

Title: Sexual relationships in Hispanic countries: A literature review

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Abstract

Purpose of review: Sexuality is a complex dimension for which culture seems to play an important role, particularly in countries that are more traditional. This review summarizes the knowledge about sexual relationships in Hispanic countries, considering sexual debut, attitudes, behaviors and satisfaction.

Recent findings: In line with the literature reviewed, the sexual double standard seems to be continuing to influence sexual relationships. Some countries show more open expressions of sexuality based on the level of gender inequality or sexualized context, and within countries, variables such as religious commitment, family characteristics and access to resources may play important roles in sexuality.

Summary: Future research, policies and interventions should consider these specific characteristics, including these forms of expression of sexuality, in the adjustment of cross-cultural and cross-national strategies.

Keywords: sexual attitudes; sexual behavior; sexual debut; sexual satisfaction; Hispanic countries; gender differences.

Introduction

Sexuality is a complex dimension that contributes to our quality of life¹. The expression of sexuality includes thoughts, attitudes, motivations, and behaviors, for which the cultural context plays an essential role². In this sense, sociocultural values and traditions guide sexual manifestations within a community. Clearly, this influence interacts with the characteristics of each person who, at the individual level, draws on sociocultural influences in expressing his or her own sexuality. The result is the existence of specific nuances of sexuality and likely many common aspects within communities.

Some studies have revealed cross-cultural differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors. In a comparison among the US, Turkey and Ukraine, which represent both individualist and collectivist cultures, North American people reported more satisfaction with their relationships and lower judgments of sexual experiences than people from Ukraine, who reported higher scores than Turkish people³. Another cross-national study comparing countries reported lower gender differences in sexuality in countries characterized by egalitarian social standards⁴. In addition, some dissimilarities are also found in more similar contexts. In a study of four European countries, certain differences were observed between Portuguese people, who identified an important role of sex for well-being, and people from Belgium and Denmark, who did not report this role of sex⁵.

Most of these studies emphasize the relevance of sexual attitudes, motivations, and behaviors on sexual satisfaction^{3,6}, as well as the role of gender differences and traditional values, which may lead to the underestimation of women's sexuality⁷.

This situation seems to be more noticeable in traditional cultures, such as Hispanic culture, which is characterized by conservative conceptions that regularly hinder sexual expression that deviates from family planning⁸. Conventionally, *machismo* and *marianismo* have facilitated a double standard in sexual development in which the role of women is based on being passive and committed, while the role of men is associated with being sexually active and experiencing physical pleasure⁹⁻¹⁰. However, some differences in sexual expression among Hispanic countries has been reported¹¹. Additionally, beyond these common bounds, some studies have also reported differences within countries based on specific aspects, such as religious beliefs, social development, ethnicity or access to education, that may influence sexuality regardless of personal traits¹²⁻¹⁴. Considering this complex situation, it is necessary

to characterize what is known about the sexuality of Hispanic people for the development of effective policies and strategies aimed at this population. For this reason, this study describes specific evidence about sexuality (sexual debut, attitudes, behaviors, and sexual satisfaction) in different Hispanic countries.

Methods

This scoping review was based on five stages, as proposed by Arskey and O'Malley (2005)¹⁵: (1) define the research question, (2) identify relevant studies, (3) select appropriate studies, (4) organize the data and (5) summarize the results. Considering the diversity of studies and methodologies, we carried out a qualitative analysis of the content and main findings.

The research question was as follows: What are the main characteristics of sexual relationships in Hispanic countries? To identify relevant and contemporary studies, we conducted a review in four databases (Psycinfo, PubMed, Scielo and Redalyc) searching the following keywords: “sexual debut”, “sexual attitudes”, “sexual relationship”, “sexual behavior”, “sexual activity”, “sexual satisfaction”, AND each country (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, Peru, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela). The inclusion criteria were papers written in English or Spanish language with a publication date from 2014 to 2019 that were based on Hispanic countries and included a detailed description of qualitative or quantitative methodologies. The exclusion criteria were as follows: studies based on Hispanic migrant people or acculturation processes and studies focused on physical, psychological or social risks or hazards (STD exposure, unwanted pregnancy, sexual violence, sexual dysfunctions, sexual orientation discrimination, and sexuality in physical or mental diseases) or reproductive health. We also excluded papers without full access. Of the 1,678 studies identified in the databases, 40 were included in the analyses based on the inclusion criteria and after the removal of duplicates (see figure 1). To facilitate the comprehension of the results, information was organized according to the variables: sexual debut, sexual attitudes and motivations, sexual behavior and sexual satisfaction.

