The comparison between perceived body image and sexual assertiveness in athletic and non-athletic married women

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Abstract

Background: Having a positive feeling about her body and the rights of sexual autonomy are the critical components in women’s sexual activity. However, the previous study indicated that regular physical activity can improve women’s satisfaction with body image.

Objective: The aim of this study was to compare the perceived body image and sexual assertiveness in married women athletes and non-athletes.

Methods: The sample size consisted of 60 athletes and 60 non-athletic married women selected through multistage cluster random method. The body image questionnaire (Ficher) and sexual assertiveness test (Halbert) were used to gather the data. Data was analyzed between these two groups by utilizing the independent t- test.

Results: The findings indicated that there is a significant difference between athletic and non-athletic married women in body image (p<0.05). Also the difference in sexual assertiveness between the two groups is significant (p<0.05). Sexual assertiveness and positive body image in athletic women is higher than in non-athletic married women.

Conclusion: The research revealed that perceived body image can be an affective factor to promote mental and physical health in women by sexual assertiveness and positive body image. This result can be considered as a physical activities and fitness can increase positive body image and assertiveness in women.

Key words: body image, sexual assertiveness, physical activity, women
1. Background

Body image has been a powerful central concept for health psychologists. The concept has since been expanded to include both perceptions and attitudes. The perceptual component refers to how we ‘see’ our size, shape, weight, features, movement and performance, while the attitudinal component refers to how we feel about these attributes and how our feelings direct our behaviors (1). Many studies have been done in this area because of the importance of body image on interpersonal and social relationships. The many studies show that some people have a preoccupation with perceived flaws or faults in their physical appearance (2). It is presumed that a negative estimation of body image develops feelings of pity, disgust, as well as depression and may also elicit intrusive thoughts about one’s appearance (3). Understandably, the preoccupation with body size and attractiveness adversely affects men as well as women but the dissatisfaction with body shape is especially problematic for females as a partial result of cultural idealization of thinness (4,5). Dissatisfaction with body image is an important component of a variety of prevalent health problems in females such as depression, obesity, and the spectrum of eating disorders, low self-esteem, sexual disorder and social distress (6,7). Like body image, female sexuality is a complex phenomenon. Women’s bodies are sexual objects of male desire (8). Researchers have suggested that, in comparison with men, women’s sexuality may be more influenced by cultural factors (9,10). Another research study has shown that one of the common sexual women’s concern is body image (68.5%) (11). Since the body is a focus of attention during sexual activity, body image also could play an important role in sexual health. Negative body image (e.g. feeling about appearance) has more detrimental effects on sexuality among women than men (10). Indeed, previous research has indicated that women who experience anxiety about their appearance and shame about their bodies tend to feel more self-consciousness during sexual activities (12) and are prone to having less positive sexual experiences and more sexual problems (13). Women more satisfied with body image reported more sexual activity (14, 15, 16, 17), orgasm (14, 18, 19, 20) and initiating sex; greater comfort undressing in front of their partners, having sex with the lights on; trying new sexual behaviors (18, 21) and pleasing their partners sexually than those dissatisfied with body image (18), and higher level of sexual assertiveness (22). Sexual assertiveness is one of the critical concepts in women’s sexual activity. Assertiveness was defined in a social-psychological sense in terms of an individual’s own perception or interpretations of how assertive he or she feels in his or her marital relationships (13, 23). A recent systematic review has shown that the construct of sexual assertiveness is relevant to our understanding of sexual behavior as it is related to better sexual functioning, fewer sexual victimization experiences, and less risky sexual behavior. Thus, sexual assertiveness facilitates the attainment of sexual goals, such as sexual autonomy and satisfaction and protects people from unsafe sexual practices (24). Therefore, individuals with less sexual assertiveness in general and women in particular are less likely to run away or avoid sexual aggression and risky sexual behaviors. It is also interesting to note that individuals who are more sexually assertive are likely to be more sexually satisfied (25). On the other hand, physical activity can play a significant role in furthering public health and increasing of individual satisfaction with body image. Physical activity and sports offer girls an opportunity to experience freedom of movement and to invest in the instrumental qualities and potential of their bodies (26). Furthermore, exercise is typically prescribed to patients for its weight and health value rather than as a good way to enhance the mood or quality of life. It is noted that losing weight as a physical activity goal, in general, is inextricably related to appearance norms and thinness pressures, particularly for women. Because of that it is difficult to separate out “attractiveness” and “thinness” pressures and goals from a weight loss goal for women. The previous studies show that aerobic exercise can improve the level of body image satisfaction and reduce the level of social anxiety (27, 28, 29). Physical activity can improve self-esteem especially in elderly individuals (30). The results of studies in this area reveal that the level of self-esteem and body image in the active group is higher than in the inactive group (30, 31). Accordingly as noted above, the current study examined the influence of body image on sexual assertiveness.

2. Objective

Based on the above, the aim of this study is to compare the perceptions of body image and sexual assertiveness in married women athletes and non-athletes.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Plan

This study was conducted in 2012 in Tehran; the present study is a causal-comparative study. The sample consisted of two groups: 60 Married women athletes and 60 Married women non-athletes. The married women athletes group was selected with multistage cluster random method from Beheshti University, Teheran University and Azad South University.

3.2. Measurements

Sociodemographic data sheet

A sociodemographic data sheet was used to record personal information including age, marriage duration, sports field and university.

