**What does research tell us about women’s experiences, motives and perceptions of masturbation within a relationship context?: A systematic review of qualitative studies**

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Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Dr. Breanne Fahs for helpful feedback on the protocol for this review, Ms Aikaterini-Maria Litsou for her assistance with selection and quality assessment of the studies and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

Funding details: The first author’s PhD studentship funding was provided by the Republic of Turkey-Ministry of National Education.

Disclosure statement: The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this review as no new data were analyzed in this study.

**Abstract**

This systematic review provides an overview of what qualitative research has revealed about partner-related factors around women’s masturbation and explores how these factors relate to women’s behavior, perceptions, and motives towards masturbation. Eleven studies were identified and secondary thematic analysis was used for synthesis. Women’s perceptions often focus on the (potential) negative influences of masturbation on current or future relationships. Motivations some women reported for masturbating due to partner-related factors were diverse. Findings suggested that some women modify their masturbation behavior when in a relationship. The implications of these findings for sexual health educators and clinicians are discussed.

Keywords: women; masturbation; relationship; qualitative research; secondary thematic analysis

**Introduction**

Masturbation is the self-determined physical act of touching one’s genitals or any part of one’s body with conscious self-stimulation that may result in orgasm or pleasure (Bowman, 2017). This self-stimulation may or may not involve the use of sex toys (Bowman, 2017). Although mutual masturbation is often not very well defined, in the current review, mutual masturbation is defined as partner involvement or partner presence during self-stimulation, which may occur without, before, during, or after sexual intercourse.

***The prevalence of women’s masturbation and sex toy use***

According to Fahs and Swank (2013, p. 667), greater recognition of the role of clitoral stimulation in women’s pleasure and the emphasis on sexual self-reliance has helped promote the idea to “take pleasure into your hands” among women. Recent frequency estimates of women’s reported masturbation experiences exceed 80% in middle- and high-income societies (Bowman, 2014; Burri & Carvalheira, 2019; Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Herbenick et al., 2010). There has been less research investigating women’s masturbation in lower income countries. The few studies that have explored this reported lower rates of masturbation compared to middle- and high-income countries, based on nationally representative (Das et al., 2009) or regional data (Chi et al., 2015; Younis et al., 2018). The estimated prevalence of women’s reported masturbation in China ranges between 10% and 18% (Chi et al., 2015; Das et al., 2009). Younis et al. (2018) recently found that 53.3% of Egyptian women in their study reported masturbation. When comparing the frequency of masturbation among women of different sexual orientations, most studies have found that lesbian and other sexual minority women report masturbating more frequently than heterosexual women (Gerressu et al., 2008; Herbenick et al., 2010; Laumann et al., 1994).

Many women also masturbate with sex toys, both with partners and alone (Dōring & Poeschl, 2019; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Herbenick et al., 2010). A nationally representative U.S. study found that 40% of heterosexual-identified women reported using vibrators in partnered sex, and 45% did so while masturbating (Herbenick et al., 2010). Dōring and Poeschl (2019) found that heterosexual-identified women in Germany reported using sex toys significantly more frequently while masturbating than men (N = 1,723), and heterosexual men reported sex toy use in partnered sex (52%) more than during solo masturbation (37%). While Herbenick et al. (2011) noted that heterosexual women might have concerns about how their partners react and some women in their study believed that a vibrator was intimidating to a partner, the majority of their male participants had positive feelings about women’s vibrator use.

Although research has demonstrated consistent gender differences in some Western countries (including the United Kingdom, United States, Sweden, and Australia), with women reporting masturbating less often than men (Driemeyer et al., 2017; Gerressu et al., 2008; Herbenick et al., 2010; Laumann et al., 1994; Richters et al., 2014), the majority of women report engaging in self-pleasure at some point in their lives, even when involved in romantic relationships (Burri & Carvalheira, 2019; Gerressu et al., 2008; Herbenick et al., 2010). In the second British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal), women were more likely to masturbate when they were having partnered sexual activity, while this pattern was reversed among men (Gerressu et al., 2008). Other studies have suggested that for men, masturbation is frequently perceived and experienced as a substitute for partnered sex, but for women masturbation seems to complement partnered sex within a wider sexual repertoire (Burri & Carvalheira, 2019; Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Regnerus et al., 2017).

***Reasons for masturbating***

Research demonstrates a huge diversity in women’s motivations to masturbate, with different motives existing at different times across the lifespan. Women report masturbating to release sexual tension, for pleasure, to relax, to cope with stress, to get to sleep, as a substitute for partnered sex, and to learn about their own anatomy, desires, and sexual likes and dislikes (Bowman, 2014; Burri & Carvalheira, 2019; Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Clifford, 1978; Das, 2007; Das et al., 2009; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Laumann et al., 1994; Philippsohn & Hartmann, 2009; Rowland, Kolba, et al., 2020). These diverse motives might help to explain the reverse sexual double standard regarding masturbation observed by Haus and Thompson (2019). They found that women who masturbated when in a relationship were rated as higher quality partners than men who masturbated when in a relationship. Their suggested explanation for this finding was participants’ belief that women reported motives for masturbation based on both their own pleasure and intimacy with a partner, but men reported motives based only on their own desires and pleasures (Haus & Thompson, 2019).

***Justification for this review***

The reported frequency of orgasmic difficulties varies widely due to the subjective aspects of orgasm experience (Graham, 2010) and the lack of consistency in studies’ methodology (Graham, 2010; Simons & Carey, 2001). Whether distress is included in the assessment also influences prevalence estimates (Hayes et al., 2006), since only a fairly small proportion of women with orgasm difficulties report associated distress (Mitchell et al., 2016; for a review, see Graham, 2010). The estimated frequency of female orgasmic difficulties ranges between 18% and 41%, depending on features such as severity, persistence over time, and culture (Graham, 2010; Hayes et al., 2006; Laumann et al., 2005). While this review focused on the experiences of women of any sexual orientation, there is also evidence of sexual orientation differences in orgasm, suggesting that heterosexual women report sexual activity without orgasm more frequently than bisexual and lesbian women (Blair et al., 2018; Frederick et al., 2018; Garcia et al., 2014).

Female masturbation - sometimes including the use of vibrators - is often recommended by therapists treating women with orgasmic and arousal problems (LoPiccolo & Lobitz, 1972; McMullen & Rosen, 1979; Meston et al., 2004; Reisinger, 1974,1978; Wylie, 2007). Although masturbation appears to be an effective treatment technique for women with orgasmic difficulties, various problems, including lack of knowledge or understanding of the role of self-pleasure among women and/or their partner, might affect the success rate of interventions (LoPiccolo & Lobitz, 1972; Mosher, 1979).

Importantly, studies find that women still receive contradictory messages and should experience self-control regarding masturbation (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). The source of negativity and stigma around female solitary masturbation is sometimes seen as related to women’s own concerns (e.g., individual embarrassment), but cannot be separated from societal attitudes. There appears to be a societal attribution that men are the source of female orgasm, and an idea that “you should not have to do that” (i.e., pleasure yourself) because you should have a partner to “give you an orgasm” (Fahs, 2011, pp.50-53; Kraus, 2017).

Little is known about how women navigate the role of masturbation in their relationships. Although qualitative research on women’s masturbation has been done (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Hogarth & Ingham, 2009), little is known about how, and to what extent, women’s experiences with masturbation are related to partners’ perceptions, how partners might influence women’s behavior (to engage in or avoid masturbation), and how much couples communicate about women’s masturbation.

*Women’s pleasure within relationships*

Traditionally, orgasms have been perceived as the goal of sex and a sign of “healthy” sexuality and relationships. Although social norms and cultural ideas about healthy sexuality and sexual satisfaction often include orgasm in partnered sexual activity (Bell & McClelland, 2017), many young women report not experiencing orgasm during penile-vaginal intercourse (Bell & McClelland, 2017; Blair et al., 2018; Graham, 2010; Herbenick et al., 2018; Wade et al., 2005; for a review, see West et al., 2004). In a cross-sectional study of women aged 18 to 94 in the US (N = 1,055), Herbenick et al. (2018) found that 36.6% reported clitoral stimulation was necessary to reach orgasm during sexual intercourse. Considering diverse preferred techniques for clitoral stimulation, this requires multifaceted communication with a partner (Herbenick et al., 2018; Towne, 2019). It is noteworthy, then, that women who have difficulty experiencing orgasm have reported problematic communication with partners about sexual activities linked to direct clitoral stimulation (Kelly et al., 2004).

Important aspects related to the prioritization of a partner’s concerns over women’s own pleasure were highlighted by Salisbury and Fisher (2014). In this qualitative study, young heterosexual women described a tendency to refrain from discussing the need for clitoral stimulation due to the fear of their partner’s judgement. Similarly, Nicolson and Burr (2003) highlighted that the women in their study (aged 19-60, mean age = 28.6 years) expressed less concern about having an orgasm during sexual intercourse for themselves than for the sake of their partner*.* In an experimental study with men (N = 810), Chadwick and van Anders (2017) reported that despite greater attention to women’s pleasure, men’s concerns regarding women’s orgasms may be in line with societal expectations that prioritize men’s masculinity. Heterosexual women’s descriptions of feeling pressured to experience orgasm with a male partner (Fahs, 2011, pp.53-55; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014), or men’s perceived achievement of masculinity resulting from a woman’s orgasm(Chadwick & van Anders, 2017),can partially be explained through sexual scripts. Established sexual scripts might lead women to compromise their own sexuality as a means of maintaining a strong relationship with a partner rather than achieving their own sexual pleasure (Wiederman, 2005). Traditional sexual scripts and the sexual double standard, however, do seem to be changing, and may now be more influential at the cultural than at the dyadic level (Masters et al., 2013).

