

Understanding Gender Differences in the Association Between Empathy and Sexual Fantasies

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the association between empathy and sexual fantasies, with a focus on potential gender differences, among young adults in India. A sample of 120 university students and graduates (60 female, 60 male) participated, recruited through purposive sampling. Measures included the Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire (WSFQ) and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). The data were collected using Google Forms. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, correlational analysis, and the use of Jamovi software. The results help gain an understanding of the possible gender differences and correlations between empathy and sexual fantasies. The findings of this study can provide insight into the psychological processes that underlie the development and manifestation of sexual impulses in people.

Keywords: *Fantasy, Sadomasochism, Empathetic Concern, Gender difference*

Choosing pronouns to refer to ourselves and others, choosing clothes stores or store sections to shop in, choosing goods to use to take care of our bodies—the list of gender-related decisions we make every day is practically endless. Whether directly or indirectly, gender affects almost every decision we make in life, from our social networks and families to our schooling and employment (Simula, 2019). A diverse spectrum of desires, behaviors, and dreams is included in the complex and comprehensive concept of human sexuality. Individuals' sexual experiences and desires are significantly shaped by their sexual fantasies. On the other hand, empathy is a crucial psychological concept that affects how people comprehend and relate to others on an emotional level. Sexual preferences, attitudes, and behaviors have all been significantly influenced by gender, among other things.

Because they are less constrained by social, moral, and cultural norms than actual sexual action is, sexual fantasies offer an intriguing window into the evolutionary drives that underlie sexual behavior. People are mainly free to indulge their vulgar inclinations and primordial lusts in fantasy in ways that could be considered inappropriate. Fantasy can also be used selfishly, without consideration for one's partner's preferences or sensitivities, therefore it is more likely to disclose the differences between men's and women's biological natures than sexual behavior or public declarations of opinion (Wilson, 1981). Sexually

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aroused mental ideas that can facilitate desire and really improve the sexual experience are referred to as sexual fantasies. Sexual fantasies are a key variable in the systematic study of sexual identity and sexuality since they have a significant impact on future sexual behavior and serve as a reflection of the past.

Personal experiences can both shape and be shaped by the erotic imagination. Giving and receiving pain can occasionally be a part of the bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism (BDSM) practice (Luo & Xiao, 2018). Early studies frequently adopted the premise that the use of the BDSM is somehow connected to psychopathology (Taylor and Ussher, 2001). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illnesses, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) continues to include sadism and masochism as paraphilic illnesses. In psychological and psychiatric textbooks, masochism and sadism were also labeled as abnormal behaviors (Davison and Neale, 1990). Recent studies, however, have raised doubts about the accuracy of conceptualizing the majority of BDSM practitioners as psychologically ill (Powls and Davies, 2012). A variety of consensual behaviors, such as leather, kink, sadomasochism (SM), dominance and submission (D/s), master/slave (M/s) relationships, power exchange, bondage, and discipline, are referred to together as BDSM in academic research and by participants. Although it can be challenging to pinpoint commonalities among such a wide range of activities, scholars generally concur that the following elements must be present for something to be classified as BDSM: consensual, mutual definition of the situation, some kind of power exchange, and frequently but not always sexual context or meaning. In these practices, "dominant" refers to someone who exercises power (such as the top dog, master, or sadist), "submissive" refers to someone who cedes control, and "switch" refers to someone who switches positions depending on the situation (Simula, 2019). Feminists have been debating BDSM for a very long time. Two main feminist argumentative strands have arisen since the feminist sex wars began in the mid-1980s. Radical feminists frequently perceive BDSM as relying on established power disparities in ways that reproduce and sustain harmful structural disparities for women.

Still, a growing body of research contends that sexual fantasies serve as a powerful illustration of how male and female libido have developed differently in our species (Tortora et al., 2020). According to a prevalent gender stereotype, men are more interested in sex than women are for simply physical reasons. According to sociobiologists, this distinction is biologically based. Many sociologists and anthropologists, however, contend that the distinction is cultural. Regarding sexual attraction, the nature vs. nurture argument has persisted for a while without concluding (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997).

Since they are impacted by a variety of biological, psychological, and social factors, sexual fantasies are intricate and multifaceted. According to Baumeister's Socio-Cultural Theory of Sexuality, which was put forth in 2000, sexual fantasies are influenced by social and cultural norms. Using this paradigm, we will investigate how the psychological concept of empathy interacts with cultural norms and expectations to affect sexual fantasies. What is regarded as taboo or acceptable in terms of sexual desires might vary depending on the attitudes and ideas that different cultures hold regarding sexuality. Movies, television shows, books, and pornography are just a few examples of the many ways that the mass media shapes people's sexual imaginations. People's desires and expectations may be influenced by how sexual encounters and relationships are portrayed in the media. Certain sexual fantasies or desires may become stigmatized as a result of sociocultural circumstances. Some desires could be

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viewed as taboo or socially inappropriate in some cultures, which might cause people to repress or conceal their fantasies.

