



**Universiteit Utrecht**

Master Thesis

The Relationship Between Emotional Intimacy and Sexual  
Satisfaction: The Mediating Role of Sexual Communication  
Satisfaction

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### **Abstract**

Previous research indicated that low sexual satisfaction is common among women and demonstrated that emotional intimacy is associated with sexual satisfaction. The present study investigated the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction, and the mediating role of sexual communication satisfaction in this relationship. In a cross-sectional design, 251 female participants met the criteria and completed an online questionnaire assessing emotional intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction. Results showed that higher levels of emotional intimacy were associated with greater sexual satisfaction, and this relationship was mediated by sexual communication satisfaction. These findings suggest that satisfaction in sexual communication might explain how emotional intimacy influences sexual satisfaction, and clinicians and researchers should further evaluate the role of sexual communication satisfaction in the context of couple's intimacy and sexual relationships.

*Keywords:* emotional intimacy; sexual communication satisfaction; sexual satisfaction.

## Introduction

Sexual satisfaction is defined as “an affective response arising from one’s subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one’s sexual relationship” (Lawrance & Byers, 1995). Previous research has indicated that sexual satisfaction is associated with emotional well-being, relationship satisfaction, and overall quality of life (Rosen & Bachmann, 2008; Walters & Williamson, 1998). However, a published study with 26,032 participants in 26 countries found that only 45% women reported being satisfied with their sexual life (Wylie, 2009). Therefore, it is important to gain insight in factors affecting sexual satisfaction. According to Shahhosseini and colleagues, factors affecting sexual satisfaction in women are demographic factors, pathophysiological factors, psychological factors and sociocultural factors (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). In this research, we focus on one psychological factor, specifically the experience of emotional intimacy.

Emotional intimacy, which can be defined as “a perception of closeness to another that is conducive to the sharing of personal feelings, accompanied by expectations of understanding, affirmation, and demonstrations of caring” (Sinclair and Dowdy, 2005, p. 194) has been introduced as an important factor affecting sexual satisfaction (Štulhofer et al., 2014). Clinebell and Clinebell defined intimacy as mutual need-satisfaction degree in the relationship and targeted emotional intimacy as the base of all other types of intimacy. When core intimacy needs are not fulfilled satisfactorily, the potential for sexual satisfaction decreases dramatically (Clinebell & Clinebell, 1970). For instance, if a relationship conflict is favorably resolved, partners feel more positively and special towards each other. In other words, resolution of a constructive conflict further will help emotional intimacy and it is very fundamental for a healthy long term sexual functioning (Metz & Epstein, 2002). Experiencing emotional intimacy may positively impact sexual

satisfaction. This conception is supported by Štulhofer and colleagues' study, in which emotional intimacy is strongly linked with the partner-centered component of personal sexual satisfaction (e.g., partner's ability to orgasm). Their results suggest that emotional intimacy can influence sexual satisfaction structurally, by intensifying the partner's pleasure-related components (e.g., partner's sexual creativity, orgasm) (Štulhofer et al., 2014). Other empirical studies have also revealed a significant relationship between a couple's higher emotional intimacy with higher sexual satisfaction (e.g., Haning et al., 2007; MacNeil & Byers, 2005). However, factors accounting for these associations, which can reveal further insights relevant to facilitating sexual satisfaction, are not yet fully understood.

One factor possibly accounting for the association between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction might be sexual communication satisfaction. Wheelles, Wheelles and Baus (1984) defined sexual communication satisfaction as "satisfaction with communication *about* sexual behavior with one's partner, and the satisfaction that sexual behavior itself communicates." According to a theoretical perspective about self-differentiation by Schnarch (1991), well-differentiated individuals (i.e., individuals who are able to endure intimacy; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) tend to remain emotionally connected in an intimate relationship, which facilitates them to talk about sexual matters with their partner. This, in turn, results into higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Tim & Keiley, 2011). Empirical finding showed that individuals' ability to adjust their emotional reactivity is not directly affecting sexual satisfaction, but it allows individuals to discuss more readily about sexual matters with their partner. This ability to communicate about sexual issues subsequently leads to higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Tim & Keiley, 2011). Furthermore, in a study conducted in socially anxious individuals, it was found that lower levels of emotional

intimacy predicted lower levels of sexual communication satisfaction, which in turn predicted lower sexual satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2012).