Research has shown that masturbation is one of the most common sources of orgasm among young women (Smith et al., 1996; Wade et al., 2005). Rowland et al. (2019) recently found that women reported greater orgasmic pleasure during partnered sexual activity than masturbation; however, women who experienced orgasmic difficulties reported lower orgasmic pleasure during partnered sex than women who did not experience orgasm difficulties (N = 2059, age range 18-90 (mean = 28.8), samples from the USA and Hungary). More recently, Rowland, Kolba, et al. (2020) reported that higher masturbation frequency was associated with lower orgasm difficulty and greater orgasmic pleasure among women (N = 2215, mean age = 28.8 years). As noted by Coleman (2003), self-pleasure can contribute to a sense of control and autonomy over one’s own body, and eventually might improve the capacity for intimacy with a partner because of increased sexual self-identity and sexual self-esteem. Yet, Kraus (2017) found that for many women in a relationship, masturbation remains taboo partly because of the fear that partners may misinterpret female masturbation as a sign of their own inability to meet their partner’s needs.

There is a particular gap in the literature on men’s perceptions and reactions to female masturbation, both solitary and mutual, within the relationship context. Women’s perceptions and experiences with their partner, and how men react towards their partner’s masturbation experience, are little understood.

***Why is this review important?***

A growing body of literature has emerged on female self-pleasure (Bowman, 2014; Burri & Carvalheira, 2019; Fahs & Frank, 2014, Goldey et al., 2016). However, less research has focused on women's experiences and perceptions of masturbation within a relationship context. To the authors’ knowledge, this review is the first to provide an overview of the qualitative research on partners’ reactions and views on women’s masturbation and sex toy use. Better understanding of women’s ideas of their partner’s perceptions of female masturbation in the context of relationships, and of positive and negative associations with these, might help women to construct positive associations with pleasure seeking and sexual desire (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2011).

Masturbation techniques illustrate how women stimulate themselves to experience pleasure or orgasm and these techniques might help inform women and men about clitoral stimulation methods during partnered sex. The findings of this review might be useful to improve outcomes in sex therapy, as the meanings that are associated with female masturbation might affect the success rate of therapy that utilizes masturbation. Additionally, integrating the accumulated findings on women’s perceptions of partner views and women’s experiences of partner reactions can be used to inform interventions which provide educational solutions, instead of pharmaceutical solutions, and which can target men, women, and couples to overcome orgasm difficulties and increase overall sexual satisfaction.

***Objectives of review***

The main aims of the present review were to determine what qualitative research has revealed about women’s self-pleasure within a relationship context, focusing on partner-related factors (such as women’s perceptions of their partners’ ideas and their partners’ reactions, if experienced) around women’s masturbation, and to explore how these relate to women’s behaviors and perceptions of masturbation.

The present review sought to answer the following research questions:

(1) What has qualitative research revealed about women’s perceptions of their partner’s views on women’s masturbation?

(2) What has qualitative research revealed about the relationship- and/or partner-related motives for experiencing self-pleasure among women?

(3) What has qualitative research revealed about women’s experiences of masturbation when in a relationship and their partner’s reactions to women’s solitary and/or mutual masturbation?

(4) What is the overall quality of the qualitative research in this field?

The secondary thematic analysis aimed to answer the following research question:

(1) How do women’s experiences and perceptions of relationships, and of their partners’ ideas, feelings and/or reactions, relate to women’s perceptions, behaviors, and motives regarding masturbation?

**Method**

***Selection criteria***

Studies were included in the review if they:

* were written in English
* were published prior to October 2019 (no time limit for the earliest study)
* were primary research studies (not systematic reviews, editorials, commentaries, or theoretical articles)
* included adult women of any sexual orientation over 18 years old as participants
* explored women’s experiences of, or motivations for, female solo masturbation
* used a qualitative method of data collection and analysis

Studies were excluded if they:

* included only young women under 18 as participants
* explored women’s self-stimulation as a treatment component for acute or chronic medical conditions (e.g., stimulation or vibrator use following treatment of gynecological cancer, or dilator use as a treatment of vaginismus), without concentrating on the pleasure aspects of masturbation or sexual enjoyment of women
* did not assess or report on women’s perceptions of their partner’s ideas, or women’s experience of their partner’s reactions to female solo masturbation, or what partner-related factors influenced women’s motivation to experience self-pleasure

***Search strategies***

Searches were conducted on the PsycINFO, Medline, Embase, and CINAHL databases. Additional exploration of the grey literature was conducted and ProQuest Dissertations & Thesis GlobalTM was searched to obtain collections of doctoral dissertations from around the world. The key words used for searches are presented in Table 1 (a detailed table on the search strategy can be found in the online supplementary material).

[Table 1 near here]

***Selection of studies***

The reference manager software EndNote was used to assess the articles for relevance.Some articles were excluded based on their title if they clearly did not meet inclusion criteria. Studies with unclear titles that lacked abstracts were obtained for a full text review. The first author made evaluations about screening and full text reading, and after the initial screening, decisions on study eligibility were made with a second coder, an experienced qualitative researcher, who reviewed half of the articles that required full text review. After completing full-text reading, any uncertainties when deciding which papers were eligible were discussed with one of the co-authors (CG) (for the list of articles chosen for full-text reading, see online supplementary file). As recommended by Moher et al. (2009), the selection process implementation is presented in Figure 1.

***Quality assessment***

Although it is vital to consider and evaluate the methodology of qualitative studies (Dixon-Woods et al., 2004; Ring et al., 2011), there is no widely agreed method of evaluation (Carroll et al., 2011; Daly et al., 2007; Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The general consensus is that some assessment is required to establish the possible influence of a study’s quality on the findings of the review, to avoid over-reliance or under-reliance on certain findings, and to reduce the possibility of researcher bias (Carroll et al., 2011; Dixon-Woods et al., 2007; Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

In this review, a standardized tool, The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence’s checklist (NICE, 2012), was used to assess the methodological limitations and strengths of the included studies. The checklist has been successfully used in several recent qualitative reviews (e.g., Bradbury et al., 2018; Lui et al., 2018; Sinković & Towler, 2019). Each item in the checklist was assessed with three descriptive grades: (++ (positive), + (insufficient/unclear), or – (inadequate)); an overall grade was also assigned to each included study. Using NICE guidance, when deciding on an overall grade, a higher grade is recommended if the study fulfils “all or most of the checklist criteria,” and a medium grade is suggested if the study fulfils “some of the checklist criteria.” In order to score the highest grade (++), an article needs to score ++ (positive) on at least 10 out of the 14 criteria; ++ (positive) scores are needed on at least six to be assessed as a middle grade (+); lowest quality (-) articles score less than six positive grades (Sinković & Towler, 2019). A second coder independently rated three randomly chosen articles, and then the results were compared and the differences resolved through discussion. It is important to note that the results of the quality assessment did not have an impact on the exclusion of specific studies.

***Synthesis of the findings***

In order to help readers consider the context of the primary studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008), structured summaries of each included study, describing the aims, sample, data collection method, data analysis method, and key findings are presented in Table 2.

Secondary thematic analysis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used to integrate the findings from the primary qualitative studies. While staying close to the primary data, secondary thematic analysis enables a researcher to conduct an interpretative synthesis (Dyer & das Nair, 2013; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Interpretative synthesis occurs at the final stage of the analysis and enables researchers to go beyond the content of the primary studies and generate new interpretive explanations (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The verbatim findings were organized and extracted using NVivo software, but the analyses were completed using both NVivo and by hand using highlighters. The findings or results sections of the study reports were counted as data (Dyer & das Nair, 2013; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The first author coded each line of the results section of each study report, including the participants’ quotes and authors’ interpretations related to the review questions according to their meaning and content (Thomas & Harden, 2008). During this stage, line-by-line coding of the findings of the primary studies was conducted, and every sentence situated within the objectives of this review had at least one code applied.

In the next stage, free codes were generated into related areas to build up the descriptive themes. The coding lists and descriptive themes were examined in the primary studies to check for consistency, and to see if any changes or additional codes were needed. A total of 16 initial codes were created. Then, the codes were examined and grouped according to their similarities and differences. The final coding process resulted in three structures (current or future partner-related motives, perceptions of partner’s ideas regarding women’s masturbation, and experience when in a relationship and reactions from partner), with several sub-codes used to organize a total of seven descriptive themes.

In the final stage, descriptive themes were organized to create analytical themes. A draft summary of the themes was written by the first author, and the second reviewer commented on the draft. The final version was agreed by both reviewers. The findings of primary studies were combined by listing the themes which described women’s experiences and perceptions of masturbation when in a relationship to explore how partner-related factors relate to women’s behavior and motives to avoid or engage in masturbation. The descriptive themes which resulted from the inductive analysis of the primary studies were central to “going beyond” the content of the original studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The reviewer then considered the changes in women’s views and experiences of masturbation when in a relationship. Throughout this process, analytical themes started to develop, and three such themes were created (see Results).

**Results**

The initial search identified 721 articles; 229 of these articles were excluded because they were duplicates. Most of the studies were excluded following a screening of the titles and abstracts (see PRISMA flow-chart, Figure 1).

[Figure 1 near here]

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the 11 articles included in this review. Most of the research was published in peer-reviewed journals; three of the selected studies were unpublished doctoral dissertations (Bowman, 2017; Frank, 2014; Hong, 2004). The earliest study was published in 2004 (median year 2014), and most studies were conducted in the U.S. (nine articles). The most common method for data collection was interviews (used in nine articles). Thematic analysis (four articles) and grounded theory (four articles) were the most commonly used methods in the analysis.

[Table 2 near here]

***Quality assessment***

The quality assessment was based on the report and not on the research itself (Dixon-Woods et al., 2004; Sinković & Towler, 2019). The quality of the included studies was relatively high; the majority of the NICE checklist items was met by six of the studies and these scored the highest grade ++ (positive). Only three studies failed to fulfil the majority of the NICE checklist items and these were scored as inadequate. The results of the assessment are presented in Table 3.

[Table 3 near here]

The aims of the studies were clearly presented in all of the included articles (see Table 2). The 11 studies reported on data from a total of 425 women. The participants’ age ranges varied; five studies recruited a broad age range (from 18 to over 50 years), in four studies the participants were aged between 18 and 35, and in two studies women were aged between 22 and 40. Most studies described using self-selected methods for recruitment; five studies used purposive sampling to maximize diversity (Bowman, 2017; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Frank, 2014; Hong, 2004). Among these, racial/ethnic minority women and sexual minority women were intentionally oversampled in two studies (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013). Two studies did not provide information on their recruitment and sampling strategy (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). In five studies, interviews and focus groups were carried out at on-campus locations (Bowman, 2017; Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016), or at a site chosen by the participants (Hong, 2004; Huong & Liamputtong, 2018); five articles did not report the location of interviews (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Marcus, 2011; Towne, 2019; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). Six articles lacked information on how the data were transcribed verbatim, or by whom (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Marcus, 2011; Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Towne, 2019; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). Only one study reported that the participants (10 out of 15) had given feedback on the report of their transcripts (Towne, 2019).

