

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN MIDDLE-AGED IRANIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study aimed to evaluate the relationship between body image perception, sexual satisfaction in middle-aged Iranian women.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted on 437 women. Data were collected using demographic questionnaires, Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI), Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS), and Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ). The data was analyzed using ANOVA, Chi-square test, Spearman's correlation coefficient, and logistic regression analysis through SPSS, version 21.

Results: In total, 58% of the studied women were completely satisfied with their body image, while 35% and 7% had mild and moderate dissatisfaction, respectively. A positive significant association was observed between sexual satisfaction and body image in the participants ($P < 0.0005$). Moreover, the number of children and sexual initiative were significant influential factors in sexual function.

Conclusion: According to the results of this study, positive body image perception was associated with increased sexual function and satisfaction. It is recommended that sexual and marital counseling be provided for middle-aged women in order to enhance their sexual function and satisfaction through promoting self-body image.

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Introduction

Women within the age ranges after early adulthood and before old age are referred to as middle-aged (45-65). Today, midlife is regarded as the golden stage of life given the increase in the average human life expectancy. However, mental health of middle-aged individuals might be at risk due to the biological, physical, and psychological changes associated with this life stage (1).

According to the literature, sexual health of women plays a pivotal role in the improvement of marital relations (2, 3). Sexual problems commonly occur in middle-aged women due to hormonal, physiological and psychological changes (4). Considering that the prevalence of sexual dysfunction is four times higher in postmenopausal women, quality of life of these

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individuals is expected to decline (5). Physiological changes during midlife may lead to sexual dysfunction in women. Furthermore, sexual dysfunction in women has been reported to be caused by various psychological factors, including depression, anxiety, psychological symptoms, low self-esteem, and negative body image perception(6).

Body image is defined as the perception of an individual towards the aesthetics or sexual appeal of their body, which could range from very positive to very negative. At all times, the beauty of human body has been a central factor in human society; however, the perception of the individual towards their body image might not be entirely realistic and influenced by various parameters (7).

The prevalence of dissatisfaction with body image was 66.6% in Brazil (8) it was estimated 8.84% among obese women in America(9). One study in Turkey showed that 1.3% of middle-aged women had a distorted body image (10). Previous studies suggested that women tend to have a more negative perception towards their body image compared to men, which might give rise to numerous physical and mental consequences (11). Since negative body image perception could impair social and marital functions, as well as the interpersonal and family relations, it is regarded as a predictive factor for sexual behavior(12).

Given the importance of sexual function and satisfaction in marital adjustment and health of middle-aged women (13), this study aimed to evaluate the relationship between body image perception, sexual function, and satisfaction in middle aged Iranian women.

Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted on 437 women referring to the healthcare centers of Ahvaz city, Iran.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria of the study were women with the age range of 45-60 years, being sexually active, and having basic literacy. Exclusion criteria were as follows: 1) history of gynecological any surgery within the past three months (e.g., hysterectomy, perineorrhaphy, and mastectomy); 2) having depression or other mental disorders; 3) presence of mental or sexual disorders in spouse; 4) polygamy; 5) presence of underlying chronic diseases (e.g., cardiovascular diseases, diabetes mellitus, and asthma); 6) history of infertility; 7) use of medications affecting sexual function, such as blood pressure medications and tricyclic antidepressants (e.g., clomipramine, imipramine, and amitriptyline); 8) use of immunosuppressive chemotherapy agents (e.g., bromocriptine and tamoxifen) and 9) obese and underweight women (body mass index of <18.5 and >30).

Data collection tools

Required data were collected using demographic form, which was prepared in two main sections included personal information and sexual issues. The validity of this questionnaire was confirmed by content validity.

Female sexual function index

The Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI) consisting of 19 items to evaluate sexual function in six domains of sexual desire, sexual arousal, vaginal lubrication during intercourse, orgasm, sexual satisfaction, and sexual pain. The scores of each domain are calculated by summing up the item scores and multiplying the result by the domain factor. Additionally, the full FSFI scale scores were calculated by summing all six domains of sexual function. Total score of less than 26.55 represents sexual dysfunction. Reliability of FSFI and its subscales was calculated via Cronbach's alpha in a study by Fakhri et al. in 2012 (14).

Larson index of sexual satisfaction

Larson's Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS) consists of 25 items to assess sexual satisfaction, which are scored based on a Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4, and strongly agree = 5). In ISS, score less than 50 are interpreted as sexual dissatisfaction, scores 51-75 represent low sexual satisfaction, scores 76-100 indicate moderate sexual satisfaction, and scores above 100 represent high sexual satisfaction. Reliability and validity of ISS were calculated at 98% by Mooshkbid Haghighi et al. (2001) (15) and Asadzadeh et al. (2011) (16).