Figure 1 around here

Results

Sexual debut

Regarding sexual debut, there are some differences among Hispanic countries. Studies from Mexico report an average age of sexual debut from 11.4 (SD=1.8)¹⁶ to 17.3 (SD=1.9)¹⁷ years, with an earlier debut for men and younger people. In Spain, for non-penetrative practices, young people report their sexual debut at approximately 13 years old, and for penetrative practices, the debut is reported to be two years later¹⁸. In Peru, sexual debut is reported at 14 years old and as earlier than 15 years old for 17.6% of adolescents¹⁹⁻²⁰. Colombian young people report sexual debut slightly later, at 15.3 years old (SD=1.6)²¹, and in Nicaragua, 33% of adolescent men and 21% of adolescent women report being sexually active at that age²². In Brazil, 26.5% of people initiate sexual experience at age 13 or younger²³, but the median age at first intercourse is 15 years old²⁴. Finally, young Chilean people report their first sexual experience at 16.38 (SD=2.36) years old²⁵, and in Argentina, 40-50% of women report being sexually active at this age²⁶.

Despite the differences, some variables seem to facilitate earlier sexual debut in most of these countries. First, men usually report earlier sexual debut than women in countries such as Mexico²⁷⁻²⁸, Brazil²⁹ and Spain¹⁸. Moreover, lower socioeconomic status and less communication with parents are also associated with earlier sexual debut in countries such as Mexico^{27,28,30}, Spain³¹ and Peru^{20,32}, where being less religious is also an important factor, as well as in Argentina²⁶, Spain³³ and Mexico³⁴. According to the last study, Catholic boys internalize more sexual double standards regarding premarital sex and virginity than nonreligious boys.

Most studies report progressive sexual development, for example, in Mexico¹⁶, Spain¹⁸ or Peru²⁰, where genital kissing and touching are reported to be more frequent than anal/vaginal intercourse among adolescents. Additionally, some studies report an increasingly early sexual debut over generations in Chile²⁵.

Insert table 1

Attitudes towards sexuality

Attitudes seem to be related to sexual experiences. Spanish young people report more permissive sexual values than Peruvian and Costa Rican young people³⁵. In Ecuador,

attitudes seem to be more conservative, as 74% of young people agree that sexual onset should occur upon marriage and the affective dimension of sexuality is dominant over sexual desire or pleasure³⁶. In contrast, in Puerto Rico, approximately 61.8% of young and adult people agree that they would participate in casual sexual encounters³⁷.

In this context, most of the studies, except for those in Puerto Rico³⁷ and Ecuador³⁶, report gender differences. In Spain, young men are more likely to have erotophilic attitudes than women, have more open views towards different sexual behaviors in isolated or social contexts³⁸⁻³⁹ and have more accepting and pleasant thoughts about sexuality⁴⁰. In particular, these trends are observed among men who self-identify as masculine, while those who self-identify as feminine are more likely to be erotophobic⁴¹. Moreover, Spanish adolescents report gender differences regarding sexual motivations⁴². Men are more likely to enjoy sexual interaction, while women are more likely to have affective intentions. A similar result is found for Colombian adolescents⁴² and young Mexican people⁴³⁻⁴⁴. Mexican men associate casual sexuality with pleasure, whereas women are more likely to connect it to irresponsibility. In addition, in some regions of Mexico such as Veracruz, 33% women are opposed to masturbation and report anxiety about sexuality⁴⁵. In Oaxaca, indigenous women still report shame and passive roles, with virginity and motherhood being important values⁴⁶. In any case, younger generations seem to report slight changes from the views of older generations, and specific groups such as college students report a more equalitarian and permissive view of sexuality⁴⁷.

