Characteristics of a Sex-Positive Attitude: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The term *sex positivity* is present in recent years in academia, in activism, and in media, and *sex-positive* is used by individuals for self-description – but the meaning varies and can even be contradictory. This research aims to understand sex positivity from an individual's perspective as an attitude, considering different contexts of the current discourse. In this article, I apply a qualitative research approach through interviewing experts working on sex positivity. The results of a focused analysis demonstrate that a sex-positive attitude can be operationalized according to twelve characteristics. Based on this, sex positivity can become comprehensible and applicable to individual societal actors and contribute to further research on the measurability of sex positivity.

Keywords: *sex-positive attitude, sex positivity, positive sexuality, expert interviews, focused analysis*

Introduction

In past decades, using the terms *sex-positive* or *sex positivity* or also *positive sexuality* has increased in academia, in activism, in media, and by individuals – but depending on who is using them, the meaning varies and can cause misunderstandings (Langer, 2025). The current discussion of sex positivity is cross-disciplinary and neither led by one discipline nor by a certain or single aspect. Moreover, it includes critical and partly contradictory perspectives from scientists to activists. Similarly, the understanding of sex positivity is distinguished by a definitional variance, which has shown shifts in recent years (Langer, 2026). In addition to considering the perspective or context for defining sex positivity (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Jones, 2022; Queen & Comella, 2008), I argue elsewhere (Langer, 2026) that it is important to recognize that the discourse itself can be structured in three distinct contexts: an institutional context, a participatory context, and a private context, as shown within publications that include the keyword *sex-positive* and related terms. Since this discussion on sex positivity is primarily conducted in English and includes contributions from many voices, I find this structure beneficial. First, it highlights the construct of *sex positivity* in its overall complexity as well as within each specific context. Second, it provides insight into the extent that sex positivity has permeated public life, sexual culture, and private spheres. Third, assuming that sex positivity is desirable, it underscores the challenges individuals may face in comprehending the term *sex-positive*. Furthermore, these contexts connect to an individual's perspective of encountering various direct as well as indirect implications through sex positivity.

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Institutional Context

The institutional context applies on an institutional level that frames the public life and the perception of sexuality within societies, including medical or educational institutions, science and research, or political developments. The World Health Organization's current definition of sexual health is influential for understanding sex positivity; however, the described connection to sex positivity varies (Langer, 2026). Many scholars assert that a diversity of definitions is healthy and productive (Klein, 2021; Williams et al., 2015), although other scholars argue that science and research would benefit from a clear definition when applying sex positivity as an approach (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Watjen, 2020). For integrating sex positivity in science and research the *positive sexuality framework* (Williams et al., 2015) is widely but not solely used. However, under this term a conceptual diversity evolves, and additionally frequently used terms are *sex-positive framework* (Burnes et al., 2017; Fava & Fortenberry, 2021; Harden, 2014; Kimmes et al., 2015) or *sex-positive approach* (Baggett et al., 2017; Burnes et al., 2017; Cruz et al., 2017; Fava & Fortenberry, 2021) – alongside *sex positivity* and *sex-positive*. That certainly can cause confusion and lead to misunderstandings. Furthermore, the terms *positive sexuality* and *sex positivity* are often used synonymously, however Williams and Prior (2025) argue that the first is broader, more inclusive and less likely to be reduced to good sex.

In recent years, sex positivity has been incorporated into various research disciplines to enhance understanding, foster awareness, and address issues related to sexuality in various aspects of life, including health care (Nimbi et al., 2021), social work (Williams et al., 2016), multicultural education (Burnes, 2017), and psychology (Baggett et al., 2017; Burnes et al., 2017; Fava & Fortenberry, 2021). Sex positivity is also discussed in scientific literature concerning politics (Fahs, 2014; Mintz, 2019). However, critics argue that current discussions on sex positivity often overlook issues of multiple discrimination, and that future research should incorporate an intersectional approach (Alexander, 2019; Crowell et al., 2017).

Participatory Context

The participatory context describes a public, partly commercialized togetherness shaped by people's involvement and interactions. This occurs in various spaces online and offline, such as (online) communities, educational events, or kinky play parties, and is associated with the term *sex-positive*. Predominantly popular and activistic texts emphasize two partially overlapping aspects: challenging traditional sexual morals and critiquing sexuality from political and power perspectives. This is seen in different understandings of the terms *sex-positive* and *sex-negative*, and the additional use of *sex-critical*.

Within the participatory context sex positivity is discussed as a multifaceted movement (Gabosch & Shub, 2019; Neff, 2020), and also identified both as a sex-positive mainstream and as a sex-positive subculture, owing to increasing normalization associated with sex positivity (Barker & Hancock, 2017, 2019; Hanson, 2021). Barker and Hancock (2019) argue that the sex-positive mainstream focuses more on pleasure and great sex, and less whether good sex is based on consent. From a sex-critical perspective, which seeks to move beyond the binary of positive and negative, critics note the absence of critical analysis concerning power dynamics, such as determining who is included or excluded (Downing, 2012; Fabello, 2014; Stryker, 2013). The sex-positive

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subculture overlaps with a feminist perspective, as sex positivity includes a political aspect (Hanson, 2021). Furthermore, a feminist perspective on sex positivity within this context connects to deep feminist discourse and considers the terms *sex-positive* and *sex-negative* as contradictory, yet both progressive – challenging to overcome *sexmoralism* and *compulsory sexuality* (Millbank, 2012). In this regard, sex negativity aims to untie the knot of sex, power and violence tied under male dominance, critiquing sexuality on a political basis (Millbank, 2012). Otherwise, *sex-negative* refers to normative or moral behavior, and an understanding of sexuality reduced to reproductive functions (Mosher, 2017; Williams et al., 2015). That also outlines *sexmoralism*, the outdated version of *compulsory sexuality* (Millbank, 2012).

