

A content analysis of reasons for disclosing sexual fantasies and partner responses

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify some of the reasons held by participants for either disclosing or concealing a sexual fantasy. Participants were asked to describe either how their partner responded to a disclosure or (for those reporting on an undisclosed sexual fantasy) how they anticipated that their partner was likely to respond. A mixed-methods approach was employed. Two hundred and eighty-seven participants were surveyed about their reasons for disclosing/concealing fantasies and either their actual or anticipated disclosure experiences. The majority of participants (69.3%) indicated having disclosed a sexual fantasy at some point in their relationship. Five categories of reasons for disclosing/not disclosing a sexual fantasy were generated through descriptive content analysis. These categories were *sexual gratification*, *relationship-motivated*, *partner traits or characteristics*, *communication patterns*, and *specific fantasy content*. Participant descriptions of their partner's response to the disclosure of their sexual fantasy were frequently coded as positive. For those describing how they believed their partner would be likely to respond to the disclosure of reported

sexual fantasy, these anticipated responses were often coded as negative. The findings of the current study deepen our understanding of sexual fantasy disclosure and highlight some of the reasons held for either disclosing or concealing sexual fantasies. More widely, these findings may have implications for sex education, furthering our understanding of sexual dysfunction and sex/relationship therapy.

Key Words: Sexual fantasies, Intimate relationships, self-disclosure, mixed-methods, content analysis

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A content analysis of reasons for disclosing sexual fantasies and partner responses

A sexual fantasy can be defined as any mental imagery, occurring during a conscious state, that is sexually arousing or at least considered to be erotic (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). The private nature of fantasies enables personal exploration of a diverse range of sexual acts, including those that may be perceived as impossible to enact or likely to trigger relational conflict, without fear of social or relationship repercussions (Ahlers et al., 2011; Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2022).

Population surveys generally have concluded that most adults experience sexual fantasies at least occasionally (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995; Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2022). While content is highly diverse, few fantasies are truly rare (Ahlers et al., 2011; Bártoová et al., 2021; Joyal et al., 2015; Joyal & Carpentier, 2017), and Lehmiller (2018) suggested that most can be placed into one or more of seven categories: sex involving multiple partners; sex involving the exchange of power or pain between partners; novel or exciting experiences; socially taboo or forbidden experiences; non-monogamy; passion and romance; or flexibility in regard to gender or sexual identity.

Sexual fantasies serve a variety of purposes. For example, in a review of the literature, Leitenberg and Henning (1995) concluded that having sexual fantasies can be beneficial for sexual functioning, including through greater sexual desire, arousal, orgasmic consistency and pleasure gained through sexual acts. Similarly, Hill (2008) found that individuals who experienced sexual fantasies more frequently, also reported more frequent sexual interactions. Additionally, engaging in sexual fantasies about current partners can benefit the relationship through greater sexual desire for the partner (Birnbaum et al., 2019; Langeslag & Davis, 2022) and greater engagement in relationship promoting behaviours (Birnbaum et al., 2019).

Rosa and colleagues (2019) reported that greater levels of sexual fantasy were associated with greater desire for sexual novelty, and more willingness to initiate and comply with novel sexual acts. This may have wider relational implications, as sexual novelty has previously been linked to greater sexual (Frederick et al., 2017) and relationship (Matthews et al., 2018) satisfaction.

There are also, however, many reasons a person may choose not to disclose a fantasy to a sexual partner. Disclosure of highly taboo fantasies, or of those that are otherwise inconsistent with the established norms of a relationship, could potentially be damaging to the relationship. For some individuals, their sexual fantasies may be associated with guilt (Cado & Leitenberg, 1990) or otherwise appraised negatively (e.g., Renauld & Byers, 2001); Lehmiller and Gormezano (2022) argue that this may be especially likely when a person perceives their fantasy to be very uncommon. The characteristics of a person's relationship with the person to whom they are disclosing are also likely to be important: an oxytocin administration study by Mikolajczak and colleagues (2010) reported that oxytocin increased trust when the discovery of sexual fantasies was at stake, providing an indirect indication that trust is important when disclosing sexual fantasies. Finally, some sexual fantasies may simply not be accompanied by any desire for enactment (Joyal et al., 2015).

Despite this apparent complexity, self-disclosure of sexual fantasies is an area that has received very limited research attention. Self-disclosure can be broadly defined as the process of making oneself known to a targeted individual through the revelation of personal information, including sexual information (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Rehman et al., 2011). Le and colleagues (2010) argue that self-disclosure generally acts to strengthen and maintain romantic relationships, with higher disclosure rates associated with lower rates of relationship dissolution. Byers and Demmons (1999) argue that the disclosure of sexual likes and dislikes (i.e., preferred sexual behaviours, not fantasies) leads to the development of a mutually

pleasurable sexual script in the relationship. This is due to such disclosures increasing partner knowledge and therefore allowing them to prioritise performing liked sexual acts rather than disliked acts. Similarly, in a study in which both members of the relationship were sampled, Rehman and colleagues (2011) reported that sexual satisfaction was higher amongst participants who disclosed their sexual likes and dislikes, and amongst men whose partners did the same (note that this study also focused on preferred sexual behaviours, rather than fantasies). The authors also reported that greater disclosures of sexual preferences were associated with lower levels of sexual dysfunction, particularly in female participants. As sexual satisfaction has previously been highlighted as a predictor of later relationship satisfaction (Fallis et al., 2016), this may have implications for wider relationship outcomes. For example, relationship satisfaction can predict greater relationship happiness (Fisher et al., 2015), perceived marital quality (Stanik & Bryant, 2012), and relationship stability (Sprecher, 2002).

