

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sexual satisfaction and oversexualization among adults. The moderating role of self-esteem

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BACKGROUND

In the contemporary world, there is excessive creation and exposure of one's own sexuality among adults. Taking this into account, the determinants of sexualization are being sought. The aim of this research was to assess the significance of selected demographic variables and the number of sexual partners, as well as psychological variables (self-esteem and sexual satisfaction) for revealing behaviours related to over-sexualization. We also investigated whether self-esteem can moderate the relationship between sexual satisfaction and over-sexualization.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Seven hundred persons, including 403 women (298 heterosexual and 105 gay) and 297 men (199 heterosexual and 98 gay) were surveyed. The respondents were aged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 22.90$, $SD = 4.62$). In the study the following tools were used: the Oversexualization Questionnaire, the Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire and the Self-Esteem Scale.

RESULTS

It was found that sexualized appearance was more important for homosexual persons than heterosexual ones and seduction differentiated women and men and was correlated with the age and the number of sexual partners. Oversexualization demonstrated in appearance and message contents was correlated with low self-esteem and low sexual satisfaction. Low self-esteem was found to be a significant moderator in the relationship between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appearance.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study indicates the importance of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction for sexualized appearance. Low self-esteem moderates the relationship between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appearance.

KEY WORDS

oversexualization; sex; sexual orientation; sexual partners

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BACKGROUND

Social and cultural changes affect the way in which adult people treat their sexuality and behaviours related to it. Ubiquitous media coverage strongly highlights sexualized external appearance. Due to this fact, it is becoming more and more important for a person to demonstrate their own sexuality in order to adjust to social expectations.

Among women there is common dissatisfaction with their physical appearance and it is increasing in different parts of the world (Swami et al., 2010). A research review (APA, 2007) showed that women and girls are more often sexualized than men and boys. The phenomenon of sexualization is independent of the age of examined women. It leads to the continuous monitoring of one's own external appearance in order to adjust it to its ideal and at the same time sexualized version (Skowronski et al., 2022). The research shows an increase in the significance of idealized visual images related to one's bodies in men, too. They still appreciate the physical appearance of the female partner, but they also attach more and more importance to their own looks (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Sumter et al., 2022). The social approval of the ideal image strengthens and develops behaviours related to self-sexualization. It includes care about appropriate outfit styles, which are to emphasize attractiveness and sexiness, as well as appearance correction, including the use of diets, beauty treatments and the procedures of aesthetic medicine or plastic surgery. According to Brassard et al. (2016), sexualization has also a relational dimension. It is demonstrated in sexually suggestive remarks, grooming and new sexual behaviour orientation.

The excessive exposure of one's own sexuality is referred to as oversexualization (Brassard et al., 2016), but also as sexualization (hyper-sexualization) (APA, 2007). The phenomenon of oversexualization was identified due to the need to differentiate between the sexualization of children and that of adult people. Oversexualization of adults means the integration of the social belief system, which leads an individual into sexualizing their relationships with other people, using their bodies and behaviours in order to give pleasure and seduce a person (Brassard et al., 2016). Its strength depends on how important it is for an individual to get other people's attention (Fasoli et al., 2018). Oversexualization is a relatively new construct. It has been assessed in the context of romantic attachment, commitment, intimacy (Brassard et al., 2016, 2018, 2021), sexual functioning and sexual self-esteem (Brassard et al., 2015; Peixoto et al., 2018). Taking into account the findings from the previous research, the ones connecting sexualization with self-esteem and sexual satisfaction are gaining in importance.

Self-esteem is a multidimensional construct. Apart from global self-esteem, its specific dimensions have

been identified. According to the research (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2022), an increase in and a positive development of global self-esteem allow us to predict similar changes in its domains specific for adult people. On the other hand, Dapp et al. (2023) came to the conclusion that it is the specific domains that affect the global self-esteem, and that such a relationship direction is the strongest in case of the assessment of our own body. They explained that there are two mechanisms responsible for that phenomenon – high observability of external appearance – it is visible for other people and it is subject to direct assessment – and its importance, which takes place in the majority of societies. According to Lammek (2022) corporeality constitutes a symbolic social message and is an important dimension of one's own self. Therefore, physical features greatly influence the general assessment of a person's value.

