizing data collected online to investigate the definitions of sexual pleasure among emerging adults, adults, and seniors. Based on the findings of the literature review, we elected to inquire about their definitions of solitary pleasure through an open-ended question with the aim of more accurately accounting for the complexities that frame the experience of sexual pleasure. Our research question was: “How do people from different age frames define solitary sexual pleasure and how do these definitions differ across age groups?”.

Methods

Participants

For this study, which uses a convenience sample (i.e., which is employed to gather data from individuals according to ease of access), the participants were asked to answer anonymously a set of questions that collected quantitative and qualitative data. The inclusion criteria for participation in this study were: the age above 18, proficiency in the Portuguese language, and prior experience with sexual interactions.

From 5000 responses, 1844 were considered eligible, once the participants that did not answer the qualitative question presented were excluded. The participant's ages ranged from 18 to 83 ($M_{age} = 40.62$; $SD = 12.28$; there are 21 missing values). There were 680 (36.9%) self-identified men, 1117 (60.6%) self-identified women and 26 (1.4%) identified as non-binary. 5 (0.3 %) people answered “I don’t know”, 6 (0.3%) people answered “I prefer not to respond”, and 10 (0.5%) answered “other”.

Procedures

This study is part of a larger research project that focused on examining sexual pleasure and its associated meanings and was a collaboration between the Sex Education Museum (MUSEX- Museu Pedagógico do Sexo), the Master's Degree in Sexology at Universidade Lusófona - Centro Universitário de Lisboa and the Portuguese Society for Clinical Sexology (SPSC- Sociedade Portuguesa de Sexologia Clínica). The survey was first reviewed by representatives of the organizations, to certify that the content was adequate and relevant and that the survey was not too long. 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**), the survey was tested on the online platform – Qualtrics.

Using a snowball method, by advertising the online survey on social networks, and encouraging people to share it with their personal contacts and social media platforms, the data was collected from January until March 2023.

All participants consented to participate in the study through informed consent, and IP and geolocation deleted before saving the final database. Only the team working on the project can access the information collected because it is protected with a password.

The study was conducted using three different sets of questions presented after the informed consent (i.e., to ensure the participants' will to be a part of the study), socio-demographic data (e.g., age, gender, and relationship configuration), quantitative data, and lastly on qualitative aspects. For the current study we present socio-demographic data and participants' definitions of solitary sexual pleasure (a term similar to solitary masturbation, or just masturbation in the context of the study) whose definition was presented before the open question - "Given your experience, how do you define sexual pleasure when you masturbate?".

There were no incentive offers or reimbursements for the participants in this study and they were allowed to stop their participation at any time without consequences.

Data Analysis

The participants' answers were coded by the master's student under the supervision of Professor Patrícia M. Pascoal and assisted by Ph.D. student Andreia A. Manão.

The data underwent reflexive thematic analysis in accordance with the Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach, as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2021). This method of data

analysis was selected due to its efficacy in elucidating the experiences, behaviors, and sentiments expressed by the participants. This method is flexible, in that there is no prescribed order for the steps to be followed; one can revisit steps at any time. Furthermore, the method encourages the researcher's subjectivity (i.e., the themes are created based on their perspective and interpretations of the participants' responses). The active role of the researcher is also characterized by the possibility for their creativity to be expressed and the capacity to create themes and stories constructed based on the data available. In other words, the themes that are created, are not merely a description of the information provided; rather they are an interpretation of that information that provides a deeper and richer understanding of the data.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) allows for the identification of patterns that can reinforce commonalities of the participants' practices and perspectives, thereby facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the construct under investigation. In conducting this data analysis, the research adopted was an inductive, experiential, and reflexive approach. The inductive approach entails the absence of a pre-existing theoretical framework for coding and developing themes, instead, the process begins with the researcher immersing themselves in the data. The experiential approach is characterized by an emphasis on comprehending the experiences of the participants and examining the subjective meanings they ascribe to these experiences. The reflexive approach is distinguished by the researcher's reflection and shaping of the analysis in light of their values and interactions with the data.

To analyze the data, we followed a procedure that involved six steps. Initially, the responses were read multiple times to gain an understanding and familiarize with the data. Secondly, the student and the researcher developed an initial coding of the first data sets based on the content of each response, using a semantic method. In the third step, the student autonomously coded all the data sets. The fourth step consisted of the verification of the codes by the investigator. In the fifth step, we verified if there were similarities and redundancies within the codes and proceeded to group them, when adequate, according to latent meaning. In the sixth step, we developed a coding scheme to enhance the coding process's efficiency and ensure consistency in the codes, to divide them into themes later.

