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Sociosexual Orientations and Well-Being: Differences Across Gender

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ABSTRACT

Background Sociosexuality explains whether people hold an (un)restricted orientation toward casual sex, and its effects on well-being are inconclusive. This study investigates how specifically the facets of sociosexuality relate to three components of well-being in men and women. **Methods:** Self-report measures of sociosexuality and well-being were assessed in 556 Polish adults. **Results:** Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis revealed differences in sociosexual attitudes and desire across gender. Structural equation models showed significant results only for men—emotional and psychological well-being were positively predicted by sociosexual behavior and negatively predicted by desire. **Conclusions:** Sociosexuality predicted well-being differently across gender.

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Sociosexuality; well-being; mental health; gender differences

Introduction

Sex outside romantic relationships (casual sex) is becoming more common in society, and scholars have consequently drawn more attention to the study of uncommitted sexual relationships (e.g., Fahs & Munger, 2015; Vanderdrift et al., 2012). A key aspect in the field of casual sex is sociosexuality, a psychological construct defined as people's disposition toward casual sex that contributes to explain mating mechanisms in the social environment (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). After years of studying well-being, research focused on three defining components of mental health: emotional, psychological and social well-being (Keyes, 2002). Uncommitted sex has been typically linked to declines in general well-being; nevertheless, the study of the association of sociosexuality with specific types of well-being remains understudied. The current paper aims to resolve how the specific facets of sociosexuality relate to different components of well-being in men and women.

Sociosexuality as individual characteristic

Sociosexuality describes the level of willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relationships. This construct quickly became popular among evolutionary psychologists investigating mating strategies (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Schmitt, 2005). As a personality trait, sociosexuality captures individual differences on the extent to which people hold a more restricted or unrestricted orientation toward sexual intercourses (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Continuing Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) unidimensional conceptualization of sociosexuality, researchers focused on global sociosexual orientation and its environmental and personal determinants rather than on the psychological mechanisms that contributed to the choice of adaptive mating strategies. Penke and Asendorpf (2008) proposed three distinguishable but correlated dimensions in sociosexuality: behavior, attitudes, and desire. Sociosexual behavior constitutes the frequency of uncommitted sex, number of past mates, or one-night stands; sociosexual attitudes refer to the person's mindset and beliefs about sex without emotional engagement; and sociosexual desire

reflects the motivation for uncommitted casual sex in form of fantasies about sexual activities and arousal activation (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008).

Gender differences in sexuality

Several theories provide accounts of gender differences in sexuality. Based on evolutionary psychology, the theory of sexual strategies proposes that gender differences are the result of reproductive strategies evolved across previous generations (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Accordingly, gender differences in sociosexuality occur because men and women differ in their sexual strategies to ensure genetic transmission to future generations. This theory holds that, in an attempt to increase the likelihood to pass on their genes, men tend to maximize their sexual encounters, whereas women tend to select a partner with resources to ensure child survival (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Therefore, men are supposed to be more inclined to casual relationships (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Morrison et al., 2013). Gender differences in sexual approaching strategies also extend to the use of online dating apps. Previous research found that sociosexuality motivated a greater use of Tinder, and the motivations to use this app were different across gender since men selected more indiscriminately potential matches than women (Sevi et al., 2018).

Women and men differed in their emotional mechanisms to engage in and appraise sexual activities (Townsend & Wasserman, 2011). This is in line with the parental investment theory, which posits that differences in parental investment result in differences in sexual behavior (Trivers, 1972). Because men tend to be the lesser-investing parent, they have more to gain than women from indiscriminately engaging in short-term sex with numerous partners. Another account of sexual gender differences can be found in the gender similarities hypothesis. This hypothesis argues that differences in almost all psychological attributes between men and women are small, however, gender differences can be found in some sexuality variables, including sociosexual attitudes (Hyde, 2005). Previous research

has found that men consistently reported more sociosexual behavior and permissive attitudes toward casual sex than women, although in some studies the differences were small (Townsend & Wasserman, 2011).

To examine gender differences in sociosexuality, Schmitt (2005) demonstrated in a cross-cultural study that men were more promiscuous in all countries. However, looking at gender differences through the prism of the three sociosexuality facets, Penke and Asendorpf (2008) provided evidence that German men were more promiscuous than women, but only at the level of attitude and desire and not in behavior. On the other hand, Hungarian men were less socially strict than women in all three facets (Meskó et al., 2014), suggesting that gender differences in terms of sociosexual behavior are not culturally universal. According to research, gender plays a role in sociosexuality, and therefore in the current study, the results were scrutinized separately for men and women.

