Immunocytochemical Detection of Kisspeptin Receptor and Its Association with Motility of Buffalo Bull (Bubalus bubalis) Spermatozoa

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INTRODUCTION

Kisspeptin (Kp), a neurohormone, is essential for the activity of reproductive axis (Franssen and Tena-Sempere, 2018). Kisspeptin peptide is a member of RF-amide superfamily of neuropeptides that has Arg-Phe-NH2 C-terminal sequence. After Kp discovery, different groups independently identified in the rat’s brain, an orphan G protein-coupled membrane receptor i.e GPR54 now known as Kiss1r with high affinity for Kp (Uenoyama et al., 2019).

Both Kiss1 the gene encoding Kp, and GPR54 mRNA is present in the hypothalamus especially in the mediobasal hypothalamus, preoptic area, arcuate nucleus and anteroventral paraventricular area, where it has a central action in controlling gonadotropins secretion in different species, suggesting the reproduction regulating role of kisspeptin-GPR54 pathway (Chaikhun et al., 2016; Chaikhun-Marcou et al., 2018; Mishra et al., 2019). Kiss1-GPR54 signaling is fundamental to GnRH-driven fertility (Leon et al., 2016). Mutation in Kp or in GPR54 are the main reasons for various types of reproductive axis disabilities such as, idiopathic hypogonadotropic hypogonadism (Katani et al., 2014), central precocious puberty (Oh et al., 2017) and Normalsmic idiopathic hypogonadotropic hypogonadism (Chelaghma et al., 2018).

Besides its prominent expression at the hypothalamic levels mentioned earlier, GPR54 mRNA or protein is also reported in several reproductive tissues such as in mice Leydig cells, spermatid cells, seminiferous tubules and...
testes (Hua et al., 2013; Hsu et al., 2014), in the ovaries of cats (Tanyapanyaichon et al., 2018), dogs (Cielesh et al., 2017) and pigs (Basini et al., 2018) and in the testes of human (Feng et al., 2019) and frogs (Chianese et al., 2017). Moreover, in rhesus monkeys, positive immunostaining of GPR54 was noted in round spermatocytes, seminiferous tubules, Sertoli cells and spermatids (Tariq et al., 2013) and in the perimeter of the seminiferous epithelium (Irfan et al., 2016).

KISS1 and KISS1R immunoreactivity has also been reported in human sperm cells (Pinto et al., 2012). Intense immunostaining for KISS1 and KISS1R was detected in the equatorial region, which plays a pivotal role in the fusion of male and female gametes. In majority of the cells, positive immune labelling for KISS1 and KISS1R was detected around the neck part, which suggests its role in the sperm motility. Also, the immunoreactivity of both KISS1 and KISS1R were detected in the midpiece region in a lower number of the sperm (Trevisan et al., 2018).

However, the presence of GPR54 and its feasible role in the regulation of freshly ejaculated buffalo sperm motility is still unknown. Objective of this research was to investigate the expression of GPR54 on different regions of buffalo bull spermatozoa and its relationship with motility of the fresh sperm cells. Our hypothesis was this, that GPR54 expression will be the greatest on the sperm with highest motility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Animals: In the present study, four sexually mature and trained Nili Ravi buffalo bulls (Bubalus bubalis) aged 5-7 years with body weight 300-600 kg were selected from Animal Reproduction and Genetics Programme, National Agriculture Research Centre (NARC), Islamabad, Pakistan. These bulls were primarily considered and used for semen collection under standard conditions at the NARC. Bulls were individually housed and were properly nourished daily at 10:00-10:30 AM and 4:00 PM.

Semen collection: Semen was taken from each bull in a collection yard with artificial vagina (AV) at 42°C, during the month of March (low breeding season). From each animal two ejaculates were taken, the first one was in the morning 9-10 AM and the second ejaculate was collected half an hour later. Both samples were collected before feeding. After collection semen was transported quickly and diluted semen was suspended at the bottom of tube through a plastic Pasteur pipette. After an incubation period of 30-45 minutes at 37°C, three layers of semen were formed i.e. on the top, middle and bottom of the culture tube. The whole of the experimental setup for the desired method was carried out in the water bath at 37°C. From each layer (of approximately 1 ml) 20μl semen was taken in the eppendorf tubes to check viability of the sperm and also progressive motility under phase contrast microscope. Then 200 μl semen from each layer was taken on the frosted glass slide (Santa Cruz; Biotechnology, Taxas, USA) for smear formation. In this way three smears were made from each semen sample. The smears were dried under room temperature and fixed in chilled methanol at -20°C for 20 minutes. Later, these slides were processed for standard immunocytochemistry (ICC) procedure.

