



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## Sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy in unmarried couples

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### Abstract

The present study examined the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy (at present) among unmarried couples. A quantitative correlational design was used, and data were collected from 151 unmarried individuals through standardized self-report measures. Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to assess the association between the variables. The results showed a significant negative correlation between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy ( $r = -0.244$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). This indicates that higher levels of sexual self-consciousness are associated with lower levels of current sexual intimacy. Individuals who experience greater self-focused concerns and fear of evaluation during sexual situations may find it difficult to engage fully in intimate relationships. The findings suggest that reducing sexual self-consciousness may help improve emotional and physical closeness among unmarried couples. Overall, a significant relationship exists between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy

**Keywords:** Sexual Self-Consciousness; Sexual Intimacy; Unmarried Couples; Intimacy; Psychological Factors

### 1. Introduction

Research on human sexuality has gradually shifted from an emphasis on physiological functioning and disease prevention to a broader focus on sexual well-being, satisfaction, self-concept, intimacy, and attachment. Contemporary perspectives recognize sexuality as a multidimensional experience shaped by psychological, relational, and sociocultural factors. Within this framework, an individual's perception of themselves as a sexual being plays a central role in influencing sexual functioning, satisfaction, and relational health. One key component of the sexual self is sexual self-consciousness, which reflects heightened awareness and evaluation of oneself during sexual activity. The present study focuses on sexual self-consciousness and its relationship with sexual intimacy in unmarried romantic relationships.

Changes in relationship patterns have made the study of unmarried couples increasingly relevant. Traditional relationship sequences have shifted, with cohabitation and premarital intimacy becoming common, particularly in Western cultures (Stanley et al., 2004). Research suggests that nearly two-thirds of newly married couples cohabited prior to marriage (Manning et al., 2014). As a result, non-marital relationships such as dating and cohabitation should be examined as distinct relational systems rather than transitional phases. The degree of emotional security, trust, and commitment in these relationships plays a crucial role in shaping vulnerability and intimacy.

Sexual intimacy refers to shared physical and emotional closeness between partners and extends beyond sexual acts to include trust, emotional safety, responsiveness, and vulnerability. Positive sexual intimacy enhances relationship satisfaction, emotional security, and psychological well-being. However, sexual intimacy is also a context in which individuals may feel exposed and evaluated, activating concerns related to appearance, performance, desirability, and acceptance. For some individuals, these concerns interfere with pleasure and emotional connection, highlighting the importance of examining psychological barriers to intimacy.

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Sexual self-consciousness (SSC) involves heightened concern about one's appearance, bodily responses, and perceived partner evaluation during sexual activity. Individuals high in SSC tend to engage in excessive self-monitoring, directing attention inward rather than toward physical sensations or emotional connection. This inward focus often disrupts sexual arousal, reduces pleasure, and interferes with authentic engagement. SSC is commonly associated with embarrassment, anxiety, shame, and fear of negative evaluation, which can contribute to avoidance of intimacy and lower relationship satisfaction over time.

A key mechanism underlying SSC is spectating, a cognitive process in which individuals observe and evaluate themselves during sexual activity rather than remaining present in the experience. This form of cognitive distraction consumes attentional resources and inhibits arousal, contributing to diminished sexual satisfaction and functioning. Research has consistently linked sexual self-consciousness to reduced desire, impaired arousal, difficulty achieving orgasm, and lower relationship satisfaction.

Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) provides a foundational framework for understanding the origins of sexual self-consciousness, particularly among women. This theory posits that women are frequently socialized to view themselves through an external evaluative lens, leading to self-objectification, body surveillance, and body shame. These processes have been associated with negative mental health outcomes and sexual difficulties. Sexual situations may intensify self-objectification, increase body monitoring and reduce sexual presence.

Attachment theory further explains how relational insecurities influence sexual self-consciousness and intimacy. Insecure attachment styles, characterized by anxiety or avoidance, are associated with fear of rejection, emotional distancing, and reduced sexual communication. Anxiously attached individuals may seek intimacy as reassurance, while avoidantly attached individuals may suppress intimacy to maintain emotional distance. Both patterns can heighten self-consciousness during sexual encounters and disrupt emotional closeness.