Sex positivity encompasses an array of themes, including not only pleasure, consent and relationships, but also eco sexuality, spirituality, kink, sex work, pornography, gender, disability, and education (Gabosch & Shub, 2019). While increasingly visible and used in various ways, the term *sex-positive* fosters breaking down norms. Nevertheless, a careless use also can cause misunderstandings. For example, one may understand the *positive* in *sex-positive* as mandatory to have good sex and continuously optimize one's own sexuality. However, *positive*, in terms of good, can hardly represent a universal quality (Downing, 2012). Furthermore, it is less about sexual performance, but rather "working towards a more positive relationship with sex" (Glickman, 2000).

Private Context

The private context centers on the individual, with the term *sex-positive* functioning as a self-description for a positive attitude toward sexuality. Though the institutional as well as participatory contexts contribute to individual development, such a process also requires reflecting on one's sexuality, which certainly can be challenging if sexuality is present in all forms from pleasure to proscription; thus individual support can be helpful. Accordingly, the literature pays particular attention to professionals reflecting on their own attitude to provide unbiased support for individuals (Watjen, 2020), as well as to enable communicating about sexuality and intimacy (Dodd, 2019). A language is needed to meet diverse social challenges (Glickman, 2000; Williams et al., 2013) – such as conflicts in a partnership or more broadly knowing your sexual rights. Moreover, Glickman (2019) points out that sex positivity is more a set of principles than rules. This highlights the importance of ensuring that, in challenging existing norms, new norms are not inadvertently constructed due to misunderstandings or a failure to distinguish between oneself and others – specifically, between moral principles and moralizing (Srinivasan, 2022).

Sex Positivity through an Individual's Perspective

However, for an interested as well as questioning individual, the current discourse on sex positivity may cause challenges through various direct as well as indirect implications. With the definition of sexual health by the World Health Organization, the foundation for societal development in a sex-positive sense is institutionalized. This offers certainty and reliability for entitling further progression. With incorporating sex positivity in various research disciplines, individuals can and hopefully will encounter an increasingly changing attitude towards sexuality in professional contexts. At the same time, participating in the sexual cultural togetherness can be its own challenge with sex positivity opening a continuum: on the one end, it could tempt

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individuals to produce a new "normal" in the name of simple solutions, without critically reflecting on what is their own. On the other end, it could support the further dismantling of traditional sexual morals and the promotion of critical perspectives on sexuality. Moreover, the private sphere focuses on individual development by promoting an individual understanding of sexuality, rather than comparing oneself with a societal "normal" or "abnormal."

Noteworthily in the current discussion, sex positivity is often contrasted with established social morals and generally accepted norms in western societies regarding relationships as well as sexual preferences (Alexander, 2019; Burnes et al., 2017; Ellison & Papps, 2020; Neff, 2020). Additionally, in the media, sex positivity is often connected to open relationships or kinky parties as well as sexual practices. This can cause hesitance, for example, by monogamous, heterosexual individuals to engage with sex positivity – even though sex positivity challenges a view of normality versus pathology and allows one to escape this false dichotomy (Burnes et al., 2017). With sex positivity, stereotypes about sexual orientation and gender identity are broken down, and awareness is raised about multiple types of discrimination, exclusion, and rejection (Alexander, 2019; Neff, 2020). Regarding the body with sex positivity, the focus shifts from optimization and performance to self-determination, recognizing one's own body, and integrating mind and body (Neff, 2020). Similarly, a holistic view and mindful connection with oneself can enhance confidence in one's sexuality and facilitate the transition from theoretical knowledge to practical experience, ultimately fostering connections with others. Embodiment serves as a key aspect for reorienting one's sexuality (Ellison & Papps, 2020). Furthermore, as a practical experience, sex positivity is described in various ways, often regarding kink or consensual non-monogamy. These practices emphasize competencies such as consent, respect, and open and honest communication in contrast to shame, insecurities, or condemnation based on societal norms (Alexander, 2019; Burnes et al., 2017). Yet it is important to highlight that sex positivity is not about eliminating monogamy or heterosexuality but instead critically examining them (Mense, 2021). This allows for consensual sexualities and relationships to be separated from norms and better understood as a spectrum. Moreover, Glickman (2019), Mense (2021), Neff (2020), and Roidinger and Zuschnig (2021) argue that sex positivity is an attitude.