IBM SPSS, Version 27 was used to handle quantitative data (descriptive analysis).

After the initial reflexive thematic analysis, participant's responses were grouped according to the age bracket that was defined – emerging adults (18 – 29) (Arnett, 2023),

adults (30 – 64) (Arnett, 2023; WHO, 2019), and seniors (65+) (WHO, n.d.). This categorization allowed a comparative perspective across life stages.

Results

Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, we were able to identify three main themes: (1) *Personal Fulfillment*; (2) *Basic Necessity*; and (3) *Strategies*.

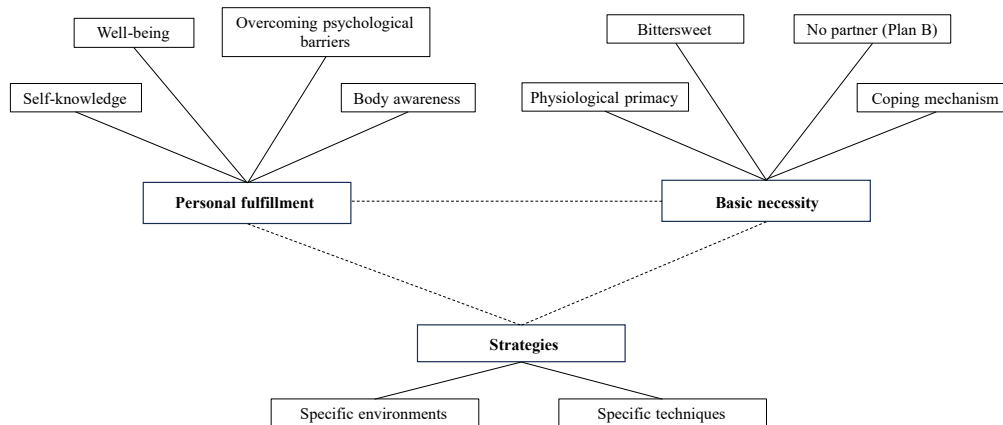


Figure 1. *Thematic map*

Theme 1: Personal Fulfillment

In this theme, the definitions of solitary pleasure, or in this context, masturbation, play an emphasis on solitary sexual pleasure as a process of personal development, discovery, and self-knowledge. This process includes overcoming difficulties with sexuality, the body, and feelings of well-being.

This main theme includes four sub-themes: (1) *Overcoming psychological barriers*; (2) *Body awareness*; (3) *Self-knowledge*; and (4) *Well-being*.

Sub-theme: Overcoming psychological barriers

This sub-theme shows the definitions that refer to solitary sexual pleasure as a process of personal development and highlights mainly positive experiences. Participants mentioned that solitary sexual pleasure, i.e., masturbation, helps them overcome psychological blockages and release repressed emotions: “*Sexual pleasure when I masturbate is a release and allows me to feel an explosion of emotions that are somehow repressed*” (Participant 1066).

For some, it means dismantling the prevailing social and educational norms and assumptions they have internalized in the environment in which they grew up: “(...) *I'm still in the process of deconstructing the bonds of society and the upbringing I had (which was extremely prejudiced and limiting)*” (Participant 470); “*Masturbation, in my case, started relatively late, because socialized as a woman, this has always been a taboo subject, unlike what happens with those who are socialized as men. This situation led me to feel afraid of exploring my body when I was younger, but fortunately, in the meantime, I've been able to demystify these conceptions*” (Participant 610).

In addition, a considerable number of participants indicate that masturbation allows them to feel empowered and in control of their body: “*I think I see sexual pleasure in masturbation almost as synonymous with sexual empowerment*” (Participant 1027); “*I feel powerful because I feel in control*” (Participant 1041). Some even see it as an act of feminism and as a form of protest: “*I recently realized that sexual pleasure in masturbation is, for me, a demonstration of feminism and emancipation: I feel I owe it to myself, and to feminist society as a whole too*” (Participant 1540).

Sub-theme: Body awareness

This theme is concerned with fostering an understanding of the participants' recognition of their bodies as a source of pleasure. It involves an exploration of the participants' experiences of their own bodies: “*Masturbation is a self-exploratory journey where we travel through sensations and explore how our body reacts to stimuli*” (Participant 1161).