Social Cognitive Theory highlights the behavioral pathway linking self-concept to intimacy. A positive sexual self-concept is associated with greater sexual communication self-efficacy, facilitating clearer expression of needs and boundaries. Effective communication strengthens intimacy, whereas heightened sexual self-consciousness undermines this process by inhibiting openness and responsiveness.

Sexual self-consciousness is also shaped by sociocultural influences. Sexual Script Theory (Gagnon and Simon, 1973) suggests that individuals internalize cultural expectations regarding sexual behavior, appearance, and performance. Media portrayals frequently reinforce unrealistic beauty standards, contributing to body surveillance and appearance-related anxiety (Ward, 2016). Gender socialization further intensifies these pressures, with women reporting higher levels of sexual self-consciousness and body-related anxiety during intimacy (Wiederman, 2000).

Emerging adulthood is marked by exploration in love and relationships, with many individuals engaging in sexual intimacy prior to marriage (Arnett, 2004). In sociocultural contexts where premarital sexuality is stigmatized, unmarried individuals may experience guilt, fear of judgment, and heightened self-monitoring. Commitment ambiguity in unmarried relationships can further increase psychological stress, activating self-protective strategies that undermine vulnerability and intimacy.

Empirical evidence consistently supports the link between sexual self-consciousness and intimacy-related outcomes. Studies have shown that higher SSC is associated with increased sexual anxiety, reduced sexual satisfaction, and diminished emotional connection (Dove and Wiederman, 2000; Sanchez and Kiefer, 2007). Impett et al. (2014) emphasized that emotional presence and responsiveness are essential to intimacy and are compromised when individuals are preoccupied with self-evaluation.

In summary, sexual self-consciousness emerges as a critical psychological factor influencing sexual intimacy. High levels of self-monitoring and evaluative concern undermine vulnerability, communication, and mindful presence, which are essential for healthy intimacy. Given the increasing prevalence of unmarried romantic relationships and the sociocultural pressures surrounding premarital sexuality, examining the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy among unmarried couples is both timely and necessary.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research design

The present study adopts a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy among unmarried couples. This design is appropriate, as it allows for the systematic measurement of variables and the examination of associations without manipulation. Standardized psychometric instruments are used to ensure reliability and validity of measurements. The design does not aim to establish causality but focuses on identifying the direction and strength of relationships between the variables.

### 2.2. Participants

The study included 150 unmarried young adults (N = 150) who were currently involved in romantic relationships, including dating or cohabiting partnerships. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure that they met the primary inclusion criterion of being in an unmarried romantic relationship at the time of data collection.

The sampling approach was chosen to obtain participants who were directly relevant to the research objectives, thereby enabling an accurate examination of the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy among unmarried individuals in romantic relationships.

### 2.3. Materials and Instruments

#### 2.3.1. Sexual Self-Consciousness Scale (SSCS)

The Sexual Self-Consciousness Scale (SSCS) was used to measure the level of sexual self-consciousness experienced by individuals during sexual activity. The scale was developed by Van Lankveld et al. (2004) to assess self-focused attention, embarrassment, and body-related anxiety that may arise in sexual situations. The SSCS provided a comprehensive assessment of cognitive and emotional concerns related to sexual self-evaluation.

The SSCS has demonstrated strong psychometric properties. Previous studies reported good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .84 to .90 (Van Lankveld et al., 2004). The scale also demonstrated adequate construct validity through its significant associations with related constructs such as sexual anxiety and sexual functioning.

The scale consisted of items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The total score was obtained by summing all item responses, with higher scores indicating higher levels of sexual self-consciousness. Scoring was carried out in accordance with the guidelines provided by the authors.

#### 2.3.2. Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Inventory – Sexual Intimacy Subscale

The Sexual Intimacy subscale of the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Inventory was used to assess perceived sexual intimacy within romantic relationships. The PAIR Inventory was developed by Schaefer and Olson (1981) to measure multiple dimensions of intimacy, including emotional, social, intellectual, recreational, and sexual intimacy. The Sexual Intimacy subscale specifically focused on comfort, closeness, and openness in sexual interactions between partners.

