Araştırma Makalesi
(Research Article)

EGEHFD, 2026, 42 (2): 322-334
Doi: 10.53490/egehemsire.1792033

Pregnant Women's Perceptions of Sexuality: A Metaphorical Study

Gebe Kadınların Cinsellik Algıları: Metaforik Bir Çalışma

Abdurrahim UYANIK [1]
Orcid: 0000-0001-6033-1440
Özlem SEYMEN[2]
Orcid: 0000-0002-9788-2200
Gülçin DEMIRDIL[3]
Orcid: 0000-0002-1512-7149

[1]Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University Erbaa Health Services Vocational School, Department of Health Care
[2] Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University Erbaa Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, Tokat, Türkiye.
[3]Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University Erbaa Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, Tokat, Türkiye.

Corresponding Author (Sorumlu Yazar):
Öğr. Gör. Abdurrahim UYANIK

abdurrahim.uyanik@gop.edu.tr

Keywords:
Pregnancy; sexuality; metaphor.

Anahtar Sözcükler:
Gebelik; cinsellik; metafor.

Gönderilme Tarihi: 27 Eylül 2025 **Kabul Tarihi:** 15 Mart 2026

ABSTRACT

Objective: Sexuality during pregnancy is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by sociocultural, religious, and psychological factors and is often regarded as a taboo. This study aimed to explore pregnant women's perceptions of sexuality through metaphors to address this knowledge gap.
Methods: A case study design was used from qualitative research methods. Between January and May 2024, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 48 pregnant women aged 19 and above, residing in a district in Türkiye. "Sexuality during pregnancy is like…, because..." was included to determine the metaphors developed by the pregnant women about sexuality during pregnancy. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Purposive sampling was used until data saturation was reached. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.
Results: Participants generated 54 metaphors, categorized into eight overarching themes: (1) sexuality as a forbidden act, (2) use of multiple and conflicting metaphors, (3) sexuality in response to negative experiences, (4) sexuality as a normalized expression of love and connection, (5) pregnant women who feel spied on, (6) sexuality as an entirely negative experience, (7) sexuality as a source of pleasure, and (8) responsibility and obligation.
Conclusion: This study demonstrates that metaphors constitute an effective qualitative approach for elucidating pregnant women's complex and culturally grounded perceptions of sexuality. The identified themes and metaphors underscore the multifaceted nature of sexuality during pregnancy, shaped by religious, cultural, and psychological factors. These findings emphasize the need for culturally sensitive, sexuality-focused antenatal care and further research across diverse sociocultural contexts.

ÖZ

Amaç: Gebelikte cinsellik, sosyokültürel, dini ve psikolojik faktörlerden etkilenen çok boyutlu bir olgudur ve sıklıkla tabu olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu çalışma, gebelerin cinsellik algılarını metaforlar aracılığıyla inceleyerek bu alandaki bilgi boşluğunu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır.
Yöntem: Nitel Araştırma yöntemlerinden vaka çalışması deseni kullanılmıştır. Ocak- Mayıs 2024 tarihleri arasında, Türkiye'de bir ilçede yaşayan, 19 yaş ve üzeri 48 gebe ile derinlemesine yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. "Gebelik sırasında cinsellik … benzer, çünkü..." ifadesi, hamile kadınların gebelik sırasındaki cinsellikle ilgili geliştirdikleri metaforları belirlemek amacıyla dahil edilmiştir. Görüşmeler yaklaşık 30 dakika sürmüş, katılımcı onayı ile ses kaydı alınmış ve veri bütünlüğü ile gizliliği sağlamak için kelimesi kelimesine transkripte edilmiştir. Amaçlı örnekleme uygulanmış ve veri doygunluğuna ulaşılana kadar devam edilmiştir. Tematik analiz yöntemiyle veriler değerlendirilmiştir.
Bulgular: Katılımcılar toplam 54 metafor üretmiş ve bunlar sekiz tema altında sınıflandırılmıştır: (1) cinsellik yasak bir eylem olarak, (2) birden çok ve çelişkili metafor kullanımı, (3) olumsuz deneyimlere tepki olarak cinsellik, (4) sevgi ve bağlanmanın normal bir ifadesi olarak cinsellik, (5) gözetlendiği hissine kapılan gebeler, (6) tamamen olumsuz bir deneyim olarak cinsellik, (7) haz kaynağı olarak cinsellik ve (8) sorumluluk ve yükümlülük. Bu metaforların çoğu dini, kültürel ve psikolojik etkilerle şekillenmiştir.
Sonuç: Bu çalışma, metaforların hamile kadınların karmaşık ve kültürel temelli cinsellik algılarını aydınlatmada etkili bir nitel yaklaşım oluşturduğunu göstermektedir. Belirlenen temalar ve metaforlar, dini, kültürel ve psikolojik faktörler tarafından şekillendirilen hamilelik dönemindeki cinselliğin çok yönlü doğasını vurgulamaktadır. Bu bulgular, kültürel açıdan duyarlı, cinselliğe odaklı doğum öncesi bakımın ve çeşitli sosyokültürel bağlamlarda daha fazla araştırmanın gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

How to cite: Uyanık, A., Seymen, Ö.,Demirdil, G. (2026). Pregnant Women's Perceptions of Sexuality: A Metaphorical Study.*JEUFN*, 42(2), 322-334. Doi: 10.53490/egehemsire.1792033
Kaynak Gösterimi: Uyanık, A., Seymen, Ö.,Demirdil, G. (2026). Gebe Kadınların Cinsellik Algıları: Metaforik Bir Çalışma. *EGEHFD*, *42*(2), 322-334. Doi: 10.53490/egehemsire.1792033

INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy is a natural physiological process that brings about profound anatomical, hormonal, emotional, and psychological changes in women- many of which directly influence sexual functioning and activity (Fakahany & El-Kak, 2025). Sexuality is widely recognized as a fundamental human instinct essential for both individual well-being and the continuation of the species (Szymańska, Kisielewski, Kisielewska, & Tomaszewski, 2024). Beyond these physiological and emotional transformations, beliefs, cultural norms, and personal attitudes toward sexuality continue to exert a significant influence on sexual experiences during pregnancy (Abé, 2025). Studies have shown that pregnant women experience a range of fears related to sexual activity. These include concerns about miscarriage, the belief that orgasm may trigger miscarriage or preterm labor, anxiety that the fetus might sense or remember the sexual act, fear of harming the fetus-particularly the baby's head- during intercourse, apprehension about contracting infections, and the worry that sexual activity in the later stages of pregnancy may induce premature birth (Foumane et al., 2014; Kulhawik et al., 2022). In addition to these fears, cultural norms, beliefs about motherhood and fatherhood roles, lack of accurate information, and negative attitudes toward sexuality can further compromise women's sexual experiences during pregnancy (Gönenç & Topuz, 2018). One of the most influential factors shaping women's perceptions of sexuality during pregnancy is the persistence of cultural myths. Sexual myths are defined as beliefs rooted in misinformation- false, incomplete, or distorted-lacking any scientific basis (Civil & Yıldız, 2010). The absence of comprehensive sexual education and the inability to openly discuss sexuality within families or communities contribute significantly to the development and perpetuation of these myths (Jamshed & Kamal, 2021). Religion, as a deeply embedded element of cultural identity, also plays a crucial role in shaping sexual norms and values. Over time, religious doctrines have formulated distinct perspectives and behavioral expectations concerning sexuality. In many societies, including Türkiye, sexuality remains a taboo subject, often associated with shame and moral restriction, particularly in relation to premarital sexual activity (Civil & Yıldız, 2010). Such myths not only influence couples' sexual behavior but may also lead to emotional distancing and avoidance of sexual intimacy. Sociocultural and religious belief systems- especially in conservative or traditional societies- continue to restrict open dialogue about sexuality, particularly during sensitive life stages such as pregnancy.

In Türkiye, both pregnant women and the healthcare professionals who provide antenatal care often fail to address sexuality during pregnancy in a comprehensive and adequate manner (Efe et al., 2014; Kaya, Yılmaz, Günaydın, Çalımlı, & Sadeghi, 2022; Torkestani et al., 2012). This limited engagement is well-documented in the literature and reflects a broader discomfort surrounding the topic. Moreover, existing research on this issue remains scarce, particularly in terms of qualitative and metaphor-based studies that explore the subjective meanings attributed to sexuality during pregnancy (Alsibiani, 2014; Ziaei, Keramat, Kharaghani, Haseli, & Ahmadnia, 2022). A metaphor is a cognitive tool that involves understanding a complex subject, phenomenon, or situation by likening it to a more familiar object, event, or experience. While metaphors may not precisely convey what they represent, they facilitate the visualization and interpretation of abstract or unfamiliar concepts, making them more accessible and meaningful (Çivril, Aruğaslan, & Özaydın Özkara, 2018). According to Saban (2008), metaphors serve as mental models that allow individuals to comprehend one phenomenon through the lens of another. Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (2005) define metaphor as a way of understanding one concept in terms of another's perspective. As a communicative device, metaphors transcend the specifics of everyday experiences, enabling individuals to grasp underlying meanings and broader realities (Güneş, 2021; Saban, 2008).

Despite a growing body of research on sexuality during pregnancy, existing studies largely rely on biomedical or risk-oriented frameworks and direct self-report methods, which limit the exploration of women's culturally and psychologically embedded meanings. Addressing this gap, the present study contributes to the literature by using metaphor analysis to reveal how pregnant women construct sexuality as a multidimensional experience shaped by sociocultural and religious norms.

METHODS

Design

This study employed a phenomenological design, a qualitative research approach aimed at exploring individuals' lived experiences and subjective meanings. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to this aim, as it facilitates an in-depth understanding of human behaviors, experiences, and processes. It adopts a holistic and interpretative stance by utilizing data collection methods such as observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis (Erdoğan, Nahcivan, & Esin, 2014).

The phenomenological method is a qualitative research approach that aims to explore phenomena of which individuals are aware but lack detailed understanding, focusing on how participants experience specific processes or events (Sart, 2015; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

Sample and Setting

Accordingly, data sources in phenomenological research should comprise participants who have directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation and can articulate their lived experiences (Çivril et al., 2018; Uygun, Gökkurt, & Neslihan, 2016). In phenomenological research, participants' definitions of a phenomenon are not judged as true or false; rather, these subjective interpretations are systematically categorized to reveal the range of individual perspectives (Uygun et al., 2016). Metaphors, commonly employed as a qualitative data collection tool, particularly serve a descriptive function by providing rich, nuanced content and vivid imagery that capture diverse viewpoints related to a subject, event, or phenomenon (Çivril et al., 2018; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

Participants consisted of pregnant women aged 19 years and older who were residing in a district in northern Türkiye. Initial participants were reached through personal contacts within the community, and additional participants were invited through referrals from pregnant women who had already participated in the study. All participants were informed about the study and invited to take part on a voluntary basis.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual, in-depth interviews with 48 pregnant women aged 19 and above, residing in a district in northern Türkiye who voluntarily participated in the study. The interviews were conducted in the principal investigators' academic offices between January and May 2024, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. With participants' verbal and written informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning unique codes to each participant. Using purposive sampling, data collection continued until saturation was reached, at which point interviews were concluded. The study is conducted by three academic staff members, two of whom are from the field of obstetrics and gynecology nursing, and the other from the field of psychiatric nursing.

