



Body Image Implications on Mental and Health Well-Being



Gabriela L. Alshafie, B.S., Morehead State University*

Zainab Anwar, Morehead State University, Tara Holaday, M.A., Morehead State University, & Timothy S. Thornberry, PhD, Morehead State University

INTRODUCTION

This study examined the relationship between body image and behaviors related to sexual health. Body image and sexuality, both physically-oriented domains of self, are likely linked. However, few studies have examined the association between body image and safe sex practices. Gillen, Lefkowitz, and Shearer (2006) indicate that males who evaluated their appearance more positively and who were more oriented toward their appearance were more likely to report risky sexual behavior. However, females who reported being less satisfied with their bodies reported more risky sexual behavior. People's concern with how others perceive and evaluate them can lead them to engage in more risky behaviors (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994). The relationship between body image and risky health behavior is complex, and in need of further exploration.

HYPOTHESES

- It was predicted that female participants who reported never or sometimes engaging in safe sex practices would have higher body dissatisfaction scores than those who reported always engaging in safe sex practices and those who are not sexually active. However, we expected this trend to be reversed among male participants.
- It was predicted that individuals reporting less comfort with speaking about sexual health would have higher levels of body dissatisfaction.

All other analyses of body dissatisfaction and sexual health behaviors were exploratory.

PARTICIPANTS

Age

•18-31 years old
($N = 288$, $M = 19.1$, $SD = 1.63$)

Gender

•70.5% Female, $n = 203$
•29.2 % Male, $n = 84$

Ethnicity

•Caucasian: 93.1%, $n = 270$
•African American/Black: 2.1%, $n = 6$
•Hispanic: 3%, $n = 1$
•Biracial: 2.8%, $n = 8$
•Multiracial/ethnic: .7%, $n = 2$

MATERIALS & PROCEDURES

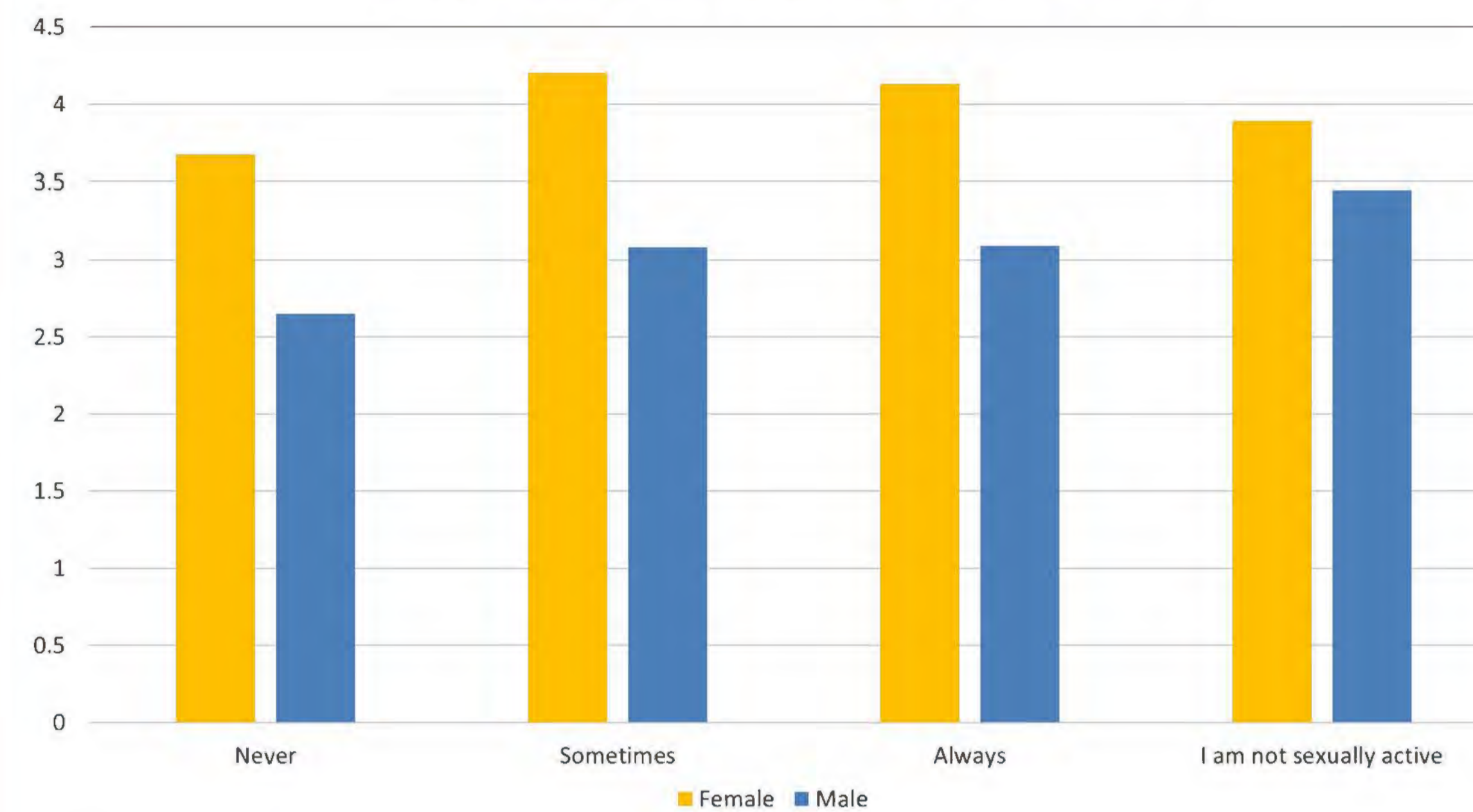
After obtaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, researchers recruited introductory psychology students to participate in the project. Data were collected using an online experimental database, SONA. Consent was obtained prior to data collection.

