

Dissemination of Older Women's Ideas: A Study of New Perspectives on the Body and Sexuality of Older Women in China

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Abstract. This study focuses on analyzing older women's perceptions of how they view sex and their bodies based on the context of the digital media age. An interdisciplinary theoretical perspective is used to analyze more objectively the women's perspectives on sex and their bodies. There are three main research questions, i.e., what are older women's perceptions of how they view sex and their bodies in different contexts? How do they see sex and bodies in the context of subject construction theory? And how do they understand sex under the framework analysis of sexuality? This paper uses the interview method to interview 10 elderly women aged 50-80 in Guangzhou, China. Two of them were selected for representative subject case analysis. It aims to find out whether there is any change in older women's view of sex and body in the age of digital media.

1. Introduction

The prevalent association of sexuality with older individuals often evokes a sense of peculiarity among the general populace. Society's establishment of a rigid sexual age boundary has, over time, profoundly constricted people's perceptions, giving rise to a formidable social repression of the multifaceted spectrum of sexual behaviors. This constriction is further accentuated by the rapidly aging demographic in China and the burgeoning sexual revolution, a phenomenon that is steadily stoking public interest in the sexual lives of the elderly. For instance, recent years have witnessed a burgeoning concern within the public health domain, with a growing emphasis on the rising prevalence of HIV among the elderly population, as well as an increasing focus on the elderly clientele of sex workers by researchers. Nevertheless, this approach to highlighting sexual dynamics among the elderly has the unintended consequence of laying bare their intimate expressions, inadvertently fostering a new layer of stigma in the process of affording attention to their sexual experiences.

In contrast to the limited research landscape and prevailing narrowness of discourse in China, international literature demonstrates a more developed lineage of research and a comprehensive analytical framework. The initial discourse on this subject in Western academic circles primarily centered around the challenge to the prevailing notion of asexuality in old age. During the 1960s and 1970s, a substantial body of data-driven surveys on the sexual desires and behaviors of older

individuals emerged, aiming to substantiate the assertion that seniors too possess the inclination and capacity for sexual engagement. This endeavor sought to dismantle the deeply ingrained preconceptions surrounding elderly sexuality, dismantling the associated stigma and misconceptions. As the notion that sexual activity among the elderly is both common and normal gradually solidified into academic consensus, research on this topic began to evolve, branching into increasingly diverse dimensions and deeper layers of exploration.

The prevailing notion that sexual activity diminishes with age primarily stems from the belief that the aging body naturally impedes the physical aspects of sexual intercourse. However, what often escapes notice is the intriguing transformation that occurs in the pursuit of sexual satisfaction among many older individuals when physical limitations enter the picture. In these cases, the quest for sexual gratification shifts from being purely physiological to becoming profoundly psychological, with intimacy emerging as the cornerstone of their sexual lives. This phenomenon illustrates how sex transcends the confines of the physical and psychological realms, offering the possibility for it to transcend the very act of sexual intercourse and shape the very essence of one's sexual identity. In the realm of sexual expression, older individuals ingeniously replace direct intercourse with alternative forms of intimate interaction, such as kissing, hugging, and tender touching. It is crucial to emphasize that these adaptations are not viewed by older individuals as a compromise or second-best option; quite the contrary, their satisfaction with their sexuality and life in general increases as a result.

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Beyond concerns related to the aging body, there exists an alternative perspective that places greater emphasis on non-physical factors influencing sexuality in old age, particularly through the lens of gender analysis. On one hand, while sociocultural pressures affect both older men and older women, women, in particular, find themselves more overtly constrained by cultural expectations. As Joseph Michael Daly astutely pointed out, women in certain cultures, such as the Orient, are expected to fulfill men's sexual needs even in the absence of personal sexual interest or pleasure, especially after they can no longer bear children. However, the landscape of women's roles in sexual relationships has undergone significant transformation in the wake of sexual liberation. The focus of their sexual lives has gradually shifted from solely pleasing others to prioritizing self-satisfaction, which holds profound significance for elderly women.

On the other hand, the influence of partnership dynamics on the sexual lives of older adults exhibits notable gender disparities. The presence or absence of a partner and the quality of the partnership prove to be far more critical for older women than for older men. In some studies, these factors are even considered pivotal in determining the overall quality of older women's sexual lives. The absence of a partner or the deterioration of a partnership leads to a significant reduction in their sexual life satisfaction. This isn't solely due to the lack of a sexual intercourse partner but is rooted in the profound importance of the relationship itself for older women.