To ensure participants' privacy, confidentiality, and psychological safety, all interviews were conducted in a private, quiet, and uninterrupted setting. The academic offices used for the interviews were arranged to prevent external disturbances, with doors kept closed and no third parties present during the interviews. Interviews were carried out individually, allowing participants to speak freely about personal and sensitive topics. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or terminate the interview at any time without any negative consequences. Throughout the interview process, the researchers adopted a supportive and nonjudgmental approach to promote participants' comfort and emotional well-being.

Data collection tools

The data were collected using a socio-demographic characteristics form and a semi-structured interview form, which were developed with expert (There are 3 specialists in the field of obstetrics and gynecology nursing and 2 specialists in the field of psychiatric nursing) opinion.

Socio-demographic characteristics form

It consisted of 9 questions including age, educational status, family type, number of pregnancies, obstetric history, gestational week, marriage type, age and educational status of the spouse.

Semi-structured interview form

"Sexuality during pregnancy is like ……. because …....." question is included.

Analysis

Quantitative analysis of data

BM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyze the data. In the evaluation of the data, arithmetic mean, standard deviation, percentage distribution, minimum maximum values were used as descriptive statistical methods.

Qualitative analysis of data

The metaphors developed by the participants were analyzed in 5 stages.

Coding and sorting phase

At this stage, the metaphorical perception data collection forms were reviewed, and the identified metaphors were compiled in alphabetical order. Forms that were entirely blank, incomplete, or contained responses deemed unrelated to metaphors were excluded from the analysis.

Category development phase

At this stage, valid metaphors were analyzed according to their shared characteristics, focusing on the metaphor's subject, source, and the relationship between the two. Each metaphorical image was linked to a theme reflecting common aspects of sexuality during pregnancy and subsequently categorized into distinct conceptual groups.

Sample metaphor image compilation phase

At this stage, the metaphors generated by participants were re-examined using Saban's (2008) metaphor analysis framework and the content analysis techniques described by Yıldırım and Şimşek (2006). The relationships within each metaphor- namely (1) similarity, (2) simulation, and (3) combined similarity and simulation- were systematically analyzed. Following this process, a total of 54 metaphors, including multiple metaphors, were identified from 48 participants, as two participants did not produce metaphors during the coding and sorting phases.

Stage of ensuring validity and reliability

Ensuring validity in qualitative research requires a transparent and detailed presentation of the research process. Accordingly, the data analysis was thoroughly described. During the analysis, a sample metaphor was selected and included in the findings section, accompanied by direct quotations from the participants. The validity of the results was further supported by detailed explanations of the eight conceptual metaphor categories. A total of 54 metaphors derived from the data were organized within these categories. To enhance reliability, the metaphors and categories were reviewed and finalized based on the expert evaluations of three faculty members specialized in relevant fields. Expert agreement was quantified using Miles and Huberman's formula (Miles & Huberman, 1994), where matching categories between experts were classified as "Consensus" and non-matching as "Dissent." The inter-rater reliability was calculated as 87% using the formula:Reliability Consensus Percentage = Consensus / (Consensus + Dissent) × 100.Since values above 70% indicate acceptable reliability, the results of this study demonstrate satisfactory expert agreement

Data transfer to computer environment

The data were entered into a computer software program to facilitate the interpretation of findings, generate tables displaying each conceptual category alongside their corresponding metaphors, and calculate participants' demographic characteristics as well as the frequency and percentage of metaphors and categories. Evaluation and interpretation were conducted based on the resulting analyses.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Approval No: 370631, Date: 07.12.2023). Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (as revised in 2013).

RESULTS

The mean age of the participants was 29.64±4.62 years, while the mean age of their spouses was 33.18±5.08 years. The average gestational week was 25.75±8.37, and the mean number of pregnancies was 1.89±0.92. The majority of participants had a bachelor's degree or higher (62.5%) and reported an optional marriage (77.1%). Most women (79.2%) had no adverse obstetric history. Similarly, more than half of the spouses (54.2%) had a bachelor's degree or higher (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics (n= 48)

Variables	Minimum- Maximum	Mean±SD
Age	21- 42	29.64±4.62
Age of spouse	24- 49	33.18±5.08
Pregnancy week	10- 39	25.75±8.37
Number of pregnancies	1- 5	1.89±0.92
	n	**%**
Education Status		
Primary School	4	8.3
Middle School	2	4.2
High School	7	14.6
Associate Degree	5	10.4
Undergraduate	22	45.8
Graduate	8	16.7
Type of marriage		
Optional	37	77.1
Arranged marriage	7	14.6
Without family approval	4	8.3
Obstetric history		
None	38	79.2
Miscarriage	6	12.5
Curettage	3	6.3
Premature birth	1	2.1
Education status of spouse		
Primary School	4	8.3
Middle School	3	6.3
High School	13	27.1
Associate Degree	2	4.2
Undergraduate	21	43.8
Graduate	5	10.4