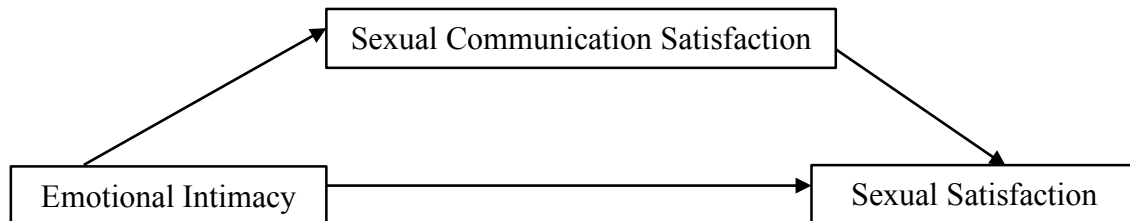
To summarize, theories and empirical studies suggest that emotional intimacy is positively linked to sexual satisfaction in women. When a couple reached a high level of emotional intimacy, in which they understand each other very deeply, communication about sexual matters might be important to influence their sexual preferences and thus influence their sexual satisfaction level. Therefore, the association of emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction might be mediated with sexual communication satisfaction. Analyzing this relationship can add more value and knowledge to define more accurate treatment goals for sexual satisfaction within romantic couples.

### **The Present Study**

The present study investigated the relationships between emotional intimacy, sexual communication satisfaction and sexual satisfaction in women. Firstly, it was hypothesized that emotional intimacy and sexual communication satisfaction will be associated with greater sexual satisfaction. Additionally, based on previous findings (e.g. Montesi et al., 2012; MacNeil & Byers, 1997, 2005), it was expected that sexual communication satisfaction would mediate the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction. Specifically, it was expected that higher levels of emotional intimacy would be associated with more satisfaction about sexual communication, which in turn would be associated with greater sexual satisfaction. The proposed hypotheses are schematically summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Schematic Summary of The Hypothesized Relationship between Emotional Intimacy and Sexual Satisfaction, through Sexual Communication Satisfaction*



## Method

### Procedure and Participants

In the present study, participants invited were females currently living in the Netherlands who are 18 years or older, are committed to a romantic relationship for at least three months, and sexually active with their partner. Participants took part in an online questionnaire provided by Qualtrics and the online address (URL) of the questionnaire was distributed through several social medias, for example Facebook groups and students' website of Utrecht University and Groningen University. The questionnaire was provided in English.

After accessing the questionnaire's URL, participants were brought to the first page that contains information about what the study is, information of anonymity of the data and withdrawal procedures, participants criteria and furthermore participants were asked to give their approval via informed consent (by ticking a box) in order to proceed to the questions. Next, six demographic questions<sup>1</sup> were asked, followed by the questionnaires about emotional intimacy, sexual

<sup>1</sup> Six demographic questions are age, education level, country of birth, sexual orientation, length of romantic relationship and whether participants are sexually active or not.

satisfaction, and sexual communication satisfaction. The average time to complete this study was 10 minutes. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University, the Netherlands (FERB-20-0345).

A total of 251 females (age range 18-50,  $M = 28.34$ ,  $SD = 5.94$ ) fully completed the questionnaire. The highest education of 49% ( $n = 123$ ) respondents was a master degree, the second highest was a bachelor degree with 38.2% ( $n = 96$ ), followed by PHD and high school with 6.8% ( $n = 17$ ) and 4.8% ( $n = 12$ ) respectively, and the remainder of 1.2% ( $n = 3$ ) was “other” education, such as MBO diploma (i.e., lower vocational education). Most participants (62.9%,  $n = 158$ ) were born in another Western countries (Countries in Europe -excluding Turkey-, Northern America and Oceania, Indonesia and Japan), followed by Non-Western countries (Countries in Africa, Latin-America and Asia -excluding Indonesia and Japan- and Turkey) with 26.3% ( $n = 66$ ), and the rest were born in The Netherlands (10.8%,  $n = 27$ ). Regarding sexual orientation, the majority of participants reported being heterosexual, by 86% ( $n = 216$ ), followed by bisexual (11.2%,  $n = 28$ ), homosexual (2%,  $n = 5$ ), and other (0.8%,  $n = 2$ ). Concerning romantic relationship length, 32.7% ( $n = 82$ ) participants were in a relationship for more than 5 years, 32.3% ( $n = 81$ ) were in a relationship for 2-5 years, 16.7% ( $n = 42$ ) were in a relationship for 1-2 years, 15.5% ( $n = 39$ ) were in a relationship for 3-12 months and the rest were in a relationship for 1-3 months (2.8%,  $n = 7$ ).