It also facilitates a deeper comprehension of the participants' sense of how they connect with their bodies: “*For me, the connection I create with my physical body by exploring pleasure for pleasure's sake is extremely important*” (Participant 444).

As indicated by several participants, solitary sexual pleasure can contribute to a more positive body image and self-esteem, thereby enhancing one's ability to accept a: “*It allows me to love and appreciate my body more (...)*” (Participant 167); “*My intimacy is strengthened as well as my confidence and self-esteem*”. (Participant 693).

Subtheme: Self-knowledge

This subtheme represents the pleasure that can be achieved by trying to know themselves and their sexual preferences when they are alone: “*Sexual pleasure in*

masturbation is the most important thing because it lets me know what gives my body the most pleasure” (Participant 1589); *“It’s a carefree discovery of what we like more or less (...)”* (Participant 304).

Through masturbation, participants see an opportunity to explore and fulfill personal desires: *“(...) you can discover new interests or curiosity in trying something out (...)”* (Participant 1000); *“For me, the sexual pleasure that comes from masturbation is the release of an inner desire for intimate touch (...)”* (Participant 32)

Besides that, they also describe sexual pleasure as attained while thinking about fantasies, imagining situations alone or with another person: *“(...) pleasure comes from masturbation thinking about or seeing another person with whom we would like to have sex but for some reason it’s not possible”* (Participant 1445); *“Making the imagination a weapon of pleasure and using it to live out the best possible fantasies”* (Participant 1828).

Subtheme: Well-being

This subtheme describes how solitary sexual pleasure, and the overall sense of well-being (i.e., psychological and physical) can be associated: *“I consider this to be a fundamental aspect of my overall well-being (...)”* (Participant 91); *“(...) I consider the state of psychological well-being that I achieve to be a form of sexual pleasure”* (Participant 595).

The experience of solitary sexual pleasure has been shown to induce feelings of relaxation and emotional satisfaction in the people engaging in it: *“Sexual pleasure through masturbation is a kind of muscle and mind relaxation”* (Participant 758); *“It’s knowing how to touch myself, in a pleasurable way and getting a great feeling of happiness”* (Participant 994).

For some, solitary sexual experiences may be more pleasurable than those engaged in with a partner. The absence of another person can afford the individual greater freedom to explore their sexual desires and engage in masturbation in a manner that may be more satisfying: *“The fact that there is no other person involved can make the experience freer and therefore sometimes more intense”* (Participant 321); *“Sexual pleasure when I masturbate reaches its peak, its maximum exponent”* (Participant 1015); *“Increases libido, I feel more disinhibited (...)”* (Participant 1720).

Theme 2: Basic Necessity

This theme encompasses all references to solitary sexual pleasure as a requisite and even inevitable phenomenon for the participants' experiences. During this experience, they are seeking to achieve physical and psychological homeostasis, as well as balance within their relationships.

This main theme includes four sub-themes: (1) *Physiological primacy*; (2) *Bittersweet*; (3) *Coping mechanism*; and (4) *No partner (Plan B)*.

Subtheme: Physiological primacy

The objective of this subtheme is to describe masturbation as a natural process that facilitates maintaining balance within the body. Participants indicated that masturbation is a method for physically alleviating sexual tension, rather than exploring the emotional aspects of sexual activity: "*The sexual pleasure of masturbation is purely physical pleasure (...)*" (Participant 140); "*Masturbation is a need, like eating or drinking*" (Participant 650); "*Requires less mental availability (...)*" (Participant 265)".

It can also be as natural as being an inherent component of the participants' routine: "*Sexual pleasure during masturbation for me is merely routine (...)*" (Participant 1418).

Given the physiological consequences of solitary sexual activity, it is important to highlight the role of orgasm as a primary objective for the individual engaged in such activity: "*When I masturbate it's only when I reach orgasm that sexual pleasure arises*" (Participant 336); "*For me, masturbation is always synonymous with orgasm. That's all it's about*" (Participant 696).

Subtheme: Bittersweet

The intention behind this theme was to highlight descriptions of the solitary sexual experience that were mostly negative. For instance, negative feelings were reported participants felt during and after masturbating, which manifested as feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, anxiety and frustration: "*In the end, I'm usually sad and frustrated, sometimes I cry and feel bad for having done it*" (Participant 874); "*Sometimes it makes me feel a bit ridiculous, a bit dirty, a bit corrupt*" (Participant 856); "*Sometimes masturbation can be purely fun, but most of the time it's associated with sadness and anxiety*" (Participant 340).