In the literature I found initial suggestions relating to how a sex-positive attitude could be described, as well as factors that may promote such an attitude (Mense, 2021; Murray et al., 2017; Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). First, the philosopher Mense (2021, pp. 28–29) articulates: "Sex-positivity is an attitude that addresses the question of how people want to live with each other, how they can connect and stay connected and how they can enjoy themselves individually as well as in each other's company. In this sense, *integrated sex-positivity* [emphasis in original] addresses fundamental communal principles of living in a society." In her article, she engages with deregulated sex-positive spaces, defined as semi-public communal meeting spaces allowing sexual interaction (Mense, 2021). She argues that these spaces are part of sex-positive culture as well as activism and, as such, address fundamental aspects of social life, particularly shaping interpersonal encounters. She succinctly outlines the aspects in an unfinished how-to list, which begins with "how to show and communicate affection, how to relate to yourself and to your body, how to relate to other people and their bodies, how to find an appropriate proximity […]" (Mense, 2021, p. 42). Reflecting those questions may be supportive to developing a sex-positive attitude. Fittingly, Mense (2021, p. 42) concludes: "The crucial point […] is that sex-positive culture needs to be good in practice and not only in theory." Second, the sexual therapists Roidinger and Zuschnig

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(2021) conclude their popular German book on sex positivity with 16 criteria for a sex-positive intimate relationship. For example, these begin with "self-responsibility and sexual learning" and "talking about sexuality" followed by "seeking consent" then "attention: presence and connection" and all being explained shortly (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021, pp. 189–193). With these criteria, they complete their historical contextualization of sex positivity, their engagement with the sex-positive movement and scene, as well as the distinctions they draw from norms structured around preferences and non-monogamous relationships. The authors emphasize that not all criteria are equally important for all people at all times, as life circumstances and priorities may change (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). Since a sex-positive relationship emerges from at least two individuals, the 16 criteria may also be understood as characteristics of a sex-positive attitude. Remarkably, they are neither about specific forms of relationships nor about sexual preferences. Third, the scientists Murray, Pope and Willis (2017) present a list of factors that support developing a positive attitude toward sexuality. Based on an extensive literature review, they identified contextual influences for better understanding sexuality and outlined them with the *Contextualized Sexuality Model*. They conclude with introducing *positive sexuality* as a new paradigm for sexual counseling, including the factors. The list counts 25 factors (Murray et al., 2017, pp. 273–285); they are connected to the individual through "problem-solving and decision-making", "receptive to pleasure" or "self-awareness" but not solely. Other factors are more relevant on an institutional level such as "access to quality sexuality education" or "public policies that promote positive sexuality." The variance of the factors underscores not only the complexity but also the contexts of sex positivity. Thus, certain factors may be understood as characteristics of a sex-positive attitude. However, a sex-positive attitude, which shapes an individual's thoughts and behavior, has not yet been systematically investigated.

Research Purpose and Significance

This study explores sex positivity from an individual's perspective as an attitude. It was led by the research question: is a differentiated understanding of a sex-positive attitude, at least with a common core, within the context of the current discourse and the outlined theoretical contexts of sex positivity possible? Thus, my research objective was, if possible, to identify characteristics that define a sex-positive attitude. Since a qualitative approach was applied, the decision was made to interview individuals who contribute professionally to the development of sex positivity.

The operationalization of a sex-positive attitude is significant for understanding sex positivity as a genuinely comprehensible "set of principles" (Glickman, 2019, p. 23). This is followed by contributing to further research on the measurability of sex positivity. Although various scales on sexuality exist, they are often based on outdated sexual morals, lack important elements of a contemporary understanding, or focus only on single aspects of sex positivity (Belous & Schulz, 2022; Casu, 2018; Hangen & Rogge, 2021; Maes et al., 2022).

In the last few years, three measures for sex positivity and positive sexuality have been published. First, with the *Positive Sexuality in Adolescence Scale* (PSAS), the multifaceted nature of positive sexuality among adolescents can be assessed (Maes et al., 2022). Second, the *Sex Positivity Inventory for Counselors* (SPI-C) has been developed to measure sex positivity among counselors to improve counseling competency (Burks, 2022). Third, the *Sex Positivity Scale* (SPS)

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evaluates a person's level of sex positivity (Belous & Schulz, 2022). Recently, the SPS has first been used in a population of doctoral psychology trainees and found to require further validation in diverse populations and contexts (Aigen, 2025). Furthermore, as noted by Aigen (2025) regarding research in psychology, there still is a lack of measures that explore sex positivity empirically. Based on a qualitative methodology, the results of this study could provide a different starting point compared to a thorough literature review as conducted for SPS (Belous & Schulz, 2022). Nevertheless, Belous and Schulz (2022, p. 2) articulate importantly about measuring how sex-positive a person is that "as researchers we are walking a thin line between judging what is sex positive, and what is not."

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative methodology, designed based on the introduced theoretical contexts of sex positivity. This approach aimed first to obtain broad interpretive insights, and second to abstract findings from specific instances for theory generation (Akremi, 2019; Bogner et al., 2014). Therefore, the chosen participants were experts as their knowledge can be seen as relevant and thus guiding for others (Bogner et al., 2014). Furthermore, the expert's knowledge can be detached and understood in a general sense (Helfferich, 2019).

For this purpose, I identified experts for each of the theoretical contexts. The experts are present in the literature, or practically involved in the sex-positive scene, or visibly integrate sex positivity in their work, and thus contribute to the development of sex positivity. I ranked them by attributed expertise and contacted one after the other via e-mail until each context was covered by two experts. For the institutional context, I interviewed Emily Prior and DJ Williams, both from the United States and with a background in research who significantly contribute to the theoretical development of sex positivity. For the participatory context, I interviewed Reinhard Gaida from Austria who organizes sex-positive spaces for education and exploration, and Eva Hanson from Germany who is part of a project to promote sexuality as an important part of the societal togetherness and writes for the associated blog. For the private context, I interviewed Beatrix Roidinger from Austria and Daniel Vonwil from Germany who are both sexual therapists and hold up a sex-positive perspective in their work. Regarding self-identification with sex-positivity, five experts identified as sex-positive, and one hesitated to use labels.