Triangulation was observed in one study which used face-to-face semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and written narratives from sexuality journals (Frank, 2014). In the majority of the articles (8 of 11), the content of the topic guide was defined or example questions were given which helped to assess whether the study was designed to address the aims of the research; the topic guide was not presented in three articles (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Towne, 2019; Yuxin & Ying, 2009).

The type of analysis (methodological approach or underlying theoretical framework) was reported in 10/11 studies (exception: Yuxin & Ying, 2009) (see Table 2). A systematic and clear procedure which allows the reader to assess how the themes and concepts originated from the data was not provided in three articles (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Marcus, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009).

Considering the reliability of the analysis, most (6/11) articles were graded as “not sure/not reported (+)”. Coding and analysis were conducted by more than one researcher in four articles (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Goldey et al., 2016; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). The role of the researcher and the researcher’s impact on the data collection and data analysis processes were critically considered in only two articles (Bowman, 2017; Towne, 2019).

Original data in the form of direct quotations from participants were provided in all included studies. Despite the overall positive scores on the reporting of the findings, the referencing of quotations was rated as “not adequate (-)” for five articles; thus, further interpretation of these quotes should be done with caution.

While the confidentiality of the data and informed consent procedures were described in almost all (10/11) of the selected studies, four articles did not report review by an ethics committee (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Marcus, 2011; Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Yuxin & Ying, 2009).

***Secondary thematic analysis***

From the original studies, codes were extracted and organized into three overarching themes. In the first thematic group, the themes around perceptions of women related to their partner’s views on women’s masturbation were organized. In the second thematic group, the themes around women’s motivation to masturbate when in a relationship and partner-related motives of women’s masturbation were categorized. In the third thematic group, the themes around women’s experiences of masturbation and/or sex toy use when in a relationship were categorized. These themes and sub-themes with the sources of evidence are presented in Table 4. Because of the length of the text, the majority of the illustrative quotes from primary studies are presented in the final coding manual (see online supplementary file).

[Table 4 near here]

*Women’s masturbation or use of sex toys might affect current or potential relationships*

Whether currently involved in a romantic relationship or not, women appear to have concerns about partners’ perceptions regarding their masturbation behavior. Some studies demonstrated that perceptions of partner’s ideas regarding women’s masturbation and use of sex toys seemed to affect some women’s masturbation behavior, as they believed that it might affect their (current or potential) partner’s feelings and then the relationship itself (Frank, 2014; Hong, 2014; Marcus, 2011).

Most of the research demonstrated the perception of women’s pleasure as being the role of men (Bowman, 2017; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Marcus, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). Some women seemed to internalize the idea that women should be sexual only in the context of a partner (Hong, 2004; Yuxin & Ying, 2009).

Yes, I almost did not want to take away his role in our making love because he gives me pleasure, and I didn’t want to say, ‘Ha ha, I want something that give[s] me more pleasure.’ (Marcus, 2011)

My husband would try a lot of the positions we learnt from the movies. We even tried oral sex. But I didn’t really like it. We just wanted to try something new. But I never think of masturbation. Why would a woman need to masturbate if she has a husband? Only the men who have no wives or who are separated from their wives do it. (Li li, age: 26) (Yuxin & Ying, 2009)

Some women believed that their orgasm should be “given” by their male partner when they are in a relationship, and that a women’s masturbation might challenge men’s role in relationships and men’s ownership of women’s orgasms; thus, men might feel left out of the process (Frank, 2014). Similarly, the idea of women’s masturbation as a threat (or insult) to men’s sense of sexual prowess was also reported in some of the selected articles (Frank, 2014; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Marcus, 2011). Another perceived threat of women’s masturbation to their partners was related to the frequency of sex toy use, even when being used with a partner (Marcus, 2011).

No. There are things that he is very sensitive about. I think if we had used it periodically [it would be okay], but not like every single time that we had sex. I think he would think that the thing is taking my place or she does not need me. You know, if we had sex and we used it a lot, that will be [a] problem for him because, well, I think he would think that, you know, that’s how he was raised, that she doesn’t need me, you know. She can, she won’t need me, [that she] can be pleased by the machine. (Marcus, 2011)

Right now, I do not really feel comfortable doing that [using the vibrator], in the room or with him watching with him. To me, it seems like it would mess with his manhood. I cannot really say what would happen if I handed him the vibrator after he came because I did not do that yet. He would deﬁnitely do it, but in his mind, he would say, maybe, yeah, ‘I did not satisfy her’ with his penis. (Marcus, 2011)

Similarly, some women believed that masturbation and sex toy use while in a relationship reflected either a bad relationship or the existence of problems in a relationship (Marcus, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). Perceived problems in a sexual relationship with a partner might include a lack of sexual competence in a partner, or unfulfilled and infrequent sexual experiences (Bowman, 2017; Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Marcus, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009).

I can’t imagine why some people need masturbation if they have sexual partners. They must be abnormal or they don’t love each other at all. My husband used to do it when we were together. It made me feel sick. (Rose, age:33) (Yuxin & Ying, 2009)

Some women without a current partner perceived that future sexual interactions might be affected by orgasms experienced through masturbation or with a vibrator. Concerns about not being able to have the same satisfaction with a (future) partner and the fear of not being able to replicate/reproduce the orgasms acquired through masturbation during partnered sex were reported (Bowman, 2017; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Frank, 2014).

Because Molly (18, white, heterosexual, Lutheran), for example, did not find her first intercourse experience to be enjoyable, she especially fears that the experience of independent masturbatory pleasure could result in future partnered sex feeling even more comparatively unsatisfactory. (Frank, 2014)

***Summary***. Regardless of relationship status, partner- and/or relationship-related concerns appeared to exist for some women due to the idea that *women’s pleasure is men’s role, and should be experienced when in a relationship*. If a woman is in a relationship but is masturbating, this might be perceived to signal a problem with the relationship or with one of the partners. As discussed below, while women’s motives to masturbate were diverse, the beliefs that women’s masturbation generally reflects an inadequacy in their partners’ sexual performance (unfulfilling partnered sex), and might affect a partner’s feelings were common for some women. Although the sources of these messages were not always clear (and were not only from the partner), these ideas appeared to result in guilt, secrecy, and changes in masturbation patterns when in a relationship. Taken together, these narratives suggested that some women appeared to internalize the perceived negative effect of their masturbation on their relationship.

*Balancing sexual needs with self and partners*

Partner- and/or relationships-related motives, for either current or possible future partners, were captured in women’s narratives in the original studies. Two distinct aspects were identified: as a substitute for partnered sex and as enhancing partnered sex.

***Substitute for partnered sex.*** The most common motive women reported for masturbation was to compensate for partnered sex, and the reasons for this substitution varied among women.

*If a woman did not reach orgasm with a partner.* Some motives were due to the partner’s performance, including lack of sexual competence (e.g., if partnered sex did not result in the woman’s orgasm), lack of sexual knowledge (e.g., when a partner did not value the clitoris), and a partner’s lack of attention to the woman’s orgasm after his orgasm (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Hong, 2004; Huong & Liamputtong).

[I]f we had had sex and then...um...then he climaxed before I did, then sometimes he would - usually he’d go take a shower after? And if I was close, then if [the vibrator] was right there (chuckles a little), then I just did it. Because I’m so close that - yeah! [How would you feel about doing that?] I’m just happy. Um... No, I’m not like upset at him or (chuckling) anything! (Uma) (Hong, 2004)

On the other hand, for some women, masturbation seemed to offer easier and/or better orgasms than partnered sex (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016).

I actually think the most enjoyable sexual experiences I’ve had are by myself … When I’m by myself it’s more for me, and I know what I’m doing and what I want. And it’s just … better with myself. (Kara, 18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) (Frank, 2014)

Notably, some women reported feeling hindered by their partner during sexual intercourse (Frank, 2014).

I know how to get myself off, it’s just my partner gets in the way of that a lot of time. (Dakota, 20, white, straight/bisexual, agnostic), (Frank, 2014)

*If a partner was not around*. Sometimes masturbation served as a situational solution, a practical alternative when a sexual partner was not around or was unavailable due to time or distance (Goldey et al., 2016; Hong, 2004; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). Some women believed that one of the benefits of masturbation was helping them to remain faithful to their partner when in a relationship (Frank, 2014; Yuxin & Ying, 2009).

He always goes away for business trips. Sometimes we have to separate for two or three months. I will touch myself during that time. I joked to him that if I didn’t know how to do it

[masturbate] I might think of other possibilities. Men should understand that masturbation is a good way for women to love themselves when they are not with their partners. Actually, he told me that he uses the same way to comfort himself when he is alone. (Wei, 28-year-old) (Yuxin & Ying, 2009)

*If a woman is not in a relationship.* Sometimes masturbation was a way to experience pleasure if women did not want to have a relationship or could not find a reliable partner. Some women were motivated to masturbate as it provided a break from the emotional stressors of a relationship (Frank, 2014).

Being by myself is a lot more fun … In the shower I can get all the shit done and I’m super relaxed after, and it’s good to be by myself without any emotional baggage that comes along with anybody, male or female. (Jordan, 21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish), (Frank, 2014)

Some women considered masturbation as a tool that would help them to develop a healthy relationship in the future. Masturbation was seen as a practical way to experience pleasure, an alternative that helped some single women avoid the possible physical (e.g., STIs, unplanned pregnancy) and emotional (e.g., regret) risks potentially associated with casual sex with an unfamiliar partner. In this context, women seem to become motivated and build up the confidence to say no to unwanted sexual activities (Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Hong, 2004; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009).