In summary, the discourse surrounding sexuality in old age initially challenged the prevailing notion of asexuality in old age. Subsequent studies have engaged directly or indirectly with this foundational issue. A substantial body of research, often grounded in questionnaire-based methodologies, has revolved around the argument that physical decline need not equate to a reduction or disappearance of sexuality. Instead, it posits that the quality of older individuals' sexuality is influenced by non-physiological factors, such as gerontological abstinence shaped by socio-cultural factors. These research endeavors shed light on certain facets of elderly sexuality and, to some extent, dispel misconceptions held by the public. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of the aging body, the dimension of time, the nuances of subjectivity, and the intricacies of sexuality are essential for refining and enriching current discussions surrounding the sexuality of older individuals.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

2.1 Research Objectives

(1).To explore the social contexts and historical dimensions in which this study seeks to explore older women's personal bodily experiences and feelings that are shaped alongside their agency.

(2).To analyze older women's understanding of their aging and sexuality under the theory of subject construction.

(3).To explore older women's understanding of sexuality within the framework of sexuality.

2.2 Research Questions

(1).what are older women's perceptions of how they view sex and their bodies in different contexts?

(2).How do older women make sense of their aging and sexuality under the subject-constructionist theory?

(3).How do older women make sense of sex within the framework of Sexuality?

3. Significance of the study

In this comprehensive study, it is evident that although each individual's perception of aging is unique, they all share a common thread in the form of their shared social environments. Furthermore, the intricate web of communication channels they utilize reveals significant overlaps[1]. By delving into the intricate processes of how these perceptions take shape and evolve, we gain profound insights into the ongoing cultural transformation. Of particular note is the impact of new media, exemplified by platforms like WeChat, which have permeated the daily lives of older individuals. This infiltration of modern technology leads to a fascinating interplay between their perceptions of aging, their strategies for managing their bodies, and the various techniques they employ for maintenance[2]. In essence, there exists a complex, interwoven relationship between individual physical and mental experiences and the cultural symbols that shape their outlook.Hence, when we embark on an enthusiastic exploration of the transmigration of permaculture, it is advantageous to commence our journey by tracing the influence of the audience's sense of their bodies. In other words, by delving into the realm of body sense research, we have the opportunity to uncover a richer and more nuanced understanding of history and its evolution.

4. Research Methods

In this study, we used in-depth interviews to recruit a total of 10 elderly women aged 50-80 years old living in Shanghai across multiple social strata and marital statuses through referrals from elders and open recruitment. Interviews were conducted under the premise of informed consent and centered on the dimensions of body and sex. Due to the sensitivity of the topic of sex, the researcher started from the physical sensations when the interviewees mentioned the following Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of sex, the researcher started with physical feelings and then transitioned naturally when the interviewees mentioned the sex of the body[3]. Due to the large age difference between the researcher and the interviewees, the researcher mostly used the consulting method to ask questions during the interviews. After summarising the interview data of the 10 interviewees, two cases were

selected for the Theme and Case Analysis. These two cases were chosen because this paper is concerned with the breakthrough and challenge of sex in old age to the mainstream imagination, and the cases of Auntie Li (55) and Auntie Leung (65) present a more complete picture of alternative sex. It is important to note that such alternatives are not preconceived by the researcher, but rather emerge from the interviewees' self-narratives, and thus the researcher felt it necessary to select the most informative and complete cases to be analyzed in detail under these summarised alternative themes.

5. Case Interpretations of Older Women on Sex and the Body

5.1 Sexual and Bodily Enrichment for Older Women

In the realm of sociological and anthropological perspectives on the body, the concept of aging transcends mere acceptance as an inevitable natural occurrence, warranting a deeper examination[4]. Instead of dismissing it, aging unfolds its profound intricacies when we uncover the concealed experiences, emotions, and practices that lurk behind the facade of old age. In doing so, we gain valuable insights into the intricate interplay between the physical body, the psyche, and society.

Perceptions of physical aging do not materialize in isolation but are born from the increasingly visible markers of time's passage. These perceptions are accentuated and magnified by the physical discomfort arising from the body's declining functions. As elucidated by phenomenology, there exists a fundamental distinction between merely possessing a body, actively engaging with one's body, and truly embodying one's existence as a corporeal being[5]. When we exist in harmonious coexistence with our bodies, we often remain blissfully unaware of their presence. However, when our bodies rebel against our control, as in times of illness, the sensation of having a body emerges, casting the body as an external and objective entity. This revelation of the veil of 'old age' tends to be more prevalent among older individuals.