For the interviews, I applied a semi-structured, non-individualized approach with open and non-directive questions. First, I asked about the individual relation to sex positivity aiming to get into the topic, and to understand their progress into experts in depth. Second, I focused on the general understanding of *attitude* as a central term for the study. Third, I covered *sex-positive attitude* with various questions to capture aspects that characterize it as well as how a sex-positive attitude evolves and is influenced. I started this section with the question: "What characterizes a sex-positive person? Or in other words: How would you recognize a sex-positive attitude in a person?" followed by more specific questions, such as: "Which aspects of interpersonal relationships reflect a sex-positive attitude?" to obtain further details and request substantiation. Fourth, I focused on critically discussed aspects in the discourse to address their potential relevance for a sex-positive attitude. Fifth, I asked to investigate the future to determine how the experts would recognize the success of their work as well as to presume context-specific influences. Therefore, I asked: "How would a society be recognizable that is predominantly characterized by

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people with sex-positive attitudes? How would interpersonal relationships be characterized?" This procedure created an open space for the experts to unfold their knowledge, interpretations, and attitudes concerning the research objective from a variety of angles. Previously, I acknowledged my dual role as both co-expert and accomplice to intentionally separate my personal and professional perspectives, although the latter became apparent during the interviews (Bogner et al., 2014). The interviews, two in English and four in German, were recorded and verbatim transcribed without translation. For this article, however, German quotes have been translated into English. Quotations within this article have been lightly edited for grammar and clarity.

For the analysis of the interview transcripts, I applied Rädiker and Kuckartz's (2020) focused analysis which is designed for semi-structured interviews, inspired by thematic analysis as well as grounded theory, and includes different aspects of a quantitative analysis. After conducting the interviews and exploring the transcripts for the first time, I developed a category system from the interview guideline to structure the data in segments, at least of sense, and then systematically differentiated each category in sub-categories, and if necessary sub-sub-categories. That led to operationalizing characteristics of a sex-positive attitude. The systematic process required both a conscious withdrawal from my own experiences and a repeated focus on the research objective while exploring the data.

Results

Twelve characteristics emerged from the interviews that define a sex-positive attitude, reflecting a broadly shared understanding of sex positivity among the experts across the institutional, the participatory, and the private contexts. Even though some differences in their perspectives emerged, all were grounded in a common understanding of attitude. Overall, the interviewees indicated that attitude is a set of values and experiences that guide individual behavior and may evolve over the course of a lifetime, as it is shaped by numerous factors. Equally, a sex-positive attitude is subject to factors that promote or hinder its development. Factors such as family, social environment, culture, education, knowledge, challenges in social interactions, and the creation as well as construction of spaces all help contextualize a sex-positive attitude in society (Langer, 2024).

As I will detail below, a synthesis from these interviews emerged that begins with understanding that a sex-positive attitude is characterized by viewing sexuality as an individual experience, approaching differences with curiosity through being open, interested, and accepting of others and oneself (*openness & acceptance*). It involves tolerating and respecting others' experiences while keeping personal boundaries (*tolerance & respect*). It emphasizes taking responsibility for one's own sexuality (*responsibility*) and accepting both personal and others' needs without perceiving differences as obstacles (*acceptance of needs*). It includes discussing sexuality and talking about desires as well as boundaries honestly (*communication*), with consent as a necessary element (*consent*). Whether alone or with others, it underlines exploring sexuality in a conscious manner (*exploration*) and incorporating lifelong learning (*continued development*). It encourages understanding and empathy toward differences and the emotions they may evoke (*peacemaking*). It further involves recognizing others holistically (*humanizing*), as well as embracing oneself fully – including sexuality as a component of authentic selfhood (*authenticity*). Ultimately, it affirms acknowledging sexuality as self-determined for oneself and others (*recognition of sexual self-determination*). In the sections that follow, I describe and illustrate each

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of the twelve characteristics in more detail and connect them to the previously mentioned first available suggestions for a sex-positive attitude.

Openness & Acceptance

The characteristic *openness & acceptance* refers to being open and accepting both of others and oneself, conceptualized as an active process, an authentic interest, and the willingness to communicate. Sexuality is perceived as an individual experience, yet differences arouse curiosity. It is precisely described through, first, the adjective *diverse* which focuses on the diversity of sexualities. For example, Williams laid out: "by acceptance of lots of diverse behaviors, by not stigmatizing people, by recognizing equality and equity in people's preferences and experiences." Thereby diversity incorporates positive perspectives as well as challenges, such as differences: "Be open, tolerant, interested. Again, without dogma, [...] but in terms of attitude. Non-sex-positive people always shut down as soon as there's a difference [...]. And that has an effect on the mood, on the openness" (Roidinger). Second, is the adjective *affirmative*, which describes a positive, affirmative approach to sexuality. Rather than perceiving sexuality and sexual variety as compulsory, sexuality is associated with joy, pleasure and enjoyment and a "fundamentally positive attitude towards sexuality" (Vonwil). Third, is the adjective *attentive*, which frames the attention for each other. Hanson articulated: "There is much more interest in the other person; people don't talk for the sake of talking, but rather they talk to each other to get in touch and to know each other; there is a great curiosity about what kind of person you are." In distinction the negative is about condemnation, exclusion or reflexive rejection. Fourth, the adjective *present*, which stands for the immediacy of sexuality and relating uncontrollability. It is about accepting sexuality as a part of life but not overrating it and placing it "somehow on a huge pedestal" (Hanson), as well as being in the present moment by "letting go of goals or purposes or results" (Hanson) and allowing it to be something "joyful, pleasurable" (Vonwil). And fifth, is the adjective *individual*, which underlines the uniqueness of sexualities. For example, Gaida formulated: "meaning that one can truly accept that almost every person's sexuality is different or that almost every person has different preferences, and to understand and accept that." A comparison with the literature also shows a connection to encountering sexual self-disclosure with openness and respect, reflected in individuals' ability to disclose and discuss openly with each other (Murray et al., 2017). Likewise, it is important to understand differences in a relationship as resource and chance instead of an obstacle (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021).