Studies show the importance of social interactions for a person's self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Mahadevan et al., 2021; Orth & Robins, 2022). It increases when an individual experiences a greater social integration and decreases when they feel isolated. Self-esteem depends on both the formal, socio-economic status (education, occupation, income) and the informal, sociometric one (based on other people's respect and admiration). Although they are correlated with each other, it is the sociometric status that is not only a stronger predictor of self-esteem (as compared with the socio-economic one) but also has a direct influence on it (Mahadevan et al., 2021).

Sexual satisfaction is a complex construct, ambiguously understood, especially when its assessment is required in reference to gender and sexual orientation (Janicka & Cieślak, 2020). Attention is drawn to the individual and relational dimension of sexual satisfaction. As an individual variable it concerns: subjective satisfaction with sexual life (Janicka, 2008), the emotional state which occurs while satisfying individual sexual desires (Ziherl & Masten, 2010), a cognitive-emotional attitude towards one's own sexual activity (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2014) or an ability to meet one's own sexual needs (Izdebski, 2017). On the other hand, according to the relational interpretation, sexual satisfaction is treated as an effect of evaluation of the positive and negative aspects of a sexual relationship (Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014). It takes into account both physical satisfaction – orgasm – and emotional satisfaction – intimacy (Basson, 2000; Davis et al., 2006). In the present study, the adopted definition combines the affective elements and the cognitive ones, which is compliant with the standards of psychological research on constructs related to sexual satisfaction (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2014).

Self-esteem is related to sexual satisfaction of women and men (Ashkinazi et al., 2024; van den Brink et al., 2018; Kvaalem et al., 2020; Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2019; Shepler et al., 2018; Traen et al., 2016)

and the feeling of confidence with regard to being desired and accepted by the partner (Yamamiya et al., 2006). Negative self-esteem especially in relation to our body results in fear of rejection, which may lead to avoiding or limiting sexual activity (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010). The findings suggest that low self-esteem of the body in women has a negative influence not only on their sexual satisfaction but also on their husbands' experience. However, dissatisfaction with the body in men does not play the same role in the sexual dynamics of a couple (Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2014). The present research showed that the people demonstrating oversexualized behaviours are oriented towards getting sexual partners. Do they, however, attach more importance to sexualized appearance and behaviour when sex is highly rewarding for them and their self-esteem high, or when their aim is to seek approval of other people, which might be connected with compensating for low self-esteem and/or deficiencies in intimate contacts.

The aim of the study was to assess the importance of some selected socio-demographic and psychological variables (self-esteem and sexual satisfaction) for displaying behaviours connected with oversexualization. Moreover, we evaluated whether self-esteem can moderate the relationship between sexual satisfaction and oversexualization.

The following research questions were formulated:

1. Is there a relationship between sociodemographic variables (gender, sexual orientation, age, remaining in a close relationship), number of partners and oversexualization?
2. Is there a relationship between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction and oversexualization?
3. Is self-esteem a moderator in the relationship between sexual satisfaction and oversexualization?

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

PARTICIPANTS

The research participants were 700 people (403 women and 297 men) aged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 22.90$, $SD = 4.62$). Taking into account gender and sexual orientation, four groups were formed: 298 heterosexual women ($M = 22.61$, $SD = 3.95$) and 105 lesbian women ($M = 20.95$, $SD = 2.50$), 199 heterosexual men ($M = 23.76$, $SD = 5.73$) and 98 gay men ($M = 23.65$, $SD = 5.00$).

Among the surveyed persons, 59% had university education, 35% secondary education, 6% elementary and vocational education. The vast majority of the respondents (93%) were not in permanent relationships. The remaining 7% of persons were in informal relationships. The number of sexual partners was from 0 to 17.

PROCEDURE AND MEASURES

This study was carried out by the computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) method. The research data were collected by means of an online survey. It followed an invitation to take part in this study addressed to adult people, i.e. those aged 18 years or over. The Research Ethics Committee approved the project involving non-heteronormative people (approval no. 6/KEBN-UŁ/II/2022-23). Three questionnaires were used for the study.

The Oversexualization Questionnaire (OQ) is the Polish adaptation (Szymczak & Janicka, 2021) of the Adult Oversexualization Questionnaire (AOQ) by Brassard et al. (2016). It includes 15 items which measure three factors: seduction, sexualized language, sexualized appearance. The assessment of how much the respondent agrees with a statement is made on a six-grade scale. The reliability of the Polish version of the questionnaire is: .83 for seduction; .80 for sexualized language; and .72 for sexualized appearance

The Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire by Nomejko and Dolińska-Zygmunt (2014) is designed to measure the sense of sexual satisfaction, understood as an attitude towards sexual attractiveness and undertaken sexual activity. This tool is one-dimensional and consists of 10 statements to which answers are given on a 4-grade scale. This method has satisfactory reliability – Cronbach's α is .83.