According to Davis's definition of empathy from 1980, empathy consists of two components: cognitive empathy (the capacity to comprehend and identify the emotions of others) and emotional empathy (the ability to share and experience the emotions of others). This study will expand on this concept by taking into account how these various aspects of empathy may affect individuals' sexual imaginations in various ways depending on their gender. A sociocultural paradigm called sexual script theory can be used to explain better how people pick up and integrate sexually relevant social norms, expectations, and actions. According to this hypothesis, people create mental scripts or templates that direct their relationships, sensations, and expectations during sexual activity. These stories can differ throughout nations and historical eras and are affected by cultural, social, and private elements. Researchers John H. Gagnon and William Simon developed the sexual script idea, which has since had a significant impact on the study of sexuality. These scripts, which people pick up through socialization and cultural influences, might influence how they view and partake in sexual activity. Sexual norms are not constant throughout all cultures and eras; they change. Different cultures have very different ideas of what constitutes acceptable sexual behavior, and even within one society, these ideas can evolve through time. Gender stereotypes and expectations are frequently reinforced in sexual scripts. These scripts may specify the roles, conduct, and obligations of both men and women during sexual encounters. For instance, men may be portrayed in traditional scripts as initiators and women as passive participants. Sexual scripts frequently involve a predetermined order of actions or behaviors. Stages like flirting, kissing, foreplay, intercourse, and post-sexual activities might be included in these sequences.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To gain an understanding of the association between Empathy and Sexual Fantasies.
- To investigate the gender differences found in the association between empathy and sexual fantasies.

Hypotheses

- **Ho1:** There is no significant gender difference in empathy among male and female
- **Ho2:** There is no significant gender difference in sexual fantasy among male and female
- **Ho3:** There is no significant gender difference in sadomasochism among male and female
- **Ho4:** There is no significant correlation between males and females in empathy, sexual fantasy, and sadomasochism.

Sample

The sample included young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 who are citizens of India. A total of 120 university students and graduates in India were included in the study.

Measures/Tools

- **Socio-Demographic Status Profile:** The profile will be constructed by the researcher to collect information about the client such as name, age, gender, etc.

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- **Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire (WSFQ):** The 24 distinct sexual fantasies evaluated by the Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire (WSFQ) are categorized into four main categories: intimate, exploratory, impersonal, and sadomasochistic.
- **Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI):** 28 items answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Does not describe me well” to “Describes me very well”. The measure has 4 subscales, each made up of 7 different items.

Procedure

Data was collected online through Google Forms. 154 samples have been collected out of which 120 were selected for the study, whereas others have been rejected due to nonsensical responses and errors found in the data. The form included a consent form, a socio-demographic questionnaire, including the age, gender, and relationship status of the individual, and the two tools WSFQ and IRI. The consent form and demographic details have to be filled out by the participants before attending the questionnaires. Each participant has to complete a set of 52 questions.

Data Analysis

The responses were collected from a Google Forms survey. Each response was recorded into a spreadsheet which was stored on the personal computer. Outliers and nonsensical responses were checked and removed. Numerical values were assigned using a consistent coding system. The binary gender groups were assigned numerical values of 0 and 1. The analysis was done using the Jamovi software. Descriptive statistics, i.e., the means, standard deviations, etc. are calculated separately. Shapiro-Wilk normality test was done. An Independent Sample t-test was done to find gender differences. Further, the correlational analysis was done

RESULTS

The test score was analyzed using WSFQ and IRI. Among 120 participants, there were 60 females and 60 males. The descriptive statistics of the participants are given below.

Table No. 1 Descriptive statistics

Dimensions	N	Mean	SD
Fantasy	120	24.5	4.91
Sadomasochism	120	10.3	6.86
Empathetic Concern	120	25.1	4.12

A Shapiro-Wilk test was performed and showed the data for fantasy and empathetic concern demonstrated normal distributions according to Shapiro-Wilk tests (fantasy: $W = 0.983$, $p = 0.140$; empathetic concern: $W = 0.975$, $p = 0.023$). However, the Sadomasochism measure indicated non-normality ($p < 0.001$).