After sharing the various struggles and pains she had endured with various contraceptive methods, Ana (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion), for example, says, “Oh, it was terrible. I far prefer masturbation simply because of this. It’s great at the time. Sex is awesome – until two weeks later when you’re like, ‘God, I hope I’m not pregnant’. You know?” In the process of trying to prevent pregnancy, partnered sex became so medicalized for Ana – so associated with doctor’s visits, prescription medications, and physical and emotional pain – that she opted to forego any contraceptive use. (Frank, 2014)

Gaining emotional connection before starting a new relationship was another motive reported by some women (Frank, 2014; Hong, 2004). Some women noted that masturbation helped them to gain control over their sexual urges, allowing them to wait to have sex with a partner to whom they had an emotional connection.

Leah (19, white, heterosexual, Jewish): I never needed to go hook up with random guys and do those kinds of things, I think, because I had masturbation more than other girls. That was their sexual outlet, so I’m glad I had that to do and not be dependent on other people or put myself in certain situations, emotionally, and upset myself, because … I have a need to trust somebody before I would think about doing anything with them. (Frank, 2014)

***A tool to enhance partnered sex and partnered intimacy.*** Another common motive among women was the intention to communicate successfully with a partner about what was explored during masturbation in order to experience more pleasure and enhance partnered sex.

*Exploration and**intention to experience pleasurable partnered sex*. Masturbation was considered a tool that provides an understanding of how the body works for some women. In this context, women were motivated to explore sexual likes and dislikes, their genital anatomy, and the unique stimulation techniques that they preferred (Frank, 2014; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). For example, some women reported valuing their clitoris more after they discovered their body through masturbation (Towne, 2019).

I have come to learn and accept that I must learn to pleasure myself before I can have anyone else truly pleasure me while having sex…. I feel that masturbation is an important part in exploring your own sexuality so you can know what you like and what you don’t like…. Masturbation is really very important to having a healthy sexual life. (Kaestle & Allen, 2011)

Women seemed to be motivated to understand their sexual preferences, and masturbation appeared to help some women to gain this sexual awareness. For some, masturbation served as their first information on, and experience of orgasm, so that they could then make sense of their orgasms during partnered sex (Frank, 2014; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). It seems that gaining sexual awareness first with oneself helps women to be more sexually aware with a partner.

If I had waited to learn that from partners it would have taken me forever, and I would probably be frustrated every other time that I had sex because I really would like to orgasm but can’t. (Di, 27, Chixan@/Mestizo/brown, queer, atheist) (Frank, 2014)

Masturbation was also sometimes considered as a tool to enhance partnered sex, as it can enrich the sexual repertoire of couples (Fahs & Swank, 2013).

The dildo was kind of small. We got it in a kit from the adult store, so it doesn’t really do anything. Neither of us (I guess you would say) wants it to be replicated like a penis, but it’s just something different to do. It’s kind of silly. Honestly, sometimes we’ll be laughing because it’s so funny. It’s tiny and laughable and not meant to be taken seriously. (Cris, a 22-year-old white lesbian woman) (Fahs & Swank, 2013)

For some sexual minority women, one of the motives was to practice in order to please a potential partner (Frank, 2014).

young women could use what they do and do not enjoy during masturbation as a starting point for trying to please new female-bodied partners. (Di, 27, Chixan@/Mestizo/brown, queer, atheist) (Frank, 2014)

Sometimes, masturbation was a way to enhance partnered sex in terms of pleasing the male partner. In this way, without personal motives, women’s masturbation appears to exist for the sake of the partner’s pleasure rather than for personal pleasure (Fahs & Swank, 2013).

Usually when [masturbation] comes up, it’s because, you know, guys like it. When it happens that I do it, it may be because the person I’m having sex with wasn’t achieving satisfaction so—so in order to push him along, I would engage in that act, for him. (Jean, a 57-year-old White heterosexual woman) (Fahs & Swank, 2013)

*A step to communicating successfully with their partner.* For some women who wanted to maximize their pleasure in a partnered context, the next step was to share their preferences with their partner (current or future). Masturbation helped these women feel comfortable with their body and gave them the confidence to communicate with a partner, as they could help or teach their partner how they experienced pleasure, or direct them during sex (Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Hong, 2004; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). The motive to teach their partner about how they experience orgasm was sometimes related to a perceived lack of knowledge among partners about this.

It is a great way of discovering your likes and dislikes… Masturbation is a much safer method of sexual expression and I have found that it has become much easier to communicate with both my partner and my girlfriends about sex. (Glenda) (Kaestle & Allen, 2011)

As Fei Fei said: The key to high quality sex is to know yourself ﬁrst and then use this knowledge to teach your partner how to give you the greatest pleasure. It’s ridiculous if you expect your partner to know you better than yourself ... (Yuxin & Ying, 2009)

I think I’ve learned something useful for when I actually do have sex and when I do get married, because … if I don’t know my body, how’s a guy supposed to know that? Seriously. So you’re having sex and you’re like, “Why isn’t this pleasurable? I’m having sex. I’m doing what I’m supposed to do.”… So I think that would come in handy and I think that’s probably for a healthier sexual relationship when I can actually be like “no, this is what you do.” (Lauren, 20, white, heterosexual, Orthodox Jewish), (Frank, 2014)

For some women, masturbation was a helpful way to build up comfort and confidence to experience self-stimulation during partnered interaction (mutual masturbation), in order to have better/easier orgasms.

Casey (21, white, heterosexual, nondenominational Christian), knowing what she likes and wants always helps to “speed up the process” when she is trying to orgasm during sex. (Frank, 2014)

***Summary***. In the context of this review, the secondary analysis covered only the partner- and/or relationship-related motives for self-pleasure. For some women in a relationship, *balancing sexual needs with self* included motives for masturbating when a partner was not physically present. Another common motive for self-pleasure among young single women was developing emotionally and physically healthy relationships in the future, as masturbation provided relief from sexual tension, and pleasure, without having sex with an unfamiliar (and potentially risky) partner.

*Balancing sexual needs with others* covered women’s diverse motives for masturbating. Sometimes self-pleasure served to provide women with orgasms if partnered sexual activity did not (generally without the partner knowing), sometimes it served to enhance partnered sexual activity, and sometimes it served to enhance men’s arousal or excitement. Enhancing current or future partnered sex was also a common motive among women, as masturbation was believed to help increase sexual awareness about sexual preferences which could then be transferred to partnered sex by communicating with and teaching a partner about what works in order to experience (better) orgasms (e.g., in relation to anatomy, sexual likes/dislikes, or stimulation techniques etc.).

*Changes in women’s masturbation behaviors and experiences with a partner*

As discussed below, across different studies, women reported various experiences and feelings when in a relationship and diverse reactions from their partner related to their masturbation behavior and use of sex toys.

***Women modified their masturbation behavior when in a relationship*.** Women seemed to modify their masturbation behavior for the sake of their relationships. Some women in relationships tried to abstain from masturbation completely, some masturbated less frequently, and some avoided masturbation when their partner was around (Bowman, 2017; Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Hong, 2004). Not feeling comfortable enough to share their experiences with their (current or future) partner, the notions of women’s orgasms being the man’s role, and the idea that women should be sexual only in the context of a partner all appeared to contribute to these changes. Some women stopped masturbating entirely or temporarily because they did not want to offend or upset their partner or they did not want to get caught (Bowman, 2017; Goldey et al., 2016). Perceived or actual reactions from partners also resulted in changes in women’s use of sex toys and masturbation behavior. For example, some women modified their behavior by limiting masturbation to times when they felt sure that they would not get caught by their partner, due to feelings of embarrassment (Bowman, 2017; Hong, 2004).

K: I mean, I think, I feel like my husband isn’t really, like, that open, so I feel like, like,   
I’ve caught him, but I feel like I would be embarrassed if he caught me, in a way? Um, so, I don’t know. I, I think I kind of wait, until times when I know he’s going to be gone for a certain amount of time um, or I know, like, where he is. Um, yeah. C: What do you think he would think if he were to catch you? Like, what would happen? K: I don’t know. I mean, I feel like, [5 second pause] I don’t know. I feel like he kind of, has a perspective a little bit about, like, that’s something men do more. Um, yeah. And like, why, like, if we’re in a relationship, why am I still doing that? (Kristy, White, Heterosexual, 27) (Bowman, 2017)

What I use is a vibrator and it’s not—to tell you the truth on that, I don’t penetrate while masturbating. I just use it on—I go around it, I go around the clitoris and that’s it. I don’t even penetrate when I use the vibrator ... . I’m embarrassed to tell my husband about masturbating. If he’s on the computer I would even sneak to the back room and take the time just for myself to masturbate while he’s in the front room, without even asking for help, or ‘‘hey babe, come watch.’’ For some reason, I am embarrassed to masturbate in front of him. (Keisha, a 34-year-old African American bisexual woman) (Bowman, 2017)

The sexual script of women’s pleasure being men’s responsibility seems to have created complex attitudes. Some women seemed to believe that they were not supposed to experience any pleasure if it was not linked with partnered sex and this belief could create thefeelings of cheating or feeling disloyal and guilty for some women (Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Marcus, 2011). Some women felt that their fidelity might be questioned because of their fantasies during masturbation (Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016).

For me, [orgasm] by myself is easier, but, I dunno, I’m married, and so, being married, for me, changed things, like…I almost feel like I’m cheating on my husband if I were to masturbate, I know that sounds kind a weird, but, so I don’t engage in that without… (heterosexual woman in the 25–40 group) (Goldey et al., 2016)

Deb (22, white, lesbian, reform Jewish) also believes that masturbating to the fantasy of someone other than her current partner would feel like “one more step” closer to cheating. For this reason, she only thinks about her girlfriend during masturbation when she is in a relationship. (Frank, 2014)

Some women preferred to experience sex toy use or genital touching when with a partner rather than on their own (Frank, 2014; Marcus, 2011). Others were motivated to enrich their sexual repertoire with a partner when in a relationship, and this seems to overlap with the descriptive theme: “exploration and intention to experience pleasurable partnered sex”. Sharing masturbation experiences with a partner or including men in the process appeared to be helpful for some women because the partner was involved, and thus experiencing pleasure seemed less “wrong” (Frank, 2014; Marcus, 2011).

