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## RESEARCH

# The role of physical satisfaction in women's sexual self-esteem<sup>☆</sup>

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### KEYWORDS

Sexual self-esteem;  
Female beauty;  
Weight;  
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Physical satisfaction;  
Female attractiveness

**Summary** Up until today, with the exception of the Wiederman and Hurst study in 1998, no research has been done with regard to the relationship between women's sexual self-esteem, body mass index, physical satisfaction and body image. Through two studies done on adult women, our objective was to better understand the impact of physical satisfaction on women's sexual self-esteem as well as investigate the elements on which the latter is founded. Data from the first study seem to indicate that BMI would be correlated in a negative and moderate manner to women's sexual self-esteem. A clearer relationship, however, is observed between sexual self-esteem and body/physical satisfaction. Results from the second study indicate no relationship between BMI and sexual self-esteem but they do, however, indicate a relationship between sexual self-esteem and body image/esteem. Furthermore, the most salient traits of attractiveness/seduction were found to be related to the face (eyes, lips, smile). Altogether, research results seem to suggest that "relationship to the body" may be central to women's conceptualization of sexual self-esteem.

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## Literature review

For a long time, sexuality was first and foremost a "men's story". Only by the 19th century do feminists, among others,

begin to take ownership of the knowledge base on sexuality in order to comment, criticize and transform it (Chaperon, 2007).

The concept of "sexual self-esteem" is relatively recent and poorly studied. It gradually emerged in literature in areas that related to questions on women, weight, sexual trauma, teenage psychology, and disability (Mayers, Heller and Heller). The concept of sexual self-esteem is elaborated based on overall self-esteem models and is defined as "positive appraisal of one's own sexuality, including appraisals of sexual thoughts, feelings and behaviors, as well as perceptions of one's own body in a sexual context" (Hensel et al., 2011). Earlier still, in 1994, Andersen

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and Cyranowski define it as “Sexual aspects of oneself that are derived from past experience, manifest in current experience, are influential in the processing of sexually relevant social information, and guide sexual behavior”. These authors suggest that sexual self-esteem would be made up of several components, including emotional and behavioral ones (Mayers et al., 2003). In 1995, Gaynor and Underwood describe it as “the tendency to value or devalue one’s own sexuality, and therefore, one’s ability to engage in — rather than avoid — sexual experiences with oneself and others”. In 1996, Zeanah and Schwarz define it as “[one’s] affective reactions to [their] subjective appraisals of [their] sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.” The authors note that family background, peer group influence and personal experience contribute to acquiring a positive or negative sexual self-esteem (James, 2007).

### Women’s sexual self-esteem

When they develop the “Sexual Self-Esteem Inventory for Women”, Zeanah and Schwarz are the first to differentiate women’s sexual self-esteem (SSEI). Indeed, from the 81 items mentioned there emerges 5 subscales, each of which reflects a specific dimension of women’s sexual self-esteem:

- competence and experience: concerns the capacity to desire and be desired by a sexual partner, as well as availability for sexual opportunities;
- attractiveness: meaning the sense of one’s own sexual attractiveness, regardless of other individuals’ perception;
- control: the capacity to direct or manage one’s own thoughts, feelings and sexual interactions;
- moral judgement: as in congruence between our own thoughts, feelings and sexual behaviors and our moral standards;
- capacity to adapt: as in congruence or compatibility between our experiences and sexual behaviors and our personal aims or aspirations.

Among those dimensions, there features “attractiveness”, as in the sense of one’s own sexual attractiveness regardless of other individuals’ perception (Zeanah and Conrad Schwarz, 1996). Later, Heinrichs, MacKnee, Auton-Cuff and Domene will conduct a study to define the factors that facilitate or harm women’s sexual self-esteem. Upon examining their results it appears that physical appearance and the relationship women nurture with their bodies play a significant part in women’s sexual self-esteem (Heinrichs et al., 2009). Although there appears to be an evident relationship between women’s sexuality, their weight and their body image, few empirical studies have been conducted on the subject (Wiederman and Hurst, 1998).

### BMI and women’s sexuality

In 2006, Meidani informs us that where the body is concerned, being thin is the increasingly dominant norm since the 1960s, particularly for women (Dany and Morin, 2010). According to Rodin et al. (1985), beauty and morality have

been assimilated to a certain degree of thinness. A “good girl” should therefore be and remain thin, and in control of her desires (Groesz et al., 2002).

More specifically, according to several studies by Tovée (Tovée and Cornelissen, 1999, 2001; Tovée et al., 1998, 1999, 2002), body mass index (BMI) would be the most crucial determinant for female attractiveness (Fan et al., 2004). More recently, the use of three-dimensional programmes and images (Fan et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2007; Crossley et al., 2012) has surfaced a significant relationship between women’s attractiveness/beauty and body mass.

Concerning the relationship between BMI and women’s sexuality, studies have yielded mixed results. On the one hand, several studies such as that of Weaver and Byers (2006), Erbil (2013) and Satinsky et al. (2012) show no significant relationship between BMI and sexual functioning.

On the other hand, Kaneshiro et al. (2008) establish a strong relationship between a high BMI and a greater lack of sexual experience, and Kolotkin et al. (2006) show that a high BMI is associated with greater deterioration of sexual life (Erbil, 2013). According to the results of a study by Esposito et al. (2007), female sexual dysfunctions would be strongly correlated with BMI. Among the six parameters of sexual functioning, they demonstrate that whereas desire and pain are not correlated with the BMI; arousal, lubrication, orgasm and satisfaction are (Esposito et al., 2007).

A study by Gagnon-Girouard et al. (2014), on the other hand, reveals that though BMI is strongly correlated with body dissatisfaction in women, it would not be associated with sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, this last study suggests that sexual and marital satisfaction would be more closely associated with perceptions and cognitions about weight, than to actual weight (Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2014).

### Body image, physical satisfaction and women’s sexuality

According to Thompson et al. (1999), body image is defined as “an individual’s internal representation of his or her own outer appearance” (Erbil, 2013). Several studies (eg. Weaver and Byers, 2006; Satinsky et al., 2012; Erbil, 2013; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2014) reveal that where women are concerned BMI would be negatively correlated to body image. The higher the BMI, the lower the body image. Furthermore, according to a cross-sectional study by McLaren et al. (2004), BMI would be a predictor of female body dissatisfaction across several age groups (Dalley et al., 2009). Similarly, according to Crossley et al. (2012), BMI would be significantly correlated with body satisfaction as well as negative affects and body distortion (Crossley et al., 2012).

It is important, however, to understand the subjective nature of body image. Cash and Hicks (1990), for instance, demonstrate that women of normal weight who perceive themselves as being overweight report less body satisfaction than women of normal weight who are conscious of their normality. Subjective body dissatisfaction could therefore be a more important indicator than BMI (Weaver and Byers, 2006). In that spirit, according to Dany and Morin (2010), indicators used to describe the actual body, such as the BMI, do not allow us to evaluate the subjective perception of

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