

# The Adult Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire: A new understanding of sexual self-concept in adults in romantic relationships

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## 1) INTRODUCTION

- Sexual self-concept has been defined as **perceptions of the self as a sexual being** (O'Sullivan & al., 2006); perceptions of one's qualities in the sexual domain (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996); a coherent, dynamic, internalized structure formed by the organized perceptions of one's sexual qualities (Deutsch & al, 2014); a multidimensional vision of the self that comprises adjectives, cognitions, emotions and behaviors that one is most likely to adopt in a sexual context (Vickberg & Deaux, 2005).
- Other constructs have similar definitions: personal experience as a sexual being and perceptions of corporal pleasure that would develop with the **integration of cognitions and emotions related to those experiences** (sexual subjectivity; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006), cognitive perceptions of the self related to sexuality that develop based on experiences (sexual self-schemas; Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994).
- However, SSC has mostly been studied in teenagehood and young adulthood, which are periods of life marked by exploration and during which the **construction of the self** is still evolving. These developmental stages are associated with **specifics sexual issues** (e.g. loss of virginity, contraceptive use, peers conformity) that are not representative of adults involved in long-term relationships (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996; O'Sullivan & al., 2006).
- Consequently, current SSC measures are **not appropriate for sexually active adults that are in a more stable, long-term relationship**.
- To address these conceptual and methodological limitations, we created a new SSC measure: the **Adult Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire** (ASSCQ; Beaulieu & Péloquin, 2016).
- The ASSCQ was developed based on 1) our elaboration of a general SSC definition: a part of the self concerned with the **sexual aspects of one's identity**; a subjective perception of the self as a sexual being; and 2) our assumption that SSC may act as a **working model of the sexual self**.
  - A working model of the self, as described in Attachment Theory, is a **mental representation of one' self and worth** (Bowlby, 1969).

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study was to conduct a preliminary validation of the Adult Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire (ASSCQ) in a community sample of adults currently involved in a heterosexual relationship

## 2) METHOD

### Elaboration of the ASSCQ

#### Initial SSC model

- Based on a literature review on SSC and our understanding of SSC as working model of the sexual self, we developed an initial theoretical model comprised of 3 components, which served as the basic structure to create a large pool of items for the ASSCQ.
- 1) Sexual self-esteem** including sexual body esteem and sexual self-efficacy.
- 2) Positive sexuality**, which includes accepting one's own sexual desires, feeling that one's sexual desires and needs are valuable, expecting that they will be respected by one's partner, and asserting one's sexual desires and needs; these needs and desires being congruent with one's personal values.
- 3) Sexual self-awareness** including acceptance of one's sexuality and integration of sexuality in one's identity and life, and sexual introspection.

#### Items

- Some items were taken from existing measures of SSC and related constructs, and others were created to reflect the three components underlying our understanding of the construct.
- We first removed items that seemed less relevant or that were redundant from our initial pool of 94 items.
- A total of 49 items were evaluated by an expert panel. 23 items were modified and 1 item was removed, resulting in a final scale of **48 items**.

### Participants and procedure

- A community sample (**N = 426**) was recruited using social media (see Table 1 for demographics).
- Participants completed online questionnaires on a secured web platform (Qualtrics Research Suite).

### Analytic strategy

- The first version of the ASSCQ (48 items) was submitted to a principal components analysis with orthogonal rotation (varimax).
- The number of components was determined using eigenvalues > 1.
- Items were attributed to a component when saturating over .3
- Items were removed if they cross-loaded (saturation difference < .3) or when appearing conceptually different from others items under the same component.
- Convergent validity was evaluated using Pearson's correlations with conceptually-related constructs (see Table 2).

Table 1. Demographics (351 women and 74 men)

	M or N	ET or %
Age (years)		
Men	28.3	10.2
Women	26.7	7.3
Duration of relationship (years)	4.4	4.8
Type of relationship (N)		
Married	40	9.4
Cohabitation	229	53.8
Dating	157	36.9

Table 2. Measures for convergent validity

Sexual esteem (SEs) Sexual assertiveness (SAs) Sexual anxiety (SAn)	3 dimensions of the Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire (IMS; Snell, et al., 1993)
Sexual satisfaction	Globale Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSEX; Lawrance et Byers, 1995)

## 3) RESULTS

- The principal components analysis suggests that SSC can be explained by a 5-components model.
- Sampling quality:  $KMO = .871$
- Bartlett's test of sphericity:  $\chi^2 (210) = 4141.456, p < .0001$

### The 5-components model explains 66.35 % in SSC variance:

**Embracing one's sexuality = 30.50 %**  
**Sexual assertiveness = 12.74 %**  
**Sexual body esteem = 8.21 %**  
**Sexual self-worth = 7.89 %**  
**Sexual introspection = 7.00 %**

- The final version of the ASSCQ thus comprises **21 items** divided into **5 subscales** (see Table 4).
- The ASSCQ presents good internal consistency (0,76 to 0,89) and good convergent validity with sexual esteem, sexual assertiveness, sexual anxiety and sexual satisfaction (see Table 3).