The decision whether to disclose sexual or intimate information to a partner can be a complex one, however. Communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) suggests that when deciding whether to disclose (or not disclose) information, the individual first must determine what the potential rewards or costs of disclosing are likely to be. In order for disclosure to occur, the perceived rewards of disclosing must outweigh the potential for costs to be incurred. For example, Kalichman and colleagues (2016) reported that individuals may avoid disclosing their HIV serostatus due to fears of incurring social or relational costs. Similarly, Kattari (2014) identified that participants were more likely to negotiate sexual needs and desires (which may be distinct from fantasies) with partners, when partners were seen as being likely to respond in a positive manner.

Very little research has been conducted to date that directly explores the disclosure of sexual fantasies in intimate relationships, instead focusing on disclosure of sexual needs,

desires, and preferred behaviours. These findings are clearly relevant, but are unlikely to be directly generalisable to the disclosure of sexual fantasies, which can be more private and may not be accompanied by any desire to enact them (Joyal et al., 2015). Nonetheless, in a very large sample of US adults, Frederick and colleagues (2017) reported higher rates of sexual satisfaction amongst those who had discussed or acted upon their sexual fantasies. Similarly, Lehmler (2020) found that, of those who reported that their favourite fantasy involved consensual non-monogamy, 60.8% had shared it with their partner. Where these fantasies were shared, experiences were largely positive (64.6%) compared to negative (19.8%). Despite quite high disclosure rates and positive experiences amongst disclosing individuals, only one in ten participants reported enactment following disclosure. Obstacles to the enactment of consensual non-monogamy included expectations of partner disapproval, belief that partners would not share the interest, not knowing how to enact the fantasy, and fear of social disapproval.

Most relevantly, in their unpublished doctoral thesis, Anderson (2011) reported asking participants to describe the possible rewards and costs associated with disclosure of sexual fantasies. Participants perceived several possible disclosure rewards, including the ability to enact fantasy content; bonding with their partner; enhancing sexual relationships; promoting communication; and learning about partner preferences. Perceived costs/reasons to avoid disclosure included fear that partners would react negatively; embarrassment with the topic; the private nature of sexual fantasies; marital status influenced decisions; to avoid making partners uncomfortable; concerns about what the content of their partner's fantasy may be; and concerns about pressures to fulfil any disclosed fantasies. Participants also rated their willingness to disclose, sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. The author found that disclosure of sexual fantasies was positively associated with sexual satisfaction in both the

person disclosing and their partner, with the important caveat that this was mediated by factors such as fantasy content.

This limited existing research, in combination with findings related to other types of self-disclosure, suggests that the disclosure of sexual fantasies can have benefits for intimate relationships. However, as much of the current research is focused on sexual information or sexual preferences, further research is necessary to identify to what extent disclosing sexual fantasies can benefit the individual or their relationship. It is also clear, however, that a person must evaluate a wide range of factors before deciding whether to disclose, and that sexual fantasies can also lead to guilt or distress (e.g., Cado & Leitenberg, 1990). Our understanding of this process is currently very limited. The present study therefore aimed to explore the reasons people give for disclosing, or not disclosing, their fantasies to sexual partners. Participants were asked about previous disclosure experiences, or about reasons for not disclosing, as well as actual or expected partner responses. Reasons for (non-) disclosure were categorised by their content, and partner responses coded as positive or negative, to provide insight into how and why people make the decision to discuss their sexual fantasies with an intimate partner.

Method

Participants

Individuals were eligible to participate if they were adults (18 years or older) who self-reported as currently or previously being in an intimate relationship, and as having had at least one sexual fantasy. A range of online platforms was used for recruitment, to facilitate a diverse sample. Platforms included social media (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn), websites such as Reddit (r/samplesize, r/psychology, r/sex) and sexandpsychology.com, and a university psychology department's research participation scheme. Students recruited via the latter method received credits to use towards their own research as incentives; no other

payments incentives were given. All recruitment materials explicitly stated that the study related to sexual fantasies.

Recruitment ran from October 14th 2021 until December 1st 2021. In total, 290 people fully completed the questionnaire; three were removed because they indicated that they did not experience sexual fantasies, so the final sample consisted of 287 participants. This large sample size was targeted to maximise the possibility of reaching saturation in responses and to conservatively provide sufficient power for the quantitative analyses, given effect sizes that are broadly consistent with those reported by e.g. Lehmilller (2020).

Participant demographics are displayed in Table 1. Participants were aged between 18 and 83 years ($M = 34.34$, $SD = 14.06$). The majority of participants reported residing in either the United Kingdom or the United States. Just under half of the sample identified as heterosexual.

Measures

Sexual fantasy definition

Prior to giving responses, participants were shown the following definition and instruction:

“What is a sexual fantasy?

For the purposes of the present study, sexual fantasies are defined as “any mental imagery during a conscious state that triggers a state of arousal or is sexually pleasurable to think about”. According to Lehmilller (2018), there are seven main categories of sexual fantasy.

You may fantasise about wanting to try a new sexual position or about an attractive celebrity on television. You do not need to necessarily intend to try this fantasy.

Sexual fantasies may occur frequently, may reoccur or may only occur once.

You may have several different sexual fantasies, although for the purposes of this study, please consider your favourite or most recent sexual fantasy. This may be a

fantasy that you have often or one that may particularly stand out. Please reflect on this fantasy throughout your participation in this study.”

The definition was developed by Leitenberg and Henning (1995), and has previously been used in research (e.g., Lehmiller, 2018).