Body shape questionnaire

Body shape questionnaire (BSQ) consists of 34 items to evaluate the perception of individuals towards their physical appearance. In BSQ, items are scored based on a Likert scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, usually, and always) when score 1 set for never and 5 set for always. The total score was within the range of 34-170. In this questionnaire, the scores lower than 81 are considered as satisfied (not worried) about body shape, 81 -110 slightly worried, 111 -140 moderately worried, and higher than 140 extremely worried. Based on Cronbach's alpha coefficient, validity of BSQ was determined at 88% by Zeyghami et al. (17) and Moghimian et al. (18) in the Iranian population.

Study design

Due to the lack of similar studies on this research subject, a pilot study was performed on 67 women who met the inclusion criteria for this study. This study was approved by Ethics Committee of Ahvaz University of Medical Sciences. In total, 437 married women enrolled in this study, which was calculated with the following formula:

$$n = \frac{(2.57 + 1.65)^2}{\left(\frac{1}{2} \log \frac{1 + 0.2}{1 - 0.2}\right)^2} + 3 = 437$$

Participants were selected via multi-stage sampling from women aged 45-60 years who met the inclusion criteria. Subjects were randomly selected from the annual census family registration in 10 healthcare centers located in the east (No. 1, 3, 4, 5, and 10) and west (No. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 10) of Ahvaz city via cluster sampling. To invite the participants, the researchers contacted the families of middle-aged women in whom the last digit of the medical record was an even number.

One of the researchers who was fluent in Arabic language assisted us in communicating with Arabic language. Objectives of the study were explained to the participants by the researcher, and informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to the study. Data collection was performed using the aforementioned questionnaires, which were completed by all the participants.

Data analysis was performed in SPSS, version 21, using frequency distribution, mean, and standard deviation to assess the demographic characteristics of the participants. In addition one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to evaluate quantitative variables, and Chi-square test was run to examine the categorical variables.

To determine the correlations between body image satisfaction and sexual satisfaction in middle-aged women, we performed Spearman's correlation-coefficient. Moreover, logistic regression analysis was used to verify the predictive factors of body image perception and eliminate the effect of confounding factors in sexual function and satisfaction. P-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the participants and their spouses based on body image perception are shown in Table 1. According to the information in this table, the body image was better in middle-aged women who were employed ($P=0.004$) and females that their husbands had the higher education ($P=0.005$). A significant difference between the body image, employment status ($P=0.004$), and number of children ($P=0.013$) was observed.

Status of the sexual relationship of the participants based on body image perception is presented in Table 2. According to the information in this table, there was a significant association between the body image, sexual initiative ($P<0.0005$), sexual perception ($P=0.009$), and frequency of sexual intercourse ($P=0.011$) in middle-aged women.

The relationship between the domains of sexual function and body image perception of middle-aged women are shown in Table 3. According to the information in this table, there were significant relationship between all the domains of sexual function, with the exception of vaginal lubrication ($P=0.31$), and body image perception.

In this study, multivariate logistic regression analysis was used to investigate the relation of the independent variable (body image) and sexual function and confounding variables (Table 4). According to the information in this table, the number of children and sexual initiative were the most significant influential factors in the sexual function based on body image of middle-aged women.

Our findings indicated that the odds ratio of optimal sexual function was significantly higher (3.8 times) in couples who were both willing to initiate sexual intercourse compared to the women whose spouses had the sexual initiative. Furthermore, the odds ratio of optimal sexual function in women with four children or less was significantly higher (1.8 times) compared to the women with more than four children. On the same note, the odds ratio of optimal sexual function in women who viewed sexual intercourse as pleasure was 9.66 times higher compared to those who had a different view towards sexual relations (e.g., marital duty).

Evaluation of the body image perception of the studied subjects indicated that 57.66% of the women were completely satisfied and 35.46%, and 6.8% of them had mild and moderate dissatisfaction regarding their sexual relationship, respectively. Mean score of sexual satisfaction in the women with satisfaction about their body image was 84.88 ± 15.31 , while it was 77.72 ± 11.97 and 74.26 ± 12.06 in women with mild and moderate dissatisfaction, respectively ($P<0.05$). In total, 58% of the studied women were completely satisfied with their body image, while 35% and 7% had mild and moderate dissatisfaction, respectively. As such, a significant association was observed between the sexual satisfaction and body image perception of the women ($P<0.0005$).