## Measures

**Emotional Intimacy.** The Emotional Intimacy Scale (EIS; Sinclair, 2005) was used to assess how participants perceived their closeness with their partner. The 5 items in this questionnaire (e.g., “This person completely accepts me as I am.”) are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree. Items were averaged so that



higher scores depict greater emotional intimacy. Research has supported the reliability and psychometric validity of the EIS. For example, In the study by Sinclair and Dowdy (2005), “internal consistency and test-retest reliability for a 6-week period were .88 and .85, respectively”. In this current study, Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = .90$ .

**Sexual Communication Satisfaction.** The Sexual Communication Satisfaction items (Wheeless, Wheelless, & Baus, 1984) were used to measure participants’ sexual communication satisfaction. The 22 items on this questionnaire (e.g., “I tell my partner when I am especially sexually satisfied”) are rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Items were recoded if appropriate and averaged, with higher scores indicating greater sexual communication satisfaction. Research has supported the reliability and psychometric validity of the Sexual Communication Satisfaction ( $\alpha = .88$ ) in a previous study (Rehman, Rellini, & Fallis, 2011). In this current study, Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = .92$ .

**Sexual Satisfaction.** The Short Version of The New Sexual Satisfaction Scale (NSSS-S; Štulhofer, Buško, & Brouillard, 2011) was used to assess participant’s positive and negative dimensions associated with participant’s sexual relationship. The 12 items in this questionnaire (e.g., “The quality of my orgasm”) are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = not satisfied at all to 5 = extremely satisfied. Items scores were averaged with higher scores indicating greater sexual satisfaction. The NSSS-S showed high validity and high reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ) on previous empirical study Štulhofer, Buško, & Brouillard, 2010). In this study, Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = .91$ .

## Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. First, bivariate associations between the study variables were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients.

Second, a mediation analysis with emotional intimacy as independent variable, sexual communication satisfaction as mediator and sexual satisfaction as dependent variable was conducted using model 4 of Hayes' Process Macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). The mediation analysis comprised three sub-analyses that estimated the total, direct, and indirect effects of emotional intimacy on sexual satisfaction. The *total* effect refers to the association between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction. The *direct* effect refers to the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction, while controlling sexual communication satisfaction. The *indirect* effect refers to the relationship between emotional intimacy on sexual satisfaction through sexual communication satisfaction. The mediation analysis comprises the following steps (Hayes, 2018): First, a simple regression analysis was calculated in order to estimate the effect of emotional intimacy on sexual communication satisfaction. Second, a hierarchical regression analysis was calculated in order to estimate the *total* effect of emotional intimacy (step 1) and the *direct* effects of emotional intimacy as well as the effect of sexual communication satisfaction (step 2) on sexual satisfaction. Third, the *indirect* effect of emotional intimacy on sexual satisfaction through sexual communication satisfaction was calculated by means of bootstrap analyses with 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2018) based on bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. (i.e., the presence of 0 value within confidence intervals indicates the absence of *indirect* effect, whereas the absence of 0 value within confidence intervals indicates the existence of *indirect* effect). Standardized coefficients are reported.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Associations Between Emotional Intimacy, Sexual Communication Satisfaction and Sexual Satisfaction

The means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables are shown in Table 1. As expected, emotional intimacy was significantly correlated with sexual satisfaction: higher levels of emotional intimacy were associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Also, emotional intimacy was significantly correlated with sexual communication satisfaction: higher levels of emotional intimacy were associated with higher levels of sexual communication satisfaction. Furthermore, as expected, sexual communication satisfaction was significantly correlated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction: higher levels of sexual communication satisfaction were associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction.