Once again, religion is indicated as an important factor in modulating sexual attitudes. This phenomenon occurs in Spain, where Christian people do not report positive thoughts about sexuality⁴⁰, as well as in Peru, Costa Rica³⁵ and Puerto Rico³⁷.

Sexual behavior

Regarding sexual practices, the literature notes some differences among countries. According to some studies, most people from Puerto Rico (93%)⁴⁸ and Spain (93%)¹¹ report past sexual experience. This percentage decreases in the case of Argentina (86%)¹² and Mexico (70%)¹¹ and particularly in Ecuador (60%)⁴⁹ and Peru (51,5%)⁵⁰. The latter two countries report higher gender differences; in Ecuador, men exceed women in sexual experience by

approximately 20%⁴⁹, and in Peru, men report more than double the sexual experience of women⁵⁰.

In particular, masturbation and mutual masturbation practices seem to be more frequent in Puerto Rico (96% report these practices)⁴⁸ or Spain (80-81% and 68-93% report them)¹¹⁻¹², than in Mexico (52% and 45% report them)¹¹ and Argentina (44% and 73% report them)¹². Vaginal sex is more frequent in Spain (87.5-90.4% report it)¹¹, Argentina (86,6%)¹² or Puerto Rico (76%)⁴⁸ than in Ecuador (67,5%)⁴⁹ or Peru (51%)⁵⁰. Oral sex is most frequent in Spain (67-92%)¹¹⁻¹² and Argentina (73.9%)¹², followed by Puerto Rico (68%)⁴⁸, Mexico (56)¹¹, Ecuador (39%)⁴⁹ and Peru (26.8%)⁵⁰. Regarding anal sex, Puerto Rico seems to report the highest frequency (39%)⁴⁸, followed by Ecuador (31,5%)⁴⁹, Argentina (29,1%)¹², Peru (27,5%)⁵⁰, Spain (16-26%)¹¹⁻¹² and Mexico (18%)¹¹.

Some studies report online sexual activities^{38,51} for which Spanish people exceed Mexican people in engagement in sex chats (approximately 32.5% vs 15%), masturbation while on the Internet (approximately 83.5% vs 28.5%) and use of the Internet to experiment with sexuality (approximately 31.5% vs 21.5%). The proportion of Mexican young people who report engaging in sex chats increase, reaching 35%, and the proportion engaging in masturbation also increase, reaching 73%; the proportion of both Spanish and Mexican people engaging in experimentation with sexuality is also higher. Older people also show online sexual activities, but their percentages are have decreased^{52,53}. In the case of Spain, among people over the age of 70, there seems to be a qualitative decrease in sexuality, which also seems to be more based on petting and masturbation than other sexual activities (44% of women who are older than 50)^{53,54}.

These results show gender differences in most of the countries, including Mexico¹⁶, Colombia⁴², Ecuador⁴⁹ and Peru⁵⁰; in Spain, there are particularly gender differences in practices such as masturbation¹¹. This type of difference is particularly relevant in Ecuador⁴⁹ and Peru⁵⁰ as well in Colombia and Mexico when they are compared with Spain^{11,42}. In Puerto Rico, this gender dissimilarity is present in religious communities but not for nonreligious people^{37,55}. The relevance of gender among religious people is also reported in Ecuador^{49,56} and Mexico³⁴.

Sexual satisfaction

Regarding sexual satisfaction, a study in Mexico⁵⁷ indicates that 42.8% of men report being sexually satisfied, while 40.29% of women report being sexually satisfied. These percentages are higher in Spain and Chile. In one study, 58.6% of men and 44.9% of women report sexual satisfaction⁵⁸. In Chile, a study⁵⁹ shows that 83.8% of men and 66.1% of women report sexual satisfaction. Finally, in Colombia, the sexual satisfaction is moderate⁶⁰, but only 36% of people report sexual satisfaction.