Sociosexuality and its relation to well-being

The study of mental health has witnessed a great advancement in the empirical field during the last years. Since the World Health Organization (2001) defined mental health as something more than the mere absence of psychopathology, new tools assessing the positive aspects in human functioning appeared. The tripartite model of well-being (Keyes, 2002) set the roots to examine mental health through three different dimensions: emotional, psychological and social well-being. Emotional well-being evaluates the presence of life satisfaction and the affective aspects of one's life (Keyes, 2002), psychological well-being captures personal fulfillment and the accomplishment of a meaningful life (Ryff, 1989), and social well-being assesses one's optimal functioning within the social environment (Keyes, 2002).

In the field of mental health, one of the research goals is to identify the processes tied to and the consequences stemming from a good psychological adjustment. With this respect, recent attention has focused on the effects of casual sex on well-being among scholars (e.g., Bersamin et al., 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2009;

Vrangalova, & Ong, 2014). Traditional discourse suggests that uncommitted sex may be deemed as detrimental for people's psychological well-being, and the benefits of sexual activity have normally been attributed to partnered relationships, leading to the assumption that sex without love is not as contributing to people's well-being as sex with love (Paul et al., 2008). Although this association has not been thoroughly studied, research generally suggests that the relationship between casual sex and psychological well-being is negative (Bersamin et al., 2014) or non-significant (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Owen et al., 2011; Vrangalova, 2015a). However, casual sex did not influence negatively well-being on the long-term (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Vrangalova, 2015b). Positive associations between casual sex and well-being are typically reported by men (Clark, 2006), and although the negative consequences of casual sex are usually lower or non-significant in men than women (Bersamin et al., 2014; Fielder & Carey, 2010), it is important to note that the effects of casual sex may vary among individuals, providing cases with potential benefits and others with potential detriments.

It has been suggested that these differences may lie in individual and social aspects. For instance, in their longitudinal study, Vrangalova (2015a) proposed that the motives that lead people to engage in casual sex would greatly influence the psychological well-being after the intercourse. More specifically, intrinsic, self-determined motivation was linked to better psychological adjustment (Vrangalova, 2015a). Other studies found that the predisposition toward casual sex moderated the effects on well-being—that is, individuals highly willing to engage in uncommitted sexual behaviors showed greater well-being after periods with sexual intercourses than periods without (Vrangalova & Ong, 2014). However, those less willing to engage in uncommitted sex did not report differences between periods with and without sexual activity. One plausible explanation of these results is explained by self-congruency theories (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It may be that sociosexually unrestrictive individuals would benefit more from casual sex because their values are consistent with their behavior (Vrangalova & Ong, 2014).

The study of sociosexuality has increasingly gathered more empirical evidences, nevertheless, up to date only Vrangalova and Ong (2014) specifically focused on the relationship between sociosexuality and well-being. In their study, casual sex had no main effects on well-being, and their results suggested that well-being after casual sex improved in people with high sociosexual orientation, whereas no well-being variations after sex were found in individuals with low sociosexual orientation. Casual sex appears as a frequent phenomenon among young adults (Eisenberg et al., 2009) with approximately 80% of college students reporting uncommitted sexual intercourses (Garcia et al., 2012). This high prevalence may be indicative of the importance that causal sex can have in the well-being of individuals, and the study of this association entails a potential line of inquiry. However, the existing scientific accounts about the role of sociosexuality over well-being are scarce and inconclusive, as most of the studies in the field employed measures of self-esteem or [lack of] depression as indicators of well-being (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Fielder & Carey, 2010) rather than more straightforward, specific evaluations of well-being. Therefore, the current study seeks to investigate the relationship between the facets of sociosexuality and the tripartite model of mental health.

Current study

The aim of the current study is to examine the association between the facets of sociosexuality (behavior, attitudes, and desire) and well-being (emotional, psychological, and social). Since previous research indicated the existence of gender differences in sexuality (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), this relationship was investigated separately for men and women. It was hypothesized that (H1) the structure of sociosexuality is highly congruent across gender using multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA). Albeit the literature showed contradictory results regarding the individual differences in sociosexuality facets (Meskó et al., 2014; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), higher scores in men were expected (H2). Regarding the association with well-being, and according to general results of prior research, it was expected

Table 1. Demographic data of the sample.