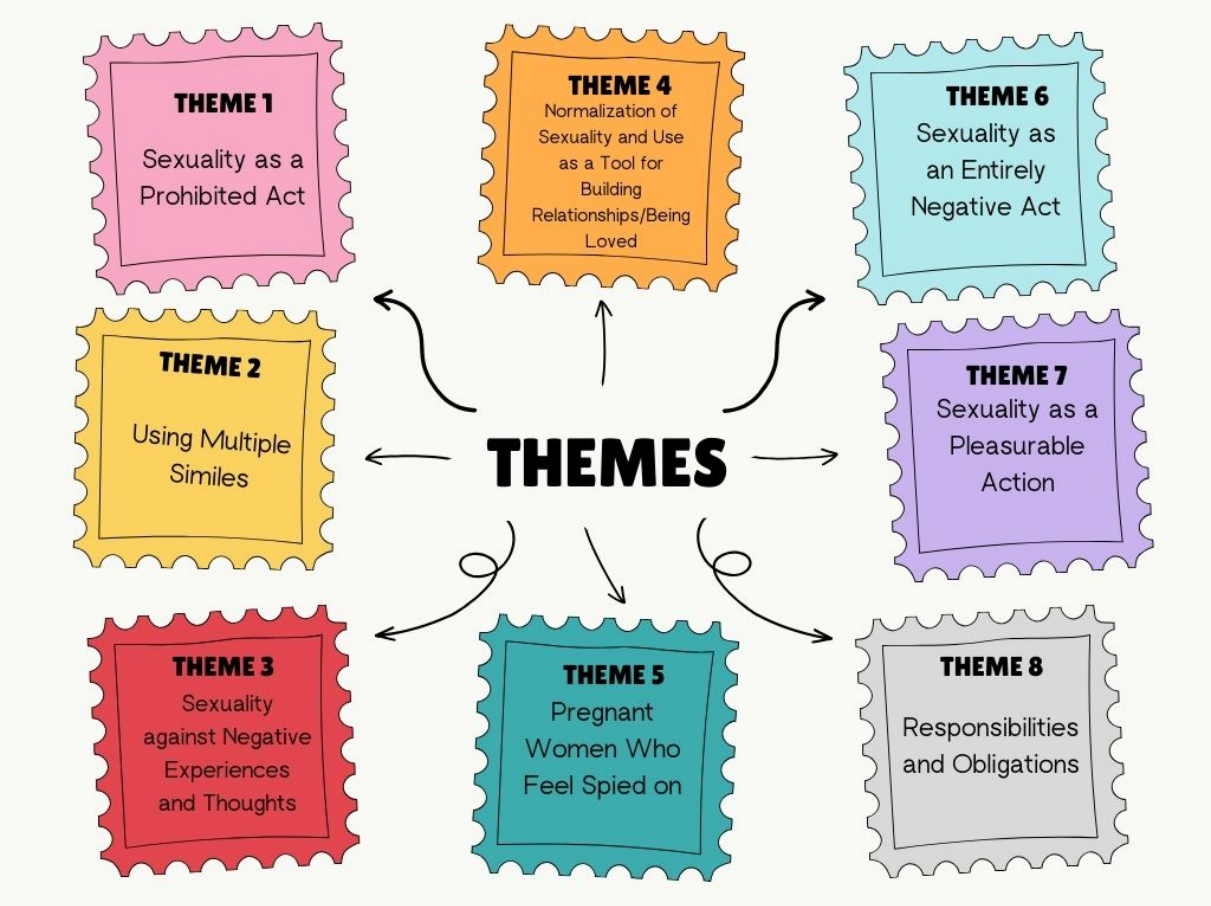
The findings related to the analysis made by categorizing the answers given by the pregnant women participating in the study based on themes are given in Table 2. Visuals of the themes are given in Figure 1.

Table 2. Matforms obtained according to the themes after the interview (n=48)

Themes	Metaphor	n	%
Theme 1: Sexuality as a Prohibited Act	Like a sin	2	11.11
	Like getting engaged	1	
	Sometimes forbidden, sometimes adventure	1	
	Like playing the stock market	1	
	Like starving, like fasting	1	
Theme 2: Using Multiple Similes	Like flying in the clouds (when not anxious) / Like being in the dark (when there is no desire)	2	11.11
	Like the mourning process / like the new marriage period	2	
	Like absence / like fear	2	
Theme 3: Sexuality against Negative Experiences and Thoughts	Like being stuck in limbo	3	12.96
	Like a ticking time bomb	1	
	Like skating on ice	1	
	Like walking on a frozen lake	1	
	Like pouring water into a pot with holes in the bottom	1	
Theme 4: Normalization of Sexuality and Use as a Tool for Building Relationships/Being Loved	Like a tree that has been watered in between	1	14.81
	Like a physiological process	1	
	Like writing a company	1	
	Like water	1	
	Like the taste of marriage	1	
	Like a walk in the park	1	
	Like an open door that I can enter whenever I want	1	
	Like an apple	1	
Theme 5:	Like someone is watching us	2	7.41
	Like voyeurism	1	

Pregnant Women Who Feel Spied on	Like there is someone among us	1	
Theme 6: Sexuality as an Entirely Negative Act	Like torture	3	16.67
	Like loneliness	1	
	Like home invasion and theft	1	
	Like a dark empty room	1	
	Like a horrible nightmare	1	
	Like absolute torture	1	
	Like a nightmare	1	
Theme 7: Sexuality as a Pleasurable Action	Like dancing to beautiful music with my wife	1	7.41
	Like flying in the clouds	1	
	Like watering the flowers	1	
	Always something enjoyable	1	
Theme 8: Responsibilities and Obligations	Like a duty	4	18.52
	Like a must	1	
	Like a mandatory duty	1	
	Like a necessity	1	
	Like an official obligation	1	
	Sometimes like a burden	1	
	Like going to work early in the morning	1	

