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## Research Article

# Exploring Perceptions on Sexual Empowerment Among Heterosexual Black Women in Braamfontein, Johannesburg

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This study explored the perceptions of sexual empowerment among heterosexual black women, aged 22–30 years, residing in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. It was a qualitative study utilising a case study research design. A purposive sampling method was used and participants were recruited using snowball sampling. Data was collected from eight heterosexual black females using one-on-one in-depth interviews, following a semi-structured interview schedule, and responses were analysed through thematic data analysis. The research findings indicate that women perceived sexual empowerment as their ability to fulfil their sexual rights. To this end, they perceived sexual empowerment as the ability to communicate on sexual matters, the power to grant or withhold consent, enjoying feelings of self-efficacy, and the freedom to experiment sexually through various sexual activities and self-pleasure. According to the participants, the factors influencing female sexual empowerment included gender norms around sexuality, social media, peer influence, and sexuality education. This study contributes to our understanding of sexual empowerment from women's perspectives and can be used to draft plans for educational seminars on sexual empowerment and policies on sexual and reproductive health rights.

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## Introduction

In the last decade, sexual empowerment has become a major topic of concern and debate, garnering significant volumes of academic research (Erchull & Liss, 2014). Literature shows that most researchers and theorists have questioned young women's sentiments regarding sexual empowerment. Researchers argue that sexual empowerment is a complex topic, and it should not be taken lightly and at face value (Lamb & Peterson, 2012), especially in African cultures where there is gender inequality. Sexual empowerment is complex

because most women are familiar with a sexist culture that endorses patriarchal norms supporting male dominance and sexual entitlement (Machisa & Shamu, 2018). Today, sexual empowerment is one of the most important concepts in health promotion and health-related quality of life among women (Alimoradi et al., 2017). Sexual empowerment is associated with sexual reproductive health, including preventing HIV/Aids (Araujo & Miller, 2014). Researchers on sexual empowerment have demonstrated that the outcomes of this form of empowerment include positive self-confidence (Bahrami Kerchi et al., 2021), the ability to achieve the objective (Pulerwitz et al., 2018), having a sense of control over life and change processes, as well as future expectation (Inglis, 1997). However, little

research has been conducted on sexual empowerment in Africa. More studies have focused only on sexual reproductive health when it comes to sexual empowerment, neglecting the fact that sexual empowerment is multidimensional (Alimoradi et al., 2017; Bostani Khaledi et al., 2020; Darteh et al., 2019; De Castro et al., 2018; Ghebreyesus & Kanem, 2018; Grose et al., 2021; Karp et al., 2020; Loll et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2017; Warren et al., 2017). Available evidence suggests that South Africa is among countries with high gender inequality and female sexual oppression. With South Africa being one of the unequal countries in gender, researchers need to explore sexual empowerment and its dynamics. South Africa as a nation has a social challenge of women being assaulted by men (Gqola, 2015). This is a result of gender inequalities making women seen as the “sexually oppressed victims” in a society where men are powerful (Lince-Deroche et al., 2016). There is a need to understand sexual empowerment within the context of a culture that objectifies, sexualises, and commodifies women (Gill, 2012; Lamb, 2010; Murnen & Smolak, 2012). Before we as researchers define the discourse of sexual empowerment, there is a need to understand how women living in unequal societies perceive sexual empowerment. Our definition of sexual empowerment needs to come from them. The study explored perceptions of sexual empowerment among heterosexual black women residing in Braamfontein, Johannesburg between the ages of 22–30 years.

### *Problem statement*

This paper seeks to explore perceptions of sexual empowerment among heterosexual black women living in South Africa, viewed as one of the most unequal societies in the world. Women's sexuality is a topic marred by patriarchal structures that do not allow open discussion. In South Africa, women's sexuality is a topic that is difficult to discuss. This can be ascribed to the cultural portrayal of the heterosexual script perpetuating a gendered power imbalance in that men have more sexual control. Previous research studies have suggested that gender stereotypes about sexuality regarding feelings and behaviours, are related to sexual empowerment (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2009; Lamb & Peterson, 2012). In a patriarchal society like South Africa, men maintain dominance over women, while simultaneously engaging in sexual relations with them. Available evidence on this topic suggests that cultural practices and products that promote the heterosexual script, do not facilitate female sexual empowerment (Murnen & Smolak, 2012). However, there is a need for

more research to understand female sexual empowerment and the role of culture in undermining female sexual empowerment. Women in South Africa continue to be socialised to accept invasive forms of sexual objectification as acceptable, and perhaps even desirable, which indicates that they are fulfilling expected role norms. In addition, gender role norms help the sexist treatment of females by females. According to Tamale (2008), women treated as sexual objects in everyday life suffer consequences related to their empowerment. These experiences are related to anger, lowered self-esteem, and psychiatric symptoms associated with depression, anxiety and disordered eating (Klonoff et al., 2000; Landrine et al., 1995; Sabik & Tylka, 2006; Swim et al., 2001). As women continue being sexually oppressed victims in South Africa (Lince-Deroche et al., 2016), it is necessary to conduct this research on female sexual empowerment.