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	411	73.9
	Male	144	25.9
	Gender not reported	1	0.2
Professional status	Student	303	54.5
	Employed	215	38.7
	Unemployed	36	6.5
	Retired	2	0.4
Education	Higher education	251	45.1
	Secondary education	297	53.4
	Elementary education	8	1.4
Place of residence	City above 50,000 residents	350	62.9
	City between 20,000 and 50,000 residents	64	11.5
	City up to 20,000 residents	142	25.5
Personal status	Alone	208	37.4
	Informal relationship	282	50.7
	Formal relationship	61	11.0
	Divorced	5	0.9

that (H3) the three facets of sociosexuality would negatively predict emotional, psychological and social well-being, and (H4) its effect would be lower in women than men.

Method

Participants and procedure

The studied sample comprised $N=556$ adults from Poland (73.9% women; 0.2% did not report gender) aged between 16 and 70 years ($M=23.48$; $SD=4.60$) who took part in an online survey—a Google Forms was created for that purpose, which included the description and aims of the study, an informed consent, demographic questions and the self-report measures. The participants were recruited using an advertisement placed on a social networking site. The authors created a Facebook event with an explanation of the study and the link to the Google Forms, which was published by the authors on their personal boards and shared by the institutional Facebook accounts. The advertisement could also be shared by others participants to reach a broader sample. The participants were compensated for taking part in the study with a small monetary incentive (i.e., 2.5 PLN, which equals approximately to 0.6 USD). The respondents could withdraw from the study at any time without further explanation and no partial responses were collected. No missing data was registered because all responses were mandatory. The studied sample was a combination of student (54.5%) and community population (38.7%

employed, 6.5% unemployed, and 0.4% retired). Most of the participants (62.9%) lived in a large city above 50,000 residents, had completed secondary (53.4%) or higher education (45.1%) and were remaining within a romantic relationship (61.7%). Remaining participants lived in a small city up to 20,000 residents (25.5%) or between 20,000 and 50,000 residents (11.5%) and only a few respondents (1.4%) completed just elementary education (Table 1).

Measures

Demographic Survey at the beginning of the study contained information about gender, age, education, place of residence, professional status and relationships. Sexual orientation information was not collected.

The Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Polish adaptation: Jankowski, 2015) was administered to measure the sociosexual behavior, attitudes, and desire. Within the current study, participants answered nine items using a five-point Likert-type response scale, which was different for each subscale. For instance, on items measuring sociosexual behavior participants indicated the number of different partners from 1 = 0 to 5 = 8 or more (sample item: “With how many different partners have you had sex in the past 12 months?”), on items measuring sociosexual attitudes, participants rated their agreement from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (sample item: “Sex without love is okay”), and on items measuring sociosexual desire respondents indicated the

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations between studied variables.

Dimension	Overall (N = 556) M (SD)	Women (N = 411) M (SD)	Men (N = 145) M (SD)	R					d
				1	2	3	4	5	
Mental health									
1. Emotional well-being	3.93 (1.26)	3.95 (1.21)	3.85 (1.39)	–					.07
2. Psychological well-being	3.77 (1.18)	3.76 (1.18)	3.81 (1.19)	.77**					.08
3. Social well-being	3.13 (1.18)	3.15 (1.18)	3.05 (1.17)	.61**	.69**	–			.04
Sociosexuality									
4. Behavior	1.77 (0.81)	1.73 (0.73)	1.88 (0.98)	.03	.10*	–.01	–		.17
5. Attitude	2.77 (1.30)	2.59 (1.27)	3.27 (1.25)	–.04	.03	–.03	.54**	–	.55
6. Desire	2.32 (1.08)	2.08 (0.93)	2.99 (1.18)	–.10*	.01	.01	.38**	.58**	.85

Note. *r* = Pearson's correlation; *d* = Cohen's *d* effect size (positive values indicate higher mean in women, and negative values indicate higher mean in men).

p* < .05; *p* < .01.

frequency from 1 = *never* to 5 = *nearly every day* (sample item: “I can imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying casual sex with different partners.” Within the current study, the internal consistency estimates were good for each of the subscales ($\alpha = .81$ for behavior, $\alpha = .82$ for attitudes, and $\alpha = .88$ for desire) and the scale was well fitted to the data ($\chi^2_{(24)} = 64.777$; $p < .001$; CFI = .979; RMSEA = .056[.040–.072]).

Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2002, 2009; Polish adaptation: Karaś et al., 2014) was used to measure three components of well-being: emotional, social and psychological. The participants responded 14 statements connected with their experiences over the last month using six-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 6 = *every day* (sample item: “During the past month how often did you feel interested in life”). The structure of MHC-SF has been validated across different cultures and showed good psychometric and structural performance (Rogoza et al., 2018), which makes it an adequate measure to assess different components of well-being. Within the current study, the internal consistency estimates of each component were good ($\alpha = .88$ for emotional well-being, $\alpha = .85$ for social well-being, and $\alpha = .88$ for psychological well-being) and the scale was well-fitted to the data ($\chi^2_{(74)} = 374.589$; $p < .001$; CFI = .920; RMSEA = .085[.077–.094])

Statistical analyses

All analyses were carried out in Mplus v. 7.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). The scripts and materials necessary to reproduce the study are available at Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/zngcp/?view_only=e57a464fa766449c9ce417a1bd990e5f).

Due to the lack of multivariate normality, all of the analyses were conducted using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors. No correlations between residuals were added in any of the analyzed measurement models.

To test the differences in sociosexuality across gender, we carried out MGCFA in which latent mean scores of men and women were compared in order to examine if the facets of sociosexuality (behavior, attitudes, and desire) could be meaningfully differentiated. In MGCFA three progressively constrained models were compared: configural (i.e., unconstrained), metric (i.e., with factor loadings constrained to be equal) and scalar (i.e., with item intercepts constraint to be equal; Meredith, 1993). Following Chen's (2007) criteria to evaluate the model fit, the configural model should be well fitted to the data if values >.90 in CFI and TLI and <.08 in RMSEA and SRMR were reported, and the differences between configural and metric as well as between metric and scalar did not exceed .01 in CFI and .015 in RMSEA.

In order to examine the association between sociosexuality and well-being, three different structural equation models (SEM) were analyzed, in which the three facets of sociosexuality predicted emotional, psychological and social well-being: (1) a model for overall sample, and separate models for (2) women and (3) men. The models may be deemed as well fitted when the estimates of CFI $\geq .90$ and RMSEA $\leq .08$ (Byrne, 1994).

Table 3. Pearson's correlations among the studied variables across gender.

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Emotional well-being	–	.74**	.57**	.07	–.05	–.20*
2. Psychological well-being	.78**	–	.66**	.18*	.07	–.08
3. Social well-being	.62**	.70**	–	.08	.08	.02
4. Sociosexual behavior	.00	.07	–.05	–	.54**	.46**
5. Sociosexual attitude	–.03	.01	–.06	.54**	–	.53**
6. Sociosexual desire	–.05	.04	.03	.32**	.56**	–

Note. Below diagonal values correspond to women's correlations. Above diagonal values correspond to men's correlations.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 4. Measurement invariance of sociosexuality across gender.

	χ^2 (df)	CFI	RMSEA
Configural	85.66 ₍₄₈₎	.981	.053
Metric	133.64 ₍₅₄₎	.960	.073
Partial metric	98.96 ₍₅₂₎	.976	.057
Scalar	106.98 ₍₅₈₎	.975	.055
Metric vs configural	47.98	.021	.20
Partial metric* vs configural	13.30	.005	.004
Scalar vs partial metric	8.02	.001	.002

Note. *Loadings of items 1 and 7 were freed.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics and correlations of the studied variables are presented in Table 2, and intercorrelations for women and men are presented in Table 3. In general, men reported higher psychological well-being and scored higher in the three dimensions of sociosexuality than women. Conversely, women showed higher emotional and social well-being than men. The correlations between sociosexuality and mental health showed significant values only for men, with a negative correlation between emotional well-being and sociosexual desire. The intercorrelations of both the mental health and sociosexuality subscales were significant (see Tables 2 and 3).

Test of the differences in sociosexuality across gender

The results of the MGCFA comparing the structure of sociosexuality across gender are presented in Table 4.

The configural model was fitted to the data very well, which indicated that both men and women defined sociosexual behavior, attitudes, and desire in a similar manner. Hence, our first hypothesis was confirmed. Although the metric model was still very well fitted, the difference

Table 5. Latent mean comparisons of gender differences in sociosexuality.