Figure 1. Visual of themes (This image was created using canva.com)



Analysis of responses from 48 pregnant women yielded 54 metaphors, including multiple metaphors per participant. When these metaphors were categorized thematically, the following key themes emerged:

Theme 1: Sexuality as a Prohibited Act

A common characteristic of the metaphors within this theme is the perception of sexuality as forbidden, shaped by religious and sociocultural boundaries. Below are sample metaphorical expressions illustrating this theme:

“Sex during pregnancy is like an engagement. There is no intercourse. But childbirth will be my wedding. It is free to have sex after the wedding.” (P 38, 42 age, 21 weeks gestation)
“Sexuality during pregnancy is like an adventure. Because it is a bumpy journey, sometimes we are forbidden and sometimes we are free. For example, I was banned because I had a risky pregnancy.” (P 40, 23 age, 16 weeks gestation)
“It's like playing the stock market. My baby was an IVF baby and now, God forbid, all that labor and waiting, I am counting seconds not minutes. Believe me, if something happened after the relationship, I would neither forgive my husband nor myself. That's why, thanks to my husband, he doesn't approach me in that way.” (P 46, 30 age, 16 weeks gestation)

Theme 2: Using Multiple Similes

Some participants experienced difficulty in capturing their perceptions of sexuality during pregnancy with a single metaphor and instead employed multiple metaphors to describe different aspects of their experience. These responses were grouped under this theme. For example, Participant 12 articulated her views on sexuality during pregnancy in relation to varying emotional states as follows:
“It's like flying in the clouds; when there is no anxiety. It's like being in the dark; when there is no desire. Because when it happens at the same time, when it is mutual, it is a beautiful thing. Sometimes there is a reluctance because of the fear that something will happen to the baby, then it feels like I will stay in the dark room and I will not be able to run and get out. I mean, there is a feeling that I will lose my child and I will not be able to save it.” (P 12, 41 age, 22 weeks gestation)
“It would actually be more accurate for me to answer this periodically. Because I felt different emotions in each period. First of all, my pregnancy was through IVF treatment. There is fear in me because I had one miscarriage. I also experienced reluctance at first. Therefore, sexuality in pregnancy in the first periods is like a mourning process. In the 2nd trimester, when everything goes well, hormones already push you to sexuality, you desire your partner. Therefore, sexuality in this period is like a new marriage period. Because everything is in order and there is desire.” (P 39, 31 age, 30 weeks gestation)

Theme 3: Sexuality Against Negative Experiences and Thoughts

Within this theme, sexuality was experienced as ambivalent simultaneously desired yet accompanied by persistent apprehension. Sample metaphorical expressions corresponding to this theme are presented below:
"It’s like walking on a frozen lake. There might be bleeding, you could fall through at any moment, but if you don’t, you might make it across. Honestly, it was banned at first because the risk of miscarriage was high there are negative emotions, there is fear." (P 5, 32 age, 17 weeks gestation)
"After all, a child is on the way will there be problems or not? You feel anxious, constantly questioning whether you’re doing the right or wrong thing, wondering if it could harm the baby. We asked our elders, and they said it would be fine, but still, there’s that fear like a ticking time bomb that could go off at any moment. There was a risk during the first three months, but afterwards, I think it turned into an obsession for me this fear that sexuality could somehow harm the baby." (P 15, 27 age, 22 weeks gestation)
"Sexuality feels like being in limbo for me. On one hand, of course I want it too, but sometimes I find myself torn partly because I’m tired, and partly because I’m afraid it might harm the baby." (P 35, 33 age, 24 weeks gestation)
"It’s like pouring water into a pot with holes in it. No matter how much effort you put in, it never fills to the level you want. Neither you nor your partner can experience the same satisfaction as before. After pregnancy comes the postpartum period, then the baby hears things, interrupts, and so on. The space that sexuality used to occupy in our lives has now been flooded." (P 42, 27 age, 28 weeks gestation)

Theme 4: Normalization of Sexuality and Use as a Tool for Building Relationships/ Being Loved

In this theme, pregnant women conceptualized sexuality as a normalized aspect of their experience, often portraying it as a means of connection, affection, or feeling loved. Examples of metaphorical expressions illustrating this theme are provided below:
"It’s like water essential and indispensable. Can you live without water? During pregnancy, you sometimes drink it in gulps, sometimes sip by sip, but always with pleasure." (P 25, 29 age, 19 weeks gestation)
"It’s like an open door something I can enter whenever I want. Sexuality during pregnancy is an act that can happen at any time. There’s no set limit to it. That’s why it resembles an open door, because you can always walk through it." (P 30, 28 age, 32 weeks gestation)
"Sexuality during pregnancy is like an apple because it is sweet, its parts complement each other, and it is easily accessible. Sexuality during pregnancy is a sign of love; it means being together. Just like two halves of an apple. My partner and I are two halves of the same apple. Sexuality during pregnancy allows these halves to come together

and become whole, because my partner is my counterpart, and through sexuality, we can become one." (P 31, 21 age, 14 weeks gestation)
"It's like writing flashcards. When I was a child, I used to write flashcards for my father he seemed to love me more when I did. Now, even if I don't want to, it feels like I'm collecting love points when we're intimate." (P 44, 34 age, 20 weeks gestation)