### *Significance of the study*

This study was motivated by a gap in scholarship on women's sexual empowerment in Africa, in particular South Africa. There is little research done in South Africa, and research on sexual empowerment done in Europe only and focusses on female adolescents. This study contributes to the literature because debates about female sexual empowerment have generally lacked data on women's perceptions of sexual empowerment in a context where gender role norms facilitate objectification of women and gender-based violence. This study also contributes to the ongoing debate about the definition of sexual empowerment, relating to women's perceptions.

The findings of this study will help social workers and public health policymakers to understand sexual empowerment from women's perspectives. Evidence from this study aims to inform policies on sexual and reproductive health programs targeted at educating women on their sexual rights. This study will improve the sexual health care of women and assist in upholding women sexual rights in South Africa effectively. With increased knowledge in understanding the sexual empowerment of women in South Africa along the lines of enhancing education on sexual reproductive health for women, their situation can be better understood and addressed.

## **Literature Review**

This section presents a critical analysis of the literature related to the problem under study, which is female

sexual empowerment. The first step in this process is to understand what sexual empowerment is.

### *Sexual empowerment*

Researchers in sexual empowerment agree that there is no single definition of sexual empowerment as it is complex and often used without clarity as to its meaning (Erchull & Liss, 2014). Peterson (2010) defines sexual empowerment as an ongoing process where one acts upon her sexual desires and pleasures in an environment where women's sexuality was restricted. In contrast, Goldman et al. (1991) argue that a subjective feeling of empowerment may not be the only indicator of whether a woman is powerful. The sexual empowerment of a girl may function to reproduce cultural and institutional constraints on women's sexuality more broadly.

According to Lamb and Peterson (2012), sexual empowerment is a multidimensional construct. Sexual desire and pleasure are the two valuable dimensions of sexual empowerment. In addition, sexual empowerment also includes successfully negotiating with sexual partners about wanted and unwanted sexual activities and intellectually and politically challenging restrictive cultural discourses about girls' sexuality (Lamb & Peterson, 2012). Similarly, feminism often uses sexual empowerment to refer to mechanisms that enhance women's power (Tolman, 2012). Sexual empowerment can describe individuals with information and opportunities to control and influence decisions that affect or define their sexuality. From this perspective, women can simultaneously experience empowerment on one level, and disempowerment on another level. For example, a girl may be feeling sexually empowered when acting autonomously on her intense positive sexual desires with her partner (Kwakye, 2020). At the same time, she can feel disempowered by contextual factors such as cultural and/ religious factors that prohibit abortion (Agocha et al., 2014). Despite many disagreements on the definition of sexual empowerment, authors in this field agree that sexual empowerment includes a subjective feeling of empowerment, and access to political power and resources that values women's sexuality.

Sexual empowerment is associated with positive sexual outcomes, like feeling good about one's sexuality, being able to ask for what one wants, and refusing what one does not want sexually, and enjoying sexual encounters (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2009). However, the available literature does not produce evidence showing the link between the subjective feelings of empowerment and sex-positive outcomes.

Using the definitions as discussed, it is best to conceptualise sexual empowerment as an ongoing and multidimensional construct. Authors and/ researchers should recognise sexual empowerment as a developmental process and acknowledge women's ambivalent empowerment.

### *Sexuality*

When one talks about sexual empowerment, it is crucial to ensure that sexuality is understood. According to the World Health Organization (2020), sexuality broadly refers to the outcomes related to sexual thoughts, desires, attitudes, values, relationships, roles and behaviours that underpin sexual health. In psychology, female sexuality relates to a female's entire being, physical, emotional, social and spiritual elements, including gender norms and how they feel about their gender (Grose et al., 2014). Historically, female sexuality fulfilled two purposes; reproduction and male sexual pleasure (Bowman, 2014). Defining female sexuality in this way leaves little room for women to focus on their sexual desires and pleasures. The saturation of society with sexualisation, the commodification of sexual agency, and confusing, contested, and contradictory messages about sexual empowerment call for new ways of working with young women (Martino & Frank, 2006; Tolman et al., 2005; Way, 2011). Ensuring that we recognise and generate collective responses to ongoing gender inequities may ameliorate some daunting dilemmas, intimate injustices, and potent possibilities for young women's healthy sexuality as they develop into adulthood and beyond.