Sexual fantasy categories

Participants were provided with a list of Lehmiller (2018)’s sexual fantasy categories, accompanied by short descriptions. The categories and descriptions were: *multi-partner sex* (“Fantasies involving more than one sexual partner, such as threesomes or group sex.”); *power, control and rough sex* (“Fantasies involving themes of power exchange or inflicting/receiving pain, such as dominant and submissive, BDSM-related fantasies, spanking, flogging or sensory deprivation.”); *novelty, adventure and variety* (“Fantasies involving sex in new locations, involving new or thrilling acts. This may involve fantasies of sex in public locations, sex in new positions or the use of sex toys.”); *taboo and forbidden sex* (“Fantasies which you consider to be taboo in the eyes of your culture, society or religion, or which involve typically non-sexual objects.”); *partner-sharing and non-monogamy* (“Fantasies about relationships where partners are free to pursue more than one sexual relationship, such as open relationships.”); *passion and romance* (“These fantasies have a strong emphasis on emotional fulfilment and connecting with one’s partner.”); *erotic flexibility* (“Fantasies involving the flexibility of one’s gender identity or sexual orientation.”); and *other*. All categories were presented in a list, and participants were asked to select which they felt matched their own fantasy. Multiple categories could be selected.

Fantasy disclosure questions (participants who had previously disclosed)

Participants who responded that they *had* disclosed their fantasy were asked: why they chose to disclose (open text response); how their partner responded (open text); whether

their partner responded as they expected them to (yes/no); how positively their partner responded (0-100 visual analogue scale [VAS]); and how comfortable they would feel sharing sexual fantasies in future (0-100 VAS).

Fantasy disclosure questions (participants who had not previously disclosed)

Participants who responded that they *had not* disclosed their fantasy were asked: why they chose not to disclose (open text); how they believe a partner would respond if they did disclose (open text); how positive they expect the experience of telling a partner would be (0-100 VAS); and how positively they expect their partner would respond (0-100 VAS).

Procedure

The research was given a favourable ethical opinion by the Staffordshire University Health, Science and Wellbeing Ethics Committee. The survey was conducted via the online survey platform Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). After consenting to take part in the study, participants completed demographic information (age, country of residence, biological sex, gender, and sexual orientation). They were then shown a definition of a sexual fantasy, and instructed to respond to the survey based on their favourite or most recent fantasy. Following this, participants were shown a list of Lehmiller (2018)'s sexual fantasy categories, and asked to indicate which of these matched their own.

Participants were then asked to indicate whether they had previously disclosed their fantasy to a sexual or romantic partner (yes/no). The survey branched based on this question: participants were asked a different series of questions depending on whether they had, or had not, disclosed (see Measures subsection, and Figure 1, for details). All participants were then presented with a debrief screen.

Data analysis

Descriptive content analysis was used to categorise written responses (Neuendorf, 2017). This approach has been used previously to examine sexual behaviour and intimate relationships (e.g., Downing et al., 2014; Driskell et al., 2008; Labrecque et al., 2021). For responses relating to reasons for disclosing or concealing sexual fantasies, the primary researcher (MLK) undertook several readings of the dataset and made initial codes. These codes were later grouped into five categories describing motivations given by participants for (not) disclosing a sexual fantasy: *sexual gratification*, *relationship-motivated*, *partner traits or characteristics*, *communication patterns*, and *specific fantasy content*. These categories are described in detail in the results section. For items assessing partner responses, descriptions were categorised as positive, negative, mixed, or neutral.

A final list of categories and example topics which fell in each category was shared with a secondary coder (JME). Both researchers independently coded all responses against the developed categories. Where participants alluded to several reasons for disclosing or concealing, these were coded as falling in multiple categories. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960). Kappa scores and percentage agreement for each category is presented in Table 2. Using the boundaries suggested by Landis and Koch (1977), most categories achieved at least moderate agreement.

Where disagreement was present for any question, both coders (JME & MLK) met to discuss these responses and came to an agreed decision. The primary area of disagreement between coders related to the *partner traits and characteristics* and *specific fantasy content* reasons for avoiding disclosure and contributed to these categories only achieving fair agreement. The disagreement occurred specifically in situations where participants expressed an expectation that their partner would disapprove of the content of the fantasy. For example:

“I figured they would not be interested in such a fantasy, as well as they would be unhappy that my fantasy included multiple people.”

MLK initially categorised such responses as *specific fantasy content* reasons, whereas JME initially categorised them as *partner* reasons. The coders discussed these responses and agreed to place them in the *specific fantasy content* category, as the perceived disapproval related to the specific content of the fantasy (rather than, for example, sexual fantasies in general). An inductive thematic approach to saturation was adopted, whereby it was determined that saturation had been reached and it was unnecessary to collect further responses due to the absence of data falling outside of the five generated categories (Saunders et al., 2018).

Results

Participants were asked to reflect on a sexual fantasy. They indicated its content, whether they had previously disclosed the fantasy, their reasons for disclosing (or not disclosing), and how their partner responded (or the anticipated response). Content analysis was used to identify categories of reasons for disclosure, and to label partner responses as positive, negative, neutral or mixed. Binary logistic regression models were also performed to examine whether sexual fantasy disclosure could be predicted by fantasy content or demographical characteristics. Additionally, multiple regression models were performed to examine whether the positivity of partner response could be predicted by fantasy content or reasons for disclosure.

Sexual fantasy occurrence and disclosure rates

As previously demonstrated by Lehmilller (2018), the most frequently selected categories were *multi-partner sex* and *power, control and rough sex*. The content prevalences of participant fantasies are displayed in Table 3. A substantial proportion (79.8%) of

participants indicated that the fantasy on which they were reflecting fell in more than one category.