Sociosexual ...	<i>M</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
... behavior	.14	1.55	.120
... attitudes	.61	5.18	.001
... desire	.81	7.90	.001

Note. Positive values of mean suggest higher scores in men.

with the configural model was exceeding the assumed evaluation criteria. Thus, the factor loadings of the two items were freed, which successfully increased the fit indices to acceptable values, indicating that the correlates of sociosexuality can be compared across gender. The difference between the scalar and the partial metric model was negligible and within the acceptable range, thus the latent mean scores can be meaningfully compared across gender. The standardized estimates from the scalar model presenting gender comparisons in sociosexuality are presented in Table 5.

As expected, and supporting hypothesis two, men scored significantly higher in sociosexual attitudes and desire, but no significant gender differences were reported in behavior.

How does sociosexuality relate to well-being?

Within each SEM model (overall sample, women and men), sociosexuality facets (behavior, attitudes, and desire) predicted well-being (emotional, psychological and social). For the overall sample, the analyzed model was well-fitted ($\chi^2_{(215)} = 701.09$; $p < .001$; CFI = .926; TLI = .913; RMSEA = .064[.059–.069]; SRMR = .056). Only sociosexual behavior emerged as a significant predictor of psychological well-being, the rest of the estimates were non-significant. This only confirmed partially our third hypothesis, as sociosexual desire and attitudes did not predict any form of well-being in the overall sample. The standardized estimates from the SEM model are shown in Figure 1.

For women, the tested model was well fitted to the data ($\chi^2_{(253)} = 4905.37$; $p < .001$; CFI = .934; TLI = .922; RMSEA = .059[.053–.066]; SRMR = .054), whereas in men, although the model was poorly fitted to the data ($\chi^2_{(253)} = 2249.25$; $p < .001$; CFI = .881; TLI = .860; RMSEA = .088[.076–.099]; SRMR = .075), the fit indices

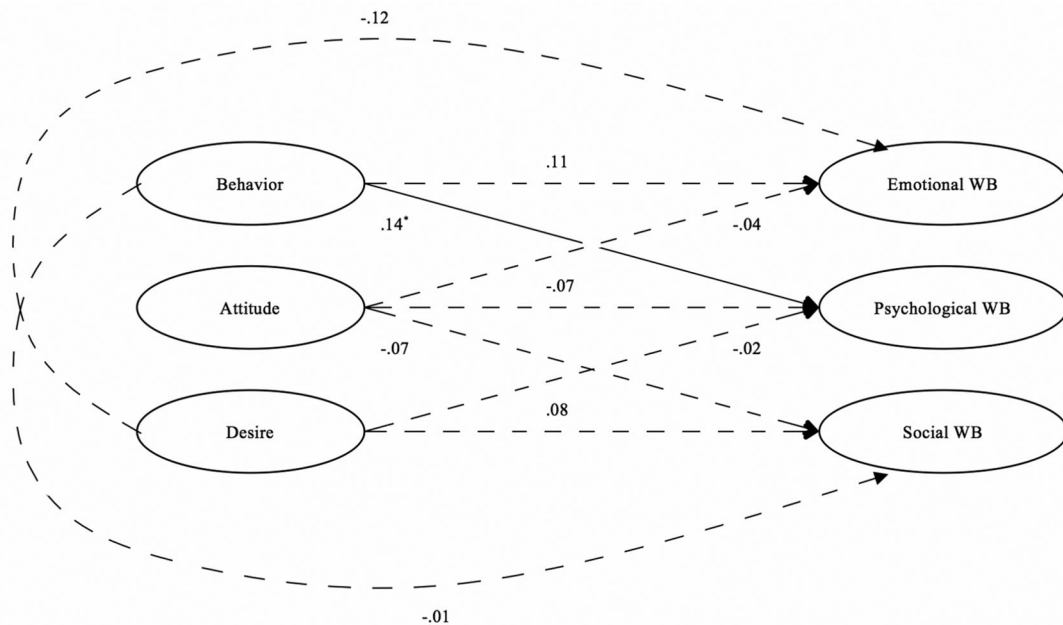


Figure 1. Standardized estimates of sociosexuality predicting well-being in overall sample. *Note.* Solid lines indicate significant relations, while discontinuous lines indicate non-significant relations. For the clarity of the figure, only the structural part of the model is presented. The model explained 2% of variance (R^2) in behavior, 1% in attitudes and 1% in desire.

were close to acceptable boundaries. In women, no facet of sociosexuality predicted well-being (although there was a tendency of desire predicting social well-being at $p = .095$). Conversely, sociosexual behavior predicted positively emotional and psychological well-being in men, whereas sociosexual desire predicted negatively these same well-being dimensions (although $p = .052$ for psychological well-being). Therefore, our fourth hypothesis was partially confirmed. No significant results were found in attitudes predicting any dimension of well-being nor in any sociosexuality factor predicting social well-being. The standardized estimates from both SEM models are presented in Figure 2.