### *Socio-cultural portrayals of sexual empowerment*

The intersection between socio-cultural factors and sexual empowerment is contested. Studies show that particular socio-cultural norms influence sexual empowerment among females (Fay & Yanoff, 2000; James-Hawkins et al., 2018; Makama, 2013; Murnen & Smolak, 2012; Tolman, 2012). The following section is going to discuss various socio-cultural factors that have an impact on female sexual empowerment.

### *Culture*

Literature on sexual empowerment demonstrates that the stereotypical portrayal of female sexuality in a patriarchal society is not empowering (Murnen & Smolak, 2012). The institution of gender and sexuality is constructed within the context of culture. Gender and sexuality are cultural constructs developed through the

process of socialisation. Different societies and cultures may therefore have different understandings of what is 'masculine' or 'feminine'. In the African culture, female sexuality is in the hands of males. The patriarchal nature of African societies has shaped and perpetuated gender inequality to endorsing male domination and female subordination. According to Figueroa et al. (2016) a patriarchal practices that give men power to control female sexuality include the payment of lobola, arranged marriages and levirate marriages. For example, in the Shona culture, lobola has subjected women to abuse, especially when perceived to have failed to be obedient to their husbands, because lobola gives a man all rights, whilst the woman is stripped of all freedom and rights (Kambarami, 2006). As a result, men have control over their wives' sexuality because of the lobola payment. Women in these marriages find it difficult to express their sexuality or sexual desires due to the subordinate position in which they find themselves. The increase in domestic violence cases has been significant due to men trying to control their wives when they express their sexuality (Ali et al., 2020). For example, reports from StatsSA show that men hit their partners for wearing miniskirts or revealing clothing (Maluleke & Moyer, 2020). It is evident that women do not have power over their bodies.

### *Religion*

Religion can dictate the relationship between men and women. Feminists argue that religion has entrenched male domination into the structure of social organisation and institutions at all levels of leadership (Attoh, 2017; Muaygil, 2018; Nyhagen, 2019; Oyeleye, 2017; Shah, 2021; Shoma, 2019). Similarly, some researchers believe that religion is used as an instrument in defence of patriarchy as it discriminates against women. Makama (2013) provides evidence that proves that patriarchal attitudes found in Islam and Christianity strengthen the traditional customs that give men the power to control women's sexuality. Men use the Bible to justify their control over women. For example, in St Paul's letter to the Colossians: a woman is expected to "submit to her husband" (Colossians 3:18), whilst the husband has to love his wife (Colossians 3:19). When women do not have control over their sexuality, they cannot be sexually empowered. According to Tolman (2012), for a woman to be sexually empowered, she needs to have power over her body and/ sexuality.

### *Sexuality education*

Sexuality education is significantly associated with sexual empowerment among females. Sexual education gives women the opportunity to be less dependent on men and have control over their sexual and reproductive health. Literature on sexual and reproductive health reveals that uneducated women usually do not have much information about family planning (Fay & Yanoff, 2000). These women have a high prevalence of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. According to Wood et al. (2020), there is a relationship between female sexual empowerment and improved reproductive health outcomes, including increased contraceptive use and decreased unintended pregnancies. A growing body of literature highlights the relationship between sexuality education and positive health outcomes (James-Hawkins et al., 2018; Samari, 2018; Upadhyay et al., 2014). Sexually educated women are empowered with knowledge and resources that give them the power over their sexuality, including the power to decide on sexual activities. Fewer studies have examined gender stereotyping in the education system that does not facilitate female sexual empowerment.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Several theories have been proposed over the years to explain female sexual empowerment and these theories offer differing explanatory frameworks for conceptualising female sexual empowerment. The theory to be discussed in this section has influenced female sexual empowerment research and has found some degree of empirical support.

### *Empowerment theory*

According to Zimmerman (2000), the empowerment theory describes empowerment as one's perceived efficacy and control over the social, economic, and political aspects of one's life. To conceptualise female sexual empowerment, the fundamental components of the empowerment theory were used in this study. According to Rappaport (1987), empowerment consists of three components which are the intrapersonal, interactional and behavioural components. Based on the original formulation of this theory, the intrapersonal component includes perceived control, motivation to control, and perceived competence and mastery. In the case of female sexual empowerment, this might correspond with females' feelings of sexual self-efficacy, desire and pleasure. The interactional component include awareness of options, awareness of

the resources needed to achieve the desired goals, and decision-making and problem-solving skills (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Zimmerman, 1995). Concerning females' sexuality, this dimension of empowerment might correspond with females' knowledge about how to experience sexual pleasure, clarity about their sexual wants and desires, as well as an understanding of how to communicate their sexual needs and desires to their partner (Zimmerman, 1995). Lastly, the behavioural component includes actions taken to directly influence outcomes. In the case of female sexual empowerment, this might correspond with females acting in the service of their sexual values and desires. This includes asking for what they want sexually, refusing unwanted sexual activities, and exploring their emerging sexuality in a way that makes them feel positive and happy. However, according to Zimmerman (1995), experiencing intrapersonal empowerment does not guarantee that one will also experience interactional empowerment or behavioural empowerment.

