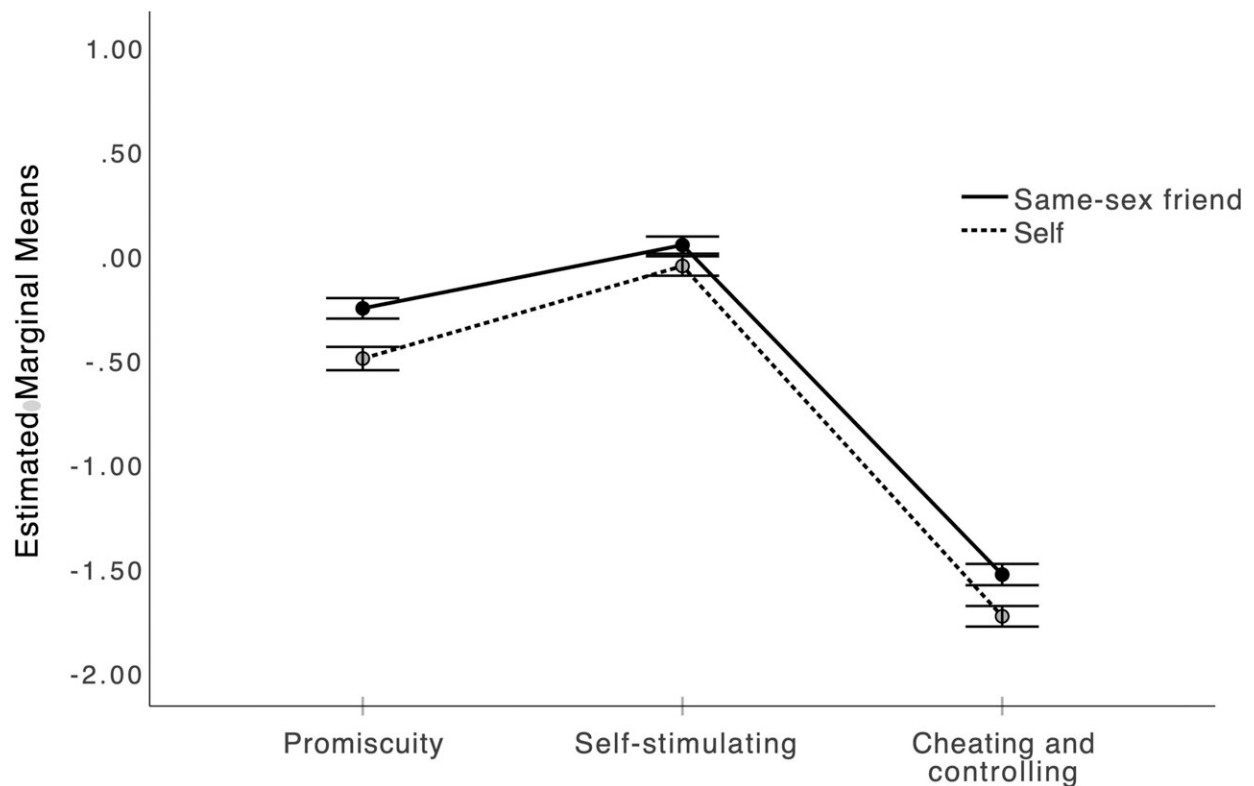


# Sexually active women are not judged more harshly than men, says study

May 16 2023, by Steinar Brandslet



Appraisals of same-sex friend (solid line) and self-reported likelihood (dotted line) of entering into a relationship with a suitor depending on whether they have a sexual history of promiscuity, self-stimulation, or cheating & controlling.

Credit: *Evolutionary Psychology* (2023). DOI: 10.1177/14747049231165687

Maybe you too have bought into the idea that men with numerous sexual

partners are actually admired, while women with the same are condemned—the so-called sexual double standard. But that turns out to be a myth, according to a new survey.

"We haven't found that [women](#) are subjected to the traditional double standards," says Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair, a professor at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

On the contrary, men are judged a little more strictly than women when it comes to short-term [sexual encounters](#). But the myth is tenacious, and a lot of people believe it.

## **Double standards are a myth**

"Everyone believes that women are exposed to a greater degree of social control than men. But that's not what we found when we asked people how they rate women's and men's sexual behavior. People are far more liberal themselves than they assume society is," says Mons Bendixen, also a professor in the same department.

"A lot of the previous research has likely focused only on [long-term relationships](#) and not short-term sexual encounters. This might contribute to the myth, although we didn't find signs of double standards there either," Kennair says.

The NTNU professors collaborated with two international researchers, Andrew G. Thomas, a senior lecturer at Swansea University and David M. Buss from the University of Texas at Austin.

"This research adds weight to the growing body of evidence that sexual double standards, while an enduring and alluring part of folk psychology, have very little basis in reality," says Thomas.

## **Jealousy, infidelity, control—and masturbation too**

The research group investigated how heterosexual Norwegian women and men evaluate potential partners based on their sexual history. Unlike previous research, they were asked to evaluate them as prospective partners for their male and female friends.