For sexual satisfaction, most of the studies revealed gender differences. In Mexico, men report more sexual satisfaction than women at sexual onset¹⁷, as well as among the youngest sexually active individuals⁴⁴. In Chile²⁵, adult men report more sexual satisfaction than women, but adolescent women have slightly higher satisfaction than men, supporting other results⁶¹ that report lower sexual satisfaction of women in the adult stage. Among Chilean couples⁶², men indicate more sexual dissatisfaction than women. Similarly, another study⁶³ does not report gender differences in young and adult people. In Spain, there are also controversial findings. Some authors⁵⁸ observe gender differences, with men having higher satisfaction than women, while others⁶⁴ do not reveal gender differences and state that men report lower satisfaction because of their lower frequency of engagement in sexual activities. Regarding quality factors, there are some gender differences. In Mexico, women associate pleasure with emotions more frequently, while men usually associate pleasure with the physical dimension and sexual sensation⁴⁴. In Chile⁶³, a study notes that 47.4% of sexual satisfaction is related to sexual frequency, happiness, and perception of health. In Spain⁵⁸, a relevant role of sexual assertiveness for men and women is identified, and women also report positive sexual thoughts⁶⁵. In Colombia, a study shows that sexual satisfaction is related to self-esteem in men and women⁶⁶.

Some studies focus on women, and the relevance of sexual attitudes to satisfaction seems to be common. For Mexican women, sexual satisfaction is related to lower religiosity, more sexual education and open-minded sexual attitudes toward masturbation, premarital sex and lower anxiety about sexuality⁴⁵, as well as egalitarian attitudes⁵⁷. This result is in line with those of some authors^{58,67} that indicate the relevant role of sexual attitudes in sexual satisfaction for Spanish women. Regarding sexual orientation, a Spanish study on adult women reports more satisfaction among lesbian women than among heterosexual women⁵³.

Regarding age, sexual satisfaction is higher among younger women who report a greater variety of sexual practices and affective behaviors⁶⁸.

Conclusion

In general, terms, sexual relationships among Hispanic people are still strongly related to gender roles and scripts that frequently modulate attitudes, beliefs and behaviors in different Hispanic countries^{18,27,29,38,42,43,49}. In this sense, men usually report an earlier sexual onset^{19,21,22}, more sexual experience and sexual partners^{11,33}, as well as liberal attitudes towards sexuality^{40,43,45}. Such gender differences are also noticeable in new practices such as online sexual activities that are reported in countries such as Spain⁶⁹, Mexico⁵¹ and Peru⁷⁰. However, regarding sexual satisfaction, the findings show inconsistent results for countries such as Chile^{25,62} and Spain^{58,64}, while Mexico maintains gender differences⁵⁷. Mexican women still prioritize emotions and commitment; meanwhile, for men, desire and physical aspects are more important. Some studies report sexual differences across generations, with younger people seeming to be more sexually open^{25,47}.

In general, gender differences in Hispanic countries are higher than those presented in other studies based on cultures such as Northern Europe⁵. In line with past studies^{4,71} that relate more gender-egalitarian regions to lower double standards in sexual expressions, sexual expression in Hispanic countries differs from that in countries that report more equality between men and women. In fact, among Hispanic countries, Spain, which has a better position on the gender inequality index⁷², seems to show more liberal attitudes and experiences, as well as lower gender differences. Moreover, concerning the level of satisfaction, the studies report higher percentages of satisfaction in Spain and Chile than in Mexico or Colombia, even though an important percentage of people are unsatisfied with their sexuality in the former countries. In addition, Spain and Puerto Rico seem to be characterized by more open-minded sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors, particularly in comparison with countries such as Peru and Ecuador. Puerto Rico, which belongs to the Caribbean culture, also shows more open expressions of sexuality, as some authors have noted⁷³. Men and women in the Caribbean context seem to report more open attitudes and behaviors related to sexuality, differentiating affection and love from sexual desire and behavior more frequently than people in other countries. In contrast, more inhibited cultures

may contribute to low sexual expression, as some authors have reported in other cultural contexts such as China⁷⁴.