Theme 5: Pregnant Women Who Feel Spied on

In this theme, pregnant women described sexuality through the concept of being noticeably monitored. Examples of metaphorical expressions related to this theme are provided below:
"It's like voyeurism. Imagine that there is a living being inside you, as if it sees everything you do, as if it is watching you, and having sex while it feels you, I don't know.... I mean, it's both a sin and a bit perverted, like voyeurism... It's like having sex in front of your child..." (P 43, 24 age, 24 weeks gestation)
"It feels like someone is watching us. As my pregnancy weeks progress, I feel as if there is someone between us. This feeling makes me lose desire." (P 33, 30 age, 36 weeks gestation)

Theme 6: Sexuality as an Entirely Negative Act

Within this theme, pregnant women described their experiences and perceptions of sexuality using metaphors that reflected entirely negative meanings. These expressions were often conveyed with strong emotional intensity, and in some cases, participants became tearful while articulating their experiences. Sexuality was portrayed as distressing, unwanted, or overwhelming, and was described independently of notions of duty or responsibility. Sample metaphor expressions illustrating this theme are presented below.
"Breaking and entering is like theft. I think it should never happen during pregnancy. I think I would be unfair to my child. I got married at an advanced age and we started to want children and sexuality became child orientated. There was fertilisation there, it was as if a living being was sitting inside my belly, no one should come." (P 9, 27 age, 27 weeks gestation)
"It's like a nightmare. I don't have a positive attitude towards sexuality during pregnancy. In fact, I was always scared of sexuality when I was young. I saw it as something painful and very painful. When I got married, this fear continued. In my pregnancy, the fear of harming the baby was added. That's why I don't favour sex during pregnancy. I think it's unnecessary. You want to wake up but you can't wake up. It's like a nightmare" (P 21, 31 age, 16 weeks gestation)
"It's like a nightmare. ... How should I put it now... You know when it comes down on you, you think it will never end? I mean, helplessness, to be honest, I don't want it very much and I don't want it at this time because I had a miscarriage before, but my husband... (Crying) It's like that, desperately waiting for it to end for something I don't want." (P 36, 31 age, 32 weeks gestation)
"It's literally torture. Sexuality has always been a tool for me. A tool for the continuation of the generation. It's like torture for me when I'm like this. I'm swollen all over and it's really just for my husband to see that job when I'm in this state... (Crying)" (P 34, 26 age, 28 weeks gestation)

Theme 7: Sexuality as a Pleasurable Action

In this theme, pregnant women interpreted sexuality as an act of pleasure and enjoyment, with metaphors reflecting a positive and uninhibited perspective. Metaphors that did not convey avoidance or reluctance were categorized under this theme. Sample metaphorical expressions related to this theme are presented below:
"It is like dancing with my partner to beautiful music. I did not experience any hesitation, fear or reluctance from sexuality during my pregnancy. My husband did not develop any negative attitude either. It was a situation of mutual enjoyment." (P 20, 26 age, 38 weeks gestation)
"It is like flying on clouds. When the nausea of early pregnancy passes, I feel like I am flying on clouds." (P 23, 28 age, 36 weeks gestation)
"I have always enjoyed it. I continued my pregnancy in a way that I did not overdo it and did not tire myself. I did not feel any decrease in desire, fear, etc." (P 2, 27 age, 29 weeks gestation)

Theme 8: Responsibilities and Obligations

Within this theme, pregnant women predominantly framed sexuality in terms of responsibility and obligation, often neglecting their own sexual needs and engaging in sexual activity primarily to satisfy their husbands. Notably, a substantial proportion of participants (18.52%) expressed their perceptions of sexuality through metaphors categorized under this theme. Sample metaphorical expressions related to this theme are presented below:

"It's like getting up at the crack of dawn and going to work, waking up from a sweet sleep and not being able to leave the warm bed. I have reluctance during pregnancy, in fact I had reluctance before pregnancy." (P 19, 34 age, 10 weeks gestation)
"I think of it as a duty to my husband. I didn't want to do it in the early stages of pregnancy because of nausea and vomiting, and then it became difficult to do it as my belly grew. But I do it because my husband wants me to." (P 22, 22 age, 38 weeks gestation)
"It is like a compulsory duty. It was like a compulsory duty because I was married, my husband is actually a good person, but I felt responsible because I was married, like an obligation, I had a lot of difficulty during my pregnancy, nausea, etc. There was reluctance, so it was like a duty." (P 14, 29 age, 23 weeks gestation)
"It's like an obligation. It's something that has been bothering me lately. Because it is very difficult, it is like a duty towards my husband." (P 17, 39 age, 35 weeks gestation)

DISCUSSION

The concept of sexuality during pregnancy has been defined as a complex and context-dependent phenomenon that varies across different cultures and belief systems. In this study, a common characteristic of the metaphors related to the theme of sexuality as a forbidden act was the perception of sexuality as prohibited, shaped by religious beliefs, societal norms, and concerns about potential harm to the fetus.

Although multiple factors contribute to the perception of sexual behaviors during pregnancy as prohibited, religious and cultural beliefs play a particularly significant role. Kaya et al. (2022), in their study on sexual myths, similarly characterized sexual intercourse during pregnancy as a forbidden act, describing it as impure- findings that align with those of the present study. According to the findings of a phenomenological study by Yangin and Eroglu (2011), common reasons cited by participants for ceasing sexual activity during the late stages of pregnancy included beliefs rooted in prohibition, such as the view that intercourse constitutes a sin according to Islamic teachings, and the misconception that the baby may be born 'stained' due to confusion between vernix caseosa and sperm. It has also been reported that, within certain religious beliefs, sexual intercourse during pregnancy is associated with taboos likened to incest between father and child. Such beliefs are not exclusive to Turkish culture; traditional Chinese medicine, for instance, includes numerous prohibitions on sexual activity during pregnancy. These restrictions are intended to protect the fetus from "malignant effects" and to prevent pregnancy-related complications (Liu, Hsu, & Chen, 2013).