High rates of disclosure (69.3%) were recorded. A binary logistic regression model, with fantasy content coded as categorical dummy predictor variables, was not significantly predictive of whether participants reported disclosing their sexual fantasy, $\chi^2 = 10.53$, $df = 8$, $N = 287$, $p = .230$. No individual fantasy categories in the model were significantly predictive of disclosure, $p > .05$. A binary logistic regression model consisting of age, biological sex, gender and sexual orientation, was not significantly predictive of sexual fantasy disclosure, $\chi^2 = 4.30$, $df = 4$, $N = 287$, $p = .367$. No individual demographical characteristic in the model was significantly predictive of disclosure, $p > .05$.

Reasons for the disclosure/concealment of sexual fantasies

Using content analysis, five categories were generated that encompass the reasons participants gave for disclosing, or not disclosing, a sexual fantasy to their partner. Briefly, these categories were *relationship-motivated*, *communication patterns*, *sexual gratification*, *partner traits or characteristics*, and *specific fantasy content*. These categories are discussed in further detail below. Responses could fall into multiple categories. Table 4 shows the frequency of each category in the data. Participants most frequently cited sexual gratification reasons (38.91%) for disclosing sexual fantasies to their intimate partner, whilst specific fantasy content reasons (28.09%) were cited most frequently for concealing sexual fantasies.

Relationship-motivated

A participant's relationship with their partner was highlighted by participants as a reason for both disclosing (16.28%) and not disclosing (16.85%) their chosen sexual fantasy. In order for responses to be coded in this category, the participant had to provide some indication that their reason for engaging (or not) in the disclosure of their sexual fantasy was

motivated by their relationship (such as the type of relationship), specific traits in the relationship (e.g., trust or love), desires to increase positive traits in the relationship, or fear that disclosure would threaten the relationship.

In established relationships, the level of commitment present often led to perceived obligations to disclose sexual fantasy content to romantic partners. In new relationships, the lack of familiarity and trust between partners led to fears of receiving judgement or overwhelming partners. In these relationships, participants indicated that sexual fantasy disclosure can be a gradual process associated with the slow intentional revelation of information in preparation for a larger (potentially more stigmatised) disclosure.

“We are not in a relationship and are both seeing other people. I do not want to be judged when it is so early on with us seeing each other.”

Factors such as the levels of trust, love, and closeness in a relationship were highlighted as facilitating the disclosure of sexual fantasies. The presence of these factors facilitated open communication between partners.

“Because I love and trust him and we can openly discuss what we want in our sexual life”

Power dynamics, including elements of submission, were also seen to prompt disclosure, potentially due to social norms surrounding communication in BDSM relationships (Kattari, 2014). For some participants, disclosure served a function in their relationship, increasing intimacy and bringing partners together. For these participants, sexual fantasy disclosures were seen to act as a form of emotional bonding between intimate partners. The disclosures came out of desire for honesty with a partner, and to increase trust in the relationship.

“I wanted to be honest with my wife... I wanted a relationship where trust and confidence were strong enough that would allow me to share those thoughts...”

Some participants expressed that their decision to disclose stemmed from relationship dissatisfaction. For these participants, dissatisfaction reduced concerns about disclosure outcomes, allowing for more open communication of sexual fantasies.

“I knew it wouldn’t work out, but I just was tired of not receiving anything so I just threw it [the fantasy disclosure] out there. I told her that because I did want it to happen, but knew it wouldn’t despite her asking so much of me in the bedroom.”

Communication patterns

Responses in this category highlighted how communication patterns in the relationship can influence disclosure decisions. Communication patterns accounted for 21.32% of the reasons provided for disclosing a sexual fantasy and 20.22% of the reasons provided for concealing a sexual fantasy from an intimate partner. There are similarities between responses categorised as “*communication patterns*” and those categorised as “*relationship-motivated*”. However, for a reason to be coded as “*communication patterns*”, participants must have explicitly cited that disclosure was a result of communication-related goals, existing communication patterns, or desires to promote communication in the relationship.

For some participants, their desire or ability to communicate sexual fantasies was limited by discomfort, embarrassment, or fear of judgement. Additionally, some participants viewed their fantasy as a private topic, whilst others indicated that they would only discuss their fantasy if it came up naturally in a conversation, or their partner initiated such a conversation.

“Privacy and the topic never coming up in conversation. Feeling uncomfortable in case my fantasy didn't match theirs and fear of judgement.”

Responses by participants who had previously disclosed their fantasy to a partner suggested that the ability to communicate develops over an extended period, leading to an increased level of comfort with discussing such topics. Some participants also held beliefs that communication was vital for ensuring sexual compatibility.

“My partner and I were able to communicate very clearly, and as a result felt comfortable enough to share fantasies with one another in an attempt to understand how we could help please each other more.”

Some participants indicated that their partner played a role in their disclosures, such as through disclosing their own fantasies, initiating the conversation, or directly asking. For some participants, disclosure was intended to encourage partners to disclose their own fantasies.

“I'm not fully sure how the conversation started, but I and my partner were just laying in bed when he decided to ask me about any sexual fantasies and this is when I told him - I just told him openly.”

Some participants reported using technology, such as pornography or online quizzes (which only reveal to partners fantasies that they both share), to initiate the disclosure of sexual fantasies.

“Very open communication style and also performed online quizzes that anonymise fantasies unless you match with your partner regarding them (mojo upgrade). This helped start a dialogue”.

Sexual gratification

Sexual gratification was more commonly cited as a reason for disclosing a sexual fantasy (38.75% of responses) than for not disclosing a fantasy (16.85% of responses). Responses were placed into this category when the reason for (non-) disclosure was a desire to increase sexual gratification (for the participant or their partner). This most frequently took the form of a hope to enact the described sexual fantasy with their partner.