Viability test: Standard hypo-osmotic swelling test (HOST) was used to check sperm’s viability, originally illustrated by (Jeyendran et al., 1984). Two different solutions were prepared by dissolving 1.35 g fructose and 0.73 g sodium citrate in 0.11 of refined water. The osmolality of final solution was approximately 150 mOsm/kg. The procedure was carried out by mixing 50 μL of the specimen containing spermatozoa with 500 μL of pre-warmed hypo-osmotic solution (37°C) for 30-45 minutes. Incubated sample was observed under a phase-contrast microscope at 40X magnification. Approximately 200 sperm cells were counted in at least 10 different screen shots, with more than 10 spermatozoa in each field. Sperm cells having normal cell membrane were represented by coiled sperm tail.

Immunocytochemistry: To observe the GPR54 like immunoreactivity (ir) on fixed buffalo bull spermatozoa, the smears were processed for standard immunocytochemistry protocol. From each animal, three semen smears were obtained for GPR54 immunostaining. While three smears obtained randomly from one animal were used as control slides.

For immunostaining smears were incubated in anti-GPR54 antibody (Catalogue no. H-048-61; Phoenix Pharmaceuticals, Inc., Burlingame, California, USA, used at 1:500, diluted in PBS containing 0.03% TritonX-100, 0.05% BSA and 10% normal goat serum) for 48 hours in humidified chamber at 4°C. Next smears were incubated in Alexa Flour 488 goat anti rabbit (Catalogue no. ab150077; Abcam, Cambridge, UK secondary antibody, used at 1:400, diluted in PBS containing 0.03% TritonX-100 and 0.05% BSA) for 2 hours in dark at room temperature. At the end, coverslip was placed over the slide and kept at 4°C for drying, overnight.

Microscopy: Fluorescent microscope (AMEP-4615, Evos, Bothel, Washington, USA) was used to observe GPR54 like ir at different magnifications and screen shots were taken.
**Statistical analysis:** Total number of GPR54 like (ir) spermatozoa of each smear was calculated followed by the calculation of mean±SEM of GPR54 like ir spermatozoa per smear for each animal. Data were analyzed using one-way and two-way repeated measures ANOVA followed by the post hoc Tukey’s test. An association between sperm motility and GPR54 expression was examined by correlation procedure (GraphPad Prism version 5.01, GraphPad Software Inc., San Diego, CA, USA).

**RESULTS**

**Swim up motility:** TALP (sperm motility-stimulating media) based Swim Up procedure arranged the sperm in three layers according to motility (Fig. 1). One-way ANOVA along with Tukey’s Multiple Comparison Test revealed a significant difference (P<0.0001) between the three layers containing spermatozoa with respect to the progressive motility. The spermatozoa in the top most layers showed the highest motility (P<0.005) as compared to that in middle and lower layers. The hypo-osmotic swelling (HOS) test showed that the viability of the spermatozoa also increased from lower to upper layer, supporting the measurements obtained from sperm Swim Up.

![Fig. 1: Comparison of mean ± SEM swim up motility of buffalo bull spermatozoa (n=8) in the upper, middle and lower layers.](image)

GPR54 expression: GPR54 like ir was observed in 100% of sperm cells in smears (n=24) from all the three layers for all samples ejaculates (n=8) through fluorescent microscopy. GPR54 like ir was detected in head, neck/midpiece and tail regions of spermatozoa in different layers (Fig. 2a, 2b, 2c). Through visual observation a dense GPR54 expression was observed throughout the neck/midpiece regions of the spermatozoa locating in all the three layers. While, a 50-60% of the spermatozoa of all the three layers showed positive immunoreactivity in the tail region. However, no staining was observed with primary antibody omitted control spermatozoa prepared randomly from any buffalo bull negative control (Fig. 2d). Comparison of GPR54 like ir in different regions within each layer showed that GPR54 like ir was significantly lower in tail areas as compared to other regions (Fig. 3).

Interlayer comparison of mean number of GPR54 like ir in particular region observed in 200 studied sperm is presented in Fig. 4a. Two-way repeated measure ANOVA showed no effect of layer on GPR54 like ir. Similarly, mean total GPR54 like ir found at various regions of sperm observed in 200 studied sperm is compared across three layers. One-way ANOVA demonstrated no significant variation in number of GPR54 like ir sperm coming from the three layers (Fig. 4b). Moreover, no significant correlation was observed between total GPR54 like ir with respect to percentage motility of each layer of each animal (Fig. 4c).

