

ATTRACTION TO RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION: MEDIATING ROLE OF SEXUAL SATISFACTION AMONG INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Background- Relationship satisfaction is important for overall well-being, particularly during young adulthood when individuals indulge in intimacy, commitment, and long-term partnerships. Among the many factors that contribute to the quality of romantic relationships, sexual satisfaction and physical attraction are often highlighted as important. Yet in the Indian sociocultural context, romantic relationships are not as openly discussed as in the West.

Purpose- The study aims to examine the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in the relationship between physical attraction and relationship satisfaction in the young adult population of India.

Methods- The study employed a correlational research design. Using purposive sampling, data was collected from 193 individuals between 18 and 29 years of age who were currently in a romantic relationship. Participants completed the Physical Attraction Scale, the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale-Short Form, and the Relationship Assessment Scale.

Results- The results demonstrated a significant partial mediation effect of sexual satisfaction in the relationship between physical attraction and relationship satisfaction. The total effect of physical attraction on relationship satisfaction was significant ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect was also significant ($a \times b = 0.18$), as indicated by the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval (0.096–0.277), confirming the partial mediating role of sexual satisfaction.

Conclusion- Findings suggest that while physical attraction directly enhances relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction plays a meaningful partial mediating role. It offers deeper insight into the dynamics of young adult romantic relationships in the Indian context. The results imply that interventions aimed at improving relationship quality may benefit from addressing both relational and sexual dimensions of young adult partnerships.

Keywords- Physical attraction, Sexual satisfaction, Relationship Satisfaction, Young adults, romantic relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Multiple attempts have been made to understand the factors influencing relationship satisfaction, which is a key determinant of relational stability and individual happiness when it comes to romantic relationships. This paper explores the role of physical attraction and sexual satisfaction in relationship satisfaction.

Physical attraction is discussed in social psychology since long. It influences not only initial attraction but also the dynamics of relationships and satisfaction over time, affecting more than just romantic relationships but other interpersonal connections as well. Past researches have shown that attractiveness has a very significant impact on desirability from the opposite sex, while other personality factors are considered much later [1,2]. Hatfield and Rapson argued that the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype continues to shape judgment of people, and attractive people seem to have an advantage over ones who are deemed unattractive [3]. Attractive individuals are still perceived as more competent and smarter, socially desirable, and emotionally stable, which can increase their romantic desirability at least in initial interactions [4,5]. However, while initial attraction might mostly rely on physical appearance and perceived attractiveness, forming and maintaining a relationship is most likely driven by deeper emotional, sexual, and communicative interactions between the two parties [3,4].

Contrary to earlier discussed findings, some studies have also shown that physical attractiveness and attraction continue to shape relationship dynamics after the initial stages of a relationship [6,7,8]. McNulty et al. found that a partner’s physical attractiveness predicted higher marital satisfaction for men but not as much for women,

suggesting gender differences in the role of perceived physical attractiveness of a partner, with the wife being relatively more attractive [6]. Similarly, Meltzer et al. observed that men's satisfaction tended to increase when their partners were seen as attractive by them, whereas women's satisfaction was indifferent [7]. These findings are congruent with research findings indicating that male satisfaction is more visual aesthetic driven, while female satisfaction is linked to emotional investment and satisfaction [8].

Recent researches have explored other aspects of this relationship. Barelds and Dijkstra found that positive illusion of overestimating a partner's attractiveness was associated with higher relationship satisfaction, as such unreal perceptions promote idealization and emotional closeness in couples [9]. Similarly, Penton-Voak et al. found that people with higher relationship satisfaction were more likely to perceive their partners as more attractive, suggesting that satisfaction also shapes the perception of attractiveness of partner [10]. This suggests that the link between physical attractiveness and relationship satisfaction may be bidirectional, and that both can reinforce each other.

Cross-cultural findings, particularly those from Indian subcontinent, are also of great significance here. In cultures where arranged marriages and family influence usually shapes partner selection and marriages, physical attraction is often kept secondary to socioeconomic status, religion, educational background, job profile, and family compatibility. However, with globalization, exposure to media, and the rise of autonomy in partner selection and love marriages, Indian young adults have increasingly prioritized physical attraction along with social, emotional and moral compatibility [11,12]. The Indian dating scene has transformed significantly over the past few years with rise of digital platforms, urbanisation, and changing gender norms. Studies on Indian young millennials and later generations suggest that while emotional intimacy remains of importance, physical appearance significantly affects attraction and self-esteem within relationships too [13].