I think it’s just an awareness, especially when we’re on vacations and stuff like that. We’ll talk about [masturbation], so the other person isn’t completely left out of the experience … I just don’t want to keep things hidden … I don’t want to feel like if I masturbate it’s a secret, so then I just talk about it, and in turn he talks about it. I think it’s good to be open. (Casey, 21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), (Frank, 2014)

***How to discuss/communicate with a partner?*** Some women attributed their ease and confidence when communicating with their partner about their sexual likes to masturbation (Frank, 2014; Hong, 2014).

I am able to say … ‘this feels a lot better’ and ‘I don’t need this’ or ‘more of this.” Things like that. So [masturbation’s] definitely helped me to be able to articulate what feels better. (Deb, 22, Caucasian, Lesbian, Jewish) (Frank, 2014)

Two studies were notable, as they included details on women’s experiences regarding *how* they shared (or could not share) acquired knowledge about how they experienced sexual pleasure from masturbation with a partner (Marcus, 2011; Towne, 2019). Sometimes communication was not easy due to the fear of upsetting a partner’s feelings. Some women expressed confusion and concerns about not being able to explain to a partner that they masturbated and not knowing how to raise the issue properly. Importantly, some women especially reported a lack of knowledge on how to communicate to their partner that they preferred clitoral stimulation techniques to vaginal stimulation (Marcus, 2011; Towne, 2019).

Here is my question. How do you work a vibrator into a conversation? He is sitting there and [I say,] ‘I was doing the laundry today. Hey, I got a vibrator.’ How do you work that into the conversation? How do you think you do? I have no idea. That is part of my problem. (Marcus, 2011)

I’ve always wanted to use words more to try to explain what works and what doesn’t, but I haven’t been able to figure out how to do that in a short way that’s explainable for someone to understand. So usually I do use my hands to demonstrate, and that doesn’t always work. I don’t know if they don’t realize that I’m trying to show them something, or they don’t realize that what they’re doing isn’t working. I certainly haven’t always been clear about what I want in terms of correcting if they try to do something and it doesn’t work the right way. (Towne, 2019)

One study explored aspects of clitoral stimulation with women who required clitoral stimulation to experience orgasm during partnered sex (Towne, 2019). Almost all of the women in this study (14 out of 15) stated that they learnt how to orgasm (and their preferred stimulation techniques) via clitoral stimulation during masturbation. One of the striking findings was that each woman described different stimulation preferences when masturbating; therefore, transferring bodily knowledge in a partnered context involves communication about these specific preferences.

Towne (2019) reported some of the details on women’s strategies; most initiated verbal communication with their partner about the need for clitoral stimulation in order to experience orgasm during partnered sex. Some women introduced the need for clitoral stimulation (with or without a sex toy) with a new partner just after sexual activity had begun. Some initiated clitoral stimulation themselves during partnered sex without explicit verbal communication, some demonstrated clitoral stimulation by masturbating in front of their partner, and some preferred both body language and verbal communication due to the complexity of the explanation.

One woman emphatically stated, “Of course I initiated it. How do men usually initiate clitoral stimulation? They don’t care. They don’t give a shit about the clitoris! So yeah, I initiated it.” (Towne, 2019)

One woman described her use of body language in combination with sound; she elicited partnered clitoral stimulation by “tilting my hip or arching my back” and moaning to give him encouraging feedback. (Towne, 2019)

***Partner’s reactions.*** Sometimes partners were reported as being a source of first information on masturbation and this appeared to have a positive influence on some women’s perceptions (Frank, 2014; Hong, 2014; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Perceived encouragement from partners inspired some women to explore self-stimulation during sex or on their own (Frank, 2014; Kaestle & Allen, 2011).

I was dating this Swedish guy … We were having sex and he’s like, “You don’t touch your clitoris.” And I was like, “Am I supposed to?” And he was like, “Yes.” And I was like, “What do you mean?” … And masturbation was okay in my household … It was not a big deal. But, I never really understood it. I was like, “I don’t really want to masturbate. I don’t understand. I don’t think it’s bad or gross or … immoral, but I don’t get how it’s going to get me in the mood.” And then he’s like, “Well, you should go home and work on it by yourself.” … And then after that, I was like, “How was I not doing this before? … This is ridiculous!” (Jordan, 21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish) (Frank, 2014)

Although some women felt positively after partner encouragement, others felt concerns and wished to explore masturbation on their own before their partner taught them (Frank, 2014).

I had only heard about one girl fingering herself in middle school. I finally tried masturbation because my second boyfriend ever told me to do so. Through my boyfriend I learned about my sexuality. It’s just driven me crazy that I’ve never noticed it. It makes me wonder what it would’ve been like if I did it on my own … What would I find pleasing now? (Celia, 18, Hispanic, heterosexual, no religion) (Frank, 2014)

While a partner as a source of first information on masturbation was reported in three articles, no study explored the reactions of partners when women disclosed their masturbation experiences. Understanding and supporting partners, and explicit approval from partners, seemed to create comfort for some women (Fahs & Swank, 2013; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009).

I put my hand between my legs, compressing, twisting and rolling my thighs ... I achieve   
orgasm within one minute all by myself. That’s why even after three years of living apart in different cities from him [her boyfriend, now her husband] we are still together ... Now he is always around me and our sex life is harmonious, but I still do it [masturbate]. I am just so used to doing it. He is very understanding. Most of time I do it after lovemaking. I tell him: ‘Hey! I am going to do a bad thing’. He knows what I mean. He lies down beside me and lets me do it by myself. If he is not tired he helps me by kissing me or touching my breasts. It is really nice. (Yuxin & Ying, 2009)

When I asked my boyfriend about female masturbation he said, ‘all girls do it, I think it is sexy.’ He even offered to buy me a vibrator! (Oma) (Kaestle & Allen, 2011)

On the other hand, relatively negative reactions from partners could elicit changes in women’s masturbation and sex toy use (Bowman, 2017; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Hong, 2004). These reactions included jealousy and feeling upset; one woman reported that her partner did not like her dildo.

I had a dildo before, Mr. Cool Guy, but I got too emotionally attached to him. I really liked him and enjoyed my plastic man but my boyfriend didn’t like it. Eventually I just threw him away so he and I couldn’t have our sexual rendezvous anymore. (Zhang, a 36-year-old Asian-American bisexual woman) (Fahs & Swank, 2013)

Some of the men I’ve chatted with about (my vibrator) become jealous that they can’t perform the same act as the vibrator does, so I try to shy away from speaking to them about it. When I can’t have an orgasm during sex with them, they become, you know, kind of self-conscious because I tell them that I can with a vibrator. Now I just don’t talk about it at all with them. (a 25-year-old white heterosexual woman) (Fahs & Swank, 2013)

***Summary***. Overall, when in a relationship, some women tried to abstain from masturbation, some continued to masturbate but hid their behaviors from their partner and/or masturbated less frequently (compared to when single), and some continued to masturbate, sometimes with partner participation. Changes in women’s self-pleasure behaviors when in a relationship might have resulted from the perceived negative attitudes of a partner. While some women appeared to be comfortable talking with a partner about their masturbation experiences and self-learned sexual preferences, for others, lack of knowledge on communication strategies in terms of discussing self-learned sexual preferences without hurting the partner’s feelings, and uncertainties over how to incorporate a sex toy such as a vibrator into partnered sex, were common concerns. Concerns about sharing masturbation experiences were sometimes due to perceived (or real) reactions from a partner. Although reactions from partners to women’s self-pleasure were not explored in the primary studies, some varying responses from partners were obtained in women’s narratives. Some women reported their partner as a source of first information on masturbation, some reported understanding and supportive partners and their explicit approval, while others reported negative feelings from partners, such as jealousy and upset.

**Discussion**

The current review investigated women’s perceptions of their partners’ ideas about women’s masturbation, the partner-related motives women reported for their masturbation, and women’s masturbation experiences when in a relationship.

***Partner-related perceptions***

The sexual script theory (SST; Gagnon & Simon, 1973), which proposes that sexual behaviors are scripted and culturally/socially determined, is the most discussed theoretical explanation of the societal discomfort around women’s masturbation (see Gauvin et al., 2019; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Towne, 2019). Sexual scripts also provide sexual cues about what sexual behaviors are appropriate and under what circumstances (Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Wiederman, 2005). Although most sources of sexual socialization (for example, society, culture, religion, media, peers, or family) provide messages within heterosexual partnered interactions (penile-vaginal intercourse, or PVI) (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000), sometimes women appear to accept these societal messages as if they are their (potential) partner’s ideas. The sexual scripts around notions that women’s pleasure is men’s responsibility, and pleasure needing to be experienced within a relationship, seem to persist for some women. This perception that women’s pleasure should be “given to them” by men is especially evident in young heterosexual women’s narratives and appears to shape some women’s behaviors and feelings towards masturbation and sex toy use, regardless of their relationship status (Bowman, 2017; Frank, 2014; Hong, 2004; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Marcus, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009). While some believe that if a woman masturbates when in a relationship it may reflect an inadequacy in their partner’s sexual performance, which then might threaten their male partner (Bowman, 2017; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Frank, 2014; Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Marcus, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009), other women have challenged these ideas and have accepted self-stimulation as a normal sexual behavior in all contexts, including when they are in a relationship (Bowman, 2017; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Hong, 2004; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Marcus, 2011; Towne, 2019).

Herbenick and colleagues’ (2011) U.S. survey on beliefs about women’s vibrator use reported that most men and women held low negative and high positive beliefs. The majority of men and women did not agree that “women’s vibrator use is intimidating to women’s partners”; however, more women than men agreed with this. The authors suggested that women have more concerns about vibrator use regarding partner response than men’s actual concerns. Women’s partners’ actual beliefs, perceptions, and experiences towards women’s masturbation and women’s use of sex toys (both solitary and mutual) need further investigation. Perhaps nowadays societal norms may be less influential at a dyadic level (Masters et al., 2013) and/or may influence women’s attitudes but may not always affect their behaviors. After women become involved in relationships, they might make individual adaptations related to their partners’ beliefs and reactions (Laumann & Gagnon, 1995, p.188, Wiederman, 2005) (as discussed below, some women still masturbate but less frequently and sometimes in secrecy when in a relationship).