The sensation of emptiness felt by them can be explained, for some, by the reminder of not having a partner: *“For me, masturbation implies an emptiness at the end (...)”* (Participant 49); *“(...) a certain feeling of emptiness for being alone”* (Participant 470).

There were also some reported responses about the concern of the frequency that they masturbate, more than being part of their routine: *“(...) I feel it's an addiction I have, and every day before I go to bed I have to masturbate, I don't do it for pleasure (...) But it's the way to sexual satisfaction without a partner”* (Participant 1625); *“(...) more often than I'd like...”* (Participant 1827).

Subtheme: Coping Mechanism

The solitary sexual experience, when used to deal with psychological and emotional challenges can be regarded as a coping mechanism, rather than merely a source of sexual gratification. This approach can help participants to regulate emotions and alleviate accumulated tensions: *“(...) I associate the pleasure of masturbation solely with relieving accumulated stress (...)”* (Participant 860); *“A way to forget about everyday problems (...)”* (Participant 1342); *“(...) it often helps me to decompress and manage anxiety (...)”* (Participant 1034).

Reported responses show that participants also resort to masturbation as a sleep aid: *“(...) helps me sleep better (...)”* (Participant 51); *“I use masturbation to induce sleep”* (Participant 243).

It is also used to help with procrastination and something to do when bored: *“I often use it (...) to mitigate some distress or difficulty in starting tasks - work, energy to get out of bed”* (Participant 591); *“It can also be used to escape moments of boredom and annoyance, I don't deny that”* (Participant 1351).

Subtheme: No partner (Plan B)

The absence of a sexual partner can be a motive for people to engage in sexual masturbation. In some cases, individuals may have a sexual partner but lack the opportunity for a sexual encounter: *“(...) it gives me pleasure to the extent that I mitigate the distance from my partner”* (Participant 887); *“(...) when my partner is unavailable (...)”* (Participant 1639).

On the other hand, some individuals lack the opportunity to engage in sexual activity with a partner at their discretion. In such cases, masturbation may be employed

as an alternative to partnered sexual activity: “(...) *lack of a sexual partner in adulthood*” (Participant 1632); “*Masturbation is satisfying when you don't have someone (...)*” (Participant 50).

This alternative can be perceived as less pleasurable compared to the partnered sexual activity in a significant proportion of the responses analyzed: “(...) *is not as satisfying as a relationship with someone else*” (Participant 316); “*I get more pleasure when I'm with someone else*” (495). Despite the ease with which self-pleasure can be achieved due to the familiarity many individuals have with their bodies, there can still be a preference for sexual activity with a partner: “(...) *a person who knows their body reaches pleasure faster (...), it's good but I prefer pleasure for two*” (Participant 721).

Theme 3: Strategies

This theme refers to specific techniques and procedures that individuals utilize for masturbation, as well as the contexts in which they prefer to engage in such activities.

This main theme includes two sub-themes: (1) *Specific environments* and (2) *specific techniques*.

Subtheme: Specific environments

In this subtheme, solitary sexual pleasure is delineated to specific places, mostly defying the traditional idea of masturbation in privacy: “*I generally need and like varied and non-routine stimuli, (...) diversifying the places where it happens (...)*” (Participant 88); “(...) *whether in the shower, in bed or even at work (...)*” (Participant 920); “*Usually in prohibited or unsuitable locations*” (Participant 1145).

The environments in which the participants engage in self-stimulated sexual activity also impact the pleasure they experience: “*It implies privacy and security in the environment where I practice it*” (Participant 1337); “*Creating a magical and romantic atmosphere, with scents, oils, and lighted candles (...)*” (Participant 276).

The use of external stimuli to potentiate the solitary sexual experience is included in this sub-theme, including the use of pornography, erotic literature, and/or other content associated with the adult industry: “*I often use pornographic videos as a stimulant*” (Participant 237); “*Whether through erotic reading or adult movies (...)*” (Participant 34). The imagination of participants can be seen as a complement to the external components mentioned above: “*I resort to pornography to masturbate, and I only feel more pleasure*

when, while watching pornography, I imagine myself in the place of the person being penetrated or when I imagine myself a voyeur, commenting on what I see and giving recommendations” (Participant 256).