Sexual satisfaction is also a factor of interest in a romantic relationship. It is a subjective assessment of the positive and fulfilling aspects of a sexual relationship that contribute significantly to relationship stability, commitment, and emotional well-being [14]. The Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS) by Lawrance and Byers (1995) outlines four key factors of sexual satisfaction. First, the model links sexual satisfaction closely with general relationship satisfaction. Second, satisfaction increases when the rewards of sexual interaction outweigh the perceived costs. Third, satisfaction is enhanced when these outcomes exceed one's expectations based on previous experiences or perceived norms. Finally, perceived fairness in sexual give-and-take between partners contributes to higher satisfaction [15]. Conversely, over-sexualisation might lead to objectification, which in turn lowers relationship satisfaction [16].

Fallis et al. [17] and McNulty et al. [18] found a strong bidirectional association between sexual and relationship satisfaction, indicating a relationship where both reinforce each other. Park et al. further added that sexual satisfaction predicts future changes in both sexual frequency and relationship contentment over time, but he found the association to be unidirectional where sexual satisfaction affected relationship satisfaction but not the other way round [19]. These findings align with Quinn-Nilas's developmental perspective, which shows that relationship and sexual satisfaction change together over time [20].

Sexual satisfaction is however, not the same for everyone; it changes from person to person depending on body image, cultural expectations, and gender dynamics. Van den Brink et al. found that positive body image is correlated to increased perceived relationship satisfaction through higher sexual satisfaction [21]. It also revealed that consumption of objectifying media (e.g., porn) is related to lowered relationship satisfaction through the variable of partner-objectification [22]. Cardelli et al. concluded that having an attractive partner may result in both joy and anxiety, enhancing desire but could also induce and develop feelings of insecurity and jealousy in the partner perceived as less attractive [23]. In the Indian subcontinent, these relationships are also marked by societal judgment and limited sexual education and communication especially among women because of social norms and gender based double standards [24]. Carvalho found that Indian post-millennials show an increased curiosity for matters of sexual and emotional compatibility, but society norms and taboos hinder open communication and sex education [13]. This gap between curiosity and fulfilment creates mismatched expectations and emotional strain, affecting both sexual and relationship satisfaction.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in relation between physical attraction and relationship satisfaction among Indian young adults. By studying these variables, this research seeks to contribute to a more detailed and developed understanding of relationship satisfaction and factors contributing to it.

METHOD

Research Design

The study employed a correlational research design to examine the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in the relationship between physical attraction and relationship satisfaction among young adults. Data was collected using standardised questionnaires to assess variables and their interconnections.

Sample

Data were collected using purposive sampling from Indian young adults in intimate romantic relationships who were sexually active with their partners. A total of 200 responses were obtained, of which 193 were retained for

analysis after removing outliers. The inclusion criteria required participants to be 18–29 years old, of Indian nationality, and currently involved in an intimate romantic relationship.

Tools

Physical Attraction Scale

PAS was developed by Karandashev et al. (2020). The scale has 8 items assessing the emotional as well as the behavioural aspects of physical attraction to a partner on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale has excellent reliability ($\alpha=.90$ for behavioural and $\alpha=.89$ for emotional). The average inter-item correlation for the behavioural dimension was .61, and for the emotional dimension it was .65, indicating relative independence of the dimensions [25].

The New Sexual Satisfaction Scale - Short Form

This scale was developed by Brouillard, Štulhofer, and Buško (2011). It is a multidimensional self-report measure designed to assess sexual satisfaction in both clinical and non-clinical populations. The scale comprises 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert format. It has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with reliability coefficients ranging from $\alpha = .90$ to .93 [26,27].

Relationship Assessment Scale

RAS was developed by Hendrick in 1988. It is a self-reported scale consisting of 7 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. It has high reliability ($\alpha=.86$), a mean inter-item correlation of 0.49, and test-retest reliability of 0.85 [28].

Procedure

For data collection, participants were informed about the purpose and background of the study and provided their informed consent before participation. Personal information was collected on age, gender, educational qualification, and locality. These variables were recorded to gain a better understanding of physical attraction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. Responses were scored as per the scoring guidelines of the respective scales. Collected data was analysed using IBM-SPSS statistical software version 25.

RESULTS

A sample of 193 Indian young adults was analysed. As shown in Table 1, 54.4% of the data came from the female population, and 45.6% came from the male population. The sample consisted mostly of undergraduate students (62.2%) and urban area residents (89.65%). The age range was 19 to 30 years, and the mean age of participants was 23.01 yrs. (SD=2.35)

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N=193)

Variable	Category	n (%)
Gender	Female	105 (54.4%)
	Male	88 (45.6%)
Educational Qualification	Under-graduate	120 (62.2%)
	Post-graduate	73 (37.8%)
Locality	Urban	173 (89.6%)
	Rural	20 (10.4%)
Age	Mean (SD)	23.01 (2.35)
	Range	19–30

Table 2 depicts the differences across gender that were assessed using an independent samples t-test.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and t-tests by Gender