“Because it was a fantasy I would love to act upon and wanted to see how interested my partner would be in exploring the fantasy.”

Participants often described disclosing with the intention of introducing sexual adventure, sexual excitement and/or increasing sexual pleasure. Some participants described disclosing with the intention of gaining insight into partner sexual likes and desires, which acted to increase sexual pleasure for both partners. For some participants, the act of disclosing itself was an arousing or sexual process for them or their partner.

“.... in an attempt to understand how we could help please each other more.”

“I decided to tell my partner about the fantasy because I knew that it would bring sexual arousal to them too so I wasn't uncomfortable with sharing my fantasy to them.”

Sexual gratification reasons were also provided for the avoidance of disclosure. Disclosures were avoided where enactment was perceived to be not possible, undesirable, or not pleasurable: “If I tell my partner, he will try to make it come true and I haven't come to terms yet whether I want to really do it”

Partner traits or characteristics

Participants more frequently cited their partner's experience, views, or personality as a reason for concealing their sexual fantasy (16.85% of responses) than disclosing it (4.65%).

Responses indicate that participants' decision whether to disclose their fantasy was influenced by their partner's sexual experience, with some indicating they avoided disclosing because their partner was "new to kink", "vanilla", or "sexually conservative". When partners were viewed to be sexually open or adventurous, participants felt more able to disclose:

"She is very adventurous and enjoys bringing fantasy's to life. She's equally sharing and open minded"

For some participants, disclosure was avoided due to fears that partners would respond in a critical or judgemental manner. In contrast, those who had disclosed often viewed their partner as "non-judgemental" and "a source of support".

"Fear of judgment, rejection and inadequacy. She has been openly critical of people with attributes that fit within the imagery of my fantasies."

"They did not respond in an open-minded way to less taboo fantasies. I chose not to expose myself to them for judgment."

"My current partner I feel safe with and regardless of whether or not we act on this fantasy I don't feel ashamed or like I need to hide away the thoughts I may have."

Specific fantasy content

Responses in this category emphasised that the nature of the fantasy was central to decisions to disclose (or not). This is distinct from, for example, *sexual gratification*, where the decision may be more related to a general desire to increase sexual pleasure. Specific fantasy content was a further category of reasons for concealing a sexual fantasy (28.09%) and, less frequently, disclosing a fantasy (18.60%).

For some participants, the acts present in sexual fantasies are representative of elements of their sexual identity, such as fantasies involving BDSM or same-sex acts: "Because for me,

BDSM isn't just a fantasy to spice up the sex, but a sexual identity..." For these participants, disclosure may not only serve to inform partners of sexual fantasies, but of elements of their sexual identity. Disclosure may function as a way of screening for sexual compatibility, with the acceptance/sharing of this identity acting as a prerequisite of relationship formation. Some participants described specifically forming relationships with partners known to share their fantasy or identity. "...I don't want to compromise on that, so I'll just look for partners that are into it as well & discuss things early on." For some participants, the concealment of fantasies led to the development of an inner conflict, which led to disclosure: "I have had this fantasy for quite some time and after hiding it for so long, it really started to eat away at me and I became tired of hiding it from her."

Several participants described how they factored the specific content of their fantasy into their decision about whether to disclose. Participants were more likely to disclose fantasies whose content was perceived as posing little threat to their relationship, for example because the fantasy was not especially taboo, was likely to be shared by their partner, or had elements that were already present in sexual encounters with current partners.

"We communicate well with each other and have been together for 60 years. This fantasy was almost realized when I was 12 years old....so no threat to our relationship."

The perceived extremity of the fantasy often influenced likelihood of disclosure: participants generally indicated an increased readiness to disclose less extreme or more socially acceptable fantasies:

"For me they were easy to disclose because they were normal/socially accepted."

"Some of them I have, and some I will take to the grave because they are socially unacceptable and/or will offend my partner."

Partner response to actual disclosures of sexual fantasies

Participants descriptions of their partner's response to sexual fantasy disclosure were independently coded by two researchers as either positive, negative, neutral or mixed. The majority of described responses were coded as positive (81.72%). Positive responses from partners often included elements of communication, "sharing of his own similar fantasies", which functioned to negotiate enactment, responded with enthusiasm about the hypothetical situation as a fantasy, discussion of possibility of enactment", gain more information about the fantasy, "He said he never tried it before and will educate himself about that topic", or to engage in reciprocal self-disclosure, "sharing of his own similar fantasies". For some participants, disclosure elicited a sexual response, including arousal, sexual interactions, or enactment of the fantasy. Partners were often seen to be understanding, accepting, non-judgemental, and supportive.

In comparison, less than ten percent of partner responses were coded as "negative". Such responses often included partners not showing interest in the acts present in the fantasy, showing disinterest, or being hesitant: "They said they didn't really have the same fantasies and didn't understand the appeal."

Responses were categorised as neutral when they were neither clearly positive nor negative. Less than ten percent of described responses in the sample were coded as neutral and often involved partners responding in an ambivalent manner, such as by showing limited interest in the fantasy: "Without judgment but with limited curiosity or interest. There was no talk at all about acting on the fantasy or incorporating it into our sex life through role play or dirty talk."

Mixed responses were any that incorporated both positive and negative elements. Few responses were categorised as mixed (2.69%). Such responses often described reactions that

changed over time: “At first she was shocked and didn’t agree to it. After having an actual conversation more deeply about it, she agreed to go on with it. She was uncomfortable at first but after communicating more deeply she eased into it.”