All participants completed the following questionnaires online:

- A series of questions regarding physical health (e.g., sleep habits, weight, eating habits, sexual behaviors, etc.)
- Selected questions from the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996).
- Body Image Scale (created for present study)
Example items [1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*)]:
 - If I lost weight, I would feel more attractive.
 - I feel positively about my body.

RESULTS

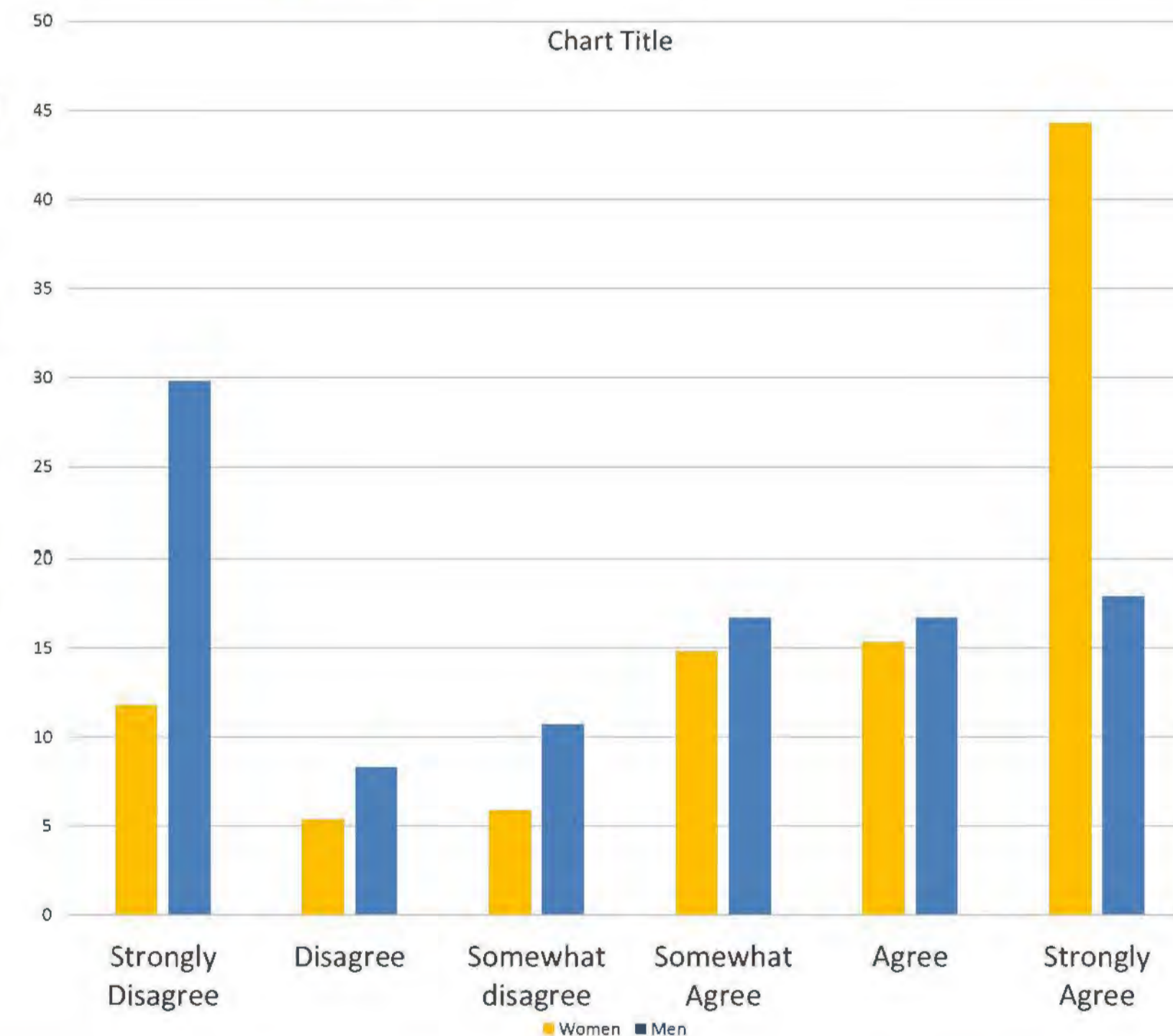
Mean Body Weight Dissatisfaction Scores and Frequency of Safe Sex Practice



