



# An integrated model to understand sexuality in older adults in urban China: The mediating role of sexual interest



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The subject of sexuality in older adults has remained grossly understudied in China, despite the country having the largest older population in the world.

**Objective:** Guided by the Sexual Script Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), this study used path analysis to test an integrated path model for sexual activity with sexual interest as a mediator.

**Methods:** Survey data was collected from a representative sample of 688 community-dwelling older Chinese adults aged 60 or above residing in Tianjin, China.

**Results:** The final integrated model yielded a satisfactory model fit. Sexual knowledge, sexual attitude and perceived sexual control have direct positive effects on sexual interest in sample older Chinese. Furthermore, sexual interest mediated the effect of sexual knowledge, sexual attitude, perceived sexual control, available sexual partner, male gender and education level on sexual activities. Age was found negatively associated with sexual activities, while a non-significant relationship for sexual interest was observed. Male gender positively associated with sexual activities and sexual interest. In addition, education level has a positive effect on sexual interest.

**Conclusion:** The integrated model highlighted the mediating role of sexual interest on sexual activities, thereby contributes to advancements of understanding of sexuality in older Chinese population. The current study also provides empirical evidence to the development of intervention and education programmes on sexuality among older Chinese adults. These programmes should pay attention to address the issues of sexual interest and partnership in older adults. Frontline health professionals should be sensitive to the needs of sex education in older population.

## 1. Introduction

Recent studies in Europe and United States have found that many older adults remain sexually active and exhibit a moderate to high level of interest towards sex well into their 80s (Beckman, Waern, Gustafson, & Skoog, 2008; Galinsky, 2012; Karraker, Delamater, & Schwartz, 2011). Being sexually active has been positively linked with mental health (Choi, Jang, Lee, & Kim, 2011), self-esteem (Katz & Marshall, 2003), marital quality (Galinsky & Waite, 2014), and subjective well-being (Lee, Vanhoutte, Nazroo, & Pendleton, 2016), while the lack thereof has been associated with lower quality of life (Lee, Vanhoutte et al., 2016). That being said, research on how sexual interest mediates sexual activity among older adults in Asian countries is very limited. The present study is an attempt to fill this knowledge gap by examining the mediating effect of sexual interest on the sexual activity of older Chinese adults and its relationships with predictors such as sexual

knowledge, attitude, control, etc.

### 1.1. Correlates of sexual activeness in the older population

A growing body of empirical evidence has shown that greater sexual knowledge, positive attitude towards sex, greater perceived sexual control, higher level of education and available sexual partner helps maintain sex life in older adults (Guan, 2004; Karraker et al., 2011; Lindau et al., 2007; Momtaz, Hamid, Ibrahim, & Akahbar, 2014; Wang, Lu, Chen, & Yu, 2008; Yang, 2015; Yang & Yan, 2016), whereas advance age, female gender and poor health negatively associated with sexual activity in older adults (Buono et al., 1998; Kim & Jeon, 2013; Lee, Nazroo, O'Connor, Blake, & Pendleton, 2016).

Meanwhile, studies in the West have also found interest in sex a prominent predictor for sexual activity (DeLamater & Moorman, 2007; Lindau et al., 2007). Sexual interest, in turn, is positively associated

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with various predictors such as available sexual partner (DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Papaharitou et al., 2008). However, considering the vast cultural differences between eastern and western countries, further studies are necessary to determine the applicability of such findings to Asian countries such as China.

### 1.2. Sexuality in older Chinese

The open-door policy introduced in 1978 and the rapid industrialization that followed have led to increased sexual awareness among the younger people in mainland China (Pan, William, Wang, & Laumann, 2004). Many older Chinese, however, adhere to traditional Confucian principles (Guan, 2004; Yan, Wu, Ho, & Pearson, 2011), which regard sex as a mean of procreation and any deviation from such purpose disgraceful and inappropriate (Lee, Kwon, Kim, & Moon, 2007). This may have led to an atmosphere of repression that discourages older adults from seeking pleasure through sex (Ho & Tsang, 2012). The shrinking social networks (Choi et al., 2011) and inadequate understanding of their own bodies, coupled with insulation from mass media, may have further dwindled their sexual activity. An integrated model examining the relationship between sexual interest and sexual activities can bring about better understanding of the sexuality, and potentially improve sexual health, of the world's largest older population.