Tolerance & Respect

The characteristic *tolerance & respect* describes tolerating and respecting others' sexual experiences. In contrast to *openness & acceptance*, it is conceptualized as a passive process that entails an awareness for experiences differing from one's own without active engagement. For example, Vonwil framed it as "openness to difference, in that sense a kind of tolerance" and Gaida expressed it as "simply the understanding that not all people are the same." More specifically, Prior underlined it with "being willing to take a step back, being willing to recognize that your experience isn't the only experience going on," but likewise she was explicit that "I don't have to like it, I don't have to engage in it. […] I think the core of it is being very accepting with other people and as long as no one's doing anything that's not consensual, as long as no one's action is harming others without consent let it happen." Thus, it means to overcome a general normality and

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to be supportive through tolerating and respecting the other, while still recognizing one's own limits. Nevertheless, Roidinger pointed out that tolerance "isn't something we are born with." Additionally in the literature, *tolerance & respect* extend beyond sexual experiences and apply to respecting one another more broadly (Murray et al., 2017).

Responsibility

The characteristic *responsibility* denotes feeling responsible for one's own sexuality. For example, Roidinger shared her belief deriving from therapeutic practice that "relationships improve when people take more responsibility for their feelings and their being. I see many couples who want their partner to do what they want and feel what they want. And that, of course, rarely works." Thus, *responsibility* involves being aware of one's own emotions or emotional pain points and acting carefully as well as consciously. In practice, that means "confronting the so-called triggers, traumas, the things that hurt, the things you keep stumbling over" (Roidinger) as well as a responsible use of mind-altering substances because people "might do things they wouldn't do sober" (Gaida). This includes the willingness to question and reflect on emotions as well as behavior. Therefore, Prior spoke about a healthy curiosity: "you need to be willing to ask questions, you need to be willing to question things, you need to be able to wonder why and how stuff happens." For *responsibility* the ability to reflect is fundamental for a sex-positive togetherness and "this presupposes that one is willing to reflect in the first place, that one says that this is something good […] I do not assume that this is always self-evident for everyone" (Roidinger). Similarly in the literature, *responsibility* is about not expecting others to be responsible for one's well-being and instead be self-responsible (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021).

Acceptance of Needs

The characteristic *acceptance of needs* refers to being aware of and accepting both one's own and the needs of others. In an intrapersonal sense, this involves recognizing that some needs may not be preferred while still accepting their existence, remaining open for change, and creating space for unpreferred needs that will eventually require attention. For example, Vonwil emphasized: "to deal with the fact that needs have a place regardless of whether I like them or not," and Gaida further explained that a need which is "always repressed and, above all, not lived out, will eventually surface. The unlived needs react and then govern you from the shadows. That's why I believe it's so important to confront sexuality." In an interpersonal sense, the *acceptance of needs* entails maintaining openness toward differing longings and not perceiving them as obstacles. For the future, Prior described dealing with both perspectives in practical terms: "I hope what we see again are people being more accepting of others, chilling out, just being a little bit more relaxed, recognizing that one person's choice is not another person's have to. What works for me doesn't have to work for you. And what works for you doesn't have to be dictated to me as what should work for me." Furthermore and deriving from the literature, self-awareness can help to understand one's own responses to sexual experiences with others (Murray et al., 2017).

Communication

The characteristic *communication* denotes communicating verbally and nonverbally about sexuality, expressing one's own needs and limits in an open and honest way. At least one should

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be "clear as best as possible, as honest as possible" (Prior), or put slightly differently to be "able to simply name things as they are, to describe again what you might have just done during sex with your partner, what might not have worked so well, or what felt really good. In short, being able to talk about many aspects of the experience" (Vonwil). The aspect of nonverbal communication refers to more physical interacting. For example, in a playfight: "People come to fight in order to get to know each other, not to make contact through words or talking, but through physicality" (Gaida). It also emerges that communication contributes to relationships in general and has a connecting and relieving effect. For example, when "sex-positive couples have developed a language for themselves to talk about their sexuality, about their relationship, and not just when they are in crisis, they simply have established a conversation and feedback culture" (Roidinger). Furthermore, the literature emphasizes that communication about sexuality presupposes basic communication skills (Murray et al., 2017).