Variable	Female Mean (SD)	Male Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Physical Attraction	35.02 (5.13)	35.39 (4.97)	-0.50	0.615
Sexual Satisfaction	78.61 (13.91)	80.77 (13.29)	-1.10	0.272
Relationship Satisfaction	27.13 (5.78)	27.44 (5.54)	-0.35	0.724

Perusal of Table 2 reveals that there are no significant gender differences in physical attraction ($p = .615$), sexual satisfaction ($p = .272$), or relationship satisfaction ($p = .724$) between males and females.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and t-tests by Locality

Variable	Urban Mean (SD)	Rural Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Physical Attraction	35.40 (4.87)	32.60 (6.31)	2.23	0.027*
Sexual Satisfaction	79.76 (13.36)	77.60 (16.48)	0.71	0.481
Relationship Satisfaction	27.43 (5.62)	25.95 (5.92)	1.20	0.233

*p-value<0.05

Table 3 shows differences based on locality. The results show that urban participants have significantly higher physical attraction scores compared to rural participants ($p = .027$). However, no significant locality-based differences were found for sexual satisfaction ($p = .481$) or relationship satisfaction ($p = .233$).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and t-tests by Educational Level

Variable	Post-graduate Mean (SD)	Graduate-level Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Physical Attraction	35.06 (5.34)	35.26 (4.88)	-0.28	0.780
Sexual Satisfaction	79.06 (14.36)	79.92 (13.24)	-0.41	0.679
Relationship Satisfaction	28.15 (5.34)	26.75 (5.81)	1.71	0.090

Table 4 illustrates differences based on educational differences. The results show that undergraduates and postgraduates do not differ significantly in physical attraction ($p = .780$), sexual satisfaction ($p = .679$), or relationship satisfaction ($p = .090$), suggesting that academic qualification has little to no impact on these variables.

Table 5. Intercorrelation matrix of Physical attraction, Sexual satisfaction and Relationship satisfaction

Variables	1	2	3
1. Physical Attraction	1	0.53**	0.54**
2. Sexual Satisfaction		1	0.50**
3. Relationship Satisfaction			1

Table 5 represent the Pearson correlation between the three study variables. The analysis reveals significant positive correlations among the primary study variables. Physical attraction shows a moderate positive correlation with both sexual satisfaction ($r = .53$, $p < .01$) and relationship satisfaction ($r = .54$, $p < .01$). Sexual satisfaction is also positively correlated with relationship satisfaction ($r = .50$, $p < .01$). These significant correlations suggest that individuals who perceive their partners as more physically attractive tend to report higher levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction.

Figure 1. Showing mediation of Sexual Satisfaction between Physical Attraction and Relationship Satisfaction

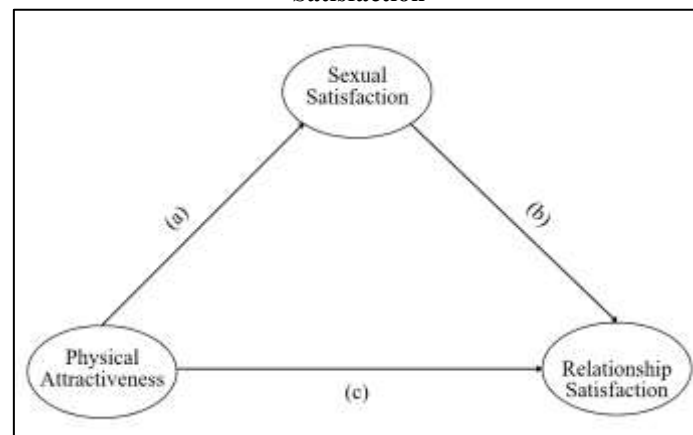


Table 6. Mediation Analysis of Sexual Satisfaction

Path	Effect (β)	p-value	95% Bootstrapped CI
a (Physical Attraction $\rightarrow$ Sexual Satisfaction)	1.44	< .001	-
b (Sexual Satisfaction $\rightarrow$ Relationship Satisfaction)	0.13	< .001	-
c (Total Effect: PA $\rightarrow$ RS)	0.61	< .001	-
c' (Direct Effect controlling for M)	0.43	< .001	-
Indirect Effect ($a \times b$)	0.18	-	0.096 to 0.277

Table 6 shows that physical attraction significantly predicts sexual satisfaction (path a: $\beta = 1.44$, $p < .001$), and sexual satisfaction significantly predicts relationship satisfaction (path b: $\beta = 0.13$, $p < .001$). The total effect of physical attraction on relationship satisfaction is also significant ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect ($a \times b = 0.18$) is supported by a bootstrapped 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.096 to 0.277, indicating a significant mediation effect of sexual satisfaction. The direct effect remains significant after controlling for the mediator (c' :

$\beta = 0.43$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that sexual satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between physical attraction and relationship satisfaction (Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

Since time unknown, Interpersonal relationships have been an important part of human life. Among these, romantic relationships have a special place in everyone's life, impacting emotional health, social identity & relationships, and overall quality of life. Present study was conducted to examine the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in the relationship between physical attraction and relationship satisfaction among Indian young adults. Results found that gender differences were not significant for any of the variables, suggesting that men and women in this age range evaluate partner physical attraction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction in broadly similar ways. This is notable in prior researches, particularly from Western samples, which often report gendered patterns in how attractiveness influences perception of relationship quality and satisfaction [6,7]. The lack of these differences could indicate the shifting societal norms in the urban young adult population in India. The gap between the traditional gender expectations about appearance and sexuality have narrowed significantly over time.

