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## Body Image, Peer Pressure and Sexual Activity

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Whitney Miller is a senior Psychology Pre-Medicine major with a minor in Chemistry from St. Louis, MO. After graduating from Xavier, Miller plans to attend medical or graduate school or work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Her research interests include marriage and relationships, body image, peer pressure, and sexual activity. Miller's initial involvement with this project began as a project for her Experimental Psychology course that she later extended into her research project for her Introduction to Research course.

### Abstract

Yamamiya, Cash, and Thompson (2006) found that when women begin to obsess over their bodies and their overall physical attractiveness, especially when trying to attract the opposite sex, they begin to form a negative body image about themselves. However, although research has shown that body image is assessed when attempting to attract the opposite sex, the relationship between body image and peer pressure's influence on sexual activity has not been shown. Additionally, Whitbeck, Yoder, Hoyt, and Conger (1999) found that females with higher levels of self-esteem had significantly lower levels of sexual activity than those with lower levels of self-esteem. But, nothing has yet compared body image, peer pressure, and sexual activity. Thus, the aim of this study was to examine the effect of body image and peer pressure on the rate of sexual activity of college students. Undergraduate participants ( $N = 29$ ) voluntarily answered surveys containing questions regarding body image, peer pressure, and sexual activity. The results indicated that there were no significant relationships among participants' body image, peer pressure experience, and their rate of sexual activity. In future studies, these variables can be studied to establish their effects on the rate of sexual activity of college students.

### Key Terms:

- Body Image
- Peer Pressure
- Sexuality
- College Students

## Introduction

For many young adults, college is the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. In most cases, college is where young adults begin their lives, forming and shaping themselves into who they want to be and what they want to become in the future. According to Patrick, Maggs, and Abar (2007), due to new demands and opportunities, college is an ideal time to examine the personal goals or obstacles that play a role in young adults' lives. In college, however, there are many obstacles that test the character of a person. Three of the biggest challenges young adults may face are peer pressure, body image, and sexual activity. There is, however, some doubt as to whether each of these challenges affects the other. This study examines the relationship between peer pressure, body image, and sexual activity on a historically Black university's campus.

In Western society, it is common to see that the prototype of an attractive female body is for women to be thin. This image is shown in many television commercials that depict women appearing to be very slim and men fawning over them. A considerable amount of women do not fit this prototype. Shoemaker and Furman (2007) found that many women who do not look like what the media portrays may find that thinness is an acceptable and crucial part of being attractive. Furthermore, Yamamiya, Cash, and Thompson (2006) found that when women begin to obsess over their bodies and their overall physical attractiveness, especially when trying to attract the opposite sex, they begin to form a negative body image about themselves. With advertisements promoting a particular female body image, it is not surprising that young adults may begin to question their attractiveness and body image as a whole.

Following other researchers work, Franzoi and Shields (1984), for the purposes of the present study, negative body image is defined as a degrading view of one's body, making one's

physical appearance personally displeasing. Although the media is a constant source of idealism, many females may gain a negative body image from their peers on campus. According to Franzoi and Klaiber (2007), people's body image decreased when they compared themselves to others who closely matched society's ideas of physical attractiveness. Women may then begin to base their self-attractiveness not only on those with whom they compare themselves, whether it be peers or women in commercials, but also on the behaviors of their peers.

Next, in line with Franzoi and Klaiber (2007), peer pressure is defined as an influence on the decision of others, causing them to conform to what peers or society desire. Note that peer pressure can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. As much as people can be pressured into doing something they may not want to do, such as having sex, they can also be pressured to do something that is beneficial to them, like earning good grades. The pressure to conform to what is acceptable or to what is desired is a daily obstacle for many. Assuming that peers have heavy influences on each other, given the amount of time they interact, it is safe to conclude that peer pressure can greatly influence many activities that go on in young adults' lives.