The Self-Esteem Scale by Rosenberg (SES) – in the Polish adaptation of Laguna et al. (2007) – measures the level of self-esteem. It consists of 10 statements to which answers are given on a 4-grade scale. The tool is characterized by a good internal consistency – Cronbach's α from .81 to .83.

RESULTS

In order to verify the assumption of normal distribution of the analysed variables, the Shapiro-Wilk test was applied. The test values for all the analysed variables ranged from 0.79 to 0.99. Some statistically significant deviations from normal distribution were found ($p < .01$). Therefore, in the following analyses non-parametric statistical methods were applied, and the moderation analysis was carried out based on the bootstrapping method.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS AND OVERSEXUALIZATION

Table 1 presents a comparison of the mean values of the oversexualization level in women and men as well in persons with heterosexual and homosexual orientation. The Mann-Whitney U test was applied.

Table 1

Oversexualization level in surveyed women ($n = 403$), men ($n = 298$), heterosexual people ($n = 497$) and gay people ($n = 203$)

| Oversexualization | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>U</i> | <i>p</i> | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------|
| | Women | | Men | | | | |
| Sexualized appearance | 19.96 | 6.35 | 19.60 | 5.88 | 61087.50 | .561 | .06 |
| Sexualized language | 7.76 | 3.00 | 7.64 | 2.87 | 61707.50 | .721 | .04 |
| Seduction | 17.38 | 5.79 | 18.53 | 5.27 | 55877.00 | .013 | .34 |
| | Heterosexual people | | Gay people | | | | |
| Sexualized appearance | 19.20 | 6.03 | 21.30 | 6.21 | 42153.50 | .001 | .35 |
| Sexualized language | 7.84 | 3.04 | 7.38 | 2.68 | 48350.50 | .081 | .15 |
| Seduction | 17.78 | 5.81 | 18.10 | 5.06 | 51132.00 | .536 | .06 |

It was found that the scores on the seduction scale were statistically significantly higher in the group of men than in the group of women ($p < .05$). Gay people perceived their value and attractiveness to other people in terms of demonstrating sexual aspects in appearance to a greater degree than heterosexual persons ($p < .01$). The effect (Cohen's d) was found to be weak. No statistically significant differences according to gender were found in the group of heterosexual people and that of gay people.

The average values of the oversexualization level in single persons and those in close relationships were compared. It turned out that the people living in a relationship regarded themselves as more skilful in seducing and flirting ($M = 19.79$, $SD = 4.68$) than those living without a partner ($M = 17.74$, $SD = 5.64$; $p < .05$). The effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.44$) was moderate.

It was also evaluated whether behaviours related to oversexualization could change with age. The conducted Spearman ρ correlations were significant only between the age of the respondents and the scores on the seduction scale ($p < .01$). These correlations were weak and concerned heterosexual women ($\rho = .17$) and men ($\rho = .27$) and lesbian women ($\rho = .27$). Such a correlation was not found for gay men.

NUMBER OF PARTNERS AND OVERSEXUALIZATION

The study showed that 30 respondents (4.3%) had the biggest number of sexual partners (from 10 to 17), and 66 persons (9.5%) indicated the number from 6 to 9. Among the surveyed group there were 15 people (2.2%) who said that they had not had any sexual partners. The remaining respondents – 589 people (84%) – indicated a number from 1 to 5 partners. The number of partners differentiated neither women and men nor heterosexual and gay people. Statistically significant

correlations were found between the number of reported partners and the scores on the seduction scale in all the compared groups – heterosexual women ($\rho = .66$); lesbian women ($\rho = .44$); heterosexual men ($\rho = .64$) and gay men ($\rho = .57$) ($p < .01$). The greater the number of the previous intimate relationships, the more easily the persons engaged in behaviours connected with getting another partner through flirting.

SELF-ESTEEM, SEXUAL SATISFACTION AND OVERSEXUALIZATION

Spearman ρ correlation coefficients between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction in the respondents and the oversexualization dimensions in the four groups are presented in Table 2.

