

Research Paper

## Knowledge about Sex in Relation to Sexual Self Concept among Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

Despite technological advancements and ongoing research in the universe and life sciences, sexuality remains a taboo subject in many societies. Limited knowledge about sex often leads to psychological distress in individuals and their relationships. This study investigated the relationship between sexual knowledge and sexual self concept among young adults. 400 individuals aged 18-25 years from in and around Mysuru City were randomly selected. They completed the Fullard et al. (2005) Sexual Knowledge Test and Snell's (1996) Multidimensional Sexual Self Concept Questionnaire. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant positive association between total sexual knowledge scores and total sexual self concept scores. Interestingly, knowledge about pregnancy and masturbation was negatively correlated with fear of sex, while knowledge about abortion and education was negatively correlated with sexual depression. These findings suggest that comprehensive sex education can promote positive sexual self concepts and potentially reduce negative psychological outcomes associated with sexuality among young adults.

**Keywords:** *Knowledge about Sex, Sexual Self Concept, Young Adults*

Sexuality and its impact on self-perception have long been recognized as crucial aspects of human well-being. Bazzo (2004) defines sexuality as a multidimensional model encompassing biological, reproductive, love, relational, cultural and entertainment domains. While acknowledging the negative consequences like unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, the World Health Organization and Centres for Disease Control and Prevention now emphasize comprehensive sex education to promote positive sexual health, a crucial component of overall quality of life (Blunt, 2012).

Self-concept, defined as an individual's perception of themselves (McLeod, 2008), plays a significant role in shaping sexual well-being. Baumeister (1999) describes it as "the individual's belief about himself or herself," including attributes and self-identity. This concept is particularly crucial for young adults, navigating the complexities of emerging adulthood with its physical and psychological changes (Hurlock, 2008). As Shashikumar et al. (2012) note, this period is marked by exploration and experimentation, with concepts of femininity and masculinity heavily influenced by societal norms (Arnett, 2001).

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However, inadequate or inaccurate knowledge about sex can negatively impact self-perception, leading to anxiety, guilt, and dysfunctional sexual experiences (Curtin et al., 2011). Patel (2012) highlights the vulnerability of individuals with erroneous beliefs, who may blame themselves for sexual failures and develop negative self-schemas. Mukherji (2014) emphasizes the need for comprehensive sex education that addresses both psychological and physiological aspects, moving beyond mediocre awareness programs. This is particularly relevant in light of concerns about the influence of pornography, which often fails to address critical issues like gender equality and healthy relationships (Mukherji, 2014).

Despite its potential to contribute to positive sexual self concept, research on the relationship between knowledge about sex and self-perception among young adults remains limited. Existing studies primarily focus on negative consequences like risky sexual behavior (Mukherji, 2014), leaving a gap in understanding the broader spectrum of impacts, including the potential for fostering positive self-concepts and healthy sexual development. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the relationship between knowledge about sex and various dimensions of sexual self concept among young adults.

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Aim:*

To examine the relationship between knowledge about sex and sexual self concept among young adults.

#### *Participants:*

This study recruited 400 young adults aged 18-25 years from in and around Mysuru City using a simple random sampling technique. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and procedures. Participation in the study was purely on a voluntary basis. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection and after explaining about the confidentiality of the data. Participants were then provided with the questionnaires and given clear instructions for completion. Both questionnaires were self-administered, emphasizing anonymity and confidentiality of responses. Participants were encouraged to answer all items honestly and to their best ability. No time limit was imposed, but they were encouraged to complete the questionnaires as efficiently as possible.

#### *Assessment Tools*

1. A semi-structured socio-demographic profile to ascertain the socio-demographic details shall be used.
2. **Sexual Knowledge and Attitude Test by William Fullard and Lawrence M Scheier (2005):** The Sexual Knowledge and Attitude Test for Adolescents (SKAT) is a developmentally appropriate, paper and pencil self-report questionnaire for assessing subjective evaluations and knowledge proficiency regarding sexual behaviour and sexual experience for adolescents (Fullard, Scheier & Lief, 2005). The SKAT includes 41 trichotomously scored knowledge items (*True, False, and Not Sure*) and slight modification in items will be made. Reliabilities for the knowledge items are as follows: internal consistency 0.75; test-retest stability over a 2-week period was .85.
3. **The Multidimensional Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire by William E. Snell, Jr. (1996):** The Multidimensional Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire (SSC) consists of 100 items arranged in a format where respondents indicate how characteristic of them each statement is. A 5-point Likert scale is used to collect data on peoples'

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responses, with each item being scored from 0 to 4: not at all characteristics of me (0), slightly characteristic of me (1), somewhat characteristic of me (2), moderately characteristic of me (3), very characteristic of me (4).