***Partner-related motives***

Unfulfilling partnered sex and the unavailability of a partner were reported motives for masturbation among some women in relationships. However, whether women communicated with their partner about their masturbation experiences and how their partner did or would react were not explored in detail in any of the studies. The findings demonstrate that the motives to masturbate for some single women are to develop healthy, physically, and emotionally trusting relationships in the future. Masturbation could bring situational sexual relief so that women could then focus on developing emotional connections and for some, avoid unwanted casual sex.

Another reason for masturbation commonly referred to by women was gaining sexual awareness and enhancing partnered sex. Women were inspired to explore their anatomy, sexual likes and dislikes, and then to share this bodily knowledge with a potential or current partner in order to have a better sex life. Some women considered masturbation as a helpful tool that prepared them to communicate successfully with their partner about how to please them, as it enhanced comfort and confidence with their own sexuality and brought to light sexual preferences. Although the perception of masturbation as a helpful tool which did or could ease communication on this sensitive topic was commonly reported by women, the original studies lacked information about how these women successfully communicated with their partners (if they did).

Kraus (2017) argued that women’s masturbation is “the manifestation of a failing sex life both in quantitative and qualitative terms” (p. e40); however, the results of the current review demonstrated that most women in relationships considered masturbation as a tool that enhanced partnered sex and sexual health rather than only compensating for unsatisfactory or unavailable partnered sex. In line with this review’s findings, Haus and Thompson (2019) experimentally examined the reported motives of 264 US adults (115 women, 149 men) regarding why hypothetical men or women in committed relationships masturbated in a range of hypothetical vignettes/scenarios. They found that participants rated motives on a masturbation motives scale (MMS) for women to masturbate as being both pleasure-focused (stress release, fun, self-care) and intimacy-focused (enhanced relationship, foreplay, improve sexual communication, maintain sexual health) to a greater extent than hypothetical men. Reported motives for men to masturbate were based on their own desires and pleasures. It is important to note that the authors used a non-standardized measurement of assumed motives (MMS), which was created for the purposes of the study. Future research might benefit from use of a comprehensive and validated assessment of actual motives for masturbation (Haus & Thompson, 2019). In a national probability sample of American adults (8,090 women and 7,648 men, aged 18 to 60), Regnerus and colleagues (2017) examined the compensatory and complementary model hypotheses of masturbation by examining associations with masturbation and the frequency of partnered sex. While in the compensatory model masturbation is seen as a substitute for sexual desires when partnered sex is not possible (due to infrequent partnered sex, lack of a partner, or unfulfilling partnered sex), the complementary model holds that masturbation enhances partnered sex, and may even be practiced mutually (Regnerus et al., 2017). In line with previous quantitative studies (Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Gerressu et al., 2008), Regnerus et al. reported that an increase in masturbation was associated with increasing partnered sex frequency among women. The authors suggested a complementary relationship for women and a compensatory relationship for men. While men report that they are more likely to masturbate if they are not having partnered sex, or are unhappy or dissatisfied with their partners, for most women, masturbation does not seem to be “a partner substitute” (Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Das, 2007; Laumann et al., 1994; Burri & Carvalheira, 2019; Gerressu et al., 2008; Regnerus et al., 2017). Instead it is more likely associated with openness, body comfort and acceptance, high levels of sexual interest and desire, and comfort with their own sexual desires (Bowman, 2014; Burri & Carvalheira, 2019; Wentland et al., 2009)*.*

***Experiences when in a relationship and reactions from partners***

Four of the eleven studies focused only on male/female relationships (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Marcus, 2011; Towne, 2019; Yuxin & Ying, 2009), and in most other studies, the majority of participants identified as heterosexual. The relationship status of participants was diverse in nine articles but only two studies included women who were involved in a mixed-sex relationship (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Marcus, 2011).

Overall, the evidence suggests that women modify their masturbation behavior when in a relationship. Some women stop masturbating (temporarily or permanently) or masturbate less frequently, some continue in secrecy (sometimes to hide their behavior from partners but sometimes because they see it as a private experience, potentially related to feelings of autonomy; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016), and some experience self-pleasure with their partner’s participation or encouragement.

Although there was not enough information to generate a clear picture of men’s actual reactions to their partner’s masturbation, partners were sometimes reported as a source of first information about masturbation, and appeared to encourage some women to try masturbation (Frank, 2014; Hong, 2004; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Men sometimes did this in pursuit of women’s pleasure, but sometimes it also appeared to be in the interests of their own desire or arousal (Fahs & Swank, 2013). Importantly, some women reported concerns about obtaining such knowledge first from a partner, and wondered what their sexual awareness in terms of sexual sensations, sexual preferences, and pleasure would be if they had experienced masturbation before partnered sex (Frank, 2014). A lack of knowledge among male partners with regards to women’s sexual pleasure appeared to leave some women who have sex with men confused.

Only two studies explored whether and how women communicated with their partners about their masturbation or sex toy experiences (Marcus, 2011; Towne, 2019). Marcus (2011) recruited heterosexual women who had never used a vibrator before, and then asked them to use one for a month, with the aim of learning about behavioral and attitudinal changes. The participants were asked how they decided to use the vibrator with their partner. Some women reported concerns and confusion about how to raise the issue, even if they wanted to. Most of the women in the study reported feeling too uncomfortable to share the experience properly, without hurting their partner’s feelings. Although most of the women reported perceived comfort with their partner, it was noteworthy that they did not share their vibrator experiences with their partner. One possible explanation for why these women did not feel able to share their vibrator experiences with their partner might be that they were using a vibrator for the first time for the study. Whether these women continued to include a vibrator in their sexual repertoire (solitary or alone), or just used the vibrator for the four weeks of the study, was not assessed.

On the other hand, Towne (2019) recruited women who required clitoral stimulation during partnered sex to experience orgasm and explored how these women acquired clitoral stimulation when having sex with a partner. Each participant in this study reported different masturbation techniques and some women appeared to be confused due to the complicated aspects of communication (stimulation preferences, rhythm, pressure, use of vibrator, etc.; Towne, 2019). This might be attributed to lack of knowledge and discussion on how to explain to a partner the sexual preferences that they had discovered themselves. Girls and young women rarely receive direct and accurate knowledge about sexual pleasure, particularly about solitary masturbation, from school, parents, partners, peers, or media (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Ingham, 2005; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2003). Rather than being taught about the functions of their genitalia or the location of the clitoris and its only known function (pleasure) (Fields, 2008; Waskul et al., 2007), girls are mostly taught about their sexual anatomy within the realm of reproduction (Fields, 2008).

While confusion over how to raise the issue of masturbation was common in these two studies, Towne (2019) also reported some of the strategies used by women when discussing their sexual preferences, including using verbal communication, body language, or both; however, the details of women’s strategies, and the aspects of communication (how, where, when), were beyond the scope of the study.

In a survey study of 913 French women aged 18 to 69, Kraus (2017) found that the majority of women currently in a relationship (55%) told their partner that they had experienced masturbation during their lifetime, 22% reported that their partner did not know that they had masturbated, and 23% stated that they had not had the opportunity to tell their partner. Similarly, in Herbenick et al.’s (2010) large-scale U.S. survey study, the majority of heterosexual (85.9%) and bisexual (89.7%) women, and all of the lesbian women indicated that their partner had knowledge about their vibrator use. Fourteen percent of women reported that their partner did not know that they used a vibrator. In line with findings in the current review, most reported that the reasons for not sharing their masturbation experiences with partners included feeling uncomfortable, concerns about their partner’s feelings, concerns about their partner’s response (indicating masturbation or sex toy use would question his manhood), and perceived partner reaction (jealousy, threatened). Some women reported that they did not consider telling their partner, as they did not see it as important to do so and some just preferred to masturbate privately (Herbenick et al., 2010).

The most reported barriers to communicating about vibrator use and masturbation were the women’s concerns about their partner’s response (Marcus, 2011; Towne, 2019), discomfort with communicating with a partner about sexual preferences (Gauvin et al., 2019; Herbenick et al., 2010; Marcus, 2011), lack of knowledge on communication strategies about women’s self-learned sexual preferences (Towne, 2019), and the idea that men might be threatened by women’s self-stimulation (Fahs & Swank, 2013; Herbenick et al., 2010; Marcus, 2011). However, overcoming the barriers to communicating on this topic might improve partnered sex. For example, very recently, in a multinational survey study (N = 2215 women, mean age = 28.8) conducted in the U.S. and Hungary, Rowland, Hevesi, et al. (2020) reported that the greater the alignment between women’s masturbation and partnered sex (the ratio of the techniques used in masturbation to partnered sex), the lower the difficulty with arousal and orgasm, the greater the likelihood of experiencing orgasm, and the greater orgasm latency during partnered sex.

The findings of the present review suggest questions for further exploration, such as:

* how do women explain to their partner about their masturbation experiences, and how do they transfer what they have learnt through masturbation to partnered sex?;
* what strategies do women use when discussing masturbation or sex toy experience?;
* are there differences in applying masturbation techniques to partnered sex in an early relationship compared to women’s experiences in established or committed relationships?;
* how might discussion of masturbation with a partner affect women’s sexual behavior and sexual satisfaction, and how do women’s partners react?;
* how might any of these experiences and reasons differ by sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, or education level?

***Cultural differences***

Shame, guilt, fear, and uncertainty, along with curiosity, pleasure, and will (Bowman, 2017) were common in women’s stories in all included studies. Only two studies, however, were conducted in Asian countries, one in Hanoi, Vietnam (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018) and one in Shanghai, China (Yuxin & Ying, 2009). Consistent with the limited research findings from non-US countries, this review highlights that sexuality, women’s pleasure, and non-coital sexual activities such as masturbation tend to be more silenced and/or stigmatised in some non-US cultures (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Rashidian et al., 2013; Rashidian et al., 2020).