According to our findings, 44.5% of the middle-aged women with low sexual satisfaction were satisfied with their body image, while 45.8% and 10.4% of these subjects had mild and moderate dissatisfaction, respectively. Furthermore, 61% of the women with moderate sexual satisfaction were not dissatisfied about their body image, while 34% and 5% of these subjects had mild and moderate dissatisfaction, respectively. Moreover, 83% of the women with low sexual satisfaction were satisfied with their body image, while 14% and 3% of these subjects had mild and moderate dissatisfaction, respectively. Evaluation of the relationship between body image perception and level of sexual satisfaction was indicative of a significant difference in the body image perception of the women with low, moderate, and high sexual satisfaction ($P<0.0005$).

Significant confounding variables of sexual satisfaction based on the results of multivariate logistic regression analysis are shown in Table 5. According to the information in this table, factors such as the number of children, sexual initiative, and education level of the spouse were the most significant influential factors in sexual satisfaction of middle-aged women.

In this study, the odds ratio of optimal sexual satisfaction was 4.7 and 3.1 times higher in women whose spouses had academic education compared to those whose spouses had secondary and primary education (or were illiterate), respectively. Furthermore, the odds ratio of optimal sexual satisfaction in couples who were both willing to initiate sexual intercourse was 2.9 times higher compared to the women whose spouses had the sexual initiative. In addition, the odds ratio of optimal

sexual satisfaction in women with four children or less was 1.2 times higher compared to women with more than four children.

Evaluation of the relationship between the body image perception of middle-aged women and domains of sexual function and satisfaction was indicative of significant associations between body image perception and sexual desire ($r=-0.11$; $P=0.022$), sexual arousal ($r=-0.181$; $P<0.0005$), orgasm ($r=-0.191$; $P<0.0005$), sexual satisfaction ($r=-0.197$; $P<0.0005$), and sexual pain ($r=0.154$; $P=0.001$). Moreover, significant associations were found between the body image perception of middle-aged women and total scores of sexual function ($r=-0.138$; $P=0.004$) and sexual satisfaction ($r=-0.257$; $P<0.0005$). However, no significant correlations were observed between body image perception and vaginal lubrication ($r=-0.051$; $P=0.287$).

Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the relationship between body image perception, sexual function, and satisfaction in middle-aged women. According to the results of the present study, satisfaction of middle-aged women with their body image was directly correlated with the scores of sexual desire, sexual arousal, orgasm, sexual satisfaction, and sexual pain with the exception of vaginal lubrication. In other words, positive body image perception among these women was found to be associated with closer sexual function to the optimal level. This could be due to the fact that vaginal lubrication is more influenced by physiological and hormonal factors than psychological factors, such as body image. This finding has been confirmed in the study by Pujols et al. (19).

Findings of Berman et al. were indicative of a significant relationship between sexual desire and positive genital self-image, which is consistent with the results of the current study. However, Berman et al. observed no significant association between body image perception and sexual arousal (20). In this regard, Ackard et al. reported a significant relationship between body image perception and orgasm among women (21). Some studies have shown that the self-esteem of women affects all the domains of sexual function, which is in line with the results of the present study (19, 22).

The results of the current research indicated that higher body image satisfaction in women is associated with enhanced sexual function, which has been confirmed by Ackard et al. (21) and Satinsky et al. (23). On the other hand, the study by Steer et al. proposed that withdrawal from sexual intercourse due to cultural beliefs (e.g., guilt or shame) is associated with increased self-consciousness towards the body shape during sexual activity (24). Furthermore, in the present study, score of sexual satisfaction was found to be higher in women who were satisfied with their body image, which has been confirmed in similar studies (19, 21, 25).

In our research, evaluation of the effect of confounding variables on sexual function revealed that the number of children, sexual initiative, and perception of sexual relations were the most significant confounding variables affecting sexual function and satisfaction in middle-aged women. Our findings indicated that the optimal sexual function was higher in women who had sex for pleasure compared to those with different sexual perceptions, which is in line with the results obtained by Zargar et al. (26). In our study, level of body image satisfaction was higher in employed women compared to housewives, which was inconsistent with the results obtained by Khorshid et al. (27). This difference could be due to the variations in the cultural background of the studied populations.

In another research, Coleman and Antonucci observed a significant relationship between the body image perception of women and factors such as physical and mental health, self-esteem, and employment status (28). Since body image is considered inherent to the self-esteem of women, our findings were in line with the results obtained by Coleman and Antonucci in this regard.