Table No. 2 Shapiro-Wilk Normality test

Dimensions	Shapiro-Wilk W	Shapiro-Wilk p
Fantasy	0.98	0.14
sadomasochism	0.93	<0.001
Empathetic concern	0.97	0.02

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Examination of kurtosis (-0.156, SE = 0.0438) and skewness (0.722, SE = 0.221) with standard errors suggested the data met the assumptions of normality. Therefore, parametric tests will be utilized.

Table No. 3 Skewness and Kurtosis

	Fantasy	Sadomasochism	Empathetic Concern
Skewness	-0.44	0.72	-0.23
Std. error skewness	0.22	0.22	0.22
Kurtosis	0.62	-0.15	0.63
Std. error kurtosis	0.43	0.43	0.43

An independent sample t-test was conducted to understand the significant gender differences in each of the dimensions. The results showed the presence of significant gender differences in fantasy ($p = 0.04$) and empathetic concern ($p = .001$). Whereas there are no significant gender differences in sadomasochism ($p = 0.761$).

Table 4 Independent Sample t-test

	Statistic	df	p
Fantasy	-1.993	118	0.04
Sadomasochism	-0.305	118	0.76
Empathetic Concern	-4.739	118	.001

A Pearson correlation was conducted to understand the correlation between the dimensions for each gender. The results showed that in females, the presence of positive correlation between fantasy and sadomasochism ($r = 0.315$, $p = 0.014$) and fantasy and empathetic concern ($r = 0.423$, $p = < .001$), and there was no correlation between empathetic concern and sadomasochism. In males, a correlation was found between fantasy and empathetic concern ($r = 0.330$, $p = 0.010$).

Table 5 Pearsons Correlation – female

		Fantasy	Sadomasochism	Empathetic Concern
Fantasy	r			
	Sig.diff			
Sadomasochism	r	0.31*		
	Sig.diff	0.01		
Empathetic concern	r	0.42**	0.22	
	Sig.diff	<.001	0.08	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 6 Pearsons Correlation – male

		Fantasy	sadomasochism	Empathetic Concern
Fantasy	r			
	Sig.diff			
Sadomasochism	r	0.17		
	Sig.diff	0.18		
Empathetic Concern	r	0.33**	0.12	
	Sig.diff	0.01	0.33	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The current study investigated the relationship between empathy and sexual fantasies, exploring potential gender differences in these associations. The purpose of this discussion is to go into the results, their implications, and possible directions for further research.

The results of the Shapiro-Wilk tests conducted on the data for fantasy and empathetic concern indicated that these variables demonstrated normal distributions. For sadomasochism, however, the data was shown to be not normally distributed. The examination of kurtosis and skewness with standard errors suggested that the data for all dimensions met the assumptions of normality.

The study revealed a significant gender difference in empathy, sexual fantasies and their correlations. Females demonstrated higher empathy, challenging H01, and aligning with Hanson and Mullis (1985), suggesting socialization fosters nurturing traits in women. Contrary to H02, females showed stronger links between sexual fantasies and empathy, highlighting emotional sensitivity's role in sexual desires (Bogaert & Brotto, 2014). H03 was supported, finding no gender difference in sadomasochism, emphasizing shared agency in BDSM practices (Richters et al., 2008). H04 partially held, with females showing connections between empathy, fantasy, and BDSM, unlike males. These findings stress the need for nuanced, inclusive sexual health research.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the intricate relationship between empathy, sexual fantasy, and sadomasochism, shedding light on potential gender differences in these dimensions. This study's findings carry significant implications for understanding gender dynamics in empathy, sexual fantasy, and sadomasochism, challenging traditional assumptions and stereotypes. By highlighting the nuanced interplay between these dimensions, researchers can foster a more inclusive and compassionate approach to studying human sexuality and psychological traits. Understanding the diversity of individual experiences and desires within the realm of human sexuality is crucial for promoting sexual health and well-being.

Future research should delve into the underlying mechanisms driving these gender differences and explore their implications for mental health and interpersonal relationships. Additionally, qualitative inquiries into the lived experiences of individuals within BDSM communities could provide deeper insights into the motivations, pleasures, and challenges associated with engaging in sadomasochistic activities.

The study faces limitations such as a restricted participant pool for quantitative research, potentially compromised data accuracy due to a lengthy online questionnaire via Google Forms, and a binary gender framework that overlooks diverse gender identities. These constraints may impact the study's comprehensiveness and inclusivity, warranting caution in drawing generalized conclusions. Addressing these limitations could involve diversifying recruitment strategies, refining survey methodologies for better engagement, and adopting more inclusive frameworks to capture diverse perspectives accurately.

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Conflict of Interest

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