While Yuxin and Ying’s (2009) study contributed to each theme in the secondary synthesis, the study by Huong and Liamputtong (2018) was under-represented regarding specific supporting statements from the participants on women’s experiences of masturbation when in a relationship (the final major theme). Instead, the perception of “women’s pleasure is men’s role and should be experienced within a relationship” was significantly more common in this study. Although the aim of Houng and Liamputtong’s study was to explore women’s perceptions and experiences of masturbation, the analysis resulted in two themes: “‘real’ sex as penile-vaginal intercourse” (p.507), and “what is wrong with masturbation?” (p.509). The authors reported that about 30% of the women in their study (N=20) mentioned masturbation in their narratives; three women had positive attitudes (seeing masturbation as normal, natural), but others reported feeling ashamed or guilty. Considering the experiences of these women when in a relationship, the authors reported that the women either reduced their masturbation frequency or discontinued masturbating after marriage (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018).

It is important to note that cultural differences seem to result in widely diverse perspectives on the themes identified through the secondary analysis; thus, this might limit the value of the narratives (see the online supplementary file) in terms of the understanding of women’s sexual pleasure in non-Western cultures.

***Quality assessment***

Small sample sizes (Fahs & Swank, 2013; Hong, 2004; Towne, 2019) and an overrepresentation of highly educated, relatively young and White women could limit the findings’ generalizability.

The aim of the quality assessment was to evaluate the theoretical consistency, methodological rigor, and the relevance of research analysis and interpretations of the data (NICE, 2012)*.* Analysis of data relies on indicators of methodological appropriateness (Eakin & Mykhalovskiy, 2003) and the NICE checklist is procedure-centered. However, study with a clear description of the methodology with poor interpretation of data might be scored as “adequate”, but may offer little insight into the secondary analysis; vice versa, sometimes “in-depth” and/or rich analysis with an unclear description of method might be scored as “inadequate” or “unclear”, but may provide important insights (Carroll et al., 2012; Dixon-Woods et al., 2004). For these reasons, inadequately reported studies were not excluded from the synthesis.

Although the type of data collection and analysis were generally appropriate to answering the research question posed, overall, the lack of reporting on data collection, context, and reliability of method should be taken into account when evaluating the studies discussed, and any overall positive evaluation of the included studies should be interpreted with caution. Despite the methodological limitations of some of the included studies, each article contributed a value and perspective to the secondary analysis. Because of the mixed methodological quality, some studies contributed more (e.g. Bowman, 2017; Frank, 2014; note that both are doctoral dissertations) than others.

Three studies failed to fulfill the majority of the NICE checklist items (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018; Marcus, 2011; Yuxin & Ying, 2009), and these were scored as inadequate. In the secondary synthesis, however, only one of these three articles was under-represented in terms of supporting statements from participants (Huong & Liamputtong, 2018). However, in the analysis, both the participants’ statements and author(s)’ interpretations were considered and interpreted; thus, despite the lack of statements, the paper contributed a value to the synthesis. The lack of statements (quotes) from the participants might indicate cultural differences and barriers towards discussions on women’s sexuality and pleasure in Asian/non-Western countries (Rashidian et al., 2020).

Regarding women’s understandings and perspectives of women’s masturbation, qualitative methods provided valuable insights. Due to the rich nature of the qualitative data the secondary data analysis enabled us to move beyond what the research revealed about relationship-related factors (such as a partners’ beliefs, feelings, and reactions towards women’s masturbation), and helped to answer the particular secondary synthesis research question of how partner-related factors might affect women’s perceptions, motives and behaviors regarding masturbation.

***Strengths and limitations of the review***

This review is the first to synthesize an overview of the qualitative research on women's experiences and perceptions of masturbation within a relationship context. Including dissertations should have helped to reduce publication bias (i.e., negative, neutral, or limited results are less likely to be published) (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014; Butler et al., 2016).The use of a standardized quality assessment tool and the involvement of a second coder to assess the quality of three of the studies independently, were additional strengths of the review (NICE, 2012).

Regarding limitations, only English language studies were included, and nine out of the 11 studies were conducted in the U.S., which could limit the generalizability of the synthesis. Although the secondary thematic analysis was useful for identifying the commonalities and unique aspects of the themes identified across the included studies with different participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the analysis was limited to quotes and themes determined by the authors of the original articles (Dyer & das Nair, 2012). Another challenge during the analysis was lack of clarity of the reported context (e.g., characteristics of participants and settings, the topic guide) in the original studies.

**Conclusions**

Although some women have challenged the traditional script of women’s pleasure which assumes that orgasms are men’s responsibility, an internalized stigma towards women’s masturbation within relationships appears to persist for some, due to a lack of discourse, knowledge, discussion, and communication. One question that needs to be asked, however, is how much of the internalized stigma toward women’s masturbation within a relationship is due to actual experiences with a partner and how much to women’s own concerns and perceptions? Future research involving couples is needed to estimate the between-partner concordances and discordances in experiences, beliefs, and attitudes towards women’s masturbation, and the extent to which the sexual scripts of women’s masturbation persist at a dyadic level.

This review highlights the need for evidence-based platforms, as well as counselling and sexual health materials, on the strategies that women can use to communicate sexual preferences with a partner. To inform this, further qualitative and quantitative research exploring how women communicate their self-learned sexual preferences with a partner is needed. Additionally, further research should focus on what strategies are perceived as helpful and how sexual communication with a partner regarding women’s preference for genital stimulation might affect sexual satisfaction, sexual well-being, and relationship quality.

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Table 1

*The key terms which were searched under the default field, which searches abstracts, authors, subject headings, titles and keywords.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Category 1 |  | Category 2 |  | Category 3 |
| solo-sex OR self pleasur\* OR  masturba\* OR sex toy\* OR vibrator\* OR self stimulation OR self-stimulation OR solo masturba\* OR self-touching | AND | wom? n or female\* | AND | qualitative OR ethnograph\* OR phenomenol\* OR ethnonurs\* OR grounded theor\* OR purposive sample OR hermeneutic\* OR heuristic\* OR semiotics OR life experiences OR cluster sample OR action research OR observational method OR content analysis OR thematic analysis OR constant comparative method OR field stud\* OR theoretical sample OR discourse analysis OR focus group\* OR ethnological research OR ethnomethodolog\* OR interview\* |