Also, the highest and lowest levels of body image satisfaction were observed in women whose spouses had academic education and secondary education or lower, respectively. In another research, Skandarnjad et al. claimed that gender and education level were the most significant predictors of body image perception (29), which is in line with the results obtained by Zolfaghari et al. (30).

Findings of the current study showed no significant correlations between body image score and factors such as age group, age at marriage, education level, socioeconomic status, and length of menopause, which was consistent with the results obtained by Raeisi et al. (31) and Khorshid et al. (27).

According to the findings of the present study, body image satisfaction was higher in couples who were both willing to initiate sexual intercourse. Ackard et al. claimed that women who were satisfied with their body image were less withdrawn, had more pleasure in sex, and were more confident in satisfying their sexual partner (21). In explanation, it could be stated that due to the dominant cultural beliefs among Iranian women, factors such as guilt and shame may deter women from taking initiative in sexual relations with their spouse. In the Iranian culture, initiation of sexual interaction by women is considered reprehensible, and men are commonly expected to take sexual initiative (26).

According to the study by Afghari et al., one of the most significant factors in the evaluation of the emotional challenges in postmenopausal women is feeling the old age, which was reported to lead to body image dissatisfaction in these women. High rate of body image dissatisfaction in the present study was consistent with the findings of Afghari et al. (32). Similarly, the majority of middle-aged women evaluated in previous studies in this regard have been reported to have low body image

satisfaction (8-10, 33). In the opinion of many women, menopause and midlife are synonymous with old age, disability, and disease (32).

Conclusion

In conclusion, our findings indicated that with higher body image scores, sexual function and satisfaction of middle-aged women reduced. Since body image could be a predictive factor for sexual satisfaction and function in women, it is recommended that sexual and marital counseling be provided for middle-aged women as a vulnerable population in order to promote their body image perception and sexual function and satisfaction in the postmenopausal period.

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Table 1.Demographic characteristics of middle-aged women and their spouses based on body image perception

Variables		Body Image Perception (%)			P-value
		Satisfaction n=252	Mild dissatisfactio n n=155	Moderate dissatisfaction n=30	
Age (year)	45-50	61	34	5	0.263
	51-55	55	35	10	
	56-60	53	39	8	
Age at Marriage (year)	<20	59	34	7	0.511
	20-30	54	40	6	
	>30	69	27	4	
Age Differenc e with Partner	≤5 years (older partner)	63	32	5	0.059
	5-10 years (older partner)	55	36	9	
	>11 years (older partner)	35	50	15	
	Woman Older than Partner	51	41	8	
Education Level	Primary or Below	51	37	12	0.109
	Secondary	57	37	6	
	High School	69	27	4	
Employment Status	Housewife	52	40	8	0.004
	Employee	66	32	2	
	Self-employed	73	21	2	
Residenti al Status of	Owner	60	34	6	0.416
	Rented House	52	37	11	
	Living with Spouse Family	45	45	10	
Income of family	Moderate	58	35	7	0.798
	Poor	53	38	9	
Employment Status of Spouse	Self-employed	52	42	6	0.005
	Employee	71	25	4	
	Retired	55	31	14	
	Unemployed	54	35	11	

Education Level of Spouse	Primary or Below	52	41	7	<0.0005
	Secondary	41	51	8	
	High School	63	29	8	
	Academic Education	78	17	5	
Number of Children	≤4	63	29	8	0.013
	>4	51	43	6	
Contraception Method	Hormonal Contraception	75	23	2	0.054
	Condoms	55	39	6	
	Tubal Ligation	31	50	19	
	Intrauterine Device (IUD)	66	32	2	
	Menopausal	56	36	8	
Menopausal Status	Yes	56	36	8	0.429
	No	60	35	5	
Length of Menopause (year)	1-5	55	37	8	0.885
	6-10	61	33	6	
	≥11	57	36	7	
		59	36	5	

Table 2.Sexual relationship status of participants based on body image perception