These coded findings are in line with participant descriptions, with disclosing participants largely describing their partner’s response as positive ($M = 79.07$). When reflecting upon their experiences of disclosing sexual fantasies, most participants indicated that their partner responded as they expected them to (82.8%) and that they would feel comfortable disclosing fantasies again in the future ($M = 79.97$ out of 100).

Fantasy content and disclosure reasoning as predictors of response positivity

A multiple linear regression model, with fantasy content coded as categorical dummy predictor variables, was not significantly predictive of the reported positivity of disclosure experiences, $F(8, 189) = 1.52, p = .154$. No individual fantasy types were significantly predictive in the model, $p > .05$.

A multiple linear regression model, with disclosure reason coded as categorical dummy predictor variables, was overall significantly predictive of VAS scores indicating positivity of partner response, $F(5, 192) = 2.332, p = .044$. However, no individual reasons were significantly predictive in the model, $p > .05$.

Anticipated partner response to a hypothetical future disclosure

Participants who were reflecting upon a fantasy that they had not disclosed were asked to consider (and describe) how their partner would be likely to respond if they were to disclose their sexual fantasy. These responses were again coded as either positive, negative, neutral, or mixed. Half of the participants anticipated that their partner would respond in a negative manner. For some participants, disclosure was seen as a possible threat to the

relationship, as likely to trigger relational conflict or potentially harming partners emotionally:

“She would be shocked, and possibly it would make her feel like I had no interest in our relationship and would be looking at leaving her due to our lack of sex life. She’d feel she wasn’t enough, and maybe my extreme fantasies were a path to something she wouldn’t wish to be involved in, or a signal I’d cheat.”

Some participants expressed fears that disclosing may lead their partner to feel pressured or obligated to enact the fantasy: “.... I’m afraid it might put too much pressure on them, and they might feel that they’re obligated to act out my fantasy even if they don’t want to.” Likewise, it was perceived that there was the potential for disclosing to lead to unwanted sexual encounters: “... they might want something in return that I am not comfortable with.” Disclosure in some cases was seen as holding the potential for leading to experiencing judgement (including humiliation), stigmatisation, or legal threats:

“... they’d have a lower opinion of me.”

“She would think I was a pervert and make me go to talk to someone, a counsellor”

Just under a quarter of participants (23.68%) indicated that they believed that their partner would respond in a positive manner, though many of these positive responses included a degree of uncertainty. Participants expressed hope that their partner would respond in an open-minded and non-judgemental manner. For some, disclosure responses were seen as likely to involve conditional acceptance of the fantasy: “I feel that they would be open to some aspects of it but not to the same extreme extent as me and would possibly try out some of the more neutral parts of what I’m into.”

Again, under a quarter of participants (22.72%) indicated beliefs that their partner would respond in a neutral manner. As with the experiences of participants reflecting upon a

disclosed fantasy, neutral fantasies often included anticipated limited expressions of interest by the partner or ambivalence: “They would probably be neutral. They would not be offended or disgusted by it and would be supportive of me having my own fantasies but they would not want to participate in it.” Others were uncertain how their partner would respond: “I am not sure.”

A small number of responses (3.41%) were coded as mixed, with beliefs that partners would respond both positively and negatively. For some, this was due to beliefs that disclosing would lead to enactment or sexual experiences, which was not the intention of disclosing: “I think she would see it positively, but it might result in increased sexual interactions, which I really don't enjoy.”

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the reasons for (non-) disclosure of sexual fantasies between intimate partners. We also asked participants how their partner responded when they disclosed (for those who had previously disclosed their fantasy), or how they expected that their partner would respond if they were to disclose (for undisclosed fantasies).

A large proportion of participants in this study (69.3%) had previously disclosed their fantasy. This is very close to the 69.8% reported by Anderson (2011), and slightly higher than the 60.8% disclosure rate reported in Lehmiller's (2020) study. In agreement with previous research (Lehmiller, 2018; 2020), the most frequent fantasy themes in our sample were *power, control and rough sex; multi-partner sex; novelty, adventure and variety; and passion and romance*; with each present in over half of participants' chosen fantasies. The prevalence of each of these categories is lower than those recorded by Lehmiller (2018; 2020), likely because participants in the present study were asked to only focus on a single fantasy. Most

participants indicated that their chosen fantasy contained elements of several themes, suggesting a complexity to fantasy content.

We identified, through content analysis, five categories of reasons participants gave for (not) disclosing their fantasy. These were characteristics of the relationship, communication patterns with their partner, perceptions of their partner (e.g., their personality or views), desire for sexual gratification, and specific characteristics of the fantasy.

Reasons relating to relationship characteristics were given at similar frequencies for both the disclosure and concealment of sexual fantasies. Factors such as commitment, trust, love, and relationship closeness were mentioned in association with disclosure, and several participants indicated that their ability or desire to disclose increased as their relationship developed. This is consistent with findings relating to other forms of self-disclosure (e.g., Humphreys & Newby, 2007; van de Bongardt & de Graaf, 2020). The frequency with which relationship factors (including duration) were cited by participants suggests that this may be an interesting avenue for future study.

Sexual gratification was the most common category for past disclosures. Several participants who cited this reason also indicated a desire to enact the fantasy, perhaps suggesting that the association between sexual fantasy disclosure and sexual satisfaction previously reported by Frederick et al. (2017) may occur—at least in part—via enactment. Byers and Demmons (1999) argued that the disclosure of sexual likes/dislikes leads to the development of a mutually pleasurable sexual script in the relationship and, consequently, increased sexual satisfaction; it may be that disclosure of sexual fantasies can have a similar effect. It is, however, also possible that a new fantasy disclosure is sufficient to increase sexual novelty (and, thus, sexual satisfaction; Frederick et al., 2017) in a relationship, even in the absence of enactment. Indeed, not all participants in the present study wanted to enact

their fantasy, and Lehmler (2020) found that only one in ten participants who had disclosed their fantasy of consensual non-monogamy subsequently enacted it. The present study did not explicitly ask participants about enactment of fantasies; future research may aim to explore the factors that determine both whether disclosure leads to enactment, and whether this is ultimately associated with sexual satisfaction.