The PAIR Inventory has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with the Sexual Intimacy subscale showing good internal consistency and evidence of construct validity (Schaefer and Olson, 1981). The subscale has been widely used in relationship research and has been shown to correlate significantly with relationship satisfaction and adjustment.

The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Certain items were reverse scored as specified in the scoring manual. The total sexual intimacy score was calculated by summing the item scores after reverse scoring, with higher scores indicating greater perceived sexual intimacy.

### 2.4. Procedure

The present study examined the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy among unmarried couples using a quantitative, correlational research design. Participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. All participants were informed about the research's ethical standards and provided written informed consent prior to their participation.

Data were collected using the paper-and-pencil method. Participants first completed a socio-demographic data sheet, which included their gender, educational qualifications, and relationship status. They then completed standardized questionnaires to assess the study variables. Sexual self-consciousness was measured using the Sexual Self-Consciousness Scale (SSCS; Van Lankveld et al., 2004), and sexual intimacy was assessed with the Sexual Intimacy subscale of the PAIR Inventory (Schaefer and Olson, 1981). Clear instructions were provided, and participants were encouraged to respond honestly. Adequate time was given, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.

After completion, the responses were collected and scored according to the respective scoring manuals. The data were then coded and analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient to examine the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy among unmarried couples. All procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

## 2.5. Statistical analysis

The data collected were analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient to examine the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy among unmarried couples. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were calculated to summarize the participants' scores on both variables. All analyses were conducted using statistical software, and results were interpreted at a 0.05 level of significance.

## 2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to data collection. The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and no identifying information was recorded or disclosed. The collected data were used solely for academic and research purposes.

## 3. Results

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of Sexual Self-consciousness and Sexual Intimacy (at present)

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Deviation</b>
Sexual Self Consciousness Levels	151	21.29	8.403
Sexual Intimacy (at present)	151	22.63	4.822

Table 1 indicates the descriptive statistics for Sexual Self-consciousness levels and Sexual Intimacy (at present). The mean score of Sexual Self-consciousness levels is 21.29, with a standard deviation of 8.403, indicating a moderate level of self-focused attention, embarrassment, and evaluative concern during sexual situations among the participants. The variability in scores suggests individual differences in the extent to which sexual self-consciousness is experienced.

The mean score of Sexual Intimacy (at present) is 22.63, with a standard deviation of 4.822, reflecting a moderate to high level of perceived emotional and physical closeness in current intimate relationships. The comparatively lower standard deviation indicates greater consistency in participants' experiences of sexual intimacy.

The difference observed between the variability of sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy may be attributed to psychological factors such as body-related concerns, fear of negative evaluation, and heightened self-monitoring during sexual activity, which can influence individuals differently. These findings suggest that while sexual intimacy remains relatively stable among unmarried couples, sexual self-consciousness varies considerably and may play a significant role in shaping intimate experiences.

**Table 2** Correlation matrix between Sexual Self-consciousness levels and Sexual Intimacy

		SEXUAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS LEVELS	SEXUAL INTIMACY (AT PRESENT)
Sexual self-consciousness levels	Pearson correlation	1	-0.244**
	Sig (2-tailed)		0.003
	N	151	151
Sexual intimacy (at present)	Pearson correlation	-0.244**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.003	
	N	151	151

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

“Since the obtained Pearson correlation was statistically significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed),  $r = -0.244$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $N = 151$ , the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy among unmarried couples was rejected.”

Table 2 indicates the Pearson correlation coefficient between Sexual Self-Consciousness Levels and Sexual Intimacy (at Present) among unmarried couples. This correlation provides insight into the relationship between self-focused sexual concerns and the experience of intimacy prior to any intervention.

The mean score for Sexual Self-Consciousness Levels was 21.29 ( $SD = 8.403$ ). Sexual self-consciousness demonstrated a significant negative correlation with sexual intimacy at present ( $r = -0.244$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), indicating that individuals reporting higher levels of self-consciousness during sexual situations experienced lower levels of emotional and physical intimacy in their current relationships.

The mean score for Sexual Intimacy (at Present) was 22.63 ( $SD = 4.822$ ). The negative association suggests that heightened self-monitoring, body-related concerns, and fear of negative evaluation during sexual activity may interfere with individuals' ability to engage fully in intimate experiences with their partners.