Some statistically significant correlations were found between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction of the surveyed persons and the scores on the scales of sexualized appearance and sexualized language in all the compared groups ($p < .01$). Higher self-esteem corresponds to its lower values; therefore the results indicate that the lower the self-esteem is, the higher is the strength of behaviours focused on sexualized appearance and communication of a sexual nature. On the other hand, the correlations between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appearance and sexualized behaviour were negative, which leads to the conclusion that the lower the respondents assessed their sexual satisfaction, the stronger they emphasized sexuality in their appearance and clothes and the more frequently they talked about issues related to sex and intimacy. In the group of heterosexual men there was a statistically significant positive and weak correlation between sexual satisfaction and seduction.

We also conducted the analyses of Spearman ρ correlations between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction of the respondents. For all the four groups of the

Table 2

Correlation coefficients between the scores on the oversexualization scales and the indicators of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction in the respondents in the compared groups

| Oversexualization | Heterosexual women | Lesbian women | Heterosexual men | Gay men |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------|------------------|---------|
| Self-esteem | | | | |
| Sexualized appearance | .79** | .82** | .68** | .75** |
| Sexualized language | .39** | .20* | .45** | .36** |
| Seduction | -.05 | -.06 | -.13 | .05 |
| Sexual satisfaction | | | | |
| Sexualized appearance | -.63** | -.45** | -.56** | -.64** |
| Sexualized language | -.40** | -.30** | -.42** | -.30** |
| Seduction | .01 | .00 | .19** | -.01 |

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Interactive effects between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction

| Oversexualization | β | t | p |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------|------|
| Sexualized appearance | .06 [.02; .09] | 2.86 | .004 |
| Sexualized language | .05 [-.01; .11] | 1.76 | .078 |
| Seduction | -.05 [-.11; .02] | -1.47 | .143 |

Note. β – regression coefficient value with 95% confidence interval; t – regression coefficient statistical significance value

surveyed persons they were statistically significant ($p < .01$) and ranged from $-.57$ to $-.87$. Higher self-esteem corresponded with the lower values of this indicator. That allows us to conclude that higher self-esteem coexisted with higher sexual satisfaction.

SELF-ESTEEM AS A MODERATOR IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL SATISFACTION AND OVERSEXUALIZATION

The analyses were carried out based on the Hayes Process macro in model no. 1 (Hayes, 2018). We analysed the statistical significance of the interaction effect between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction in three moderation analysis models, where sexualized appearance, sexualized language and seduction were consecutively analysed as the dependent variable. The values of the regression coefficients obtained for the interaction effects are shown in Table 3.

A statistically significant interaction effect was proved to occur between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction in the model in which the level of sexualized

Table 4

Strength of the relationship between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appearance depending on the level of self-esteem

| z | β | t | p |
|------|----------------|------|------|
| 1.29 | .08 [.00; .15] | 1.96 | .050 |
| 1.34 | .08 [.01; .15] | 2.02 | .044 |
| 1.57 | .09 [.01; .17] | 2.26 | .024 |
| 1.81 | .10 [.02; .19] | 2.45 | .015 |
| 2.05 | .12 [.03; .21] | 2.61 | .009 |
| 2.29 | .13 [.04; .22] | 2.73 | .007 |
| 2.52 | .14 [.04; .24] | 2.82 | .005 |
| 2.76 | .16 [.05; .26] | 2.89 | .004 |
| 3.00 | .17 [.06; .28] | 2.95 | .003 |

Note. z – standardized value of self-esteem level; β – regression coefficient value with 95% confidence interval; t – statistical significance test value of the relationship between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appearance

appearance was analysed as the dependent variable. In order to interpret the obtained interaction effects, we performed calculations using the Johnson-Neyman procedure (Johnson & Fey, 1950). This procedure estimates the strength of the correlation between the independent variable and the dependent one for the 22 consecutive moderator levels. In this way, we obtained estimations concerning the strength of the relationship between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appearance for the 22 consecutive levels of self-esteem. Table 4 presents only the scores which appeared statistically significant.

A statistically significant and positive relationship between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appear-

ance was found only in the group of the people with high indicators of self-esteem level, i.e. a standard deviation of more than 1.29 in relation to the average level in the surveyed sample. It should be emphasized here that higher self-esteem corresponds to its lower values. That means that low self-esteem moderates the relationship between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appearance.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the research was to analyse adult oversexualization, the manifestations of which are: sexualized appearance, sexualized language and seduction. The strength of this phenomenon was evaluated, referring to some selected demographic variables, the number of sexual partners, psychological variables (self-esteem, sexual satisfaction) and indicating the role of self-esteem as a moderator in the relationship between sexual satisfaction and oversexualization.