Body image and peer pressure can affect a young adult's life on a regular basis. However, these two are not the only things that affect young people. Sexual activity also affects a young person's life, especially on a college campus. To show a negative relationship between peer pressure and sexual activity by means of self-esteem, Whitbeck, Yoder, Hoyt, and Conger (1999) found that females, grades eight through ten, with higher levels of self-esteem had significantly lower levels of sexual activity than those with lower levels of self-esteem. This shows that in adolescents, self-esteem was influential in levels of sexual activity. It could then be plausible that self-esteem would

be influential in levels of sexual activity in other young adults.

Patrick, Maggs, and Abar (2007) found that when college students were asked why they decided to have sex, having someone to love and being loved were some of the most common answers. The peer pressure of having someone to love or being loved produces a desire to be wanted and a need for conformity among college students. Eshbaugh and Gute (2008) found that college women who regretted having sex with someone only had sex in the first place because they felt pressured in to it. In addition, Meana and Nunnink (2005) found that women who had a negative body image focused on themselves while having sex instead of focusing on their partner or the act of sex itself. This example shows a relationship not only between body image and sexual activity, but also peer pressure and sexual activity because, in this case, the female is not enjoying the act of sex itself, and she is participating in the act mainly because of her partner. Both body image and sexual activity, and peer pressure and sexual activity have been shown to be related among young adults on college campuses. Sexual activity plays a role together with body image and peer pressure, and also by itself in young adult's lives.

Researchers have defined sexual activity in numerous ways. For the purpose of this study, sexual activity will be defined as sexual intercourse including vaginal sex, anal sex, and oral sex. However, some young adults may have a different definition of sex. Knox, Zusman, and McNeely (2008) found that undergraduates at a southeastern university believed that oral sex was not really sex and that cybersex was not necessarily cheating if one was in a relationship. Sexual activity on college campuses may also have something to do with why some students decide to have sex and why some do not. Leigh (1989) found that women may decide to have sex as an expression of their love and feelings to their partner, whereas men may decide to have sex

purely for lust or sexual conquest. According to Kaestle and Halpern (2007), some college students believe that if feelings are not reciprocated, sex can strengthen the relationship.

Although body image, peer pressure, and sexual activity are all obstacles in young adult's lives, it appears that when people enter college, they are constantly faced with these and many other crucial obstacles. I hypothesize that peer pressure and body image have a strong association with the prevalence of sexual activity among college campuses. The more positive participants' body image is, the lower their sexual activity will be. The higher the participants' peer pressure experience is, the higher their sexual activity will be.

## Method

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 29 undergraduate students from a historically Black university. Any undergraduate student of any ethnicity and age could volunteer to participate in a study about body image, peer pressure, and sexual activity among college campuses. The sample consisted of males and females of different classification levels and as an incentive, participants were offered a study credit or extra credit for their psychology class at the discretion of their teacher.

### *Materials*

The first variable that was measured was body image. To measure body image, participants completed the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984). The Body Esteem Scale indicated how participants felt about their body image as they rated themselves. On this scale, participants rated their body image, measuring 35 body parts and functions on a 5-point Likert scale with "1" being "strong negative feelings" and "5" being "strong positive feelings." Possible scores ranged from 35 to 175. Higher numbers indicated a higher body image.

The second variable that was measured was peer pressure. To measure peer pressure, participants completed the Peer Pressure, Popularity, and Conformity Scale (Santor, Messervey & Kusumakar, 2000). The Peer Pressure, Popularity, and Conformity Scale indicated how participants felt about the experiences they had with peer pressure, popularity, and conformity. On this scale, participants rated 30 items divided into the three topics of peer pressure, popularity, and conformity on a 5-point Likert scale with “1” being “strongly disagree” and “5” being “strongly agree.” Possible scores ranged from 30 to 150. Higher numbers indicated greater peer pressure when making choices.

The third and final variable that was measured was sexual activity. To measure sexual activity, participants completed the Attitudes Towards Condoms Scale (Brown, 1984). The Attitude Towards Condoms Scale indicated participants’ rate of sexual activity. On this scale, participants rated 40 items on a 5-point Likert scale with “1” being “strongly disagree” and “5” being “strongly agree.” Possible scores ranged from 40 to 200. Higher numbers indicated higher rates of sexual activity and more positive feelings about sexual activity.