Consent

The characteristic *consent* represents the willingness to discover, discuss and negotiate sexual interaction, with the corresponding requirement to be able to do so. Vonwil emphasized the importance of consent for sexual interactions: "everything that happens sexually has to be consensual for me, and that's the bottleneck." Further described by Gaida as "establishing a consent culture." In a more practical sense, Prior stressed that "in fact, I think it means [to have] more clear boundaries that can be discussed and negotiated and figured out." A related aspect is the capability to deal with a "no." Gaida articulated: "I believe that you also need the ability to deal with rejection, meaning you need the ability to accept a 'no' […] if you can't do that, then you're lost, then there's no consent. That's really important to be able to do that or to learn to do that." Additionally mentioned in the literature are aspects such as how to communicate boundaries firmly or how to reject someone with respect (Mense, 2021). Yet fundamental is the ability to consent at all, meaning that people "are in control of their senses" (Gaida). Moreover, consent reaches beyond sexuality: "trying to be aware of consent in no matter what the context is. It's like consent isn't only just for sex consent is for everything" (Prior).

Exploration

The characteristic *exploration* entails exploring sexuality with consciousness by oneself, or together with others. Concerning the self, it is associated with aspects such as "curiosity, courage, a spirit of experimentation, and playfulness" (Roidinger) as well as the skills to reflect, communicate, and negotiate. More regarding together with others, exploration is seen in interactions described by "where people sometimes try new things and also allow themselves to experience joy and fun in sexuality" (Vonwil). Underlying is an understanding of sexuality as "independent action, as an independent hobby" (Hanson) as well as "mere pleasure or artistic activity" (Hanson), rather than sexuality being functionally involved in a relationship. Furthermore in the literature, *exploration* focuses on exploring sexuality together with others, primarily in intimate relationships (Murray et al., 2017; Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021).

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Continued Development

The characteristic *continued development* refers to the willingness and the interest to develop one's own sexuality, thereby also influencing one's life. Slightly differently in the literature, development relates to figuring out answers to diverse how-to-questions concerning the personal and the social life (Mense, 2021). On the one hand, development is inherent to sexuality as "you can't avoid learning something about yourself in sexual encounters" (Hanson) and is further outlined by Roidinger: "this is where growth happens […] because I simply don't assume something fixed, [something] that has to be a certain way because it's always been that way." On the other hand, development is a decision, such as accepting sexual education or working on "strength and benefits" (Williams). Thereby it is not necessarily about solving problems but a better self-understanding and a "certain degree of flexibility for change" (Gaida). This involves being aware that sexuality is "something we can learn, something we can also change throughout our lives" (Vonwil) and thus being open to new information. In practice, it means the "openness to research even if it's on a basic level, like I want to look into that […] before I decide how I feel about [it]. I want information rather than just a gut reaction" (Prior). Further in the literature, *continued development* means searching proactively for accurate (sexual health) information (Murray et al., 2017).

Peacemaking

The characteristic *peacemaking* represents building human connections through understanding and empathy, even if fear is involved as an emotional reaction to individual as well as societal change. Williams underlined the relevance of *peacemaking*: "we have to address people's fears and build human connections that is a really important piece in all of this." Although *peacemaking* is challenging, it strengthens the ability to deal with differences, as Vonwil pointed out for the future: "through a healthy approach to differences […] significantly more understanding and empathy than currently exists in a rather divided and sometimes harsh world." This also goes hand in hand with "welcoming differences and not panicking. I believe this is also a very important issue that really needs to be practiced" (Roidinger). For example, revealing one's own sexuality makes one vulnerable, even if sexuality is a self-evident option in the social togetherness and interactions are benevolent and prudent. In this sense, *peacemaking* opens a space where sexuality can be present as "impressive aspect of life […] because you have a kind of recognition for how raw and vulnerable people can be" (Hanson). Furthermore, in the literature *peacemaking* can be connected to solving conflicts as a community while respecting personal space (Mense, 2021).

Humanizing

The characteristic *humanizing* signifies seeing others holistically, including everything that relates to being human. Moreover, it involves understanding others as fellow human beings instead of constructing them as avatars. In this sense, sexual activities are about ethical behavior and not general normality. "Humanizing people probably focuses more on ethical behavior of sexuality, in what people are doing is supposed to be what's normal, or considered to be not normal," explained Williams. Prior explicated: "it's harder to humanize those who are not like you and don't think the way you think and don't believe what you believe." Behavior-wise it is about describing instead of rating others. As Roidinger explained: "I simply say on a very basic, descriptive level,

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'okay, the man likes to wear dresses,'" instead of immediately interpreting such behavior through a pathologizing lens. Similarly, it is about "awareness" for human beauty and devotion (Hanson). Also, drawing on the literature, *humanizing* can be associated with engagement with diverse emotional experiences within and among people (Mense, 2021).

Authenticity

The characteristic *authenticity* entails viewing oneself holistically and recognizing sexuality as part of being an authentic human, as well as a self-evident aspect of interaction. This includes being aware that not all sexual experiences are pleasant and that failing is possible. For example, Roidinger mentioned "the courage to fail" and explained: "So, that things don't always work out when you do something [...] that failure is simply considered from the outset and that one is benevolent and generous in this regard." Especially failing is further emphasized in the literature, as, first, freeing oneself from worrying about negative outcomes of sexual activities (Murray et al., 2017), and, second, figuring out how to deal with failure and error (Mense, 2021). Being authentic is accentuated by "whether it's about sex or another issue, just trying to be honest, trying to be clear, trying to take other people into consideration" (Prior). And besides the cognitive and emotional aspects one should also be aware of one's body and in particular nudity as part of the authentic self: "for this nakedness, which is always completely ignored in normal life, so to speak, that we carry around a completely different part of being human, which we always hide" (Hanson). An underlying aspect in the literature is also figuring out how to relate to oneself and one's body (Mense, 2021), which extends *authenticity* beyond the context of sexuality to a more general sense of being authentic.

