

Perceptions of body image linked to sexual dysfunction

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After working with adolescents for several years before her time at the University of Missouri, Virginia Ramseyer Winter noticed most of the teens she interacted with were dissatisfied with their bodies, regardless of the size and shape of their body.

Now the director of the MU Center for Body Image Research & Policy,

Ramseyer Winter is focusing on the positive rather than the negative and how that impacts the pleasure people experience when engaging in intimate behavior, up to and including [sexual intercourse](#).

"One of the things that I like about this study is that when researchers talk about sexual health and sexual function, they're almost always talking about negative [sexual health](#) and [sexual dysfunction](#)," Ramseyer Winter said. "This study certainly addresses that. However, it also talks about pleasure, and I think that's also important because we don't just want to reduce the negative outcomes, we actually want to improve the positive ones, too. It's vital that people, no matter their age or relationship status, feel as comfortable as possible during [sexual encounters](#) to reduce self-consciousness and improve mental well-being."

In a new study published in *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*, Ramseyer Winter, an assistant professor in the MU School of Social Work, analyzed the relationship between body image and sexual function in sexual encounters between two strangers or brief acquaintances. These encounters that include intimate behavior ranging from cuddling and heavy petting to sexual intercourse are known as "hookups."

The researchers not only found that negatively perceived body image is correlated to sexual malfunction for people engaging in hookups, but also that positively perceived body image is correlated to increased pleasure during sexual activities.

The study specifically focused on hookups by talking to both male and female volunteers identifying as varying sexualities. Of the study participants, 62% of the women identified as heterosexual and 43% of the men identified as heterosexual. Other participants were listed as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer and other. Ramseyer Winter said the study pushes the bounds of what has been studied before.

"This is the first study that we know of to look at men as well as women, and it is certainly the first study to look at hookup culture in relation to body image," Ramseyer Winter said. "We don't know much about folks who are hooking up in terms of body image and sexual function."

The researchers found the participants through a variety of different online forums in an effort to gather a diverse group. To be included in the study, participants must have used online apps like Tinder, Bumble and/or Grindr to hook up with someone in the past 30 days.

Researchers then conducted survey using several validated scales determining sexual function, pleasure and body image. Ramseyer Winter says that the research can particularly help young adults who are often relatively new to sexual activities.

"Many of those who are hooking up are likely to be more traditionally college student-aged, so I think this information can be used on college campuses," Ramseyer Winter said. "We may be able to use it to develop interventions that improve body image among anyone that is hooking up to help improve their [sexual function](#), and this research could be used as a guide to conducting future studies that help us understand these relationships among other demographics."

"Sexual function in hook-up culture: The role of [body image](#)" was published recently in *Body Image*.

More information: Virginia Ramseyer Winter et al. Sexual function in hook-up culture: The role of body image, *Body Image* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.05.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.05.010)

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