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations, Minimum and Maximum Scores, and Bivariate Associations between Study Variables (Emotional Intimacy, Sexual Communication Satisfaction and Sexual Satisfaction)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum	1	2
1. Emotional Intimacy <sup>a</sup>	4.42	0.74	1.00	5.00	-	-
2. Sexual Communication Satisfaction <sup>b</sup>	5.58	0.86	2.36	7.00	.39*	-
3. Sexual Satisfaction <sup>c</sup>	3.71	0.71	1.00	5.00	.32*	.69*

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Scale range: 1-5 with higher scores indicating higher emotional intimacy, <sup>b</sup> Scale range: 1-7 with higher scores indicating higher sexual communication satisfaction, <sup>c</sup> Scale range: 1-5 with higher scores indicating higher sexual satisfaction. \*  $p < .001$

## Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Emotional Intimacy on Sexual Satisfaction through Sexual Communication Satisfaction

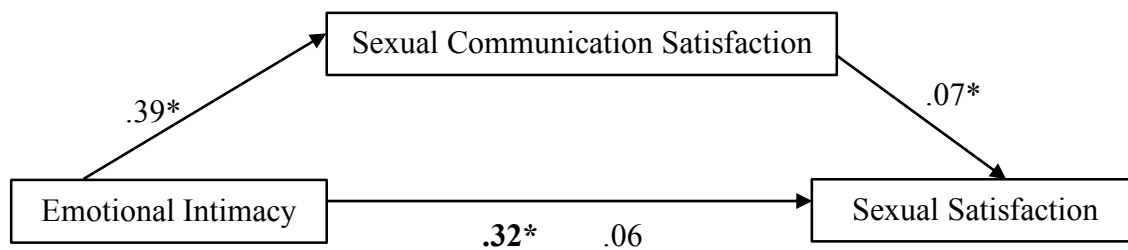
The assumptions of multiple regression analysis were tested. Normality and linearity were met. Also, no severe deviations from homoscedasticity were present. The simple regression analysis revealed a significant positive effect of emotional intimacy on sexual communication satisfaction ( $\beta = .39$ ,  $t(249) = 6.685$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Emotional intimacy explained 15% of the variance in sexual communication satisfaction,  $F(1, 249) = 44.688$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are shown at Figure 2. The first step showed that the total effect of emotional intimacy on sexual satisfaction is significant ( $R^2 = .10$ ,  $F(1,249) = 28.338$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The second step showed a non-significant direct effect of emotional intimacy on sexual satisfaction ( $p = 0.261$ ) and a significant direct effect of sexual communication satisfaction on sexual satisfaction. Emotional intimacy and sexual communication satisfaction together explain 49% of the variance in sexual satisfaction ( $F(2,248) = 119.654$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The bootstrap analyses revealed an indirect effect of emotional intimacy on sexual satisfaction through sexual communication satisfaction ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $SE = 0.064$ , 95% CI [0.175; 0.359]). This is parallel with the hypothesis, that the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction is mediated by sexual communication satisfaction.

### Figure 2

*Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis*



*Note.* Coefficient highlighted in bold represents total effect. \*  $p < .001$

## Discussion

Low sexual satisfaction is a common problem for women worldwide (Mulhall et al., 2018). More research is warranted in order to gain insight in determinants and underlying mechanism of sexual satisfaction. Therefore, this present study focused on the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction, and the mediating role of sexual communication satisfaction in this relationship.

As expected and parallel with the previous studies (e.g., Štulhofer et al., 2014; Clinebell & Clinebell, 1970), an association between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction was found in this study. Higher levels of emotional intimacy were associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Thus, women who experience stronger feelings of closeness and understanding are likely to experience greater satisfaction with sexual activity. These findings underline the importance of emotional intimacy in fostering sexual satisfaction.