Recognition of Sexual Self-Determination

The characteristic *recognition of sexual self-determination* refers to recognizing one's own sexuality and the sexuality of others as self-determined, which is associated with positive effects on health and well-being. For example, Williams underlined the aspect of "allowing or supporting people's self-determination and autonomy with regard to sexual and reproductive experience" and expanded on the importance: "[sex] contributes to health and wellbeing, I don't think you can be sex-positive without recognizing that." Further, Roidinger emphasized the right to live one's sexuality yet "the indivisible right of every person to sexual self-determination is not a given," as can be seen in "how people who are different from the majority don't have it so easy." In the literature, for promoting *recognition of sexual self-determination* the attention is drawn to the institutional level, to the hesitation as well as possibilities of governmental agencies and organizations (Murray et al., 2017).

Discussion

With this research, I argue for comprehending sex positivity from an individual's perspective as a sex-positive attitude. The question in this study sought to determine a differentiated understanding of a sex-positive attitude and, if possible, to identify characteristics that define it with respect to the various contexts in which sex positivity is negotiated.

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The results of this study show that a sex-positive attitude is operationalizable as a set of principles where the identified characteristics are neither about specific forms of relationships nor sexual preferences. They partly connect to the initial available suggestions in the literature but also go further, capturing sex positivity in its complexity. The most important finding from the differentiated description of the characteristics is that three different qualities for a sex-positive attitude emerged:

1. A sex-positive attitude involves an ongoing process of learning and development that extends far beyond initial learning, reflecting continuous growth and perpetual changes. In the literature, development is described as a process that takes time and is neither natural nor happens quickly (Murray et al., 2017), and that proactive learning and continuous self-experience are a necessity (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). The results indicate for the characteristics *openness & acceptance*, *consent*, and *communication*, that a certain amount of practice is required, both with oneself and with others – such as formulating a clear yes or no or jointly establishing a culture of discussion and feedback. Likewise, *tolerance & respect* cannot be considered inherent skills and are an aspect of learning. Similarly, the characteristics *responsibility*, *acceptance of needs*, *authenticity*, and *humanizing* involve critical reflection as well as conscious engagement, first with oneself and then with others. Further, *exploration* requires the willingness and courage to leave the familiar behind. Ultimately, the characteristic of *continued development*, which explicitly refers to the willingness and interest in development, seems to be implicitly inherent in the other characteristics.

2. A sex-positive attitude is highly individual and person specific, so that the importance of single characteristics can vary – relating to changes in life and/or priorities (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). Consequently, the characteristics can be seen as fluid and probably are rebalanced corresponding to the current life situation. Additionally, the characteristics challenge everyone differently, and accordingly not all are equally present at the same time, so that the focus can vary. Nevertheless, none of the characteristics are dispensable. For example, what would remain of *openness & acceptance*, *communication*, and *consent* without *recognition of sexual self-determination*? And even though the characteristics can be described individually, the relation between them varies – some are connected, others overlap and cross each other.

3. A sex-positive attitude refers to both the self and the self in relation to others, which can influence interpersonal relationships generally – and beyond that the whole life. Sex-positive relationships are described as nourishing, fulfilling, and pleasurable yet they also offer the space to fail (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). Mense (2021, p. 42) argues that "relating to one another is exactly what people do in practice no matter whether they are in professional, personal or sexual contact." More specifically, the results show that *responsibility* refers to the self as well as *authenticity*; whereas *authenticity* is strongly connected to *humanizing* – for the same trait but now the self in relation to others. Furthermore, *acceptance of needs* incorporates both perspectives. Differently, but both *tolerance & respect* as well as *openness & acceptance* describe the self in relation to others, whereas the latter also refers to the self; here the distinction is based on an active versus a passive trait. Further in regard to influencing the whole life, the results show that some characteristics explicitly extend beyond sexuality, linking back to life in general. More precisely, the characteristic *communication* builds on basic communication skills, *tolerance & respect*

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emphasizes respecting one another broadly as well as *consent* is important in every interaction, and also *authenticity* incorporates more aspects of life than sexuality.

Explicitly in regard to the various contexts in which sex positivity is negotiated, this study found that an influence of a sex-positive attitude by the contexts is identifiable. Moreover, the institutional, participatory, and private contexts were central for selecting experts with different expertise and perspective on the research objective. Here, it's important to also draw attention to limitations of this study. As for the contexts, two points stand out. First, the experts Prior and Williams are among the authors of the *positive sexuality framework* that is widely but not solely used for the integration of sex positivity in science and research, which is an important contribution in the institutional context. Likewise, the authors argue that positive sexuality is relevant across all levels and types of social structure (Williams et al., 2015). Interviewing both Prior and Williams for the institutional context for this study can be considered a limitation because, even though they have different backgrounds, their work is closely linked and their perspectives are therefore closely related, limiting the diversity of perspectives represented. Consequently, the results from the institutional context reveal a focus on *communication*, *peacemaking*, and *humanizing* as these are also key dimensions of the *positive sexuality framework*. Despite the limitation, the three characteristics cannot be attributed only to the institutional context but to all three contexts. Second, a compelling finding is that from the participatory context and the private context, a strong practical and body-related focus emerges. For example, the characteristic *exploration* is neither related to the institutional context nor a dimension of the *positive sexuality framework*. Moreover, *acceptance of needs* and *responsibility* are mainly practically driven and with a focus on the individual. Undoubtedly, the *positive sexuality framework* is relevant across all levels and types of social structures, but it can be argued that it is distinct from explicitly taking the perspective of the individual. This encourages promoting the transfer from theory to practice, aligning with sex-positive culture needing to be good in both practice and theory (Mense, 2021). Similarly, a practical approach for sex-positive relationships is offered by Roidinger and Zuschnig (2021), the authors of the first popular German book on sex positivity. Their approach is one of the first suggestions for a sex-positive attitude even if it focuses on relationships. Thus, for this study interviewing Roidinger for the private context can also be considered a limitation. However, there were no contradictions with the results, rather they underline that a sex-positive attitude is neither about specific forms of relationships nor about sexual preferences.