Discussion

Is sociosexuality comparable between women and men?

According to our predictions, the structure of sociosexuality is comparable between men and women, and results demonstrated that there are gender differences in this construct. Men reported more positive attitudes toward casual sex and fantasized more than women, which is in accordance with prior research suggesting a more restrictive sociosexual orientation in women

(Edelstein et al., 2011; Meskó et al., 2014; Rammsayer et al., 2017). Women generally experience more negative psychological consequences than men following casual sex and, unlike men, women's sexual behavior tend to be associated with their perception of partners' potential and willingness for parental investment (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Townsend & Wasserman, 2011), which can evoke a more restricted sociosexual orientation. However, a recent study found that sociosexual desire was closely related to women's sexual orientation, with lesbians reporting more uncommitted sociosexuality than heterosexual women (Waldis et al., 2020). On the question of sexual behavior, our study showed no differences in the frequency of past sexual intercourse across gender, despite the literature indicating that men declared uncommitted sex more frequently than women (Morrison et al., 2013). This finding contrasts previous studies suggesting that unrestrictive individuals, characterized by an orientation to have sex outside committed relationships, report higher sexual behavior (Penke, 2011; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Altogether, the field of sociosexuality still requires more scientific evidences to disentangle its underlying mechanisms.

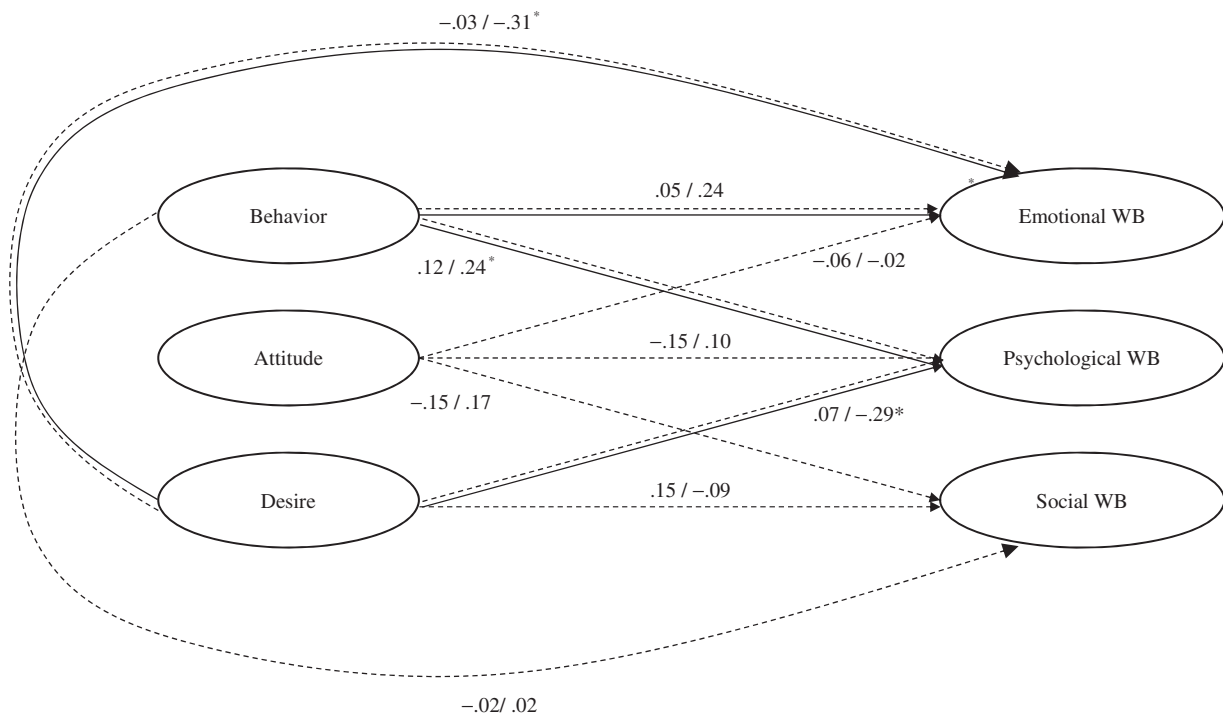


Figure 2. Standardized estimates of sociosexuality predicting well-being across gender. *Note.* The estimates of women and men are separated by / respectively. Solid lines indicate significant relations, while discontinuous lines indicate non-significant relations. For the clarity of the figure, only the structural part of the model is presented. In women, the model explained 1% of variance (R^2) in behavior, 2% in attitudes and 1% in desire. In men, the model explained 8% of variance in behavior, 2% in attitudes and 7% in desire.