Participant responses highlighted how disclosure can be specifically inhibited by the content of the fantasy, including perceptions surrounding societal or partner disapproval. The finding that disclosure may be inhibited by fears of negative partner responses is consistent with HIV disclosure research (e.g., Kalichman et al., 2016). Negative responses were particularly anticipated where partners were seen to be sexually conservative, or the fantasy perceived as taboo. Such perceptions may result from internalised stigma, as suggested by Bry and colleagues (2017), who reported associations between internalised stigma and non-disclosure. For some individuals, having sexual fantasies is associated with guilt (Cado & Leitenberg, 1990) or negative appraisals of fantasies (Renauld & Byers, 2001). Relatedly, some participants adopted a gradual process of disclosing to reduce concerns surrounding disclosure, in a way that has also been reported by those revealing their HIV serostatus to an intimate partner (Bird et al., 2017; Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Maman et al., 2001).

Specific fantasy content also featured as a reason *for* disclosure. Disclosing served not solely to increase partner awareness of sexual fantasies, but also to share elements of sexual identity (e.g., BDSM identity or sexual orientation). Disclosure may be used to assess sexual compatibility with partners (by screening for partners who are accepting and/or share sexual identities) and can be a pre-requisite to relationship formation. For those who had not disclosed these identities, it was common to report inner conflict. Similarly, Feinstein and colleagues (2020) reported negative mental health outcomes amongst bisexual and non-monosexual participants who reported concealment of their sexual identity.

Interestingly, when tested statistically, the content of a fantasy was not found to be significantly predictive of whether a participant had chosen to disclose it. There are several possible reasons for this. First, only allowing participants to select from broadly defined categories is a relatively crude measure and may mask important differences in fantasy content between participants. Second, because less than a third of participants had not chosen to disclose their fantasy, our binary logistic regression may have been underpowered to detect any effect. Or finally, it may simply be that, for most participants, fantasy content is not a major consideration; indeed, only 28.09% of reasons for non-disclosure, and 18.60% of reasons for disclosure, were placed in this category.

This study also asked participants about the actual or anticipated (for those who had not disclosed) response of their partner to sexual fantasy disclosure. In agreement with Lehmler (2020), sexual fantasy disclosure experiences were largely reported to be positive experiences. Interestingly, response positivity was not significantly predicted by sexual fantasy content or the reasons provided for disclosing. This may be due in part to participants only choosing to reveal the fantasies that their partner would likely approve of.

Participants who had not disclosed their sexual fantasy were asked how they believed their partner would respond if they chose to disclose. Responses were frequently coded as negative. This is similar to findings in other areas of sexual self-disclosure. For example, Kalichman and colleagues (2016) reported that participants who avoided disclosing their HIV serostatus often cited a belief that their partner would respond in a negative manner. On the other hand, Kattari (2014) reported that when BDSM practitioners *did* choose to engage in sexual self-disclosure, it was partially due to an expectation that the outcome would be positive.

It may be that the sexual fantasies participants choose to disclose are qualitatively different (for example, considered more socially acceptable) than those that remain private, and that participants' anticipation of a negative response to non-disclosed fantasies reflects this. Participants in the present study were not asked for any details about their sexual fantasy beyond its general category/categories, so this possibility cannot be explored here. There was also some ambiguity in the instruction to consider a "favourite or recent" sexual fantasy, which further limits the conclusions that may be drawn about the role factors such as fantasy content play in disclosure. For example, a "recent" sexual fantasy may have been one that was experienced for the first time, or was even distressing or undesirable (Renauld & Byers, 2001). Future research interested in these questions should aim to be more explicit about which of their fantasies participants should focus on, and collect more detailed information about content.

This study also had sampling limitations, which is a systemic and perennial issue in sex research (Brown, 2018). The study was advertised to online communities that exist to discuss sex and/or comprise individuals seeking to participate in sex-related research. Even among those who were recruited elsewhere, there is likely to be a bias in favour of people who are comfortable discussing topics surrounding sex and sexuality. Though no demographic measure significantly predicted disclosure, the demographic information provides an indication of differences between our sample and the general population: less than half of the sample self-identified as heterosexual, which is far below population estimates (e.g., Lansky et al., 2015). This probable sampling bias means our findings may not fully reflect the experiences of people who are less comfortable with, or accustomed to, openly discussing sex. For example, the high rates of disclosure recorded in this study (and others; Anderson, 2011; Lehmler, 2020) may be above the population average. There may also be demographic differences in the types of fantasy experienced. For example, Ahrold et

al. (2011) found that agnostic and atheist women fantasise about more diverse content than women who belong to religious groups. Future research could aim to target more representative samples, and collect more detailed information about the participants (e.g., ethnicity, religiosity, political leaning), their relationships (e.g., relationship type, duration), and their experience of sexual fantasies (e.g., frequency).