Consider Auntie Li, for instance. When she delves into the topic of old age, her immediate thoughts revolve around the deterioration of bodily functions and the ensuing pathologies, such as the perennial chill in her legs, which she repeatedly references in subsequent interviews. This is not to suggest that Auntie Li is oblivious to the visible signs of aging, such as sagging skin and the loss of her youthful body contours[6]. However, as she advances in age, the former manifestations of aging exact a more pronounced toll, causing her increasingly direct hardships.

In contrast, Auntie Leung, who is a decade younger than Auntie Li, perceives the aging process through a lens that emphasizes alterations in appearance. She underscores the threat that 'old age' poses to one's sense of beauty. Words like wrinkles, increased body weight, and sagging prominently feature in her descriptions of her feelings about aging. Even when she touches on the

effects of declining bodily functions, Auntie Leung characterizes it simply as a diminished vigor compared to my youth.

Remarkably, Auntie Li and Auntie Leung frequently employed vivid and figurative language to draw parallels between their aging experiences and those of others. In doing so, they skillfully underscored the enduring vitality of their physical selves.

Auntie Li confidently remarked, *"The doctor once told me that my body possesses the potential for far greater strength than others. It's quite amusing. Just take a look—I can match my next-door neighbor in both dancing and running with ease."*

Meanwhile, Auntie Leung's approach to maintaining youthfulness was evident in her words: *"I make it a point to nourish my body with good food, ample rest, and quality sleep every day. As a result, I genuinely feel more youthful than most."*

It becomes evident that women's perception of aging is a dynamic journey, constantly shaped by a myriad of pressures and challenges[7]. The tangible transformations in their bodies force them to confront the inevitable effects of aging, yet concurrently, they manage to unearth a semblance of youthfulness. This rekindling of youth, while not concealing the reality of aging, significantly amplifies their self-assurance and overall sense of fulfillment.

Interestingly, the act of comparison is not exclusive to elderly women, but the nature of their comparisons bears a distinct hallmark. They are not in a competition for beauty but rather for the preservation of their youthfulness. Physiological attributes that exhibit vitality beyond that of most of their peers are cherished as physical assets to be proudly displayed and harnessed. Auntie Li's daring ventures into sexual exploration are intricately linked to this mindset. During an interview, she recounted a gynecological examination from a few years back where two doctors marveled at the vitality of her genitals. This response directly influenced her self-image and became a pivotal catalyst in her sexual journey. In a subsequent article, we will delve deeper into how the pursuit of youthfulness shapes an individual's comprehension and expression of their sexuality.

In the preceding analysis, we've explored the multifaceted nature of the aging process, which extends its influence over both the individual and the societal realms[8]. It intricately weaves together personal experiences and acquired wisdom, forming a bridge that connects the bygone era with the current moment. When it comes to women, they navigate the landscape of 'old age' with a nuanced awareness of the subtle transformations occurring within their bodies. Rather than denying the inevitable aging process, they acknowledge it while also emphasizing their unique strengths in this journey. Actively, they take charge of their bodies, steering them towards a trajectory that counteracts the relentless march of time. This rich tapestry of "oldness" opens up new vistas of understanding, shedding light on how alternative expressions of aging and sexuality can thrive, challenging the conventional paradigm of aging solely at the physical level.

5.2 Older Women's Sexuality Differs From Traditional Views

Auntie Leung, an enthusiastic attendee of not one, but two "Elderly Sex Seminars," stood out remarkably due to her vibrant attire, while her outspoken and audacious remarks during the seminars drew a significant amount of interest from the audience. With an air of pride, she boldly asserted her distinction as one of China's pioneering individuals in embracing the use of sexual aids, openly displaying an array of innovative tools she had brought to the conference.

In the interview, Auntie Leung also spoke frankly and excitedly about her experience and feelings about using sex toys: *"I saw the advert page on Taobao recommending it, so I tried it. After all, this is a new era. After my lover and I used it, it simply felt great!"*

Auntie Leung's journey from embracing the notion of "using sex to combat aging" to deriving satisfaction from it reveals her profound contentment with this approach to maintaining her health. However, our primary objective is not to ascertain the actual efficacy of sex as a means of preservation, but rather to delve into the intricate process of her transition from accepting this idea to relishing it[9]. We aim to dissect how she imbued the concept of "sex" with significance throughout this journey, influencing her emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. Our analysis will center on her intricate interpretation of the meaning of sex within the realms of feelings, perceptions, and behaviors as she embraced and savored this concept.