Furthermore, the results of this study relate to social psychological research on attitudes. Based on a largely congruent understanding of attitude, the interesting finding is that the theoretical approach to attitude shows an overlap with the current results. In general, attitudes are described by first, a cognitive component, encompassing beliefs, thoughts, and attributes; second, an affective component, referring to feelings and emotions; and third, a behavioral component, relating to past, present, and anticipated behavior; for example, expanding from exploring the environment to role playing (Haddock & Maio, 2014). An attitude can be black and white, but it does not have to be, as a two-dimensional perspective considers possible ambivalences (Haddock & Maio, 2014). For example, a person who is into BDSM might enjoy a hard spanking and at the same time be annoyed by remaining marks. In reference to a sex-positive attitude, it seems that each of the identified characteristics could combine the three components. For example, this is seen in the characteristics *humanizing* and *authenticity*. With *humanizing*, both the affective and behavioral components are described, while with *authenticity* it is all three components. It can be

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assumed that the three components are not necessarily present at the same time, nor equally pronounced, but rather emerge depending on the situation. More precisely, this can be outlined with *humanizing*: the cognitive component, like an ethical consideration of sexual acts, is strongly pronounced, but at the same time, the behavioral component, like describing sexual acts rather than evaluating them, can be challenging. However, it may be insufficient to assign the characteristics only to certain components, like to consider *exploration* as purely behavioral.

Finally, based on systematically investigating sex positivity, it is definable as an attitude – a sex-positive attitude constituted by twelve different characteristics. The characteristics are somewhat surprising as they are mostly affirming fundamental aspects of simply being human and interacting with other humans. Moreover, that is remarkable as it underlines how deeply sex positivity may be engraved in the self, especially by detaching from established social morals and generally accepted norms relating to sexuality. However, the observed qualities indicate that a sex-positive attitude is highly influenced by various societal and cultural factors throughout the lifetime.

Conclusion and Future Research

This research was dedicated to understanding sex positivity from an individual's perspective based on an extensive literature review and a qualitative research approach. The study confirmed the consideration that sex positivity is an attitude, as such being strongly connected to the private, yet impacted by institutional as well as participatory contexts. Furthermore, it is the first study to operationalize a sex-positive attitude and to define it by twelve characteristics. These results add a unique perspective to a growing transdisciplinary development and research field.

In fact, the results of this study have several practical implications. For interested and questioning individuals, engaging with the characteristics may be likely to pose less of a challenge regarding established social morals and norms for relationships as well as sexual preferences, given that a sex-positive attitude proves to be detached from them. Moreover, as sex positivity becomes applicable, it may help deal with sexuality in a new way in practice and strengthen the development toward a self-determined sexuality. For example, individuals, alone or with partners, in a group, or community, can reflect and discuss the different characteristics and explore a sex-positive attitude in themselves. Thus, the results underscore sex positivity promoting and contributing to personal growth and sexual well-being, building on the *positive sexuality framework* – though not from an institutional level but directly out of the private sphere through taking an individual's perspective. However, a sex-positive attitude is influenced by different social factors and needs to be contextualized within the complex field of tensions of Western societies – such as the issues of norms, inequality and the political, which are discussed critically in the sex positivity discourse. In a professional and clinical context, the results may support and encourage counselors and therapists reflecting their own attitude for providing unbiased support for individuals. Likewise, the results may be helpful to communicate about a positive attitude toward sexuality with clients; being able to speak about specific characteristics that define a sex-positive attitude and are applicable. Thus, the characteristics may be explored in counseling and therapy.

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This study has provided a deeper insight into the challenges and the complexity evolving around the terms *sex-positive*, *sex positivity* and *positive sexuality*. On the one hand, this strengthens the idea that science and research would benefit from a definition of sex positivity, when sex positivity is applied as an approach (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Watjen, 2020), as even though positive sexuality is operationalized by the *positive sexuality framework*, various approaches have evolved under the term. And on the other hand, it may encourage conceptualizing future research as interdisciplinary if not transdisciplinary to benefit from the many voices contributing to the current understanding and recognizing the diverse influences. Besides, a natural progression of this work would be developing a measure for a sex-positive attitude. Doubtlessly, there is an overlap with the SPS (Belous & Schulz, 2022), and further comparative analysis may be beneficial.

Overall, the present study lays the groundwork for future research on sex-positive attitude and a continuously better understanding of how far the social development in a sex-positive sense has come – based on an individual's perspective and development.

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