I would feel more attractive if I lost weight.

Women ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.76$) reported a mean score on this item that was significantly greater than men ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.91$), $t = 5.00$, $p < .000$.

Women ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.11$) reported a mean score on the total body dissatisfaction measure that was significantly greater than men ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.01$), $t = 6.26$, $p < .000$.

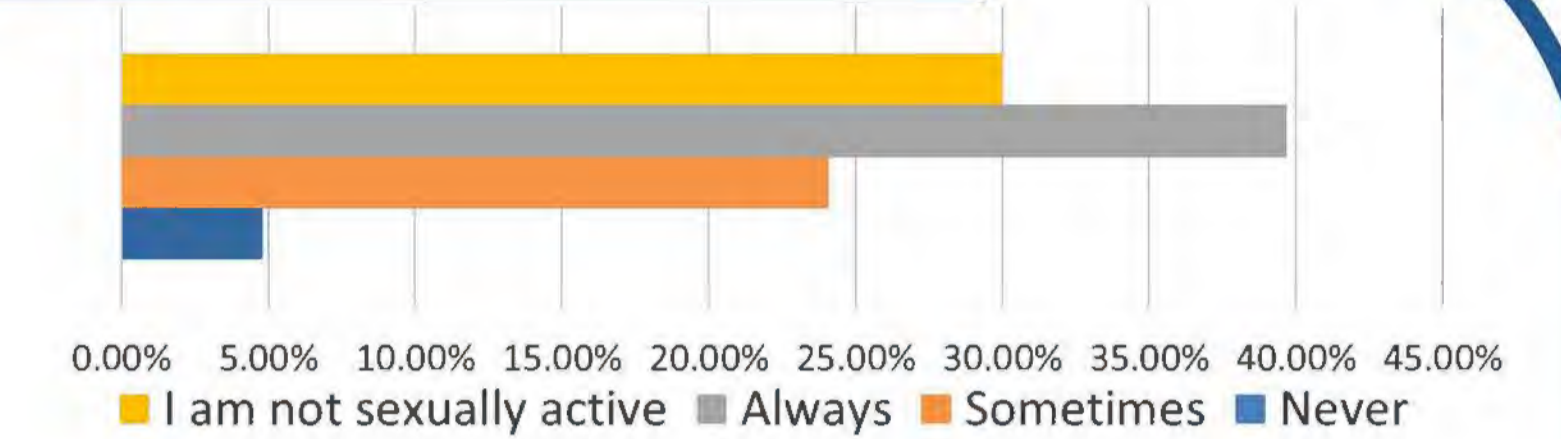


Which of the following people do you feel comfortable speaking with about sexual health?

Friends	81.4%
Doctor	58.3%
Roommate	45.5%
Parent	33.4%
Siblings	25.2%
Counselor/Mental Health Professional	19.7%
Religious Leader	4.8%

RESULTS CONT'D

Do you engage in safe sex practices?