### **Data Analysis:**

Completed questionnaires were screened for completeness and accuracy. Scores were then calculated according to the respective test manuals, and a master data sheet was prepared for statistical analysis. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to analyze the relationships between the Knowledge about Sex scores and the various psychological aspects of Sexual Self Concept.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

**Table 1, Results of Pearson's product moment correlation between Psychological Aspects of Sexual Self Concept and Factors of Knowledge about Sex.**

Psychological Aspects of Sexual Self Concept		Factors of Knowledge about Sex								
		Knowledge of Pregnancy	Knowledge of Transmission	Knowledge of Sexual Initiation and Virginity	Knowledge about Orgasm Erection	Knowledge about Masturbation	Knowledge about Negative Consequences Rape	Knowledge about Homosexuality	Knowledge of Abortion and Education	Total Knowledge about Sex
Sexual Anxiety	r	.141	.037	.077	.073	.069	.022	.099	-.030	.105
	p	.005	.463	.124	.144	.168	.661	.047	.544	.036
Sexual Self Efficacy	r	.233	.207	.152	.150	.295	.214	.168	.111	.318
	p	.001	.001	.002	.003	.001	.001	.001	.027	.001
Sexual Consciousness	r	.173	.254	.151	.142	.250	.186	.120	.074	.276
	p	.001	.001	.002	.005	.001	.001	.017	.141	.001
Motivation to Avoid Risky Sex	r	.145	.250	.075	.118	.215	.248	.146	.179	.283
	p	.004	.001	.134	.018	.001	.001	.004	.001	.001
Chance / Luck Sexual Control	r	.216	.077	.153	.151	.245	.095	.148	.060	.242
	p	.001	.123	.002	.002	.001	.056	.003	.228	.001
Sexual Preoccupation	r	.173	-.008	.106	.178	.198	.087	.170	.060	.209
	p	.001	.872	.035	.001	.001	.081	.001	.231	.001
Sexual Assertiveness	r	.184	.070	.098	.134	.186	.086	.126	.016	.193
	p	.001	.164	.050	.007	.001	.086	.012	.750	.001
Sexual Optimism	r	.133	.150	.138	.050	.227	.212	.122	.210	.252
	p	.008	.003	.006	.320	.001	.001	.015	.001	.001
Sexual Problem Self Blame	r	.084	.118	.128	.062	.180	.118	.153	.094	.188
	p	.095	.019	.010	.217	.001	.018	.002	.061	.001
Sexual Monitoring	r	.171	.059	.138	.215	.239	.132	.142	.081	.251
	p	.001	.238	.006	.001	.001	.008	.004	.107	.001
Sexual Motivation	r	.270	.110	.184	.248	.396	.164	.267	.146	.377
	p	.001	.027	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.003	.001
Sexual Problem Management	r	.214	.205	.144	.178	.301	.221	.161	.140	.325
	p	.001	.001	.004	.001	.001	.001	.001	.005	.001
Sexual Esteem	r	.277	.220	.185	.221	.341	.224	.191	.200	.387
	p	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
Sexual Satisfaction	r	.300	.179	.126	.236	.346	.171	.215	.181	.371
	p	.001	.001	.011	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
Sexual Satisfaction	r	.118	.013	.053	.055	.134	-.002	.084	-.019	.094
	p	.019	.798	.292	.277	.007	.971	.094	.699	.059

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Sexual Self Schemata	r	.218	.126	.129	.232	.329	.238	.221	.219	.361
	p	.001	.012	.010	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
Fear of Sex	r	-.116	-.045	-.002	-.081	-.234	-.047	-.046	-.067	-.139
	p	.020	.369	.962	.106	.001	.344	.358	.181	.005
Sexual Problem Prevention	r	.237	.322	.145	.144	.237	.259	.174	.221	.355
	p	.001	.001	.004	.004	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
Sexual Depression	r	.025	-.085	.086	-.008	-.033	-.011	.066	-.099	-.011
	p	.618	.090	.084	.873	.512	.821	.186	.049	.831
Internal Sexual Control	r	.228	.252	.154	.166	.272	.248	.178	.173	.345
	p	.001	.001	.002	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
Total Sexual Self Concept	r	.272	.206	.191	.213	.336	.232	.231	.161	.384
	p	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001

The study revealed significant positive correlations between total sexual self concept scores and all sub-scales of sexual knowledge, indicating a direct relationship between higher knowledge levels and more positive self-perceptions regarding sexuality. Correlation coefficients ranged from  $r = .161$  (knowledge of abortion and education) to  $r = .384$  (total knowledge about sex), all statistically significant at  $p < .001$ .

Interestingly, the "fear of sex" sub-scale of sexual self concept displayed negative correlations with specific knowledge areas. Knowledge of pregnancy ( $r = -.116$ ,  $p = .020$ ) and knowledge about masturbation ( $r = -.234$ ,  $p = .001$ ) were negatively associated with higher "fear of sex" scores, suggesting that increased knowledge in these areas may mitigate anxiety surrounding sexual experiences.

Furthermore, "sexual depression" was negatively correlated with knowledge of abortion and education ( $r = -.099$ ,  $p = .049$ ), implying that awareness about these topics might contribute to lower levels of depressive symptoms related to sexuality.