## Methodology

### *Research approach and design*

This study took a qualitative approach to explore females' perceptions of sexual empowerment. Given the nature of the inquiry, the qualitative research approach was used. Qualitative research refers to the broad approach in social research that is based on the need to understand human and social interaction from the perspectives of insiders and participants (Neuman, 2011). The qualitative research method was used because this study aimed to gather subjective data that included females' thoughts and perceptions of sexual empowerment. This qualitative study aimed to collect a rich description of sexual empowerment. The qualitative research approach was used by the researchers to understand human and social interaction from the perspectives of insiders and participants.

This study used a case study research design. A case study is a detailed analysis of a group of people and their relationship to phenomena (Yin, 2017). This qualitative research design was considered because the researchers were interested in gaining a deeper understanding of females' perceptions of sexual empowerment. One of the main reasons this research is considered a case study, is because it allows the researchers to collect detailed information on the participants (Yin, 2017). A case study is defined as research on real-life situations which are contemporary, bounded systems (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

### *Population, sample, and sampling techniques*

In-depth interviews were conducted with 8 female participants to understand their perceptions of sexual empowerment. The participants were heterosexual black women between the ages of 22-30 years residing in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. These participants are young women who are sexually active/engage in sexual activities and they can give their perceptions of sexual empowerment reflecting on their lived experiences.

The main instrument that was used in this study is a semi-structured interview schedule. Semi-structured interviews involve the use of predetermined questions where the researchers were free to seek clarification (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Questions contained on the interview schedule were open-ended questions which allowed an interactive and explorative discussion in every interview (Belk, 2007). In addition, the interview questions were also based on the literature reviewed on female sexual empowerment. Questions on the interview schedule were designed in such a way that they reflect the aim, objectives as well as the theoretical framework of the research study (Neuman, 2011).

### *Sampling method*

A purposive sampling method was used to identify and select individuals who are knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015; Neuman & Neuman, 2006). A purposive sampling requires selecting participants who are knowledgeable about the issue in question, because of their sheer involvement in and experience of the situation (Neuman & Neuman, 2006). Another sampling technique employed in this study was the purposive snowball sampling technique, in which participants were selected based on a referral from other participants (Black, 2009). Through referrals, the researchers were able to obtain participants' knowledge about the issue in question, and then asked them if they knew other people who would be suitable to participate in this study. Through these referrals, participants were identified inexpensively and efficiently, and this was useful because participants were difficult to locate.

### *Data analysis*

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data collected from the semi-structured interviews. Thematic content analysis was considered appropriate for this research because it allowed the researchers to organise raw data into units of information and to group related categories and themes into subthemes. Thematic analysis is a way of analysing data by

identifying themes that are prominent throughout the study. This is done by summarising the information that was prominent within a large quantity of data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethics should be considered for research to be conducted in a meaningful and appropriate way that respects participants' rights (Neuman, 2011). All respondents gave their informed consent before participating, and all information was treated with confidentiality. Therefore, the participants' rights were not infringed during data collection. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Department of Social Work Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) of the University of the Witwatersrand. The ethics protocol number for this study is SW/19/07/08.

## **Results/Findings**

This article presents the empirical findings from the data collected during the interviews. The results section

begins by presenting the participants' demographics. The identified themes and subthemes follow, including the codes used to identify them thematically. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of the themes and shows the relationship between the themes and the available literature.

### *Demographic information of the participants*

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants, focusing on their age and the number of years they had been residing in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. Eight heterosexual black females between the ages of 22-30 were interviewed for this study. Most participants were under the age of 25 because we used snowball sampling, and many recommended their peers. The Table shows that the majority of participants in our study have been living in Braamfontein for a long time.