### *Design and Procedure*

Upon arrival, participants were informed that they did not have to stay for the duration of the study and were allowed to leave at any time they chose. Participants were given a packet containing an informed consent waiver, a demographic survey, a blank copy of the Body Esteem Scale, a blank copy of the Peer Pressure, Popularity, and Conformity Scale, a blank copy of the Attitudes Toward Condoms Scale, and a debriefing statement. The informed consent form was collected before participants began answering the surveys. When the participants completed the surveys, they were asked not to talk, and no other participant was allowed in the room once

informed consent waivers had been collected. Researchers collected the surveys from the participants, and the participants were asked to carefully read the debriefing statement that explained the purposes of this study. The researchers assured participants that all answers given in the surveys would remain anonymous. The researchers then thanked participants for filling out the survey, and participants were asked to identify the professor for whom they would receive extra credit.

## **Results**

A Pearson correlation was calculated to examine the relationship between participants’ sexual activity and body image, peer pressure, popularity, and conformity. Between body image and sexual activity, a weak correlation was found, which means that the relationship was not significant,  $r(28) = .163, p > .05$ . Between peer pressure and sexual activity, a weak insignificant negative correlation was found,  $r(28) = -.183, p > .05$ . Between popularity and sexual activity, a weak insignificant correlation was found,  $r(28) = .019, p > .05$ . Between conformity and sexual activity, a weak insignificant correlation was found,  $r(28) = .012, p > .05$ . This study’s hypothesis was not supported, as there was no significant relationship between the variables measured.

## **Discussion**

The results did not support the hypothesis that participants who have a more positive body image will have lower sexual activity and that participants who have a higher peer pressure experience will also have higher levels of sexual activity. However, these results are not completely useless. The results of the study indicate that participants’ view of their body image had no considerable effect on their rate of sexual activity. Also, the results indicate that participants’ experience with peer pressure had no considerable effect on their rate of sexual activity. Therefore,

the results suggest that college students are more secure with their decisions regarding sexual activity and that few, if any, outside influences affect this decision.

Limitations for this study include a lack of demographic information and design flaws. The participants were not asked to give their ethnic identification thus there was no way to determine if a correlation between ethnicity and the variables studied was present. In addition, design flaws such as unclear survey directions may have lead to participants being confused about the questions being asked and how they were to respond to each question. Other limitations for this study include the limited samples of males: out of 30 participants, only three were male. Thus, the study was biased because there was not enough male input to have an even amount of responses from male and female participants. In addition, past research examining the variables of peer pressure and sexual activity reported that there was a significant relationship between the two, suggesting that there would also be significant results in this study.

Future researchers that replicate this study's design should first ask all participants to identify their ethnic identities in order to understand how ethnicity affects the variables studied. Next, all questions should be clarified in the surveys in an effort to make sure the participants know what they are being asked. Also, the number of male participants should be increased to aid in the effort of making the results non-biased. Furthermore, the effects of body image and peer pressure experience of participants between the ages of 12 to 27 should be studied because it would be determinable at what age body image and peer pressure experience play a role in participants' rate of sexual activity. Lastly, this study should be made experimental to discover if manipulating the variables has any effect on what participants think about the relationships between body image, peer pressure experience, and the rate of sexual

activity. By making this study experimental, future researchers may find relationships between variables that were not present in this study. For example, in an experimental study, participants could be provided with different images of people and then be asked to rate the body image of the person depicted. This might show how people rate others' body image and if any factors affect these ratings, such as age, skin tone, or weight.

The preset study is unique and useful in its design. There have been previous studies measuring peoples' body image in relation to self-esteem or measuring people's sexual activity in relation to age. However, this study measures body image, peer pressure and sexual activity, comparing the three against each other in order to determine if there is a significant relationship present. This is important because future researchers will be able to learn about the factors, if any, that affect sexual activity in people, which can then be applied to various fields such as sex education programs, population statistics, and future psychologists' work.

