



## Body satisfaction, sexual self-schemas and subjective well-being in women

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### ABSTRACT

The objectification of women's bodies in western culture creates special emphasis on women's representations of embodied aspects of themselves. I argue that women's satisfaction with their bodies is likely to have particularly strong implications for other embodied aspects of self: in this case, representations of their sexual selves. This paper examines the relationships between women's body satisfaction, their sexual self-schemas, and components of subjective well-being in a sample of 91 Australian women aged between 18 and 68. Body satisfaction and dimensions of women's actual sexual self-schemas predicted satisfaction with life, positive and negative affect. The relationships between body satisfaction and both positive affect and satisfaction with life were partially mediated by the positive dimensions of sexual self-schemas. This finding suggests that at least some of the negative consequences associated with body dissatisfaction are due to the negative implications of body dissatisfaction for women's beliefs about their sexual selves.

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### Introduction

There is a widely acknowledged nexus between women's body image and sexual self-confidence in contemporary western culture. Physical attraction is an important and widely emphasised aspect of intimate sexual relationships, and standards of attractiveness for women are highly consensual, and strongly contingent on a slender body (Tovee, 2001; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). The body image literature is replete with findings that women aspire to be thinner (Cohn & Alder, 1992; Fallon & Rozin, 1985), and that they believe that successful weight loss will increase their sexual attractiveness (Ryckman, Robbins, Kaczor, & Gold, 1989). Poor body image is often thought to be associated with diminished confidence in interpersonal relationships, and particularly in intimate heterosexual relationships (Ackard, Kearney-Cooke, & Peterson, 2000; Cash, Maikkula, & Yamamiya, 2004; Faith & Schare, 1993). Given the cultural embeddedness of body image for women in this central domain of life, in this paper I argue that the frequently reported association between poor body image and low levels of subjective well-being may well arise, at least in part, from the perceived consequences for one's ability to participate in intimate sexual relationships.

Confidence in one's ability to initiate and maintain satisfying intimate relationships is affected by one's beliefs about the match

between one's own personal characteristics and those desired by potential partners. While there are differences between people in the characteristics they look for in a partner, there are also shared cultural beliefs about those personality attributes that make a person a desirable partner (Wheeler & Kim, 1997). Sexual self-schemas are beliefs about the extent to which one possesses personal characteristics that are associated in contemporary western culture with "being a sexual woman" (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994), and are thus likely to be relevant to women's beliefs about their ability to form satisfying intimate relationships.

Andersen and Cyranowski (1994) developed the concept of sexual self-schemas to reflect the extent to which women see themselves as possessing a range of personal characteristics that are associated with participation in intimate sexual relationships and behavioural openness to sexual experiences and encounters. They identified three dimensions to women's sexual self-schemas. The "passionate/romantic" dimension refers to the propensity to experience positive emotions in the context of romantic and sexual relationships. The "open" dimension concerns the extent to which one sees oneself as being broad-minded and open to new experiences. The "embarrassed/conservative" dimension reflects negative feelings about the self in relationships and a lack of confidence and experience. It is important to note that none of the items on Andersen and Cyranowski's scale refers directly to sexual behaviour, attitudes, or experience. Rather, it consists of personal qualities that may enable women to engage in some kinds of behaviours and to participate in some kinds of relationships. However, although the Sexual Self-Schemas Scale does not

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measure sexual behaviour or attitudes directly, it has been found to be associated with sexual experience, romantic involvement/attachment, number of sexual partners, enjoyment of sexual encounters, and experience with a range of sexual activities (Andersen & Cyranski, 1994, 1995, 1998; Cash, Jakatdar, & Williams, 2004; Cash, Maikkula et al., 2004).

The relationships between sexual self-schemas and other aspects of women's self-knowledge have not yet been widely investigated or theorised. As intimate relationships are a central domain of many women's lives (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992), intersecting with many other social contexts, it seems likely that sexual self-schemas will reflect and be influenced by other aspects of women's self-concepts. A full discussion of these potential intersections is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I argue that the physical and embodied aspects of sex and sexuality make it particularly relevant to consider the ways in which women's representations of their sexual selves are associated with their more general representations of their bodies.