Participant number	Race	Age	Number of years staying in Braamfontein
1	Black	22	4 years
2	Black	22	1 year
3	Black	24	5 years
4	Black	23	4 years
5	Black	23	4 years
6	Black	25	5 years
7	Black	30	8 years
8	Black	27	6 years

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of the participants (n=8)

## Factors influencing sexual empowerment

### Gender norms relating to sexuality

The findings of this study present evidence that traditional gender norms that deny women sexual empowerment, still exist in contemporary South Africa. Participants reported that communicating their sexual needs, and initiating and taking control of sexual acts are seen as bad by men. According to Murnen and Smolak (2012), in a patriarchal society, only men are encouraged to exhibit power over women thus endorsing dominance during sexual activities. In a patriarchal society, men need to maintain dominance over women even when they engage in sexual relations. That is how female sexuality is experienced under patriarchy. These societal attitudes help create sexist roles that discourage women to take control, or equally participate when engaging in sexual activities. Norms of femininity expect women to be submissive and receptive during sexual acts. According to the participants in this study, women who express sexual desires and exercise choices during sexual activity are seen as prostitutes. In addition, participants pointed out that women should be sexually empowered to participate equally during sexual activities without fear of judgement.

*"... men have this thing of thinking that women who know what they want in bed are prostitutes and are seen as bad ... As women, we should be sexually empowered and be able to leave a man that is not giving*

*us what we want. We cannot be silent all the time. As women, we should be able to tell a man what we want in bed and how we want it."* (Participant 4, 23 years old)

Prevailing gender norms portray men as superior, dominant, and decision-makers during sexual activities, while women are considered subservient, passive and obedient (Figueroa et al., 2016). Thus, women have difficulty negotiating their sexual desires for fear of questioning male authority (Bandali, 2011; Machel, 2001) and being regarded as promiscuous (Bagnol & Mariano, 2008). These gender norms reveal the extent to which sexual knowledge and actions have historically been classified by gender, and how women are expected not to know more than men. A study conducted among South African men and women showed that men felt threatened by women who had sexual knowledge and experience (Makhubele et al., 2012).

### Social media

This study sought to establish how social media influences women's sexual knowledge. Participants reported that social media has empowered them with sexual knowledge which helps them to explore their sexuality and influence their sexual decisions. Social media refers to a wide range of internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities (Dewing, 2010). Social media platforms that the participants use include Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram. One of the

participants mentioned that because of social media, she now knows that sex is not only for men to enjoy but for women to enjoy as well. According to Lamb and Peterson (2012), young women look to other women in the media for information about their sexuality. Sexual empowerment begins when young women start learning about their sexuality which is associated with positive sex outcomes (Lamb 2010). Social media has been the greatest influence on sexual behaviour/practices in the 21st century; however, in more recent years, peers and the media have emerged as two of the strongest influences, particularly among young adults (Ashurst & McAlinden, 2015). Social media has given people the platform to express their sexuality freely, and be able to share information regarding sex without shame or fear of judgement (Wright, 2019). Through social media, participants learn about how to treat men and how women should be treated in bed. According to Lamb (2010), female sexual empowerment has been associated with positive sex outcomes. This shows that social media contributes to sexual empowerment as it allows young women to freely express their sexuality and share information that helps other women to learn and understand their sexuality. This is illustrated in the quote below:

*"Social media has influenced my sexual practices. Like now I have a smartphone and I just Google these things and I learn on my own. Like on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, they talk about sex openly and you will have a guy posting about how to treat a woman in bed, or females sharing how to treat a man in bed. From there, I get to pick out new things I would want to try, and this has influenced my sexual practices. Now I have learnt that sex is not only for men, but for me as a woman to enjoy it."*  
(Participant 5, 23 years old)

### Peer influence

Participants of this study acknowledged the power of peer influence on sexual empowerment. Most of the participants mentioned that the most dominant influence of sexual practices was from their peers. Previous quantitative studies have found that peers can influence good sexual practices such as a condom and contraceptive use among females (Hsu et al., 2010). Participants believe that sex talk with their peers enhances their sex knowledge. In explaining this, one participant said:

*"... I discuss with my friends, right... about how my sexual practices have changed over the years, I have always had friends who are sexually active and who like to talk about sex, and I feel like such discussions enhance my sexual knowledge in terms of how you act in bed."* (Participant 6, 23 years old).

Similarly, Robertson et al. (2006) and Hsu et al. (2010) argue that female sexual empowerment could be achieved through peer interactions, including peer education on appropriate sexual decisions. In addition, a study done by Hsu et al. (2010) provides evidence that sexual empowerment can be achieved through peer education among young women. Young women learn more from others' experiences, for example when and how to say "no" to boyfriends, what protection is best, and how to make appropriate sexual decisions.

### Sexuality education

According to the participants in this study, sexuality education is an important factor that sexually empowers women. Sexuality education is high-quality teaching and learning about a broad variety of topics related to sex and sexuality, exploring values and beliefs about those topics, and gaining the skills needed to navigate relationships and manage one's sexual health (World Health Organization, 2020). All participants acknowledged that sexuality education is important and should be taught to young women and girls. However, the results of this study show that sexuality education taught to young women only focuses on the negative aspects of sexuality. Young women are taught that sex is dangerous and that they should always abstain from it. This is evident in the following quote:

*"We should inform girls of the power of abstaining and why it is important. When you start to teach girls about safe sex, they now think they are entitled to having sex. You need them to know that there is a lot of things that go on when it comes to sex – it's emotional, spiritual and there is a lot that goes on."* (Participant 3, 22 years old).