Table 3. Pearson's correlations between the ASSCQ's 5 subscales, 3 sexual domains and sexual satisfaction

	SEs	SAs	SAn	GMSEX
Embracing one's sexuality	0,596**	0,451**	-0,402**	0,356**
Sexual assertiveness	0,496**	0,821**	-0,451**	0,402**
Sexual body esteem	0,404**	0,269**	-0,301**	0,178**
Sexual self-worth	0,274**	0,285**	-0,205**	0,311**
Sexual introspection	0,150**	0,185**	0,099*	0,111*

\*p ≤ 0,05; \*\*p ≤ 0,01; \*\*\*p ≤ 0,001; SEs: Sexual esteem; SAs: Sexual assertiveness; SAn: Sexual anxiety; GMSEX: Sexual satisfaction.

## 4) DISCUSSION

### Sexual self-concept theoretical model

- Results describe SSC with a 5-components model: Embracing one's sexuality, Sexual assertiveness, Sexual body esteem, Sexual self-worth, and Sexual introspection.
- These components are partly consistent with the current SSC literature (Cherkasskaya, 2014; Deutsch, 2012; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Snell & al., 1991). However, the component "embracing one's sexuality" is a new aspect of SSC that was not previously considered in studies using younger individuals and it brings new insight into our understanding of adult SSC.

### Definition of the 5 SSC's components

- Embracing one's sexuality:** Acceptance of one's sexuality and integration of sexuality in one's identity and life.
- Sexual assertiveness:** Feeling like one is able to express themselves regarding their sexual needs and values.
- Sexual body esteem:** Comfort in one's body appearance in sexual contexts.
- Sexual self-worth:** Feeling of being worthy of sexuality and sexual pleasure. That would translate into feeling like one's sexual desires and needs have an inherent value and are then worthy of and should be considered by the partner.
- Sexual introspection:** Reflexion about the sexual aspects of one's life.

- It would be interesting to see if our model of SSC could be interpreted through the lens of attachment theory, which is a very pertinent theoretical framework to study sexuality and romantic relationships in adulthood (Birnbaum, 2010). We plan to examine the links between SSC and attachment. This future work could help us bring more support to our hypothesis that SSC might be a working model of the sexual self.

### Adult Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire

- The ASSCQ's subscales present good convergent validity with conceptually-related measures of sexuality as well as good internal consistency.

### Limits

- The sample for this study was primarily female. Since research suggests that men and women differ in the way they experience their sexuality (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Aumer, 2014; Deutsch & al., 2014), results might not be the same in a sample with more men. Moreover, there were no minimal relationship duration to participate in the study. More research is needed to see if there are differences between young couples and long-term relationships.

Table 4. Five dimensions of Sexual Self-Concept (items from the ASSCQ; Beaulieu & Péloquin, 2016)

	* Reversed items
<b>Embracing one's sexuality</b> $\alpha = 0,84$	5. I don't consider myself a sexual person.*
	14. Sex is a natural part of my life.
	16. I believe that sexuality is part of me as a whole.
<b>Sexual assertiveness</b> $\alpha = 0,89$	17. I am usually aware of what motivates me to have sex.
	18. My sexuality is a part of my identity.
	6. I feel comfortable telling my partner about the sexual stimulation I desire.
<b>Sexual body esteem</b> $\alpha = 0,80$	7. I assert myself easily about the sexual aspects of my life.
	10. When it comes to sex, I usually ask for what I want.
	20. I can tell my sexual needs to my partner.
<b>Sexual self-worth</b> $\alpha = 0,80$	1. In general, I am comfortable with my partner looking at me when I have no clothes on.
	8. During sexual activity, I worry that my body is unattractive.*
	15. I'm not concerned about the sexual appearance of my body.
<b>Sexual introspection</b> $\alpha = 0,76$	21. I prefer that my partner does not see my body clearly during sex (when it's dark, under the covers).*
	2. If my partner were to ignore my sexual needs and desires, I would feel hurt.
	3. I expect my partner to be responsive to my sexual needs and feelings.
<b>Sexual self-worth</b> $\alpha = 0,80$	11. It's important for me that my partner considers my sexual needs and feelings.
	12. It would bother me if my partner neglected my sexual needs and desires.
	4. I reflect about my sexual desires.
<b>Sexual introspection</b> $\alpha = 0,76$	9. I take the time to think about my sexual experiences.
	13. I usually try to understand my sexual feelings.
	19. I rarely question myself about my sexuality.*

## 5) CONCLUSION



- Findings suggest that the ASSCQ is a promising tool for measuring adult SSC and advance research aimed at defining the construct.
- Our ongoing project aims to further the validation of the ASSCQ (French and English versions). To address the limitations of this first study, we are now recruiting both partners of mix-sex couples that have been together for at least 5 years.
- This poster presents the English version of the ASSCQ. **This validation study used the French version of the ASSCQ.**
- For more information about the ASSCQ, please contact the first author at noemie.beaulieu@hotmail.ca