### 1.3. Theories guiding this study

The present study was guided by the sexual script theory and the theory of planned behavior (TPB). The sexual script theory emphasizes the “contexts” of sexual activity. Simon and Gagnon (1986) argued that changes in sexual “scripts”—changing circumstances and factors associated with sexual behaviors—should be evaluated constantly and comprehensively as one's sexual needs change across different life stages. TPB postulates that intention (Ajzen, 1991) and knowledge (Ajzen, Joyce, Sheikh, & Cote, 2011) are important predictors of behavior. Recent studies have applied TPB on condom use (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Davis et al., 2016) and risky sexual behaviors in young adults (Bryan, Fisher, & Fisher, 2002; Buhi & Goodson, 2007).

## 2. The present study

The purpose of the present study is twofold: 1) to develop and test an integrated path model to advance understanding of sexual activities in older persons; 2) to determine the mediating effects of sexual interest in the relationships between sexual knowledge, sexual attitude, perceived sexual control, availability of sexual partner and sexual activities.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants

Data was collected through face-to-face household interviews in Tianjin, China between June and October 2013. The inclusion criteria were: (1) community dwelling older adults aged 60 or above; (2) residents of Tianjin for more than a year; (3) heterosexual; and (4) cognitively capable of answering the interview questions; (5) willing to participate in the study. The study protocol has been approved by the ethical committee of the author's affiliated university.

Multi-stage stratified sampling was employed to randomly select 8 of the 20 communities in downtown Tianjin. Invitation letters stating the scope and purposes of the study were distributed in selected communities. Of the 1000 potential participants approached, 688 were successfully interviewed, yielding a response rate of 69%. Reasons for declining the interviews or failure to complete the interview were mainly “no time” or “competing obligations”. All interviews were

conducted by trained interviewers.

### 3.2. Assessments

#### 3.2.1. Sexual activity

Respondents were asked to rate the frequency in which they experienced or engaged in six types of sexual activities/state drawn from previous studies (Davis, Yarber, Bauserman, Schreer, & Davis, 1998; Weinstein & Rosen, 1988). They were sexual intercourse, caressing, oral sex, reaching orgasm, use of sex toys and initiating sex.

#### 3.2.2. Sexual interest

Participants' interest in sex was assessed using the 15-item interest subscale of the Senior Adult Sexuality Scale (SASS) (Davis et al., 1998; Weinstein, 1984; Weinstein & Rosen, 1988), which examines concern, desire and preference for a series of sexual activities. A satisfactory internal consistency of 0.82 was observed in the present study.

#### 3.2.3. Sexual knowledge

Knowledge of sexuality in older adults was assessed using the 35-item knowledge subscale the Chinese version of the Aging Sexual Knowledge and Attitude Scale (Chinese ASKAS; Yan & Lee, 2013). The scale focuses on sexual changes brought about by aging (White, 1982). Scale scores range from 35 to 96, with higher scores indicating better knowledge. A satisfactory internal consistency of 0.93 was observed in the present study.

#### 3.2.4. Sexual attitude

Attitude towards sexual behavior was assessed with the 26-item attitude subscale of the Chinese ASKAS (Yan & Lee, 2013). Scale score has a potential range of 45–154, with a higher score indicating a higher level of positive attitude towards sexuality in older adults. A satisfactory internal consistency of 0.88 was observed in the present study.

#### 3.2.5. Subjective norm

Subjective norm was assessed with a single question—“Do you think it is common for older people to have sex?”.

#### 3.2.6. Perceived control over sex

Perceived sexual control was assessed using the 11-item Dyadic Sexual Regulation Scale (DSRS; Catania, McDermott, & Wood, 1984). A satisfactory internal consistency of 0.59 was observed in the present study.

#### 3.2.7. Availability of sexual partner

Respondents were asked to report their number of sexual partner in the past year. Since only 5 out of 688 participants reported having two or more sexual partners in the past year. The response was collapsed into a dummy variable indicating presence or absence of sexual partner.

#### 3.2.8. Demographics

The demographic variables included in the survey were age, gender, and education level.

#### 3.2.9. Subjective health

Participants were asked to rate their current health condition (1 = “poor” to 3 = “very good”), with a higher score representing a better subjective health.

The SASS and DSRS subscales were translated into Chinese by experienced researchers and reviewed by an expert panel. A pilot study (N = 30) conducted with older adults aged from 60 and 81 ( $M = 71$ ,  $SD = 7.2$ ) from three typical communities in Tianjin confirmed the clarity, relevance and comprehensibility of the translation.

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