Finally, a significant negative correlation ( $r = -.139$ ,  $p = .005$ ) was observed between the total score of "fear of sex" and the total score of knowledge about sex. This suggests that comprehending diverse aspects of sexual health can potentially reduce overall anxiety associated with sexual experiences.

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relationship between knowledge about sex and various psychological aspects of sexual self concept among young adults. Findings of the study revealed a significant positive correlation between total sexual self concept scores and all sub-scales of sexual knowledge, supporting the notion that higher levels of knowledge are associated with more positive self-perceptions regarding sexuality. These findings align with previous research by Deutsch (2012), who defines sexual self concept as "how individuals think and feel about sex in general and more how they think and feel about themselves as sexual beings."

Furthermore, some specific areas of knowledge exhibited interesting negative correlations with certain aspects of sexual self concept. Knowledge of pregnancy and knowledge about masturbation were negatively associated with "fear of sex" scores, suggesting that increased awareness in these areas may lessen anxiety surrounding sexual experiences. This finding resonates with Breakwell and Millward's (1997) emphasis on incorporating healthy sexual

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behavior into adolescent development to promote stable self-concept and reduce gender differences. Similarly, Hensel et al. (2011) reported that a positive sexual self-concept is associated with less reserve, anxiety, and greater personal comfort with sexuality, further highlighting the potential benefits of comprehensive sex education.

Our findings also contribute to the growing body of literature exploring the role of sexual self concept in sexual health behaviors. Studies by Lou et al. (2011) and Yueh et al. (2015) have demonstrated the importance of a positive sexual self concept for effective sexual communication and reduced sexual risk-taking behavior among adolescents. These findings emphasize the need for school-based sex education programs that not only provide accurate information but also foster healthy self-perceptions regarding sexuality. Additionally, Kim and Choi (2016) found that higher sexual knowledge scores were associated with lower sexual risk behaviors and higher assertiveness, further underlining the potential benefits of comprehensive sex education for young adults.

While not all factors of knowledge about sex exhibited positive correlations with all psychological aspects of sexual self concept, our study underscores the overall importance of sexual knowledge for young adults. This finding aligns with Kalkute et al. (2015), who reported that students with greater knowledge about sexual health engaged in fewer risky sexual behaviors. Additionally, Zhou et al. (2012) highlighted the need for effective sex education programs to equip college students with the knowledge and skills necessary to protect themselves from high-risk sexual behaviors. These findings suggest that promoting comprehensive sex education among young adults can contribute to both positive self-perceptions and safer sexual practices.

In conclusion, our study demonstrates a positive association between knowledge about sex and sexual self concept among young adults. Furthermore, we identified specific areas of knowledge that may play a role in reducing anxiety and promoting healthy self-perceptions regarding sexuality. These findings highlight the crucial role of comprehensive sex education in promoting positive sexual health and well-being among young adults.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the relationship between knowledge about sex and various psychological aspects of sexual self concept among young adults from in and around Mysuru City, India. Utilizing self-reported questionnaires, we found a significant positive correlation between total sexual knowledge scores and all sub-scales of sexual self concept. Interestingly, specific areas of knowledge (pregnancy and masturbation) were negatively associated with "fear of sex," suggesting potential anxiety-reducing effects. Overall, our findings support the notion that comprehensive sex education can contribute to positive self-perceptions and healthier sexual attitudes among young adults.

Our study highlights the crucial role of knowledge about sex in shaping young adults' sexual self concept. Higher levels of knowledge were associated with more positive self-perceptions across various dimensions, suggesting the potential of comprehensive sex education in promoting healthy sexual well-being. Specific areas of knowledge, like pregnancy and masturbation, may hold promise for reducing anxiety and fostering a more comfortable relationship with sexuality.

### *Limitations*

While our findings offer valuable insights, several limitations deserve consideration. The sample size and focus on in and around Mysuru City limit generalizability. Further research with diverse populations and longitudinal designs is needed to strengthen our understanding of this complex relationship.

### *Implications*

Our findings emphasize the importance of integrating comprehensive sex education into youth development programs. Such programs should go beyond biological information and address diverse aspects of sexuality, including pleasure, intimacy, communication, and healthy relationships. This holistic approach can empower young adults with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate their sexuality confidently and responsibly.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

- Investigate the causal mechanisms underlying the relationship between knowledge and self-concept through longitudinal studies.
- Examine the generalizability of findings by conducting research with diverse populations and across different cultural contexts.
- Investigate the potential of targeted interventions addressing specific areas of knowledge identified in this study (e.g., pregnancy, masturbation) to reduce sexual anxiety and promote healthy self-perceptions.

By addressing these limitations and exploring promising avenues for future research, we can continue to refine our understanding of the crucial link between knowledge about sex and sexual self concept among young adults, ultimately paving the way for healthier and more fulfilling sexual lives for future generations.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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