Variables		Body Image Perception (%)			P-value
		Satisfaction n=252	Mild dissatisfaction n=155	Moderate dissatisfaction n=30	
Sexual Initiative	Male	58	34		>0.0005
	Female	4	92	4	
	Both	70	26	4	
Sexual View	Marital Duty	47	43	10	0.009
	Pleasure	59	39	2	
	Marital Duty &Pleasure	66	26	8	
	Other	61	36	3	
Psychological Status during Sexual Intercourse	Anxiety	45	44	11	0.164
	Guilt	57	36	7	
	Hostility with Wife	44	56	0	
	Repression	62	35	3	
	Other	65	30	5	
Sexual Behavior of Spouse	Considerate	60	35	5	0.065
	Selfish	55	34	11	
Frequency of Sexual Intercourse	Once a Day	87	13	0	0.011
	Once a Week	56	36	8	
	Once or Twice a Month	50	50	0	
Separate Bedroom	Yes	59	34	7	
	No	53	42	5	

Table 3. Mean scores of sexual function domains based on body image perception of participants

Sexual Function Domains	Body Image Perception			P-value
	Satisfaction n=252	Mild dissatisfaction n=155	Moderate dissatisfaction n=30	
	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	
Sexual Desire	3.41±1.02	3.39±1.08	2.64±0.99	0.001
Sexual Arousal	3.74±1.41	3.42±1.49	2.75±1.06	<0.0005
Vaginal Lubrication	3.42±1.27	3.39±1.31	3.42±1.27	0.31
Orgasm	3.64±1.36	3.30±1.37	2.82±1.03	0.001
Sexual Satisfaction	3.88±1.38	3.55±1.19	2.70±1.20	<0.0005
Sexual Pain	3.86±1.10	3.27±1.47	3.96±1.10	<0.0005
Total sexual function score	21.98±6.79	20.34±6.15	17.93±5.44	0.001

Table 4. The relation of sexual function based and body image based on multivariate logistic regression analysis

Variables		B	P-value	Odds Ratio	Confidence Interval	
					Lowest	Highest
Body Image (moderate dissatisfaction)	Satisfaction	0.058	0.935	1.06	0.26	4.327
	Mild dissatisfaction	0.265	0.727	1.304	0.293	5.796
Employment Status (housewife)	Self-employed	-0.463	0.299	0.629	0.215	1.843
	Employee	0.244	0.398	1.276	0.462	3.523
Education Level of Spouse (academic)	Illiterate or Primary	0.255	0.716	1.29	0.327	5.096
	Secondary	-0.623	0.367	0.536	0.139	2.077
	High School	0.591	0.208	1.806	0.72	4.528
Employment Status of Spouse (employee)	Unemployed	0.270	0.667	1.310	0.382	4.494
	Retired	0.06	0.924	1.062	0.308	3.663
Number of Children (≤4)	>4	-0.574	<0.0005	0.563	0.433	0.733
Sexual Initiative (both partners)	Spouse	-1.344	<0.0005	0.261	0.131	0.517
	Woman	-1.988	0.089	0.137	0.014	01.358
Sexual View (other)	Marital Duty	0.453	0.646	1.573	0.228	10.869
	Pleasure	2.269	<0.0005	9.666	1.59	58.768
	Marital Duty & Pleasure	1.506	0.085	4.51	0.813	25.014

Table 5.The relation of sexual satisfaction with body image and some confounding variables based on multivariate logistic regression analysis

Variables		B	P-value	Odds Ratio	Confidence Interval	
					Lowest	Highest
Body Image (moderate dissatisfaction)	Satisfaction	0.919	0.061	2.508	0.958	6.656
	Mild dissatisfaction	0.606	0.233	1.833	0.677	4.96
Employment Status (retired)	Self-employed	-0.642	0.187	0.527	0.203	1.366
	Housewife	-0.302	0.605	0.74	0.235	2.324
Education Level of Spouse (academic)	Illiterate or Primary	-1.552	0.02	0.212	0.057	0.782
	Secondary	-1.16	0.045	0.314	0.101	0.976
	High School	-1.047	0.054	0.351	0.121	0.017
Employment Status of Spouse (employee)	Unemployed	0.562	0.205	1.755	0.735	4.186
	Retired	0.368	0.274	1.445	0.747	2.794
Frequency of Sexual Intercourse (once/twice a month)	Once a Day	1.559	0.067	4.754	0.894	25.27
	Once a Week	1.009	0.062	2.744	0.909	7.93
Number of Children (≤ 4)	>4	-0.191	0.006	0.826	0.72	0.947
Sexual Initiative (both partners)	Spouse	-1.064	0.001	0.345	0.183	0.65
	Woman	-0.966	0.081	0.381	0.127	1.127
Sexual View (other)	Marital Duty	0	0.0933	0.96	0.375	2.46
	Pleasure	0.64	0.253	1.897	0.632	5.691
	Marital Duty & Pleasure	0.723	0.137	2.06	0.795	5.333