Body image and sexual satisfaction among midlife women: A qualitative study

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I have no conflicts of interest to disclose
Background

• **Body image** – a person’s perception of the aesthetics or attractiveness of her own body

• Midlife women –
  – Changes in appearance with aging
  – Studies mixed regarding body image with aging

• Body image may affect sexual function
Background

• Our aim: To understand how body image and feelings of attractiveness relate to sexual function and satisfaction in midlife women.
Background

Qualitative research

Participant → Concepts / themes → Investigator
Methods

• Recruited via flyers, research registries, electronic newsletters, and Internet postings
• Aged 45-60
• Sexually active with partner prior 12 months
• Efforts made to recruit racially diverse sample
• 20 interviews and 3 focus groups (total N=39)
Methods

- Led by trained facilitator using semi-structured guide
- Audio recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Two investigators developed codebook using standard qualitative research methods
- Primary investigator assigned codes to all text
  - Second investigator assigned codes to 10% of text (overall kappa = 0.84)
# Results

## Sample characteristics (N=39)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>52 (46-59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menopausal status (self-report)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premenopausal</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perimenopausal</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmenopausal</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree or higher education status</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married or cohabitating</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

• Three major themes emerged from data
  – Importance of feeling attractive to sexual satisfaction
  – Body changes common during midlife
  – How women respond to changes can affect sexual satisfaction
Results

- **Feeling attractive** – important component of sexual satisfaction
Interviewer: And how important are emotional experiences like feeling close to your partner or feeling attractive to your sexual satisfaction?
Respondent: Yeah, it’s very important – very, very important. It validates that he wants to stay in the marriage, that he still feels attracted to me... I need to have that.
Results

- Smaller subset – feeling attractive became less important reason for sex with aging
Interviewer: How do you define a satisfying sex life?
Respondent: If it gives you that feeling of intimacy...
Interviewer: Is that different from when you were younger? You mentioned when you were younger the orgasm being more of a driving force.
Respondent: That, and feeling sexy and attractive and all that other stuff, it was almost like part of your identity. Like having someone say that you were sexy was what you were going after. I don’t go after looking sexy anymore.
Results

• Many women experienced changes in body during midlife
  – Weight gain
  – Breast changes
Results

- Changes in body
  - Insecurity / self-consciousness
  - Confidence
    - Less sexual satisfaction
    - Maintenance of sexual satisfaction
When he married me, I was like 110 pounds... And as I had kids, I gained weight... He’s never made me feel like, “You are undesirable because of how you look.”

Interviewer: And have you ever felt that way just from yourself?
Respondent: Yeah. I think most women do. I don’t want the lights on. I don’t want you to see my cellulite or my thighs or that my boobs are sagging.
Results

Changes in body

- Insecurity / self-consciousness
- Confidence

Less sexual satisfaction
Maintenance of sexual satisfaction
Interviewer: Do concerns about your looks or your body affect your sexual satisfaction?
Respondent: It used to. Not anymore [laughs]. I’m comfortable with my chunkiness, and my partner, he’s OK, with it... I’m more comfortable with my body now than I was as a teenager.
Results

• Potential racial differences
• Quantitative studies align with these findings
Conclusions

• Feeling attractive - important to sexual satisfaction
• Body changes common during midlife
  – How women respond to changes may affect sexual satisfaction
• Supporting positive body image and self-acceptance in midlife women may help women maintain sexual satisfaction with aging
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