The results further showed a positive relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual communication satisfaction, which confirmed preceding research that found that emotional intimacy is related to sexual communication satisfaction (e.g., Tim & Keiley, 2011). In accordance with the study hypothesis, greater sexual communication satisfaction mediated the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction. Specifically, higher levels of emotional intimacy were associated with greater sexual communication satisfaction, which, in turn, was associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction. The finding suggests that when a woman feels emotionally intimate with their partner, she can discuss sexual matters such as sexual preferences more easily and freely to her partner, which subsequently results in experiencing greater sexual satisfaction.

Regarding the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction while controlling sexual communication satisfaction, the results showed that emotional intimacy was not directly associated with sexual satisfaction. The absence of a direct link between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction may imply that these findings suggest that sexual communication satisfaction works as a key mechanism in how emotional intimacy affects sexual satisfaction. This finding confirms the self-differentiation theory by Schnarch (1991). In other words, greater feelings of emotionally intimate with a partner can be crucial for encouraging a woman to communicate about sexual matters and, consequently, increase the sexual satisfaction.

It is, however, important to note that emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction together explained 49% of sexual satisfaction in the current study, which means that the other half of the variance could not be explained by these variables. Factors like sexual assertiveness or perceived partner's responsiveness might be the other key factors to explain sexual satisfaction. For example, in a study by van der Sterren and Verheij (2009) showed that perceived partner's responsiveness also predicted sexual satisfaction. Hence, it might be important for future research to incorporate a broader perspective and include other potentially relevant variables in order to gain further understanding of sexual satisfaction in women.

The results of this study may have potential implications for clinical practice. Clinicians treating couples with sexual problems, which often are accompanied with sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 1997) could focus on improving the levels of emotionally intimate understanding and care between partners, and to educate the importance of sexual communication in order to improve sexual satisfaction. One example of a treatment is Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy, which defined by Johnson (2004) as attachment-based therapy for couples that lies on systemic principles and humanistic in order to help couple improve their relationship functioning

by making a more secure attachment bond. Using this therapy, when focusing on improving a more secure attachment bond, it helps the clients to be more emotionally intimate with their partner. This may result into them feeling closer to each other, helps them to better communicate about their sexual likes and dislikes, and in turn, might result in more sexual satisfaction.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to the present study. First of all, because of the cross-sectional study design, the direction of causality could not clearly be determined. This means that it is not possible to make the conclusion that emotional intimacy causes sexual communication satisfaction and in turn sexual satisfaction. The relationships may also be reversed or bidirectional. For example, previous findings showed that sexual satisfaction can also positively affect emotional intimacy (Yoo & Bartle-Haring, 2014). Longitudinal studies should be done to comprehend more about these interactions.

Secondly, the majority of the sample in this study were university female students (94% were bachelor, masters and PHD students), 62.9% came from Western countries, and 86% were heterosexual. Thus, the sample was not diverse between education background, country of origin and sexual preference. This indicates that the homogeneity of the participants might not be representative towards all females living in The Netherlands and it will be important to determine whether the findings of this study hold in lower educated, other nationality and other sexual preferences populations. It is possible that the relationship between these study variables differ for individuals with different backgrounds.

Lastly, the present study design did not take dyadic processes into account. As sexual relationships are dyadic in the real life, partners mutually affect each other's emotional and

behavior (Back et al., 2011). Sexual communication satisfaction is likely to be part of an interpersonal relationship. For example, previous empirical studies hypothesized that open sexual communication resulted in more sexual rewards and less sexual costs when a couple communicate their preferences and dislikes. Decreased costs and increased rewards are hypothesized to result in better sexual satisfaction (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Gordon & Snyder, 1986). Therefore, it is important for future research to use dyadic longitudinal studies to take the interdependence of partners into consideration.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the results of the present study suggest that sexual communication satisfaction is a key mechanism in the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction. These findings contribute to new insights for research and clinical practice in the area of women's sexual health in a romantic relationship context. Given the fact that romantic relationships are dyadic in nature, it is important to further study these complex dynamics to improve scientific as well as clinical knowledge about how emotional intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction interact in romantic relationship.



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