

Exploring Sexual Schemas in Menopause: Considering the Role of Sexual Function and Depression

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Introduction

Menopause

- Marks end of reproductive capability (typically ages 45-55)
- ↓ estrogen + ↓ progesterone levels ► psychological & sexual symptoms:
 - **Psychological:** Mood swings, depression, anxiety, brain fog, etc.
 - **Sexual:** Vaginal dryness, vaginal irritation, painful sex, reduced desire, etc.

Sexual Schemas

- Cognitive frameworks that shape how women view themselves as sexual beings
 - Have a meaningful impact on sexual well-being (Kilimnik et al., 2018)
 - Interventions targeting negative sexual schemas can improve sexual function (Meston et al., 2013)

Because of the biological, psychosocial, and sexual changes of menopause, women's sexual schemas likely shift during this life stage.

Objectives

- Explore sexual schemas during menopause using qualitative analysis; identify themes and classify schemas as **positive** 😊 or **negative** 😞 (or mixed/neutral)
- Examine whether **sexual function and depression** predict whether women endorse **positive or negative** sexual schemas.
 - ★ **H1:** Positive & negative schemas will emerge from participant responses
 - ★ **H2:** Positive schemas will predict higher sexual function and lower depression scores, while negative schemas will predict lower sexual function and higher depression scores

Methods

Participants

- N = 101 women (4 perimenopausal, 97 postmenopausal); Mean age = 54.87

Procedure

- 30-minute survey via Prolific
- **Quantitative** measures:
 - Demographics (age, race, etc.)
 - Sexual function: **FSFI** (Rosen et al., 2000)
 - Depression: **PHQ-8** (Kroenke et al., 2009)
- **Short essay:**
 - Participants responded to the following prompt:

"Describe how you view yourself as a sexual being... In your writing, reflect on how this may or may not have changed from the way you thought about yourself prior to menopause."

Analysis

Mixed-Methods Analysis

Qualitative coding:

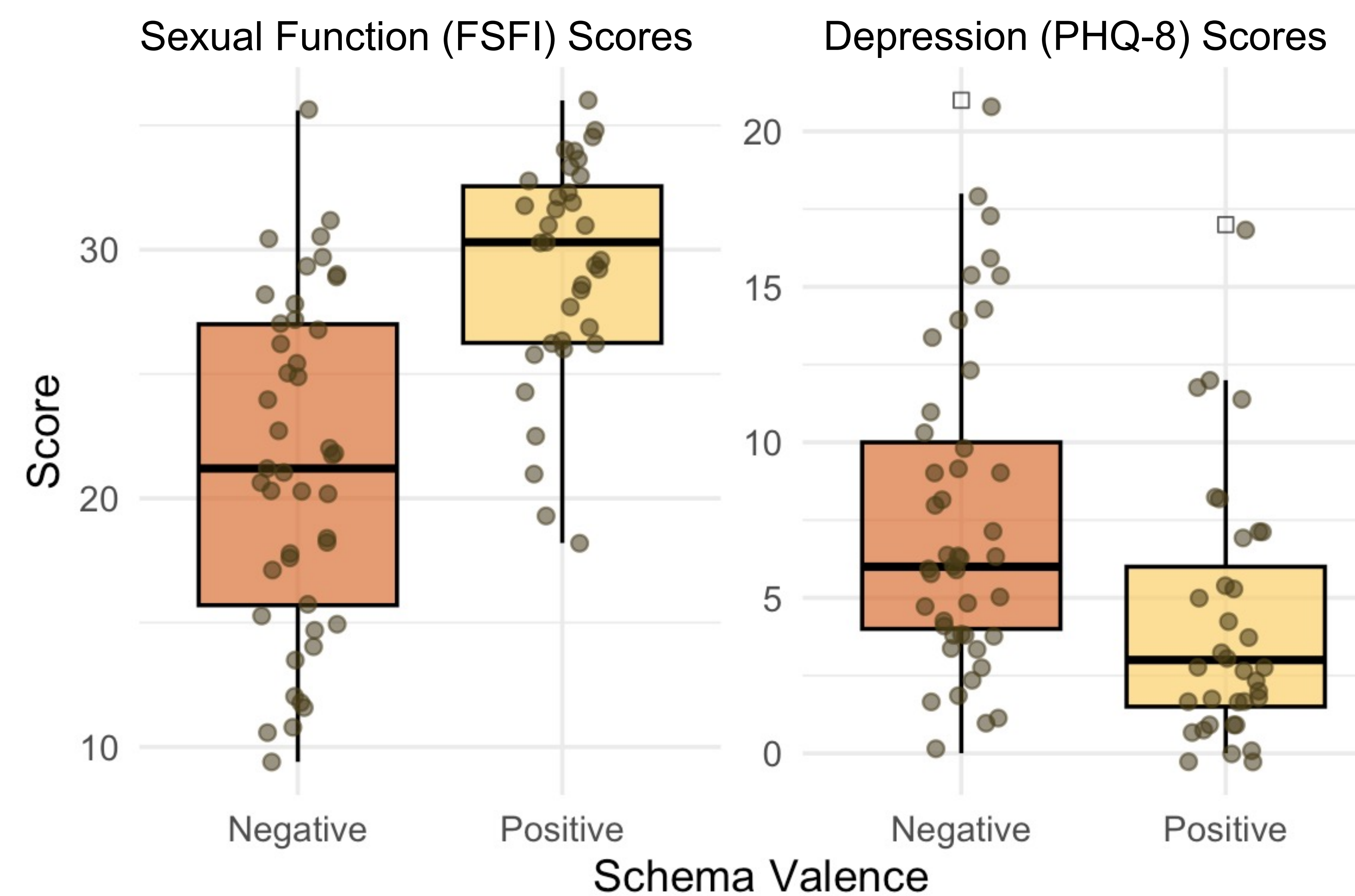
- Essays coded for **valence** (positive/negative/mixed) and themes via **thematic content analysis**