Sociosexual desire entails one of the broadest psychological constructs reporting gender differences (Hyde, 2005). As a plausible explanation, it has been suggested that the physiological systems for sexual attraction are more dependent on the physiological systems for interpersonal attachment in women than men (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Lower levels of women sexual desire and attitudes in our study can be explained in the context of post-coital evaluations. Unlike men, women tend to feel worried and vulnerable after sexual intercourses with uncommitted partners (Townsend & Wasserman, 2011). These negative feelings after sexual encounters could result in decreased attempts to repeat sexual behaviors (Fielder & Carey, 2010). As women may be guided toward quality-investment relationships, the aftermath disturbing emotional appraisals, even in permissive women, could be the result of inconformity with the level of [insufficient] partner-investment (Paul et al., 2008).

Our results may also be interpreted within the framework of cultural norms that influence women's sexuality. In general terms, Bay-Cheng's line

of research on the dynamics of sexual scripts suggests that, despite witnessing signs of progress, social evaluations of young women's worth are driven by cultural categorizations of their sexuality (e.g., abstinent or active), which still remains determined by traditionally gendered norms (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Bay-Cheng et al., 2018). Women who engage in sexual intercourses tend to be seen as promiscuous, less competent, and less emotionally stable than men (Kreager et al., 2009). The resulting feelings of self-blame and cultural characterization (Bay-Cheng, 2015) might explain why women reported lower sociosexual desire and attitudes in our study.

Uncommitted sexual experiences can be judged as acceptable in men but as inappropriate in women within the "hookup culture" (Crawford & Popp, 2003), yet it has been criticized for being defined in sexist terms (Kelly, 2012). Research suggests that women tend to report more negative outcomes after sexual intercourses than men. For instance, sexual encounters were associated with more positive emotional responses and less negative emotional responses in men than

women, including depressive symptoms and emotional distress (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Owen et al., 2011), although previous studies found these results in both genders (Bersamin et al., 2014). This is congruent with our findings since sociosexual behavior contributed to more hedonic feelings and self-realization in men but not in women.

The relationship of sociosexuality with well-being

The present study indicated that sociosexuality did not predict well-being in women. On the contrary, men reported significant results—emotional and psychological well-being were positively predicted by sociosexual behavior and negatively by sociosexual desire. This finding adds knowledge to a growing body of research pointing to gender differences in sexuality (Buss, 2016; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2011; Townsend & Wasserman, 2011). In contrast to earlier research suggesting casual sex as detrimental to psychological well-being (Bersamin et al., 2014; Fielder & Carey, 2010), in the present study sociosexual behavior was positively related to well-being, although only in men. This divergence in the results may respond to methodological disparities in the measurement of the constructs. Most studies in the field have only focused on the measurement of casual sex in terms of the number of sexual intercours (sexual behavior) rather than sociosexuality (e.g., Bersamin et al., 2014; Fielder & Carey, 2010; Vrangalova, 2015b, 2015a). Besides, research on the study of the effects of sociosexuality over well-being has been most restricted to the measurement of well-being correlates, such as [lack of] depression or self-esteem, instead of straightforward indications of well-being, such as emotional, psychological or social well-being.

By employing a comprehensible measure of mental health, I demonstrated that sociosexuality can be positively associated with psychological and emotional well-being—it should be noticed, though, that these results were significant in the overall and men sample, but not in women. Based on the findings of Vrangalova and Ong (2014), who employed sociosexuality measures, it may be the case that unrestrictive individuals

enjoy having uncommitted sex and thus feel better, probably because they feel motivated toward casual sex, while restrictive individuals may engage in sexual intercours only when they feel motivated toward it and therefore find the activity beneficial (Vrangalova, 2015a).