Body image (Fisher, 1970): body image in 1970, made by Fisher (32). This questionnaire is a 46-item self-report questionnaire. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The Cronbach alpha reliability is 0.84.
Halbert index of sexual assertiveness: This test was compiled by Halbert (1991) (33) with the aim of measuring during sexual assertiveness of women in relationship with others. The original scale by Hurlbert showed good internal consistency (from .84 to .92) and good test-retest reliability (.84). Nazari reported an internal consistency of 0.83 for the Spanish version (34).

3.3. Procedure

All participants completed 3 questionnaires, including Sociodemographic, Body image and sexual assertiveness. Then collected data was analyzed by SPSS-13 software. Data was analyzed between these two groups by utilizing independent t-test.

4. Results

In Tables 1 and 2, (opposite page) the results of socio-demographic characteristics of all participations are indicated. As shown in Table 1, the age average and marriage duration of participants is 28 and 4 respectively. As shown in Table 2, the sports field is distributed as follows: Futsal (14.2%), gymnastics (10.8), tennis (10.8%), track and field (9.2%), swimming (5.0%). Regarding the results of Table 3, the t-test indicated that there was a significant difference between the body image in the two groups (t= 5.495, df= 118, p< 0.05). According to the results of Table 4, the t-test indicated that there was a significant difference between the sexual assertiveness in two groups (t= 4.663, df= 118, p<0.05).

Discussion

This study was performed to determine the difference in body image and sexual assertiveness in married women athletes and non-athletes. Results indicated that there are significant differences between the body image in the two groups, in other words, the average of body image in women’s athletic group (182.800) is more than women’s non-athletic (166.250). The finding of the present study is similar to previous findings which had been performed in this field, for example Blum et al (2004) revealed that female athletes and non-athletes had very different body-image perceptions and all athletes had a better body-image perception (35). Sterling et al (2003) shows that Self-objectification and appearance-related grounds for exercise were significantly negatively related to body satisfaction, body esteem, and self-esteem, and functional reasons for use were positively related to each of these outcome measures (36). The previous study revealed that self-concept and satisfaction with body image of ectomorph and endomorph men is lower than mesomorph man (38). Abbott el al (2011) has shown that participation in sports activities is associated with greater athletic competence and a more positive body image (26). The literature reviewed by a panel of experts to produce the UK National Consensus Statements provides support for: exercise and decreased depression, the stress reduction effects of exercise, the association of exercise and positive mood, improvement in cognitive function in fit older adults, and positive effects of exercise on physical self-perceptions and body image (39, 40). According to Table 4, the sexual assertiveness in women’s athletic group is higher than women’s non-athletic. The previous studies have shown that negative body evaluations are likely to have a direct relationship with several aspects of female sexual functioning and behavior. Greater body comfort was associated with higher levels of sexual assertiveness, higher levels of sexual experience, lower levels of risky sexual behavior (22). A greater body image self-consciousness was associated with lower levels of sexual assertiveness (41, 42, 43), lower levels of sexual experience (22,42,44,45), and lower condom use and self-efficacy (46, 76, 48). Sexual assertiveness and sexual risk were each directly predicted by body shame. There was a significant mediating role of sexual assertiveness in the relation between body shame and sexual experience, and the relation between body shame and sexual risk (22). Based on the results of this study in both sexes there was a positive relationship between assertiveness and favorableness of self-concept and sexual functioning (49). Relationships between body image variables and gender have been demonstrated beyond actual body size, suggesting that a women’s perceptions and cognitions about her body size, rather than actual body size, have an influence on her sexuality. Additionally, women low in sex-role stereotyping had a more positive self-concept than men low in sex-role stereotyping (50). The exercise is able to improve mental health, self-efficacy and self-concept (51). According to Murphy (2002) (52), the low self-esteem and sexual assertiveness were the trait of women who have had a violent sexual activity. Most researchers have found that physical activity affects self-esteem and self-concept. Based on the results of the current and previous research, women’s body image is an affected factor in the sexual activity. Further, as mentioned, since physical activity is affected factor in body image and self-concept, so it can be argued that the sexual assertiveness in athletic women is higher than women non-athletes. Hence, it is suggested that women’s awareness of the association between self-concept and self esteem as the related and critical factor to assertiveness and body image has affected to propagate the regular physical activity. This influence is increased when women engage in the physical activity in pursuit of good health. One of the limitations of this study is that participants self-reported their attitudes and behaviors on this questionnaire, and may have not been completely honest in their responses.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all women who participated in this study.
Table 1: Mean of age and marriage duration of all participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage duration</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Distribution of sports field in participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sports field</th>
<th>n_i</th>
<th>cf</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Futsal</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gymnastic</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track and field</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: cf, Degree of freedom; ni : absolute frequency

Table 3: Mean, SD and t-value of body image in athletic and non-athletic married women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>groups</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>P value</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletic married woman</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>182.8000</td>
<td>15.68741</td>
<td>0.0001*</td>
<td>5.495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-athletic married woman</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>166.2500</td>
<td>17.26918</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: SD, Standard Deviation; df, degree of freedom; t, Student’s t - test
*P<0.05

Table 4: Mean, SD and t-value of sexual assertiveness in athletic and non-athletic married women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>P value</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletic married woman</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>66.2500</td>
<td>9.61747</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>4.663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-athletic married woman</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>56.5667</td>
<td>12.89510</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: SD, Standard Deviation; df, degree of freedom; t, Student’s t - test
*P<0.05
References
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