Differences based on locality gave more distinct findings where participants from urban backgrounds reported significantly higher levels of physical attraction toward their partners compared to those from rural backgrounds, whereas no such differences were observed for sexual satisfaction or relationship satisfaction. This difference can be attributed to the trend that urban young adults are generally more exposed to contemporary beauty standards and have better access to grooming and lifestyle resources, all of which may shape perceptions of attractiveness and attraction in self and partner. At the same time, the lack of differences in sexual and relationship satisfaction suggests that despite varying beauty norms or levels of self-enhancement, the core experiences of intimacy and relationship fulfilment may be more universally shaped by interpersonal dynamics rather than aesthetic factors. This also aligns with earlier work indicating that subjective relationship processes tend to be more stable across demographic categories, compared with self-evaluative traits like attractiveness [11,30,31].

The differences analysed based on educational qualification presented no significant results, indicating that undergraduates and postgraduates perceived themselves and their relationships in comparable ways. The findings align with earlier research suggesting that the positive outcomes of relationships are similar across all education groups [31]. Relationship patterns in young adulthood may be driven more strongly by shared cultural exposure, psychological needs, and the nature of romantic partnerships common in early adulthood, rather than academic or intellectual factors [32,33].

The correlational findings showed strong, positive associations among physical attraction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. These findings are supported by pre-existing theories of interpersonal attraction. The results also extend these theories to contemporary Indian context, where conversations around intimacy and partner expectations are changing significantly among young adults. Participants who perceived their partners as attractive and found themselves to be more attracted to them were found to be more sexually satisfied and had more relationship satisfaction. Research shows that attractiveness is correlated with perceived partner value and interpersonal dynamics [3,4]. These results support past research that shows that physical appearance have a particularly high impact on how people choose and connect with partners especially in initial stages of relationship [29]. Similarly, high sexual satisfaction has been found to be a predictor as well as an outcome of relationship satisfaction [17,20]. These findings align with prior research stating that sexual intimacy helps couples feel emotionally connected, establish more trust, and be more satisfied with their relationship overall [34].

The mediation analysis has added a more detailed understanding of the relationship between the study variables. Sexual satisfaction was found to partially mediate the relationship between physical attraction and relationship satisfaction, indicating that physical attraction contributes to higher relationship satisfaction through both direct and indirect pathways. The indirect effect suggests that one reason physical attraction plays an important role in romantic relationships is that it influences sexual experiences and the level of sexual satisfaction, which in turn enhances relationship satisfaction. Thus, physical attraction directly increases relationship satisfaction, and it also boosts satisfaction indirectly by improving sexual experiences, which further strengthens the relationship. These findings align with research suggesting that attractiveness influences relationship dynamics through desirability and quality of Sexual intimacy[7,10,35]. The presence of partial mediation further indicates that physical attraction influences relationship satisfaction not only through sexual satisfaction but also through additional factors. Prior research suggests that these factors may include emotional compatibility, social desirability, partner admiration, positive relationship illusions, and lower levels of conflict [6,9,18].

CONCLUSION

Overall, the research findings highlight the correlation between Physical Attraction, Sexual Satisfaction and Relationship satisfaction. As well as partially mediating role of sexual satisfaction in between physical attraction and relationship satisfaction. These findings are of great importance in the Indian context. Young adults in India are still finding a balance between the societal norms and contemporary trends around intimate relationships. The changing trends in partner selection have put physical attraction and sexual compatibility behind the driving

wheel. . The results imply that interventions aimed at improving relationship quality may benefit from addressing both relational and sexual dimensions of young adult partnerships.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

The use of self-report measures for data collection might have resulted in social desirability biases, considering sexual taboos in India. The correlational design also poses a hindrance in studying causal interpretations. The sample being mainly from educated backgrounds might not represent the diverse young adult population of India. Future studies could use a different research design and use more diverse data in the Indian sub context to reach more generalised findings.

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Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines. The confidentiality and privacy of participants were maintained throughout the study.

Statement of Ethics

I confirm that this work is original and has not been previously published, nor is it currently under consideration elsewhere. I further confirm that the data presented are accurate and that no data have been fabricated, falsified or manipulated. All sources used are properly cited and plagiarism has been avoided.

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