Table 2

*Characteristics of the qualitative research on women's experiences and perceptions of masturbation*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Author(s) and year | Aim | Participants | Location | Data collection method | Data analysis method | Key findings |
| Bowman, 2017 | Investigate women’s solo masturbation experiences and how do social power and embodied knowledge interact to inform women’s experiences | 30 women  Aged 25-35  Mean age=30  Self-reported sexual orientation: 20=heterosexual, 5=queer, 3=lesbian, 2=bisexual, 1=pansexual, 2=other  55% White, ethnically diverse  Relationship status:  20= in relationship, 10=single | The New York City metro area | Face-to-face semi-structured interviews | A combination of narrative and thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Riesman, 1993) | - “I’m Like Really Lost Here”:  - ‘Confusion Arising from a Tension between Embodied Pleasure and Discursive Shame’,  - ‘Confusion Arising from Masturbation Experiences Not Being What Women Expected’: (a) ‘Is this what masturbation is supposed to feel like?’ (b) ‘Am I doing this right?’ (c) ‘Is something wrong with me?’  - ‘Masturbation is an Aspect of Sexuality, So There Must be Something Negative About It’: (a) ‘Masturbation is immoral’ (b) ‘Women who masturbate are on the verge of being out of control or excessive’ (c) ‘Masturbation must have major consequences’ (d). ‘Masturbation could affect current or future sexual partners’  - “It Was Just Something that Felt Good”  - ‘Self-Discovery of Masturbation as a Free-Floating Embodied Sensation’  - ‘Shifting from a Free-Floating and Embodied to a Sexual Understanding of Masturbation’  - “It Opened Some Kind of Door for Me”  - ‘Explicitly Rejecting Shaming Messages  Learning New Information’: (a) ‘Independent learning’ (b) ‘Social learning’  - ‘Listening to One’s Body’: (a) ‘Embodied learning and discovery’ (b) ‘Embodied agency and empowerment’ |
| Fahs & Frank, 2014 | Explore women’s techniques, feelings, ideas and experiences regarding masturbation  Explore pros and cos of the invisibility of women’s masturbation | 20 women  Mean age=34, SD=13.35  Self-reported sexual orientation: 12=heterosexual, 6=bisexual, 2=lesbian  55% White, ethnically diverse | Southwestern United States | Semi-structured interviews | Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) | Five themes;  - “Assumptions that most women self-penetrate during masturbation even when primarily using clitoral stimulation”  - “Masturbation as sexual labor”  - “Masturbation as a threat to male dominance”  - “Masturbation as routine tension release”  - “Masturbation as a source of joy, fun, and pleasure” |
| Fahs & Swank, 2013 | Explore women’s subjective feelings and narratives about using sex toys across sexual identity boundaries and the meaning of sex toys in their sexual repertoire (both single and partnered) | 20 women  Aged 18-59  Self-reported sexual orientation: 12=heterosexual, 6=bisexual, 2=lesbian  55% White, ethnically diverse | Southwestern United States | Semi-structured interviews | Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) | Six themes emerged;  - “Emphasis on non-penetrative use of sex toys”  - “Embarrassment about disclosing use to partner”  - “Personifying vibrators (and dildos) as male”  - “Coercion and lack of power when using sex toys”  - “Embracing sex toys as campy, fun, and subversive”  - “Resistance to sex toys as impersonal or artiﬁcial” |
| Frank, 2014 | Understand how gender and sexuality discourses affect women’s masturbation experiences, and to explore women’s masturbation discourses | 109 women (college students)  Aged 18-32  Self-reported sexual orientation: 82= heterosexual, 12= bisexual, 6= lesbian, 9=other  57.8% White, ethnically diverse | Arizona and Michigan | Triangulation data collection; One-on-one semi-structured interviews, one-on-one focus groups, journals, and questionnaires | Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) | - “Learning the Dominant Cultural Discourses and Silences Around Female (Self-) Pleasure”  School, Parents, Religious Communities, Peers, Mainstream Media:   1. Discursive silence, (b) Explicitly prohibitive masturbation discourses, (c) Heteronormative discourses   - “The Consequences of Internalizing Hegemonic Sexuality Discourses for Young Women's Experiences of Sexual Self-(Dis)Pleasure”  ‘Masturbation as sin’  ‘Female masturbation as (secular) stigma’  ‘Female masturbation and heteronormativity’  ‘Female masturbation and the “pleasure imperative’  - “Challenging and Overcoming Internalized Masturbation Ideologies”  “Gaining intellectual masturbation knowledge”  “Taking active steps to discuss and engage in masturbation”  - “The Benefits of Normalizing Female Masturbation”  Developing an embodied understanding of female sexuality  Claiming the right to solitary sexual pleasure  Masturbation as a tool for improving partnered agency  - “Awareness of and challenging pleasure double standards” |
| Goldey et al., 2016 | Explore how heterosexual and queer women define sexual pleasure during partnered and solitary experiences | 72 women, 1 bigender participant  Aged 18-64  Self-reported sexual orientation: 40=heterosexual, 12=bisexual,13=lesbian, 7=queer, 1=gay  63.89% White, ethnically diverse  Relationship status: 21=single,  11=dating,  40=in relationship | University of Michigan | 13 Focus groups | Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) | -Solitary Pleasure  ‘‘All About Me’’: Autonomy,  ‘If You’re Horny and You Don’t Have Anybody’’: Compensation, Maintenance, Regulation  -Partnered Pleasure  ‘‘My Ultimate Goal Is to Get Them Off’’: Partner’s Pleasure,  ‘‘The Shared Vulnerability’’: Trust, Feeling desired, Closeness  - Overlap Between Solitary and Partnered Pleasure,  Exploration,  Feeling of getting outside oneself,  - Social Location and Experiences of Pleasure,  Sexual identity and entitlement to pleasure,  Age and shifts over time |
| Hong, 2004 | Investigate the influence of a discourse of pleasure on sexual resilience and sexual health, and to identify external and internal protective factors towards sexual resilience | 25 women  Aged 18-22 (inclusion of women who had had first or early negative partner sex experiences)  Self-reported sexual orientation: sexual orientation: 22=heterosexual, 1=bisexual, 2=ambiguous  52% White  Other inclusion criteria: full-time student, single/never married | The United States | Face-to-face semi-structured interviews | Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) | - “Relevant Sexual Behaviors and Sexual Messages”  ‘What constitutes a negative sexual experience?’:  (a) "Objectively" Negative Events, (b) "Contextually" Negative Events  ‘Key Messages Regarding Female Sexuality’  (1) ‘Young girls need to be protected from becoming women’, (2) ‘Women are either "prudes" or "sluts."’, (3) ‘Women should please others, not themselves’, (4) ‘Women are expected to behave like women’, (5) ‘Becoming a woman is a scary business’  - “Sexual Resilience”  ‘What does sexual resilience look like among young college women?’:  - ‘The numbing of the mind: creating distance’  - ‘Rationalizations and negative expectations’  - ‘Assigning blame’  - ‘Asserting oneself’  - ‘Being selective about partners’  - ‘Challenging the female stereotype’  - “The Discourse of Pleasure”  ‘Where, if at all, do women learn about sexual pleasure?’  (a)The role of parents, (b)The role of the media  ‘What do women learn about sexual pleasure?’  ‘Masturbation is a male domain’  ‘Female sexual pleasure comes with relationship sex’  ‘Women who do seek sexual self-pleasure have a lot to hide’  ‘Types of Masturbators’  ‘Motivations for and attitudes towards masturbation’  ‘Likelihood of identifying orgasm experience’  ‘Making false distinctions between types of orgasm’  ‘Intention to achieve pleasurable partner sex’ |
| Huong & Liamputtong, 2018 | To investigate women’s perceptions and experiences of masturbation | 20 Vietnamese heterosexual women (married with children)  aged 25-40  (other inclusion criteria: have a college or higher degree, be in salaried employment) | Hanoi, Vietnam | Face-to-face semi-structured interviews (60 to 90 minutes) | Thematic analysis (Liamputtong, 2013) | ‘Real’ sex as penile-vaginal intercourse  What is ‘wrong’ with masturbation? |
| Kaestle & Allen, 2011 | Explore how young adults have learned and currently perceive masturbation | 72 college students (56 women, 16 men)  Aged 18-24  72% White, ethnically diverse | Southeastern United States | Written narratives | Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) | - “Social contexts for learning about masturbation”;  Silent families, Peers (teaching and being taught), School settings, Partners, Media, Erotic aids  - “It Felt So Good but I Felt So Horrible: Learning the Contradiction”,  ‘Shaming strategies’, ‘Trying not to do it’, ‘Masturbation is a gendered subject’  - “Current discourses about masturbation”  ‘Masturbation is wrong or stigmatized (I Will Never Accept It or I Am Still Conﬂicted)’,  ‘Normalization: masturbation is natural or comfortable’, ‘Masturbation is critical to sexual health’ |
| Marcus, 2011 | Examine behavioral and attitudinal changes and expectations after experiencing a vibrator | 17 heterosexual women  aged 23-55  58.82% (10) White, 41.18% (7) African American  Mean lengths of participants’ relationship=11 years | New York | Face-to-face interviews (1-2 hours) | Grounded theory (*reference is not reported*) | Six areas addressed;  - “The change in orgasmic patterns”  - “The idea of introducing an outside object into sexual experience”  - “A concern about dependency on a vibrator”  - “Questions about entitlement to an object”  - “Vibrator affect relationship with a partner”  - “Changing attitudes towards sexual activities and masturbation” |
| Towne, 2019 | Explore how women acquired orgasmic clitoral stimulation during partnered sex | 15 women  Aged 23-67  53.33% White, ethnically diverse  (women who have had at least one experience of penile-vaginal intercourse with clitoral stimulation resulting her orgasm were primary participants)  4 men (partners of women participants)  Aged 24-54 | The United States | Semi-structured interviews (face-to-face or via video call) | Phenomenological methods (Moustakas, 1994) | Three major themes;  - “Masturbating to orgasm”  - “Applying masturbation techniques to partnered sex”  - “Clitoral stimulation concurrent with PVI leading to female orgasm” |
| Yuxin & Ying, 2009 | Explore how women narrate, experience and perceive masturbation | 40 young heterosexual Chinese  women  Aged 22-39 | Shanghai  China | In-depth interviews | *Not reported* | - “Women with masturbation stories”  ‘Masturbation as a way to fulﬁll the physical needs of a virgin’  ‘Masturbation as a way of loving oneself’  ‘Masturbation as a way to remain faithful or to develop intimacy’  - “Women with comments on masturbation”  ‘Masturbation is not a necessary pleasure for a single girl’  ‘Masturbation as substitute for intercourse’  ‘Masturbation as a pleasure that can be good or bad’  - “No comments group” |

Table 3

*Quality scores of articles (N=11) for each item on NICE quality assessment*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| NICE Checklist Items | Bowman, 2017 | Fahs & Frank, 2014 | Fahs & Swank, 2013 | Frank, 2014 | Goldey et al., 2016 | Hong, 2004 | Huong & Liamputtong 2018 | Kaestle & Allen, 2011 | Marcus, 2011 | Towne, 2017 | Yuxin & Ying, 2009 |
| Is a qualitative approach appropriate? | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ |
| Is the study clear in what it seeks to do? | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | - | ++ | + |
| How defensible/rigorous is the research design/ methodology? | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | + | + | - | ++ | + |
| How well was the data collection carried out? | ++ | + | + | ++ | ++ | ++ | - | + | + | + | - |
| Is the role of the researcher clearly described? | ++ | - | - | + | + | - | - | - | - | ++ | - |
| Is the context clearly described? | ++ | + | ++ | + | ++ | ++ | + | + | - | + | + |
| Were the methods reliable? | - | - | - | ++ | ++ | - | - | - | - | ++ | - |
| Is the data analysis sufficiently rigorous? | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | - | ++ | - | ++ | - |
| Is the data 'rich'? | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | + | ++ | + | ++ | + | ++ | + |
| Is the analysis reliable? | + | + | + | + | ++ | + | - | ++ | - | + | - |
| Are the findings convincing? | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | + | ++ | + | ++ | ++ |
| Are the findings relevant to the aims of the study? | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | + | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ |
| Conclusions | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | + | ++ | ++ | ++ | + |
| Ethics | ++ | + | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | + | + | + | + | + |
| Overall assessment | ++ | + | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | - | + | - | ++ | - |

*Note.* NICE = National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

Table 4

*Sources of themes*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Themes |  |  | Bowman, 2017 | Fahs & Frank, 2014 | Fahs & Swank, 2013 | Frank, 2014 | Goldey et al., 2016 | Hong, 2004 | Huong & Liamputtong 2018 | Kaestle & Allen, 2011 | Marcus, 2011 | Towne, 2017 | Yuxin & Ying, 2009 |
| Women’s masturbation or use of sex toys might (n) affect current or potential relationships |  |  | + | + |  | + |  | + | + | + | + |  | + |
| Balancing sexual needs with self and partners |  |  |  | + | + | + | + | + | + | + |  | + | + |
|  | ***Substitute for partnered sex*** |  |  | + |  | + | + | + | + | + |  |  | + |
|  |  | *If a woman did not*  *reach orgasm with a partner* |  | + |  | + | + | + | + |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | *If a partner was not around* |  |  |  | + | + | + | + |  |  |  | + |
|  |  | *If a woman is not in a relationship* |  |  |  | + | + | + |  | + |  |  | + |
|  | ***A tool to enhance partnered sex and partnered intimacy*** |  |  |  | + | + | + | + |  | + |  | + | + |
|  |  | *Exploration and**intention to achieve pleasurable partnered sex* |  |  | + | + |  |  |  | + |  |  | + |
|  |  | *A step to communicating successfully with their partner* |  |  |  | + | + | + |  | + |  | + | + |
| Changes in women’s masturbation behaviors and experiences with a partner |  |  | + |  | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + |  |
|  | ***Women modified their masturbation behavior when in a relationship*** |  | + |  |  | + | + | + | + |  | + |  |  |
|  | ***How to discuss/communicate with a partner?*** |  |  |  |  | + |  | + |  |  | + | + |  |
|  | ***Partner’s reactions*** |  | + |  | + | + |  | + |  | + |  |  |  |