In our study, one participant likened sexuality during pregnancy to playing the stock market, reflecting uncertainty and risk. This aligns with findings by Panea Pizarro, Domínguez Martin, Barragán Prieto, Martos Sánchez, and López Espuela (2019), who reported that pregnant women in their third trimester often perceive sexual intercourse as incompatible with pleasure, focusing instead on the hope for a healthy baby. Additionally, they expressed concerns that sexual activity might cause the child to experience distress or pain.

Within the theme of multiple metaphor usage, some participants demonstrated difficulty in capturing their perceptions of sexuality during pregnancy with a single metaphor, instead employing several metaphors to describe different aspects of their experience. Our findings indicate that participants expressed their experiences of sexuality during pregnancy through diverse metaphors, highlighting its dynamic and multidimensional nature. Consistent with existing literature, sexual activity has been reported to decline during pregnancy (Corbacioglu Esmer, Akca, Akbayir, Goksedef, & Bakir, 2013; Gałązka, Drosdzol-Cop, Naworska, Czajkowska, & Skrzypulec-Plinta, 2015).

Within the theme of sexuality in the context of negative experiences and thoughts, pregnancy is characterized by complex physical and emotional sexual experiences for many women (Škodi Zakošek, 2015). The metaphors identified in our study illustrate how negative perceptions of sexuality during pregnancy manifest as ambivalence and anxiety. Consistent with Škodi Zakošek (2015), these metaphorical expressions emphasize that sexuality during pregnancy is a dynamic and multidimensional experience.

False beliefs and taboos surrounding sexuality during pregnancy may lead both pregnant women and their partners to disengage from sexual activity (Ertem & Sevil, 2016; Uçtu, Bekmezci, & Özerdoğan, 2017). Additionally, women with a history of miscarriage have been observed to exhibit more negative attitudes toward sexuality during pregnancy (Öztürk Altınayak, Seçil, Eren Yurtçiçek, Arslan, & Artan, 2024; Pamuk & Erbil, 2025). Within the theme of sexuality as normalized and as a means of connection or feeling loved, pregnant women described sexuality both as a normalized aspect of pregnancy and as a way to establish emotional bonds. Kiemtore, Ouedraogo, Ouattara, and Zamane (2016) reported that the majority of pregnant women (94.2%) consider sexual intercourse during pregnancy to be normal and feasible, a finding supported by other studies (Kamal & Pervaiz, 2011; Kiemtore et al., 2016). Similarly, Güney and Bal (2023) found that 50.7% of pregnant women held positive

attitudes toward sexuality. In the same study, 33.2% of participants reported no change in the frequency of sexual intercourse during pregnancy, while 59.4% indicated that they enjoyed sexual activity. Furthermore, Radoš, Vraneš, and Šunjić (2014) emphasize that a decrease in sexual frequency among partners of pregnant women does not necessarily correlate with reduced sexual satisfaction; rather, intimacy emerges as a stronger predictor of satisfaction than frequency.

Sexuality during pregnancy plays a crucial role in strengthening emotional and physical bonds between partners, serving as a means of connection and fostering feelings of being loved. Sexual intimacy enhances emotional support by reinforcing trust and commitment within the couple. Consequently, sexuality during pregnancy is a vital component of both individual well-being and relationship dynamics.

Within the theme of "pregnant women who feel spied on" participants frequently employed metaphors likening sexuality to a form of surveillance. Research on pregnant women's perceptions of their unborn babies highlights complex emotional and psychological dynamics (da Rosa et al., 2021; Piccini, 2021). From early pregnancy, maternal imaginations about the fetus begin to shape, fostering psychological development through mother- fetus interaction (Piccini, 2021). Ultrasound examinations, which facilitate this bonding, may also evoke feelings of being observed during sexual activity (Øyen & Aune, 2016). In our study, some participants reported feeling watched while engaging in sexual activity, describing it as sinful or even heretical. Echoing these findings, Kaya et al. (2022) noted that some pregnant women believed the fetus could sense or observe sexual intercourse. Similarly, in a qualitative study by Leite et al. (2020), a participant recounted that experiencing sexual pleasure caused her baby to contract excessively; feeling watched and guilty, she was compelled to cease sexual activity. Although various interpretations can be made regarding the concept of surveillance, the belief that pregnancy was highly valued in antiquity- so much so that in some cultures pregnant women were regarded as elevated above ordinary humanity and chosen by God to sustain life- helps explain why women may be perceived as untouchable or sacred (Leite et al., 2020). This sanctification of both mother and child underpins the feeling of being watched. Moreover, it provides a psychodynamic framework for understanding why pregnant women in our study believed their unborn babies could sense or observe sexual activity. Within this context, the notion that the fetus feels sexual intercourse may reflect the mother's unconscious guilt.