Our findings indicated that having high sexual interest and high sexual fantasies appeared as slightly negative for men's well-being; apparently, the realization of the sociosexual desire (behavioral aspect of sociosexuality) was the factor that contributed to their emotional and psychological well-being. Men showed more sociosexual desire, and since this motivational component of sociosexuality guides mating strategies toward the consummation of the fantasy (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), unsuccessful behavioral attempts may derive in feelings of displeasure and unfulfillment. Fielder and Carey (2010) found in a prospective study that uncommitted sex led to psychological distress in women but not in men. Based on that, our study puts forward a different mechanism by which sociosexuality may lead men (but not women) to psychological distress. This is, the motivation to uncommitted sex (in form of fantasies about sexual activities) can lead to lower emotional and psychological well-being in men, but the realization of those fantasies, indeed, seem to increase these two facets of well-being.

Implications

The fact that certain aspects of sociosexuality can affect well-being differently in men and women can have important implications for psychology researchers and practitioners. First, women seem to pay for the consequences of traditional gendered norms and sexual scripts that still prevail in modern societies, as when it comes to engaging in sex without love, only men reported benefits for their well-being. These results further highlight the gender inequalities in how men and women experiment sexuality (Bay-Cheng et al., 2018). Second, these findings can be important for changing the socially stigmatized perception of engaging in casual sex. As the results suggest, men report more positive emotions and psychological fulfillment as a result of having frequent

uncommitted sexual intercourses, but “just” being highly motivated toward casual sex could be detrimental. Casual sex, by definition, lacks commitment and thus fails to satisfy the innate human need for a deep and lasting interpersonal connection (Vrangalova, 2015a). With this respect, understanding that uncommitted sexual relationships have different consequences to men’s and women’s well-being could help refine strategies to address sexual inequalities. For instance, it could help shift education, public policy, and clinical work away from uniform, one-size-fits-all strategies and messages concerning casual sex and its psychological consequences toward more individually tailored, and thus, useful approaches. Finally, research guided by self-determination theory, a well-established theory of human motivation and personality, shows that when people do things in order to achieve a purpose (e.g., practicing casual sex to obtain personal gratification), this has a positive impact on well-being. By contrast, when people do those exact same things in order to prevent damage (e.g., practicing casual sex to avoid negative consequences), their well-being diminishes (Gagn & Deci, 2005; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Therefore, understanding how autonomous motivation drives sociosexual behaviors may be a particularly useful tool to help young adults make responsible and educated decisions about their orientation toward casual sex. Importantly, young people need to be informed that whether their psychological and physical well-being benefits or suffers from casual sex may be dependent on their reasons for engaging in it.

Limitations and future research avenues

A number of limitations need to be considered. First, the sampling procedure was probabilistic, imbalanced in terms of gender, non-representative, and participants were volunteers from social media and the survey was performed online, therefore the results should be generalized with caution. It would be interesting to examine this relationship in samples of different ages (e.g., youth, older adults, or clinical populations) and in different cultures. Second, only self-reports were used, which can bias participants’ responses.

Because our study employed a cross-sectional design, longitudinal and experimental analyses are recommended to ensure the directionality and causal relationship of these findings. Last and notably, participants’ sexual orientation was not specified within the current study, and since sociosexuality is different in straight and sexual minority collectives, its impact on well-being might differ. Hence, it is necessary to investigate whether the present findings can be replicated in heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual individuals. As a future avenue of research, it may be relevant to study the mechanisms by which casual sex has an impact on mental health and the role of the sociosexuality components in this process. As a possibility, the congruency between sociosexuality and personal values (e.g., engaging in casual sex due to more unrestrictive orientation) may explain the differences in mental health.

Conclusions

Sociosexuality, defined as the willingness to engage in uncommitted or casual sex, was differently described in men and women. As expected, men reported higher sociosexual attitudes and desire than women, yet no gender differences emerged in sociosexual behavior. In its connection with mental health, men’s emotional and psychological well-being was predicted positively by behavior and negatively by desire. The lack of significant relationships in women highlights the gender inequalities in how men and women experience sexuality. It also aligns with the prevailing cultural and gendered norms that influence women’s sexuality and the impact that casual sex has on their well-being. Understanding the gender differences in uncommitted intercourses and its psychological consequences can help devise strategies and social policies to address sexual inequalities in different contexts.

Ethical approval

All procedures involving human participants in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institute of Psychology (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards

Informed consent

Participants signed an informed consent regarding the procedure and purpose of the study prior to enrollment in the program.

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Data availability statement

The data and code associated with the study are available at Open Science Framework

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