While this study found no significant results between body image, peer pressure, and the rate of sexual activity of college students, future participants may use the measures given to assess their own body image, peer pressure experience, and the effect they have on their rate of sexual activity in college. Future researchers may also use the results found in this study to better assess what factors, if any, affect the rate of sexual activity of college students.

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**Table 1: Correlations Between Variables**

|            |                 | ESTEEM | PEER | POPULARITY | CONFORMITY | ACT. |
|------------|-----------------|--------|------|------------|------------|------|
| ESTEEM     | Sig. (2-tailed) |        | .139 | .949       | .982       | .399 |
|            | N               | 29     | 29   | 29         | 29         | 29   |
| PEER       | Sig. (2-tailed) | -.281  |      | .019       | .295       | .341 |
|            | N               | 29     | 29   | 29         | 29         | 29   |
| POPULARITY | Sig. (2-tailed) | .949   | .019 |            | .793       | .924 |
|            | N               | 29     | 29   | 29         | 29         | 29   |
| CONFORMITY | Sig. (2-tailed) | .982   | .295 | .793       |            | .951 |
|            | N               | 29     | 29   | 29         | 29         | 29   |
| ACT.       | Sig. (2-tailed) | .399   | .341 | .924       | .951       |      |
|            | N               | 29     | 29   | 29         | 29         | 29   |

- Correlations are significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## Appendix A: Body Esteem Scale

Instructions: On this page are listed a number of body parts and functions. Please read each item and indicate how you feel about this part or function of your own body using the following scale:

- 1 = Have strong negative feelings  
 2 = Have moderate negative feelings  
 3 = Have no feeling one way or the other  
 4 = Have moderate positive feelings  
 5 = Have strong positive feelings

### *Factor Loading (see below)*

| Male                 | Female |                           |                           |
|----------------------|--------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
|                      |        | 12. biceps                | 24. legs                  |
| 1. body scent        |        | 13. chin                  | 25. figure or physique    |
| 2. appetite          |        | 14. body build            | 26. sex drive             |
| 3. nose              |        | 15. physical coordination | 27. feet                  |
| 4. physical stamina  |        | 16. buttocks              | 28. sex organs            |
| 5. reflexes          |        | 17. agility               | 29. appearance of stomach |
| 6. lips              |        | 18. width of shoulders    | 30. health                |
| 7. muscular strength |        | 19. arms                  | 31. sex activities        |
| 8. waist             |        | 20. chest or breasts      | 32. body hair             |
| 9. energy level      |        | 21. appearance of eyes    | 33. physical condition    |
| 10. thighs           |        | 22. cheeks/cheekbones     | 34. face                  |
| 11. ears             |        | 23. hips                  | 35. weight                |

## Appendix B: Peer Pressure, Popularity and Conformity Scale

Instructions: On this page are listed a number of items. Please read each item and indicate how you feel about each item using the following scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Slightly Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Slightly Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

Note: These items should be answered in response to collegiate life.

### Peer Pressure Items

- My friends could push me into doing just about anything
- I give into peer pressure easily
- When at school, if a group of people asked me to do something, it would be hard to say no.
- At, times, I've broken rules because others have urged me to do so
- At times, I've done dangerous or foolish things because others dared me to.
- I often feel pressured to do things I wouldn't normally do
- If my friends are drinking, it would be hard for me to resist having a drink
- I've skipped classes, when others have urged me to
- I've felt pressured to have sex, because a lot of people my own age have already had sex
- I've felt pressured to get drunk at parties
- At times, I've felt pressured to do drugs, because others have urged me too

**Popularity Items**

- I have done things to make me more popular, even when it meant doing something I would not usually do
- I've neglected some friends because of what other people might think
- At times, I've ignored some people in order to be more popular with others
- I'd do almost anything to avoid being seen as a "loser"
- It's important that people think I'm popular
- At times, I've gone out with people, just because they were popular
- I've bought things, because they were the "in" things to have
- At times, I've changed the way I dress in order to be more popular
- I've been friends with some people, just because others liked them.
- I've gone to parties, just to be part of the crowd
- I often do things just to be popular with the people at school
- At times, I've hung out with some people, so others wouldn't think I was unpopular

**Conformity Items**

- If a teacher asks me to do something, I usually do it
- I usually do what I am told
- I usually obey my parents
- I follow my parents' wishes even when it means not doing something I want to do
- Even when I disagree with my parents' wishes, I usually do what I am told
- I break rules frequently
- I rarely follow the rules

## Appendix C: Attitude Toward Condoms Scale

Instructions: Please read each item and write the answer that corresponds to how you feel about what is being said.