Quantitative analyses:

- **Logistic regression** predicting schema valence
 - Predictors: FSFI & PHQ-8
- **Schema valence distribution**
 - Positive: n = 35
 - Negative: n = 45
 - Mixed: n = 21 (excluded from regression)

Quantitative Results

Positive schemas were associated with higher sexual function and showed a trend toward lower depression symptoms



Note: Lower sexual function (FSFI) scores indicate worse sexual function, while lower depression (PHQ-8) scores indicate less severe depression symptoms.

Sexual function was a strong predictor of schema valence ✓

Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Overall Sexual Schema Valence

Predictor Variable	B	SE	p	OR	95% CI OR
Intercept	-10.05	3.38	.003*	0.00004	[<0.01, 0.02]
Sexual Function (FSFI)	0.33	0.10	.001*	1.39	[1.16, 1.73]
Depression (PHQ-8)	-0.21	0.12	.082	0.81	[0.63, 1.01]

Note: OR = odds ratio. CI = 95% confidence interval. *p < .01.

Depression was associated with more negative schemas in bivariate models (p = .004) ✓ but this association was no longer significant when controlling for sexual function (p = .082). ✗

References

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Qualitative Themes

"Having sex is fun...I enjoy it just as much if not more than when I was young because I understand my body so much more." (age 57)



Positive Schema Themes 😊

- **Improved sexual function**
"My sex drive is higher now..."
- **Redefined self-worth**
"My sexiness is no longer tied to my youthfulness..."
- **Enhanced self-understanding**
"I gained more sense of my own wants, needs, and desires..."

Negative Schema Themes 😞

- **Guilt about sexual changes**
"I feel bad about not having sex often..."
- **Insecurity**
"I've gained weight, I'm ugly, and my hair is gray..."
"I'm no longer sexy..."
- **Sexual Dysfunction**
"Menopause has killed my libido..."

"When I look in the mirror, I don't recognize the person looking back at me. I long for the days when I knew my body, when things felt 'normal.'" (age 54)



Summary

Conclusion

- **Sexual function** emerged as the **strongest predictor** of sexual schema valence during menopause
- Depression was related to schema valence on its own, but this relationship diminished once sexual function was considered.
- Themes reflected both **challenges** and **prosperity** in menopause, highlighting the complexity of sexual schemas during menopause.

Key Takeaways / Clinical Implications

- **Addressing sexual concerns may promote more positive schemas.**
- Depression relates to schema valence but is less predictive once sexual function is considered; **interventions may prioritize sexual health while monitoring mood.**
- Understanding how women interpret and make meaning of their sexual experiences during menopause can guide clinicians in supporting both sexual and psychological well-being.
- Identifying factors associated with negative schemas can help women anticipate and navigate sexual challenges while strengthening resilience and satisfaction.