Auntie Leung's descriptions of the pleasures of the flesh are remarkably intricate, extending beyond the mere realm of physical sensation. Her enjoyment is deeply intertwined with medical discourse, wherein she links her orgasmic experiences with physiological phenomena like cell activation, meridian stimulation, and a profound bodily passage. It's important to note that these associations lack rigorous scientific backing, relying instead on the raw, visceral experience itself. This conscious merging of bodily experiences with the interpretation of medical discourse serves a dual purpose: firstly, it demonstrates how medical discourse subconsciously shapes an individual's understanding and imagination of their own body; secondly, it showcases the individual's active participation in constructing this discourse by intentionally aligning it with their personal experiences, thus lending it a tangible quality.

In contrast to Auntie Leung, Auntie Li embarked on her journey with sex toys later in life, and her exploration was marked by a tumultuous and challenging beginning. While she, too, was introduced to this realm by a friend, it was far from a straightforward initiation. Her emotional landscape and experiences along this sexual path were multifaceted and unique.

Auntie Leung said: *"After my 40s, I've been having no sex, I just don't want these things anymore. At first, I would feel ashamed to be exposed to this, but slowly, later on, I realized that there was nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, I'm very proud of it. Because my lover thinks I'm more diverse and sexy. Hahaha."*

Auntie Li's sexual activity ceased when her husband fell ill in his early forties, leading to a prolonged period of abstinence. The reintroduction of the word sex into her life occurred only when her friend mentioned it. Intriguingly, Auntie Li's family also suggested sex toys as a means to maintain physical health, emphasizing their impact on skin, hormones, and other factors that combat aging[10]. However, Auntie Li did not immediately venture into trying them, unlike Auntie Leung. Instead, she sought scientific validation. In addition to reading books, her trust in science stemmed from a gynecological examination. Evidently, the doctor's commendation of Auntie Li's sexual vitality during the gynecological check-up significantly influenced her self-perception regarding her sexuality. Unlike her friends' persuasion, the doctor's endorsement held scientific authority, becoming Auntie Li's motivation to overcome her last psychological barrier.

Another notable aspect of Auntie Li's perspective, in contrast to Auntie Leung's, is her repeated emphasis on the transformative impact of her sexual exploration on her entire life. She describes her past self as sexually illiterate and views her encounter with her friend's advice as an enlightening experience, akin to meeting a valuable mentor. For Auntie Li, her friend's advice marked her initiation into sexuality. She doesn't describe the physical pleasure of using sex toys in the same way as Auntie Leung does but rather emphasizes the significance of sex within a relational context. Throughout the interview, she repeatedly conveys the idea that meeting a "good partner" can ignite women's sexual desires. Clearly, while she also seeks physical satisfaction, Auntie Li places a premium on the emergence of eroticism, in contrast to Auntie Leung, who separates sex from love. Moving forward, we aim to contextualize the "differences" between these two women within the scope of their respective life experiences, with a particular focus on their intimacy dynamics, to provide a more insightful interpretation and explanation.

5.3 Older Women View Their Thoughts

Auntie Li ventured into matrimony with a family boasting three generations of diligent workers. Her union, however, was devoid of shared interests and passions, with Auntie Li regarding her partner as lacking in allure and responsibility, leading to their eventual separation, ostensibly due to sleep-related issues.

Within the realm of physical intimacy, Auntie Li rarely found satisfaction in her partner's embrace. She held a belief that a skillful gay man possessed the ability to ignite a desire in a lesbian, regardless of their age. Her utilization of sex toys became a subtle stratagem, born from an inability to fully connect with her physical self.

In Auntie Li's perspective, men were inherently driven by a potent libido, prioritizing pleasure above all else, while women's sexuality held deeper meaning within the context of intimacy. Conversely, Auntie Leung viewed the realms of love and physical desire as detachable entities. Her engagement with sex toys stemmed from a fear of the ravages of time, emphasizing the role of physical intimacy in combatting the aging process.

In Auntie Leung's perspective, she firmly believes in the distinction between the realms of sex and love. Her engagement in a unique sexual practice can be traced back to her underlying fear of the inexorable passage of time, with a primary focus on the role of sexuality in countering the effects of aging in women.

These two women, Auntie Li, and Auntie Leung, both represent unconventional practitioners of what some might term sexual exploration. Auntie Li, despite experiencing a tumultuous emotional breakdown, remains steadfast in upholding the sanctity of her family unit while embarking on a journey to rediscover her sensuality, all without jeopardizing the stability of her marriage. In contrast, Auntie Leung, following a turbulent emotional ordeal with her former spouse, hesitates to progress her current relationship to a more profound level and, as a result, embarks on her exploration of sensuality. In doing so, they both exhibit a meticulous effort to reposition the significance of sexuality within the intricate tapestry of intimate human connections.