The participants were told the [potential partners'](#) number of prior sexual partners, but also the person's history of jealousy, infidelity, controlling behavior and masturbation. More than 900 people took part in the survey.

The participants were asked to rate prospective partners on behalf of friends, and to say how strongly they would recommend the partners for them.

The study was grounded in Sexual Strategies Theory, which explains the differences in how men and women approach short-term and long-term mating. The survey results are clear.

## **Men judged more strictly for one-night stands**

Kennair says the main findings can be summarized as follows: "We found no double standard for long-term relationships, while for short-term relationships, men are judged more strictly, in other words a reversed double standard."

"And both sexes are judged more strictly for long-term relationships than for one-night stands. This is new and important knowledge," says Bendixen.

The requirements are therefore higher for entering into long-term

relationships than for short-term relationships. Men are judged most harshly for short-term relationships.

A lot of people will probably reject this finding, because it is regarded as almost an absolute truth that sexually experimenting women are judged more severely than men are. But that doesn't make the belief any truer.

The criticism of people who have numerous sexual relationships is not that strong. It may be slightly frowned upon, but not much, and criticism is about the same between the sexes.

## **Why would men judge women?**

The professors were not particularly surprised by the results.

"Why on Earth would men judge women who want to have sex with them?" Kennair said.

Nor are the professors surprised that the opposite might actually be the case under certain conditions.

The latter—women judging men—is probably related to the fact that women are generally more skeptical of certain forms of sexual behavior than men are.

Women are therefore slightly more skeptical than men if a potential short-term partner for a friend has had a lot of sexual relationships in their history or is very sexually active.

## **Men like women who masturbate**

When it comes to self-stimulation, most people are even less judgmental

than about having multiple partners. Women who masturbate are actually judged less negatively than men are, especially in short-term relationships.

"Men find it sexy when women masturbate," says Kennair.

This is no surprise either, and the research supports what you probably already figured out. On the whole, there's darn little to indicate that many people care whether people masturbate or not. The vast majority think it's perfectly fine.

"Far from damning women's use of masturbation, men were very open to it, particularly in short-term contexts. This is exactly what we'd expect based on [evolutionary theory](#) which posits that men will be interested in cues to sexual access," says Thomas.

However, not all behavior is acceptable.

## **Cheating and controlling behavior are not OK**

"Prospective partners with a history of infidelity, jealousy and controlling behavior are perceived as strongly negative for both sexes. This applies equally to male and female partners," says Bendixen.

If you're easily tempted to cheat or constantly accuse your partner of cheating, you risk damaging your reputation and future opportunities.

"This view applies to both short-term and long-term sexual relationships. In particular, it relates to how the participants judged someone's suitability for a long-term sexual [relationship](#)," says Bendixen.

These habits are therefore most serious when a person considers whether extending the relationship beyond more than a night or two is worth it.

People don't want that kind of partner, either for themselves or someone they know.

"A history of cheating and controlling behavior is more problematic when people are considering partners for a long-term relationship—both for themselves and for their friends," says Kennair.

## **Religion, disgust and your own openness**

The research group also examined factors like religiosity, the tendency to feel sexual disgust, and individuals' own interest in having short-term sexual relationships.

"These factors are linked to whether participants would advise their friends to enter into sexual relations with partners who have an extensive sexual history," says Kennair.

More specifically, people who are the least religious, who aren't much bothered if someone has sex in the next room, and are themselves more open to casual sex, are more likely to advise their friends to have sex with people who have had numerous partners, who masturbate a lot or who are controlling or unfaithful.

"Openness to short-term sexual encounters is the only individual factor that influenced these recommendations more for female friends than for male friends," says Bendixen.

In other words: If you yourself are more open to short-term sex, you're more likely to recommend a like-minded person as a [partner](#) for a female friend.

## **Findings apply to people in the West and people we**

## don't know

Two points should be mentioned here. The first is that we tend to be stricter towards family and close relatives than we are towards strangers. We want them to find particularly good partners, and this has both biological and cultural explanations.

"But we're not closely related to the vast majority of people," says Kennair.

We also need to remember that all of these findings are relevant in the West, specifically Europe and North America. The researchers do not know how these issues are perceived in other parts of the world where religious and other cultural factors could influence the results—or might not.

"This is the first investigation of sexual double standards in Norwegian society, but the results aren't an artifact of the sample—a lack of sexual double standards is emerging in every culture we study," says Thomas.

The study is published in the journal *Evolutionary Psychology*.

**More information:** Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair et al, Examining the Sexual Double Standards and Hypocrisy in Partner Suitability Appraisals Within a Norwegian Sample, *Evolutionary Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/14747049231165687](https://doi.org/10.1177/14747049231165687)

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Citation: Sexually active women are not judged more harshly than men, says study (2023, May 16) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-sexually-women->

[harshly-men.html](#)

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.