Religion has been found the key in sexuality education although it only focuses on the negative aspects of sexuality and encourages young girls to abstain from sex. A growing body of research indicates that attitudes and behaviours of the members of various religious groups strictly prohibit non-marital sexual interaction (Regnerus, 2005). This is the reason why sexuality education under a religious context mainly focuses on



abstaining. Contrary to religious teachings, young people prefer to be taught information about being sexually responsible to avoid the consequences of sex, as opposed to merely proselytising about abstinence (Moore et al., 2015). According to Fay and Yanoff (2000), young people who were told to abstain from sex without comprehensive sexuality education are more likely to engage in risky sexual activities than those who received comprehensive sexuality education. This is consistent with the findings of this study, which show that preaching about abstinence is not enough to stop young people from engaging in sexual activities:

*"Initially I was not engaging in sex; I was abstaining because of my religion. At home we are Christians, and my family tells me that it was the best way and safest. But when I started talking to other people here in Braamfontein and people who were younger than me, I wanted to go through with it [having sex], so I became sexually active."*  
(Participant 6, 25 years old)

The quotation above shows that comprehensive sexuality education is needed to achieve sexual empowerment. According to UNFPA (2014), comprehensive sexual education is a right-based and gender-focused approach to sexuality education, whether in school or out of school. Sexual education of this kind aims to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them to develop a positive view of their sexuality, in the context of their emotional and social development. Sexual empowerment is achieved by embracing a holistic view of sexuality and sexual behaviour.

### *Perceptions of sexual empowerment*

#### *Sexual communication*

Responses from the participants show that sexual communication is important to achieve sexual empowerment. According to Lamb and Peterson (2012), sexual communication is an important component of sexual empowerment. An intimate relationship without effective sexual communication is a threat to sexual empowerment. Participants reported that better sexual communication is associated with greater sexual satisfaction among partners, including consensual safe sex and boundaries associated with mutual respect. This includes talking about sexual desires, preferences, fears and fantasies. A growing literature shows that sexual desire and pleasure are two valuable dimensions of sexual empowerment; they are a subjective sense of

empowerment. Results from this study reveal that when sexual communication is strong, safer sexual practices are more likely to take place. However, most participants did acknowledge that having sex without a condom, is more pleasurable than when a condom is used. Sexual communication plays an important role in persons being able to fully enjoy their sexual life because they would have communicated what they wanted (Gruskin et al., 2019).

*"With my partner, I have had such conversations with him, and the truth is that we are not ready to have children and being parents, right? So, to be honest, if you have been with someone for a long time, you feel comfortable with them to a point that you can have unprotected sex with them coz honestly, economising is safe, right, but unprotected sex is much better than protected sex according to me. So, we talk about things like this is what we like, so we have to go for HIV/AIDS testing and STI screening."* (Participant 4, 23 years old)

### *Consent*

The goal of sexual empowerment is to assist females to take control of their sexual health and adopt behaviours, especially in terms of refusing unwanted sex or in the use of contraceptives during consensual sex. Participants of this study reported that they had to shift from traditionally gendered ways of thinking that women should be in the position to either give consent or withhold consent. This is mutual sexual consent which allows the expression of a mutual desire between parties to participate in sexual activities. Participants mentioned that women should be in the position to ask men for their consent in sexual engagements, rather than wait for them as shown in the following quotation. Participants mentioned that when initiating sexual practices, it is important to ask the partner whether or not he is interested.

*"I feel like it should be both because if I feel like having sex and my boyfriend says he is not in the mood, then we cannot have sex. And if he initiates and I am not feeling it, then it will not work."* (Participant 6, 25 years old).

Previous research has demonstrated positive associations between mutual sexual consent and sexual empowerment (Bond et al., 2020). Evidence shows that

sexual consent empowers women to advocate for their interests and safety during sexual encounters.

### Self-efficacy

When it comes to sexual empowerment, self-efficacy is seen by participants as an important feeling. Self-efficacy looks at a person's ability to be confident in his/her capabilities to perform a task. In this study, participants mentioned the importance of being confident in their sexual abilities, and how having positive self-esteem is beneficial in sexual pleasures. This is consistent with the findings of a study conducted in South Africa where self-esteem influenced people's sexual practices and behaviour, and how they acted sexually (Makhubele et al., 2012). One participant mentioned that women should be able to know how to create the right environment that would make their partner want to engage in sex. Similarly, a study was conducted in Uganda where women reported the advantages of knowing how to act to make the partner get in the mood for sex to fulfil their sexual desires (Muhanguzi, 2015).