Subtheme: Specific techniques

This subtheme describes the methods people choose to practice masturbation. The different techniques utilized by participants to attain sexual pleasure, enhance their experience. An example is the use of sex toys: *“The pleasure derived from masturbation was greatly improved from the time I started using toys” (Participant 553); “I can usually only masturbate using a vibrator, I don't use my hands” (Participant 1475).*

In addition, it was observed that the participants used different procedures to induce sexual pleasure while alone, these included chemsex, prostate stimulation, and pampoarism: *“I've had some very interesting experiences after ingesting cannabis” (Participant 553); “(...) in addition to masturbation through repeated movements on the penis, I can also help by massaging the anus/prostate” (Participant 1276); “I do pompoarism (...) because I don't need anything other than my vaginal muscles. I can reach ejaculation” (Participant 1026).*

Discussion

With this study, it was possible to gain a deeper insight into the participants' perspectives on their experiences of solitary sexual pleasure, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this subject.

The available data indicates that solitary sexual pleasure is expressed using a set of strategies and can result in psychological and emotional outcomes, which may be either positive or negative. We identified the theme of *personal fulfillment* from aspects that our participants revealed to be important in sexual pleasure attained, namely feelings of empowerment since they can feel autonomy in giving pleasure to themselves with a sense of control and self-awareness, making the participants feel emotionally satisfied. Across all age groups, this theme was found, and these results are in line with a study conducted by Kaestle & Allen (2011), in which participants' responses indicated that they had experienced positive effects on their health and had gained insight into their own bodies and their sexual preferences, particularly among women. Furthermore, masturbation was identified as helping them explore their boundaries, and sexual desires in a way that they

cannot during partnered sexual contexts. Additionally, empowerment is a significant concept identified in the present study's results and masturbation can help people reclaim the ownership of their bodies and sexual autonomy, reducing feelings of guilt and shame caused by the oppressive and conservative structure of society (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Reis et al., 2021). This could be explained by the fact that people aren't focused on pleasing someone else and don't have the pressure of pleasing a sexual partner, and there is the possibility of exploring their body and their pleasure without these external barriers.

However, our analysis of the data suggests that the experience of fulfillment evolves with age. For example, among emerging adults and adults, subthemes like *body awareness* and *self-knowledge* were especially highlighted. This may be explained by the developmental focus on identity formation and exploration during these life stages (Arnett, 2004). In contrast, seniors emphasized well-being, highlighting solitary pleasure as a stabilizing and health-promoting experience, which may reflect a shift in focus from exploration to maintenance of quality of life.

Given the theme *basic necessity*, it becomes evident that the responses observed do not prioritize emotional fulfillment. Subthemes like *physiological primacy* and *coping mechanisms* were frequently mentioned across all age groups, especially emerging adults. Masturbation was often described as a way to release tension or manage stress and anxiety (Rowland et al., 2020; Wehrli et al., 2024). This aligns with biopsychosocial models of sexual behavior, where solitary sexual practices serve both physical and emotional functions. Participants tend to prioritize the satisfaction of physical needs, which can explain why the responses presented exhibit a more negative perspective. Mostly adults and seniors refer to masturbation as a way of compensating for the lack of a partner with whom they can engage in a sexual encounter (e.g., the partner is away or when they are not in a relationship) (Regnerus et al., 2017), as we can observe in the subtheme *no partner (plan B)*. Intriguingly, despite the fact that *physiological primacy* was found as the predominant theme in the responses of the senior participants within this subject area, an additional and substantial reference to the *no partner (plan B)* subtheme was observed. This observation suggests that, for older participants, although the physiological aspect remains significant, the absence of a sexual partner affects their perception of solitary pleasure. This perception may be an alternative or a means of maintaining sexual activity in their lives.

The subtheme *bittersweet*, describes feelings of guilt, shame, and loneliness, associated with the experience of solitary sexual activity, which were present in all age groups, but appeared more frequently in senior participants. These emotions align with what was found by Kaestle & Allen (2011), where guilt and shame were negative aspects related to masturbation, mostly because of the societal norms and the environment in which they grew up. An individual's cultural and religious upbringing can influence their perception of, and attitudes related to masturbation and pleasure associated (Gerressu et al., 2008). The responses of the participants in this study indicate that they perceive masturbation as a pleasurable activity since they need to satisfy their physical needs because it contributes to their overall sense of well-being. However, they also report experiencing feelings of guilt and shame because conservative values are prevalent in their lives.

Solitary sexual activity serves as a *coping mechanism* (subtheme of the theme of *basic necessity*) that enables individuals to effectively manage negative emotional states, such as stress and anxiety. This process facilitates the regulation and improvement of these emotions (Rowland et al., 2020; Wehrlie et al., 2024). In the results of this study, we can see that participants utilize masturbation to improve their psychological well-being. The results demonstrate that participants resort to masturbation as a means of enhancing their psychological well-being, with benefits observed in their mood, sleep quality, and ability to cope with quotidian stressors.