These findings highlight a meaningful inverse relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy. Increased self-focused attention during sexual activity appears to function as a psychological barrier to intimacy, underscoring the importance of addressing sexual self-consciousness when aiming to enhance emotional closeness and relational well-being among unmarried couples.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy (at present) among unmarried couples. The findings revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between sexual self-consciousness levels and sexual intimacy, indicating that higher levels of self-focused attention, embarrassment, and evaluative concern during sexual activity are associated with lower levels of emotional and physical closeness in intimate relationships. This result highlights sexual self-consciousness as an important psychological factor influencing intimate functioning in unmarried individuals.

Sexual self-consciousness emerged as a salient psychological construct in the present study, reflecting heightened awareness of one's body, performance, and perceived evaluation by a partner during sexual encounters. Individuals reporting higher levels of sexual self-consciousness may experience increased cognitive distraction, which can interfere with emotional engagement and mutual responsiveness during intimacy. This finding aligns with Masters and Johnson's spectating model, which proposes that excessive self-monitoring during sexual activity disrupts sexual responsiveness and emotional connection, thereby diminishing intimacy.

The negative association between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy is also consistent with objectification theory, which suggests that internalization of appearance-based standards leads individuals to adopt an observer's perspective toward their own bodies. Such body surveillance and evaluative anxiety may heighten feelings of embarrassment and inhibit vulnerability, both of which are essential components of sexual intimacy. Previous research

by Claudat (2013) similarly demonstrated that sexual self-consciousness and body monitoring are associated with reduced sexual comfort and satisfaction, supporting the present findings.

From a relational perspective, sexual intimacy encompasses not only physical closeness but also emotional trust, openness, and mutual attunement. When individuals are preoccupied with self-evaluation or fear of negative judgment, their capacity to remain emotionally present may be compromised. This is consistent with findings by van Lankveld et al. (2018), who reported that emotional intimacy plays a central role in shaping sexual desire and partnered sexual activity. The present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that internal psychological barriers, such as sexual self-consciousness, may weaken the experience of intimacy even in ongoing relationships.

The observed relationship also has important implications for psychological well-being. Persistent sexual self-consciousness may contribute to avoidance of intimacy, reduced relationship satisfaction, and emotional distancing, which over time may increase vulnerability to anxiety, low self-esteem, and relational distress. For unmarried couples, particularly within conservative sociocultural contexts, sexual self-consciousness may be intensified by guilt, shame, or restrictive sexual norms, further limiting the capacity for open and fulfilling intimate experiences.

The findings of the present study are consistent with prior research highlighting the role of sexual self-concept in shaping sexual and relational outcomes. Studies by Kohlberger et al. (2019) and Antićević et al. (2023) demonstrated that positive sexual self-perceptions are associated with greater sexual and relationship satisfaction, while negative self-evaluations are linked to poorer outcomes. The current findings contribute to this body of literature by specifically identifying sexual self-consciousness as a psychological factor inversely related to sexual intimacy among unmarried couples.

Overall, the results underscore the importance of addressing sexual self-consciousness when aiming to enhance sexual intimacy and relational well-being. Psychological interventions that focus on reducing excessive self-monitoring, promoting body acceptance, and fostering emotional presence may help individuals engage more fully in intimate relationships. Although the present study is correlational in nature and does not permit causal conclusions, it provides valuable empirical support for the role of sexual self-consciousness as a potential barrier to healthy sexual intimacy.

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## 5. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between sexual self-consciousness and sexual intimacy (at present) among unmarried couples. The findings indicate that a significant relationship exists between the two variables, with higher sexual self-consciousness associated with lower levels of intimacy. Heightened self-focused attention and fear of negative evaluation appear to interfere with emotional and physical closeness. The results highlight sexual self-consciousness as an important psychological factor influencing intimate relationships. Future research may explore related psychological factors and culturally sensitive interventions to promote healthier intimacy.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this research. The study was conducted independently, and no financial or commercial relationships influenced the design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of the findings.

### *Statement of ethical approval*

The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to data collection. All procedures performed in this research involving human participants were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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