The present study has provided new insights into the motivations underlying sexual fantasy (non-) disclosure, which is an understudied area. This knowledge may have considerable importance and application in the areas of sex education, sexual dysfunction, and sex/relationship therapy. Having and engaging with sexual fantasies has been linked to positive sexual functioning (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995) and, in our sample, disclosure was highlighted as an arousing process that can enhance sexual interactions. Future research may aim to explore whether communicating about their sexual fantasies may be beneficial for individuals experiencing sexual dysfunctions. Moreover, our finding that most participants who had disclosed their fantasy reported the experience to be positive may have implications for sex and relationship therapy. If conducted sensitively, the mutual disclosure of fantasies could strengthen relationships, increase intimacy, and introduce sexual novelty, which has previously been associated with higher sexual (Frederick et al., 2017) and relationship (Matthews et al., 2018) satisfaction. However, it should also be recognised that disclosure is not always desirable, and may have the potential to trigger relational conflict (for example, where fantasies are taboo or contrary to established relationship norms). Technology could help to navigate this tension via services that allow each person in a relationship to specify their fantasies separately, and only reveal those that are shared between partners.

One in five participants who had not disclosed their fantasy reported communication-related barriers, including embarrassment or a perceived inability to disclose (for example, waiting for a partner to bring up the subject). Others reported concerns that disclosure may

introduce the risk of undesired sexual interactions (for example, partners pursuing enactment where this is not desirable, or pressuring the participant to enact one of the partner's own fantasies); this suggests difficulties in communication about sexual consent, and highlights the continued importance of education in this area.

This study explored the reasons given by participants for disclosing, or not disclosing, a sexual fantasy to their intimate partner. Five categories were identified: *relationship-motivated*, *communication patterns*, *sexual gratification*, *partner traits or characteristics*, and *specific fantasy content*. It was also found that most partner responses to past disclosures were positive. Where fantasies were not disclosed, expectations of likely partner responses were predominantly negative. These findings may have implications for sex education, sexual dysfunction, and sex/relationship therapy.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1:

Participant Demographics

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Man	135	47%
Woman	128	44.6%
Non-binary/Third gender	21	7.32%
Self-describe	3	0.9%
Sex		
Male	140	48.8%
Female	145	50.5%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	136	47.39%
Homosexual	18	6.27%
Bisexual	106	36.93%
Self-described	27	9.41%
Country of residence		
Asia (Bangladesh, China, India & Philippines)	6	2.1%
Australia and New Zealand	9	3.1%
Canada	19	6.6%
Central Europe (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Slovenia & Switzerland)	15	5.2%
Eastern Europe (Belarus, Russia & Ukraine)	3	1.0%
Mexico	1	0.3%
Northern Africa (Monaco & Turkey)	2	0.7%
Northern Europe (Denmark, Finland, Norway & Sweden)	6	2.1%
Southern Europe (Andorra, Italy, Malta & Spain)	5	1.7%
United Kingdom	86	30.0%
United States of America	115	40.1%
Western Europe (Belgium, France, Ireland & Netherlands)	8	2.8%

Table 2:*Inter-rater agreement for categories (Cohen's kappa [percentage agreement])*

	Disclosed fantasies		Undisclosed fantasies	
Reason				
Relationship-motivated	0.70	(88.83%)	0.65	(88.24%)
Communication patterns	0.60	(82.45%)	0.70	(89.41%)
Sexual gratification	0.79	(89.36%)	0.76	(91.76%)
Partner traits or characteristics	0.07	(89.89%)	0.32	(68.24%)
Specific fantasy content	0.57	(84.57%)	0.24	(71.76%)
Partner response				
Positive	0.66	(88.77%)	0.60	(86.52%)
Negative	0.61	(91.98%)	1.00	(79.78%)
Neutral	0.38	(86.77%)	0.51	(100%)

Table 3:

Frequency of fantasy content for whole sample, and separated by disclosed and undisclosed fantasies.

Fantasy content	Overall (n = 287)	Disclosed (n = 199)	Not disclosed (n = 88)
Multi-partner	55.7% (160)	60.3% (120)	45.5% (40)
Power, control and rough sex	61% (175)	62.8% (125)	56.8% (50)
Novelty, adventure and variety	55.7% (160)	58.8% (117)	48.9% (43)
Taboo and forbidden sex	34.8% (100)	37.2% (74)	29.5% (26)
Partner sharing and non-monogamy	37.6% (108)	40.7% (81)	30.7% (27)
Passion and romance	52.6% (151)	54.8% (109)	47.7% (42)
Erotic flexibility	28.9% (83)	31.2% (62)	23.9% (21)
Other	6.6% (19)	5% (10)	10.2% (9)

Table 4:

Coded frequencies for disclosure reason and partner response, and mean visual analogue scale (VAS) responses.

Reasons for (not) disclosing	Disclosed fantasies		Undisclosed fantasies	
	Percentage	Proportion	Percentage	Proportion
Relationship-motivated	16.28%	42/258	16.85%	15/89
Communication patterns	21.32%	55/258	20.22%	18/89
Sexual gratification	38.75%	100/258	16.85%	15/89
Partner traits or characteristics	4.65%	12/258	17.98%	16/89
Specific fantasy content	18.60%	48/258	28.09%	25/89
Other	0.40%	1/258	0%	0/89
Disclosure responses	Actual (disclosed)		Anticipated (undisclosed)	
	Percentage	Proportion	Percentage	Proportion
Positive	81.72%	152/186	23.86%	21/88
Negative	8.60%	16/186	50.00%	44/88
Neutral	6.99%	13/186	22.72%	20/88
Mixed	2.69%	5/186	3.41%	3/88
VAS (0-100)	Actual (disclosed)		Anticipated (undisclosed)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Positivity of partner response	79.07	24.64	44.39	28.48
Comfort disclosing again	79.97	24.65		
Positivity of disclosure experience			46.11	27.94

Figure 1.

Participants were asked a series of questions about a chosen sexual fantasy. The survey branched based on whether participants indicated they had previously disclosed this fantasy. Responses (shown in grey) could be multiple choice, open text boxes, or visual analogue scales (VAS).