As for the theme *strategies*, two sub-themes (*specific strategies* and *specific techniques*) have been identified as being pivotal in the pursuit of solitary sexual pleasure, and the responses showed that participants from all age groups used specific techniques and created particular environments to enhance solitary sexual pleasure. The utilization of sexual aids (e.g., sex toys) to potentiate pleasure was commonly described among adults' responses and aligns with findings in a study conducted by Fippen & Gaither (2023). Additionally, mentioned most frequently by adults, with emerging adults mentioning it to a lesser extent, the use of sex toys and other procedures to enhance pleasure can help people improve their confidence to explore their bodies and can be related to their sense of self-awareness (Döring, 2021). Creating environments that can enhance the experience of pleasure (e.g., candles, pornography) allows for an understanding of the individual's self-awareness, tastes, and preferences, as well as providing a safe environment in which to explore fantasies (McNabney et al., 2020).

These findings align with the Incentive Motivation Theory, which suggests that sexual desire and pleasure stem from the interaction between internal states, such as mood, emotional needs, or psychological stress, and external factors, like environmental cues and sensory stimuli (Blumenstock et al., 2023). Participants' descriptions of how they experience solitary sexual pleasure included emotional regulation, inducing sleep, stress relief, and reducing anxiety, which reflects how internal emotional states can be a motive to initiate solitary sexual behavior. Creating specific environments or using particular techniques to enhance their solitary sexual pleasure experiences can suggest that these incentives play a role in triggering and/or intensifying pleasure. Additionally, participants' internal factors (e.g., stress relief, feeling lonely) can make them more likely to seek and respond to these incentives.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation identified in this study was the structure of the survey questions, given that the question "In your experience, how do you describe sexual pleasure during partnered sex?" was posed before the research question on this study. This may have influenced some participants' responses, as they were more likely to compare partnered sexual pleasure to solitary sexual pleasure, rather than simply answering about the perspective and experience of solitary sexual pleasure.

The sampling method used (i.e., snowball sampling) can be sensitive to self-selection effects so that only people who felt comfortable sharing their sexual experiences participated in the study or those who have a strong emotional bound to the theme (activists in the field of sexual health, people who are distressed from lack of pleasure, health professionals). Consequently, people who do not want to share their sexual experiences are self-excluded. Furthermore, we do not know if specific social groups were not exposed to the link of the survey and people with low new media literacy or low internet use may not have reached.

Finally, the lack of possibility to deepen the information provided and to solve ambiguous answers compromises the understanding of some contributions.

We think that a qualitative study that allows the deepening of the messages conveyed in real-time interactive context could complement the information provided.

Conclusion

This study offers substantial insight into the diverse definitions and experiences of solitary sexual pleasure across different age groups. The findings underscore the intricate interrelationship between psychological empowerment, self-awareness, and autonomy over their own body in shaping how individuals comprehend and experience sexual pleasure during masturbation.

Overall, this study reinforces the necessity of recognizing masturbation as a significant aspect of sexual health and well-being. It would be beneficial for future research to investigate potential interventions to mitigate the guilt and shame often associated with masturbation, particularly in populations where these emotions are most prevalent. Moreover, sexual education programs should emphasize the positive aspects of sexual autonomy and self-exploration, while also addressing the detrimental effects of stigmatizing solitary sexual behaviors.

A noteworthy integrative finding is the way empowerment and emotional regulation coexist. Participants frequently described masturbation as both a source of agency and a tool for managing psychological discomfort. This duality suggests that solitary sexual pleasure occupies a unique intersection between liberation and coping in contexts where partner sex is less available or desirable.

These results also provide implications for clinical and educational contexts. Clinicians should be aware that solitary sexual behavior is not inherently problematic but can reflect adaptive strategies of self-care and self-discovery. Educators might consider incorporating positive, inclusive discussions of masturbation into sexual education programs to challenge stigma and promote sexual autonomy.

In sum, this study extends existing knowledge by highlighting how solitary sexual pleasure is shaped by developmental stage, social context, and internalized norms. Future research should further explore how these dimensions interact over the lifespan and how they may differ across cultures and gender identities. A more intersectional approach would allow for a deeper understanding of solitary sexual experiences beyond dominant narratives.

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