Within the theme of sexuality as a completely negative act, some pregnant women expressed sexuality through entirely negative metaphors, detached from notions of duty or responsibility, and at times accompanied by feelings of distress. Our study found that participants who could not establish a close emotional bond with their partners prior to pregnancy experienced significant emotional changes affecting intimacy, leading them to perceive sexuality during pregnancy negatively. Previous research has reported that pregnant women often reduce or cease sexual activity due to personal, relational, and cultural factors (Hapsari & Sudarmiati, 2017; Keley, Ali Mohammad, & Kianoush, 2019; Liu et al., 2013). Conversely, other studies highlight the importance of maintaining intimacy and partner support throughout pregnancy (Gonçalves et al., 2013; Hapsari & Sudarmiati, 2017; Liu et al., 2013). Consistent with our findings, Bender, Sveinsdóttir, and Fridfinnsdóttir (2018) reported a participant who likened her feelings during pregnancy to that of a dog, describing how she wanted to push her partner away when tired but paradoxically also sought physical contact. The psychological well-being of pregnant women is closely linked to their sexual experiences and personal history, with emotions such as reluctance, sadness, guilt, and fear potentially shaping the meanings attributed to sexuality and influencing couples' experiences during pregnancy (Leite et al., 2020).

Sexuality during pregnancy is a complex source of satisfaction, encompassing both physiological and emotional dimensions and resonating deeply within the human experience. Despite the physiological and psychological changes that occur, sexuality enhances a woman's sense of pleasure and strengthens her attachment to both her own body and her partner. Within the theme of sexuality as a pleasurable act, pregnant women described sexuality as an enjoyable and fulfilling experience. Metaphors that lacked any indication of avoidance or reluctance were categorized under this theme. Lech and Martins (2003) observed that pregnant women experienced increased sexual pleasure, often expressing happiness and frequent smiling during pregnancy. García-Duarte et al. (2023) reported that 44.4% of pregnant women felt more passionate compared to before pregnancy. Similarly, Reisdorfer (2010) noted that pregnancy-related changes did not disrupt couples; rather, many enjoyed the experience. Camacho Vargens and Progianti (2010) also found an increased frequency of sexual intercourse during pregnancy. Several studies suggest that positive attitudes toward sex during pregnancy predict higher sexual activity and greater sexual satisfaction. Moreover, the continuity of sexual life during pregnancy is emphasized as a factor that enhances pleasure between partners and strengthens their relationship (Jawed-Wessel, Santo, & Irwin, 2019).

Within the theme of responsibilities and obligations, pregnant women predominantly defined sexuality

in terms of duty, often neglecting their own sexual needs and engaging in sexual activity primarily to satisfy their husbands. Notably, the majority of participants employed metaphors aligned with this theme to describe their experiences.

Although studies on sexuality during pregnancy are limited, existing research indicates that women often report that sexual activity is initiated by their partners, aimed at maintaining their partners' commitment, and frequently accompanied by an inability to reach orgasm (Efe et al., 2014; Kisa, Zeyneloğlu, Yilmaz, & Güner, 2014). These findings suggest that women may perceive sexuality during pregnancy primarily as an obligation or responsibility.

Limitation

This study was conducted in a district in northwestern Türkiye, and the findings are specific to this sociocultural context, which limits their generalizability. Future studies with larger and more diverse samples may provide more comprehensive and generalizable insights. In addition, socio-cultural and religious perspectives, sexual myths, and concerns regarding social acceptance surrounding the sensitive topic of sexuality during pregnancy may have influenced the openness and clarity of participants' responses. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the sample in terms of gestational age and obstetric experiences (e.g., a history of preterm birth) represents a limitation, as perceptions of sexuality may be shaped by individual and pregnancy-specific characteristics rather than reflecting a uniform experiential pattern.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings of this study have important implications for both clinical practice and future research. From a practical perspective, metaphorical perceptions of sexuality during pregnancy underscore the need for culturally sensitive and context-specific approaches in antenatal education and counselling. Healthcare professionals working with pregnant women should be encouraged to incorporate discussions of sexuality into routine care, while also considering the attitudes and perceptions of the professionals themselves. Such approaches may help to correct misconceptions, address concerns, and foster a more holistic understanding of sexuality during pregnancy. Furthermore, training programs for healthcare providers should emphasize the role of metaphors in shaping individuals' perceptions and behaviours.

From a research perspective, this study highlights the need for a more comprehensive examination of how metaphorical expressions of sexuality during pregnancy vary across different sociocultural and geographical contexts. Future studies involving larger and more diverse sociocultural samples may enhance the generalizability of findings by increasing the range of metaphors. Additionally, longitudinal research designs could provide deeper insights into how perceptions of sexuality evolve throughout pregnancy and the postpartum period. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that metaphors serve as an effective tool for exploring the complex and often difficult-to-articulate experiences of pregnant women.

CONCLUSION

Pregnant women produced a total of eight themes and 54 metaphors, including sexuality as a forbidden act, the use of multiple metaphors, sexuality in response to negative experiences and thoughts, sexuality as a normalized means of establishing connection and love, pregnant women who feel spied on, sexuality as a completely negative act, sexuality as an act of pleasure, and sexuality framed by responsibility and obligations. Most metaphors were rooted in religious, cultural, and psychological factors. Sexuality is a multifaceted phenomenon that women experience by attributing diverse meanings at different stages of life, and these metaphors reflect its susceptibility to both positive and negative influences. Consequently, despite a growing body of research on sexuality during pregnancy, existing studies are largely grounded in biomedical or risk-oriented frameworks, limiting insight into culturally and psychologically embedded meanings. By adopting a qualitative metaphor analysis, this study contributes to the literature by revealing how women construct sexuality during pregnancy as a multidimensional experience shaped by sociocultural and religious norms.

Author Contributions

Concept and design: A.U., Ö.S., G.D. Data collection: A.U., Ö.S., G.D. Data analysis and interpretation: A.U., Ö.S., G.D. Writing manuscript: A.U., Ö.S., G.D. Critical review: A.U., Ö.S., G.D.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding: The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

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