*"You cannot be waiting for a man always to show that he wants to have sex. As a woman, you should be comfortable with yourself in your body. Like especially nowadays as a girl, there are different ways to show him that I want to have sex like you can dress sexy, like lingerie and stuff, or create a nice environment."* (Participant 6, 23 years old).

In support of these findings, Bay-Cheng (2012) equated sexual empowerment with individualised concepts of self-efficacy. The feelings of personal confidence and competence that undergird self-efficacy are essential in motivating individuals to initiate behaviours that provoke positive sexual outcomes.

### Experimenting with various sexual activities

Women who took part in this study reported that experimenting in different sexual positions had a positive outcome in their sexual lives. According to Peterson (2010), freedom to experiment with sexual roles and fantasies is part of developing healthier sexuality. Lamb and Peterson (2012) agree that experimenting with various sexual activities is sexually empowering. Women learn from experimenting with a variety of sexual experiences and fantasies (Lamb, 2010), even if those experiences and fantasies are shaped by a misogynistic culture. A study conducted by

Muhanguzi (2015) showed that women experience full autonomy of their sexual lives when they experiment in different sexual activities. Participants were able to decide on sexual activities that they would like to do, and those that they do not feel comfortable doing. The participants mentioned that experimenting with their sexuality and selecting what they want, were ways of acting upon their sexual empowerment. Most of the participants mentioned that they were not passive recipients but active participants in their sexual lives as mentioned in the following example:

*"I always initiate this kind of things [sexual activities], especially with the positions, there are a lot of things to explore. You cannot be doing missionary every time whilst there are other things to try."* (Participant 4, 23 years old).

### Self-pleasure (via masturbation)

Peterson (2010), Levy (2014), Gill (2012) and Lamb (2010), as well as participants of this study agree that self-pleasure is sexually empowering to women. Self-pleasuring via masturbation has been increasingly accepted as one form of sexual satisfaction. Participants of this study believe that self-pleasure is empowering because it provides means to learn more about their bodies, desires and sensations. This type of sexual exploration among women increases sexual confidence and comfort with their bodies, because they can gain more knowledge about their genital anatomy and sexual response. Participants believe that through self-pleasure a woman will be able to know 'what turns her on' and be able to communicate that with her partner. Sex therapists commonly recommend masturbation to women to help them become more self-loving or to increase their self-esteem. This is supported by a study done by Hurlbert and Whittaker (1991) which found that women who had experienced masturbatory orgasms had higher levels of self-esteem than those women who had not experienced masturbatory orgasm. Participants mentioned that masturbation is the best way to explore one's sexual desires and it is a way of sexual empowerment, because women can find out what they want in bed themselves. Self-pleasure was seen as an acceptable means for women to achieve autonomous sexual pleasure. The use of sex toys was encouraged by most participants.

*"... there is another sexual act that I think women should do, which is to masturbate. Women should not be afraid to explore their bodies and getting to know themselves"*

*sexually. This goes to the point of women not having an orgasm because they do not know what they want. A couple can be married, and a woman has never had an orgasm before because she does not know what turns her on. Expecting a man to identify it for you is problematic. Women should be able to know their body and know what turns them on... know what you like ... it becomes easier, women should explore themselves first before they allow men to explore them sexually ..."* (Participant 4, 23 years old)

Some participants were against the idea of self-pleasure because of their religious beliefs:

*"I think there are things I am too moral for because of my religion, and I do not feel comfortable in doing, for example, the threesome and use of sex objects and other things."* (Participant 6, 25 years old).

Self-pleasuring via masturbation is seen as sinful and damnable in many cultures and religions. According to Cervilla et al. (2021), masturbation as sexual behaviour traditionally comprised having negative connotations, owing to the influence of religion, especially Judeo-Christianity and areas of nineteenth-century medicine. A study conducted by Döring and Poeschl (2020) in Germany found equal negative and positive attitudes towards sex toys for sexual pleasure. Differences in attitudes towards self-pleasure (masturbation) could be attributed mainly to religious and cultural influences.

## Discussion

This study explored perceptions of sexual empowerment among heterosexual females living in Johannesburg, South Africa. The findings show how women perceive sexual empowerment and the factors that influence it. The factors influencing female sexual empowerment include gender norms, social media, peer influence, and sexuality education. In this study, traditional gender norms, fuelled by patriarchal attitudes, denied women sexual empowerment. According to the participants, women who expressed their sexual desires and exercise choices during sexual activities were seen as prostitutes or promiscuous. Bandali's (2011) results revealed that women found it difficult to negotiate their sexual desires as this was perceived as questioning male authority by their partners, and thus were seen as "bad" women. This evidence suggests that gender norms still portray men

as superior, dominant, and decision-makers during sexual activities, whilst women are considered subservient, passive and obedient. To achieve sexual empowerment, participants believed that women should be allowed to communicate their sexual desires and equally participate during sexual activities.