\* If you have never had sex, put NA for each answer

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**SD**-Strongly Disagree; **D**-Disagree; **U**-Undecided; **A**-Agree; **SA**-Strongly Agree

- \_\_\_ 1. In my opinion, condoms are too much trouble.
- \_\_\_ 2. Condoms are unreliable.
- \_\_\_ 3. Condoms are pleasant to use.
- \_\_\_ 4. The neatness of condoms, for example, no wet spot on the bed, makes them attractive.
- \_\_\_ 5. I see the use of condoms as adding to the excitement of foreplay if the female partner helps the male put it in place.
- \_\_\_ 6. I would be willing to try a condom, even if I have never used one before.
- \_\_\_ 7. There is no reason why a woman should be embarrassed to suggest a condom.
- \_\_\_ 8. Women think men who use condoms show concern and caring.
- \_\_\_ 9. I intend to try condoms.
- \_\_\_ 10. I think proper use of the condom can enhance sexual pleasure.
- \_\_\_ 11. Many people make use of the condom as an erotic part of foreplay.
- \_\_\_ 12. All things considered, condoms seem safer to me than any other form of contraception except abstinence.
- \_\_\_ 13. I just don't like the idea of using condoms.
- \_\_\_ 14. I think condoms look ridiculous.

- \_\_\_ 15. Condoms are inconvenient.
- \_\_\_ 16. I see no reason to be embarrassed by the use of condoms.
- \_\_\_ 17. Putting a condom on an erect penis can be a real sexual turn-on.
- \_\_\_ 18. Condoms are uncomfortable.
- \_\_\_ 19. Using a condom makes sex unenjoyable.
- \_\_\_ 20. I would avoid using condoms if at all possible.
- \_\_\_ 21. I would be comfortable suggesting that my partner and I use a condom.
- \_\_\_ 22. Condoms ruin the sex act.
- \_\_\_ 23. Condoms are uncomfortable for both partners.
- \_\_\_ 24. Women think men who use condoms are jerks.
- \_\_\_ 25. The idea of using a condom doesn't appeal to me.
- \_\_\_ 26. Use of the condom is an interruption of foreplay.
- \_\_\_ 27. What to do with a condom after use is a real problem.
- \_\_\_ 28. The thought of using a condom is disgusting.
- \_\_\_ 29. Having to stop to put on a condom takes all the romance out of sex.
- \_\_\_ 30. Most women don't like for their partners to use condoms.
- \_\_\_ 31. I don't think condoms interfere with the enjoyment of sex.
- \_\_\_ 32. There is no way that using a condom can be pleasant.
- \_\_\_ 33. Using a condom requires taking time out of foreplay, which interrupts the pleasure of sex.
- \_\_\_ 34. I think condoms are an excellent means of contraception.
- \_\_\_ 35. Condoms seem unreliable.
- \_\_\_ 36. There is no reason why a man should be embarrassed to suggest using a condom.
- \_\_\_ 37. To most women, a man who uses a condom is sexier than one who leaves protection up to the

woman.

- \_\_\_ 38. The condom is a highly satisfactory form of contraception.
- \_\_\_ 39. I would have no objection if my partner suggested that we use a condom.
- \_\_\_ 40. The skillful woman can make placing a condom a highly erotic experience.

### Appendix D: Demographic Survey

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your gender?
  - A. Male
  - B. Female
2. What is your age?
3. What is your classification?
  - A. Freshman
  - B. Sophomore
  - C. Junior
  - D. Senior
  - E. Pharmacy School
4. What is your major?
5. What is your minor?



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