Women's satisfaction with their bodies has frequently been found to be associated with their overall satisfaction with their lives (Diener, Wolsic, & Fujita, 1995; Tiggemann, 1994). Numerous studies have shown that negative feelings about one's body are associated with negative affect, low self-esteem, and vulnerability to depression (e.g., Koenig & Wasserman, 1995; Rierdan & Koff, 1997; Tiggemann, 1994). Cash and colleagues have developed the body image quality of life construct to capture the extent to which body image concerns spill over into other aspects of life (Cash & Fleming, 2002; Cash, Jakatdar et al., 2004), and Lewis and Donaghue (2005) have similarly argued that the pervasive negative effects associated with poor body image occur partly because body image is highly embedded in many women's lives. The emerging conclusion from this line of research is that many women experience their dissatisfaction with their bodies as having material negative consequences for other important aspects of their lives including their professional, social and intimate relationships.

This paper seeks to explore the relationships between women's sexual self-schemas, body satisfaction, and their overall sense of subjective well-being in their lives. In particular, it examines whether and to what extent the well-established negative relationship between body dissatisfaction and well-being is mediated by women's sexual self-schemas. The cultural emphasis on the nexus between sexuality and a narrowly defined body ideal is strongly directed at women (Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999), and so this paper examines the extent to which body satisfaction is related to women's representations of themselves as having the personal characteristics of a culturally prototypical 'sexual woman', and the relationship of these characteristics to subjective well-being.

This study examined the relationships between women's satisfaction with their bodies, their sexual self-schemas, and three aspects of their subjective well-being: satisfaction with life, positive affect and negative affect (Diener, 1984, 2000). On the basis of previous research, positive associations between body satisfaction, sexual self-schemas and subjective well-being were predicted. However, it was also expected that the relationship between body satisfaction and subjective well-being would be mediated by sexual self-schemas, supporting the contention that the negative consequences of body image are at least partly due to their effects on women's beliefs about their sexual selves.

## Method

### Participants

Ninety-one women were recruited for the study from undergraduate psychology classes at an Australian university, and from

the friends and acquaintances of students in these classes. The only criterion for eligibility was that participants were 18 years of age or older. Women ranged in age from 18 to 68 years (mean = 30.16,  $SD = 11.11$ ).

### Measures

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used to measure women's satisfaction with life. The five items on this scale were rated on 7-point Likert scales from 1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*, with higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction. Positive and negative affect were measured using items from the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965). Participants rated the extent to which they had experienced each of 22 affect items over the course of the previous week on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating more frequent experience. The items were used to derive a measure of positive affect (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86) and negative affect (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90).

Sexual self-schemas were measured using Andersen and Cyranski's (1994) scale. This scale contains 50 items (26 scored, 24 filler) that participants rate according to their self-descriptiveness. Responses were made on 7-point scales, with higher scores representing stronger endorsement of each item (0 = 'not at all descriptive', 6 = 'very much descriptive'). Three scales were derived from the items (see Table 1 for Cronbach's alphas): a "passionate/romantic" scale (sample item: 'romantic'), an "openness" scale (sample item: 'direct'), and an "embarrassed/conservative" scale (sample item: 'cautious').

Two items were used to form a measure of body satisfaction: *How satisfied are you with your current body in general?* and *How satisfied are you with your weight?* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86). The mean of the two items was used as the measure of body satisfaction. Responses were made on a 4-point scale (very dissatisfied; somewhat dissatisfied; somewhat satisfied; very satisfied) with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. This global measure of body satisfaction was used in order to provide an assessment of the main construct of interest – general satisfaction with one's body – without creating a strong focus on participants' detailed concerns about their bodies.

### Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to all participants by the student who recruited them into the study. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter outlining the aims of the study, and participants were informed that no identifying information was being collected, and that they need not answer any question if they did not wish to. Surveys were completed in participants' own time and were returned by mail or to a posting box in the School of Psychology. All participants were anonymous and no compensation was provided for participation in the study.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics for sexual self-schema dimensions, body satisfaction, satisfaction with life, and affect.

	Mean	SD	Range	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Passionate/romantic	4.23	0.78	2.30–5.70	0.85
Openness	3.81	0.77	1.89–5.56	0.75
Embarrassed/conservative	3.20	0.83	1.43–5.00	0.62
Body satisfaction	2.74	0.64	1.00–4.00	0.86
Satisfaction with life	5.07	1.35	1.60–7.00	0.88
Positive affect	4.11	1.12	1.00–6.63	0.86
Negative affect	2.53	1.13	1.00–5.45	0.90

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