Going beyond the common sexual scripts to include attention to international differences in the gender inequality index^{11,35}, some of the results suggest how these differences may be larger by comparing different socioeconomic and ethnic groups in each country⁴⁶. Some authors examine different countries reveal the importance of specific factors such as family and peer support³²; religious commitment, particularly among women³⁴; and the level of access to resources²⁹, which may modulate sexual relationships beyond the influence of factors related to one's place of origin. These variables have been shown to be relevant in multiple countries. In particular, the role of religion has been demonstrated in cross-cultural studies⁷⁵, as well as in specific contexts such as Ghana⁷⁶, the US⁷⁷ and Malaysia⁷⁸.

Obviously, these results should be considered in light of the studies analyzed. This paper reports some findings of specific studies, which likely do not represent all cross-cultural characteristics and characteristics within countries where there is substantial diversity. In addition, the different methodologies and collected data make it difficult to draw conclusions about sex-related variables. To overcome these limitations, other reviews should analyze in detail the sexuality of specific Hispanic groups, such as the LGTB community or people with disabilities or mental diseases, who are usually excluded in studies of Hispanic sexual traditions. Additionally, to determine the relevance of specific subgroup factors, cross-cultural comparisons and comparison of different subcultures and socioeconomic levels in each country should be conducted to tailor interventions for each population.

Despite these limitations, these findings support the relevance of the double standard, as well as other factors, such as religion, to sexual experiences in Hispanic countries. In addition, this study reveals some differences in sexual expression that may be based on gender inequality and human development, such as in Spain, or cultural traits, such as in Puerto Rico. Therefore, to adjust policies and interventions, different aspects, such as gender inequality, religious commitment or sexualized subcultures, should be considered, including traditional and new scenarios of sexuality.

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Figure

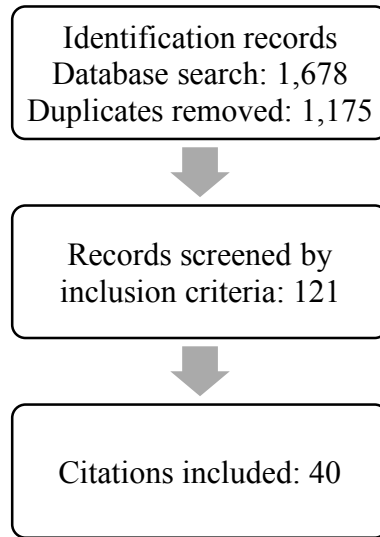


Figure 1. Flowchart of study selection.

TABLE

Table 1. Brief overview of the included studies

Author (year)	Country	Participants	Main findings
López, Carcedo, Fernández-Rouco, Caballero (2017) ⁴²	Spain and Colombia	508 (52.17% men; 47.83% women) from 15-18 years old.	Gender differences in the attribution of relevance to romantic engagement and feelings, sexual desire, attraction and masturbation, particularly in Colombian people.
Mella, Oyanedel, Vargas, de Ugarte (2015) ²⁵	Chile	767 (45.9% men; 54.1% women):18 - 56 years old.	People aged 18 to 30 report onset sexuality at 16.38 (SD=2.36) years old, and onset becomes increasingly early over the generations (particularly for women). Men have more sexual partners and a greater frequency of orgasm experience than women. For both men and women, vaginal sex and oral sex are the most frequent practices. Sexual satisfaction: younger women have higher satisfaction than younger men, but adult men have higher satisfaction than adult women.
Ramiro-Sánchez, Ramiro, Bermúdez, Buena-Casal (2018) ¹⁸	Spain	2,703 (49.9% men; 50.1% women):14-20 years old	A total of 72.7% have sexual experience (27% penetrative and 45.7% nonpenetrative). Men (M=13.39; SD=2.02) have earlier sexual onset than women (M=13.83; SD=1.43) and more partners, while women have older partners. Both men and women report two years between the initiation of penetrative and nonpenetrative practices and similar rates of masturbation
Bayer, Cabrera, Gilman, Hindin, Tsui (2014) ³²	Peru	300 (50% men; 50% women): 15-17 years old	There is a similar progression through precoital behaviors for men and women, from hugging and kissing to petting. Males (26.0%) are more likely than females (13.3%) to report engagement in vaginal sex. Lower family education and peer support are relevant to sexual experience.
Gil-Llario, Giménez, Ballester-Arnal, Cárdenas-López, Durán-Baca (2017) ¹¹	Spain and Mexico	840 (48% men; 52% women): 17-26 years old	Gender differences for both countries: men report more masturbation, more sexual partners and more instances of being unfaithful. Women report more steady partners and longer lengths of relationships. There are greater gender differences between Mexican men and women than between Spanish men and women in terms of sexual frequency, sexual orientation, and infidelity.
Freixas-Farré, Luque-Salas (2014) ⁵³	Spain	774 women: 50-59 years old	Sexual behavior decreases, particularly for vaginal sex (70.33% to 19.15%) and masturbation or petting (nearly 50% to 25%). Cybersex practices are reported. The most important barriers for satisfaction are lack of motivation/desire, self-concept, corporal image or having a partner. Heterosexual women are less satisfied than lesbian women.