6. New Thoughts on How Older Women View Sex and Their Bodies

6.1 Older Women With a Sense of Self as a Priority

The concept of the body underscores the intricate relationship between one's bodily experiences and the external realm. Within the context of this research, the elderly participants' perception of their own bodies is intricately woven with the tapestry of historical and cultural influences, bearing the distinct imprints of their era. Interestingly, they view their aging bodies as profoundly real, even though there exist variations in how they subjectively perceive these changes.

Moreover, it's essential to recognize that their perception of their bodies is far from static; rather, it dynamically evolves through their interactions with society and culture. Their daily experiences reinforce the terminology of Chinese medicine, which, in turn, shapes their perception of their bodies. Consequently, the sense of the body serves as a bridge connecting the individual to the broader external world, and the formation of bodily meanings emerges as a collaborative process of mutual definition.

6.2 New Conceptions of Older Women in Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory represents a groundbreaking paradigm shift within the realm of social sciences. It contends that a comprehensive analysis of social phenomena necessitates the inclusion of historical context, social class, and gender/sexuality as integral components.

The elderly participants in our study have traversed a diverse spectrum of societal paradigms. They have borne witness to the sexless culture, the Republican sex culture during the early era, and the emergence of the pure love

culture in the post-2000 period. Their lives have been intertwined with and impacted by the profound sexual change experienced by the Chinese population over time.

The aunts who graciously shared their experiences with us hail from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby offering a rich tapestry of perspectives. Their life journeys have instilled in them distinct perceptions and understandings of physical and sexual encounters, reflecting both disparities and shared insights across various stages of their lives.

Hence, it is imperative that we exercise utmost diligence throughout our research process. This entails a steadfast commitment to acknowledging and exploring the intricate sex/gender differences present among our research subjects. By adopting an intersectional lens and relinquishing any preconceived notions, we empower our participants to take the lead in articulating their unique experiences and narratives.

6.3 Older Women's Sexuality Under Subject Construction

The heart of the research process lies in the intricate dance of co-creation between the subjects involved. Within this intricate web, the dynamic interplay between the researcher and the interviewees serves as the crucible from which textual narratives are born. In the course of this study, though the disparity in age occasionally casts a shadow over the researcher's grasp of certain linguistic expressions employed by the interviewees, more often than not, it is this very age differential that kindles a "consultative" rapport between them. The interviewees frequently find themselves motivated to elucidate their perspectives, particularly those who draw from maternal experiences, which becomes an avenue for meaningful dialogue.

These interviewees, often drawing from their roles as mothers, willingly take on the mantle of mentorship, patiently illuminating the path for their younger counterparts. Their narratives often commence with the poignant refrain, "my daughter said the same thing." Consequently, the researcher's identity is neither elevated nor diminished, but rather, it assumes the role of a facilitator in this intricate tapestry of interactions. This role necessitates a delicate equilibrium between empathy and objectivity, contributing significantly to the tapestry of storytelling that unfolds in the research process.

7. Conclusion

In this study, the significant age gap between the interviewer and the interviewee occasionally presents challenges to their mutual expression. However, intriguingly, more often than not, this divergence in age fosters a unique connection between the researcher and the interviewee. Within the interviewees' minds, we cease to be merely the interviewer; we also become relatable, akin to a younger person. Consequently, when delving into sensitive topics such as body, sexuality, intimacy, and other personal matters, interviewees frequently exhibit a natural inclination to open up. This is especially

noticeable among those who are older, like aunts with children, who often initiate their narratives by recounting how they once shared similar experiences with their offspring.

Moreover, the interviewees exhibit an eagerness to elucidate unfamiliar terms or recount unfamiliar stories. This curiosity provides fertile ground for revisiting their own early experiences of discipline, and sharing them in the process. In essence, our approach revolves around stepping into their shoes to immerse ourselves in their world. While acknowledging the existence of certain blind spots due to differences in life experiences, it is important to note that these disparities do not necessarily diminish the ultimate research outcomes. Quite the contrary, the interviewees actively contribute to the elimination of these blind spots and augment our understanding through the provision of additional insights.

This dynamic underscores that research is a nuanced subject-subject dialogue that refrains from discarding the subjectivity of either the researcher or the researched. In this light, the research process essentially unfolds as a continuous interplay between subject and subject, a true manifestation of intersubjectivity.

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