**DISCUSSION**

This is the first study that evaluated the regional expression of GPR54 on buffalo spermatozoa having different motility qualities in order to understand the effect of kisspeptin signaling in monitoring sperm motility. Buffalo semen is widely used for artificial insemination (AI) and revealing the role of kisspeptin and its receptor in physiology of buffalo sperm could therefore, have translational implications. Present study clearly demonstrated the expression of GPR54 like ir in all regions of the sperm cell having different motility. Visually, very dense immunoreactivity was observed in neck/midpiece region. Our findings are consistent in this regard with the findings of Pinto et al. (2012) in the human sperms. It is also important to mention here that the expression of kisspeptin in the buffalo spermatozoa was also observed to be region specific (unpublished data).

Kisspeptin acts through KISS1R and activates a series of processes important for enhancing the sperm motility parameters (Pinto et al., 2012). In the present study, major GPR54 ir was observed around the head/midpiece and head portions. As these areas have been established to be important for motility (Hsu et al., 2014; Trevisan et al., 2018), our finding will suggest kisspeptin signalling may participate in control of motility. Sperm motility is essential for normal fertilization (Chang and Suarez, 2010). Indeed, exposure of kisspeptin to human spermatozoa resulted in enhanced motility (Pinto et al., 2012) and buffalo spermatozoa (unpublished data). Another finding of the present research showed that the GPR54 like ir was significantly lower in the tail region as compared to the other parts in sperm with different motility, which coincides with the study of Pinto et al. (2012), where a significant decrease in the expression of kisspeptin receptor was noted in the tail region when contrasted with the head part of human sperm. The presence of GPR54 especially at the head region of the spermatozoa highly suggests a local function of kisspeptin signalling, which may cause motility or alterations in the plasma membrane [Ca^{2+}] ion levels, resulting in the enhancement of buffalo bull spermatozoa. Although, principle result of the current research showed that regional GPR54 expression was similar in buffalo sperm showing different motility. GPR54 expression was similar in spermatozoa with clearly different motility characteristics. Our result appears to be in contrast to observation of Pinto et al. (2012), where kisspeptin exposure enhanced human sperm motility, but was decreased after the application of KISS1R antagonist, P234. Also our unpublished data supports the findings of Pinto et al. (2012), where the exposure of human kisspeptin-10 indicated a significant enhancement in rapid motile buffalo sperm.
Fig. 2: Representative photomicrographs showing GPR54 like immunoreactivity of buffalo bulls spermatozoa of all the bulls in all three layers i.e. upper, middle and lower (a, b, c respectively). Fluorescent immunocytochemistry was carried out using goat anti rabbit Alexa Fluor 488 secondary antibody. White arrows indicate GPR54 like ir. Control smears (d) were processed without primary antibody and showed no immunoreactivity. All images were taken at 40x magnification.

Fig. 3: Comparison of mean ± SEM GPR54 like ir on different sections of buffalo bull spermatozoa (n=8, Cell n=200), residing in the uppermost layer (a), middle layer (b) and lower layer (c). GPR54 like ir was significantly (**p<0.0001) lower in the tail region as compared to the other parts in all the three layers.

Fig. 4: Comparison of mean number of GPR54 like ir sperm showing in different regions, observed out of 200 studied sperm across three layers (a), comparison of mean total GPR54 like ir sperm/ 200 sperm observed from three layers (b) and comparison of total sperm GPR54 like ir in all animals across three layers (upper, middle and lower) with respect to %age motility of each layer for each animal (c).

Conclusions: The present study demonstrates that GPR54 is expressed in all parts of the freshly ejaculated buffalo bull spermatozoa, in which 100 % of the immune staining was observed in the upper regions (head, neck/midpiece) and the lower region (tail) showed 50-60% positive immune labelling. Moreover, GPR54 expression was similar in spermatozoa with clearly different motility parameters, which suggests that the buffalo sperm motility is not influenced by GPR54 expression on different regions of the sperm.
There may be a number of reasons for the non-significant association of GPR54 expression with the enhancement of motility of buffalo bull spermatozoa. It may be due to species difference; alternatively, it may be possible that endogenous kisspeptin signalling does not participate in mechanism underlying motility of buffalo bulls spermatozoa unlike human’s sperm where a significant enhancement in sperm progressive motility was noted. In this regard our previous observation in enhancement of buffalo bull sperm motility by exogenous kisspeptin may have been pharmacological and not physiological. Therefore, it is important that exposure of sperm cells to exogenous kisspeptin in physiological doses be studied to decipher physiological role of kisspeptin signalling regulating sperm motility. Alternatively, the notion that kisspeptin is involved in influencing other sperm functions through a covert pathway, cannot be excluded.

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