De Meyer, Jaruseviciene, Zaborskis, Decat, Vega, Cordova, et al. (2014) ⁵⁶	Bolivia and Ecuador	5,913 (53.6% men; 43.7% women): 14-18 years old.	A total of 23.4% have coital experience, 14.4% suffer pressure to engage in sexual intercourse, and 37.8% have difficulties with sexual communication. Gender equally is related to the use of contraceptives, positive experience, positive sexual attitudes among nonsexually active individuals and sexual communication. Religion is less associated with sexual experience except among sexually active people with mutual initiative and positive experience.
Espinosa-Hernández, Vasilenko, Bámaca-Colbert (2015) ³⁴	Mexico	1,436 (47.3% men; 52.7% women): 12-19 years old	Men have higher rates of engagement than women in the following sexual behaviors: making out (85.8% vs 82.8%), oral sex (25.4% vs 13.3%), and vaginal sex (24.7% vs 16%). Women are more conservative than men regarding the following issues: female virginity (8.7% vs 7.8%) and sexual guilt (2.6% vs 2.2%). Adolescents who endorse conservative values are less likely to practice sexual behaviors. Men and younger girls are influenced by external cultural standards, whereas older girls are influenced by sexual guilt.
Ballester-Arnal, Gil-Llario, Giménez-García, Castro-Calvo, Cárdenas-López (2017) ⁵¹	Spain and Mexico	2,227 (45% men; 55% women): 15-25 years old.	Spanish adolescents more frequently engage in cybersex practices than Mexican adolescents, revealing more gender differences in Mexico than in Spain, but not between men and women in each country. By gender, older people report more differences than younger people, particularly in Spain.
Contreras, Lillo, Vera-Villaruel (2016) ⁶³	Chile	862 (49.9% men; 50.1% women) 18-50 years old	A total of 47.4% of subjective sexual well-being is related to sexual behavioral indicators (sexual frequency, sexual caresses, and touching), happiness, and perception of health, while age, gender or socioeconomic variables are not relevant.
Guevara-Castro, Jerves-Hermida, Cevallos-Neira (2019) ⁴⁹	Ecuador	2,051 (45.6% men; 53.5% women): 15-19 years old	Most participants (61%) do not have sexual experience. There are gender differences in vaginal (50.9% vs 23.8%), oral (37.7% vs 13.7%) and anal (31.6% vs 8.7%) practices. Religion promotes differences in sexual experience for women but not men.
Morales (2018) ⁵⁵	Puerto Rico	251 (37.8% men; 62.2% women): 15-18 years old	Most participants (70-80%) do not have experience with specific practices (cybersex, pornography, petting, masturbation, and anal and vaginal sex). Men engage in masturbation more than women and, among religious people, they have more sexual fantasies. The role of religion seems to be more important among women.