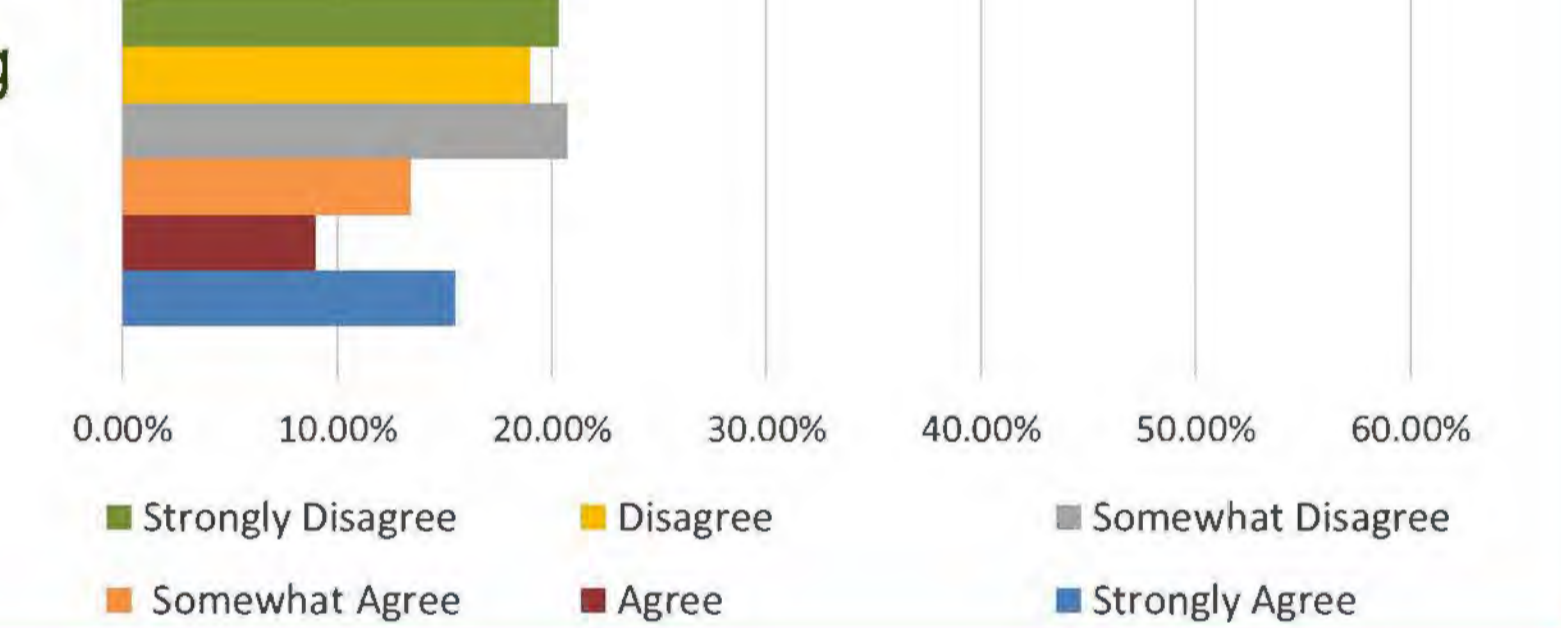
I feel as if there are resources available to me regarding safe sexual conduct on campus.



I have used sexual health resources available on campus.



I am comfortable seeking help or asking questions about sexual activity on campus.



CONCLUSIONS

There was not a significant relationship between body dissatisfaction and risky sexual behavior in either gender. However, women ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.11$) and men ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.01$), differ on overall body dissatisfaction, $t = 6.26$, $p < .000$. Moreover, results demonstrate differences between genders on the specific item, "I would feel more attractive if I lost weight." Specifically, women ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.11$) expressed more dissatisfaction on the item than men ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.01$), $t = 6.26$, $p < .000$. Students reported being most comfortable talking to their friends, and reported low levels of comfort talking to a counselor or Mental Health Professional (19.7%).

Implications:

Past research shows a strong relationship between body image dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviors. The fact that well over 50% of students reported they would feel more attractive if they lost weight suggests that the health of the MSU student body could be significantly impacted by poor body image.

More surprising, is the finding that a very small percentage of participants would be comfortable talking about sexual health with a counselor or mental health professional. This result suggests that communication between physical and mental health care providers is especially important when sexual health issues are central to client concerns. Physical health providers should be encouraged to address patient/client fears about discussing sexual health issues with mental health providers. A focus on establishing a high quality referral process between physical health and mental health resources could be an important step toward improving student health.

For more information about this study or any of those listed above, please contact:

Gabriela L. Alshafie

Tara Holaday

Zainab Anwar

galshafie@gmail.com

t.holaday@moreheadstate.edu

znanwar@moreheadstate.edu