Social media is one of the influences on female sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This study provides evidence that social media sexually empowers women with sexual knowledge which helps them explore their sexuality. A growing body of literature reveals how social media freely allows women to share their sexual understanding and sexual experiences. Peterson (2010) found that young women look to other women in the media for information that helps them to explore their sexuality. Sexual empowerment begins when one starts learning about one's sexuality. In addition to social media, peer influence influences sexual empowerment. The findings of this study suggest that peers influence good sexual practices or sexual decisions. Women share sexual knowledge with their peers. Similarly, Robertson et al. (2006) argue that sexual empowerment might be achieved through peer interactions where peers discuss good sexual practices like a condom and contraceptive use. As evident in the findings of this study and previous studies, it is safe to suggest peer sexuality education in order to sexually empower women.

Sexuality education is an important factor that sexually empowers women. Participants of this study acknowledged sexuality education as essential, and it should target young women and girls. Sexuality education equips women with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them to develop a positive view concerning their emotional and social development. This holistic vision of sexuality and sexual behaviour contributes to sexual empowerment. Contrary, sexuality education under religious context only focuses on the negative aspects of sexuality and only encourages young women to abstain from sex. A growing body of research indicates that the attitudes and behaviours of the members of various religious groups strictly prohibit non-marital sexual interaction (Regnerus, 2019). Previous studies suggest that preaching about abstinence is not enough to sexually empower women (Ajayi & Okeke, 2019; Cameron et al., 2020; Gunning et al., 2020; Najmabadi & Sharifi, 2019; Opara et al., 2020; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020; Zulu et al., 2019). Youths prefer to be taught information about being sexually responsible to avoid the consequences of sex, as opposed to merely "preaching" about abstinence (Moore et al., 2015). All factors considered, it is important to also respect efforts made by religions and

cultures that aim to protect women from being sexually oppressed by encouraging them to abstain from sexual activities until they get married.

This study also explored how women perceived sexual empowerment. The findings of this study reveal that effective sexual communication is important to achieve sexual empowerment. Women should communicate their sexual desires, preferences, fears and fantasies. Results from this study suggest that when sexual communication is effective, safer sexual practices are more likely to take place. According to Lamb and Peterson (2012), sexual communication is an important component of sexual empowerment. The goal of sexual education and empowerment leads to females' ability to take control of their sexual health. Furthermore, it leads to adopting behaviours, refusing unwanted sex or in the use of contraceptives during consensual sex. Participants suggest that sexual consent empowers women to advocate for their interests and safety during sexual encounters. Previous research has demonstrated positive associations between mutual sexual communication and sexual empowerment (Bond et al., 2020).

Self-efficacy is an important feeling that shows that a woman is sexually empowered. Feelings of confidence and competence in motivating women to initiate behaviours that lead to positive sex outcomes, are valued. In support of these findings, Bay-Cheng (2012) equated sexual empowerment with a concept of self-efficacy. Experimenting with various sexual activities was reported to be sexually empowering. Experimenting with sexual activities and fantasies provides a learning experience to women, resulting in developing healthier sexuality. Peterson (2010) and Lamb (2010) comfortably agree that sexual experimentation provides women with an opportunity to explore their sexuality. Furthermore, self-pleasure via masturbation is sexually empowering to women. Participants of this study observed that self-pleasure is empowering because it provides means to learn more about their bodies, desires, and sensations. Sex therapists commonly recommend masturbation to women to help them become self-loving or to increase their self-esteem. A study done by Hurlbert and Whittaker (1991) found that experiencing masturbatory orgasms results in higher self-esteem among women. However, self-pleasuring via masturbation may be sinful and damnable in many cultures and religions. According to Cervilla et al. (2021), masturbation as sexual behaviour has traditionally had negative connotations owing to the influence of religion, especially Judeo-Christianity.

## Conclusion

This research presented women's perceptions of sexual empowerment. Sexual empowerment is the ability to sexually communicate, have the power to give or withhold consent, having feelings of self-efficacy, the ability to experiment with various sexual activities, and self-pleasure. In addition, the paper has also discussed factors that influence sexual empowerment, e.g. gender sexual norms, social media, peer influence and sexuality education. This paper discussed women's subjective perceptions of sexual empowerment, which they believe fits their ideals of being sexually empowered. Based on this qualitative research, it is safe to suggest that sexual empowerment is a continuum, multidimensional and developmental process.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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