The characteristics of demographic variables allow us to conclude that the level of oversexualization in seduction is higher for men than women and people in relationships than singles. Seduction is more often regarded as a men's domain, necessary for them to get a partner. Therefore, men consider the ability to flirt to be more relevant and expected than women do. In turn, having a partner may be associated with greater seduction effectiveness. The research (Brassard et al., 2018) confirms that people in relationships, especially in informal ones, more often engage in sexualized behaviours than single adults and adults in formal relationships. Age and the number of intimate relationships also appeared significant for oversexualization in the area of seduction. The ability of flirting and charming in heterosexual and gay women as well as heterosexual men increases with age. In turn, a larger number of partners may be a proof of a greater effectiveness in seduction. That concerned all the respondents – regardless of their age and sex. The scores on the scale of sexualized appearance were statistically significantly higher in the group of gay people than heterosexual ones. No differences were found between women and men in the examined groups. Nevertheless, other studies showed that physical attractiveness is important, especially in men from sexual minorities. Male gay culture seems to have greater influence on men with respect to appearance (Birnholtz, 2018; Sumter et al., 2022).

The further analyses indicated that the respondents with lower self-esteem and lower sexual satisfaction display a sexualized appearance to a greater degree and more often talk about sex. It may be assumed that this kind of appearance and talk might indicate their need to look for the acceptance and interest of other people or to compensate for low (or

a lack of) sexual satisfaction. Previous studies have shown that lower sexual satisfaction is connected with a greater involvement in sexualizing one's appearance (Brassard et al., 2018), and people with unstable self-esteem more often tend to look for approval of other people (Miljeteig & von Soest, 2022). External appearance is quite important to get that approval. On the other hand, we did not confirm the findings of Brassard et al. (2016) correlating higher self-esteem with sexualized language. The lack of consistency in these results calls for their further verification.

Some statistically significant correlations were found between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction, which concerned all the examined persons. Higher self-esteem coexisted with higher sexual satisfaction. Similar research results were obtained by Hally and Pollack (1993) and Nomejko and Dolińska-Zygmunt (2014). Other studies show that an important aspect of self-esteem – higher assessment of one's body – is connected with higher sexual satisfaction (Ashkinazi et al., 2024; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010), which is true for both women and men (e.g., Traeen et al., 2016; van den Brink et al., 2018) and LGB people (Shepler et al., 2018). In the present study, low self-esteem was found to be a moderator in the relationship between sexual satisfaction and one of the dimensions of oversexualization – appearance. The respondents with low self-esteem combined sexual satisfaction with sexualized appearance. Peixoto et al. (2018) found out that self-esteem can play a partly moderating role for the relationship between sexual functioning and sexual satisfaction.

A full explanation of the phenomenon of oversexualization requires further, more in-depth research. Undoubtedly, it is also important to analyse the possible consequences for the individual, especially for their close emotional relationships and health. It should be remembered that although oversexualization is a natural and socially accepted phenomenon, it can lead to objectification and self-objectification. This manifests itself in excessive concern about appearance and even interference with the modification of one's own body. A report by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) stated that an increasing number of younger people are undergoing aesthetic medical procedures. In 2022, the number of procedures performed by plastic surgeons increased by 11.2%, with over 14.9 million surgical and 18.8 million non-surgical procedures performed. Over the past 4 years, the number of aesthetic surgery procedures has increased by 41.3% (ISAPS, 2023).

The present research results have their limitations. In the examined group there was overrepresentation of single people in relation to those living in relationships. Furthermore, there were fewer gay people than heterosexual ones. Although it is widely considered true that physical attractiveness affects

the global self-esteem (Drapp et al., 2022; Lammek, 2022; Mahadevan et al., 2021), it would undoubtedly be valuable if we also used a tool for the assessment of one's body image to complement the study. Moreover, our study only considered selected individual variables that may contribute to over-sexualization. There is no doubt that it is important to assess a broader spectrum of its determinants. It should be noted that sexualization is a phenomenon created socially and culturally, and further reinforced by the media. Therefore, the individual activates self-regulation mechanisms, which ensures their acceptance by others. With this in mind, it is also necessary to look for relational, especially familial, determinants of over-sexualization. The power of sexualization can be related to modelling the behaviours of close people and assessing the effectiveness of finding a partner and building satisfying relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study indicates the importance of self-esteem and sexual satisfaction for sexualized appearance. Low self-esteem was found to be a moderator of the relationship between sexual satisfaction and sexualized appearance.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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