

# Love Thyself Before Loving Others? A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Gender Differences in Body Image and Romantic Love

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**Abstract** The present study was designed to explore the intersection of body esteem, romantic love, and gender through qualitative and quantitative analyses. Male ( $n=107$ ) and female ( $n=113$ ) undergraduates completed the Body Esteem Scale (BES), four Romantic Love Experiences Scale (RLES) subscales, and two open-ended questions about the interrelation between body esteem and relationships. For both genders, significant correlations emerged between the BES and RLES, suggesting a link between body experience and romantic relationships. Regression analyses indicated that two individual RLES variables (i.e., trust and jealousy) predicted body esteem for women but not for men. Qualitative data coding revealed that, compared to men, women were more likely to disclose that body image influenced sexual relations and that relationships affected their self-confidence. These findings illustrate the interpersonal dimensions of body image and highlight the value of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

**Keywords** Gender socialization · Body image · Romantic relationships

Gender differences and similarities in body image and in romantic love experiences have been amply documented,

yet few researchers have examined the complex associations among gender, body image, and relationships. As myriad interconnected socialization processes underlie norms and rules about gender, body, and romance, the intersection of these processes warrants closer examination. In the present study we explored this intersection by asking how men's and women's body images relate to their experiences in romantic relationships. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we sought to expand the research literature on gender and body image within a nonclinical college population.

## Body Image and Gender

Body image is a social construct that varies as a function of differential gender socialization (Cash, Thériault, & Annis, 2004). Frederickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, and Twenge (1998) argued that the cultural environment of sexual objectification socializes women to treat themselves as aesthetic objects; by internalizing others' responses to their physical appearance, women are conditioned to overemphasize the importance of good looks. Further, Frank and Thomas (2003) observed that for undergraduate women, gender role socialization (as measured by the tendency to evaluate oneself in relation to others and to suppress one's thoughts to avoid confrontation) was related to maladaptive eating-related thoughts and bulimic symptoms, which suggests that gender role socialization may have important implications for eating disorders and body dissatisfaction.

Men, in contrast, do not appear to experience the same level of objectification as women (McKinley, 1998). As Bordo (1999) asserted, "Male scientists and philosophers have created a nearly unbroken historical stream of tracts—

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philosophical, religious, scientific—on women's bodies and their distinctive maladies and excesses, almost all linked to our reproductive systems and sexual organs. But they have been remarkably good at forgetting that men have a sex" (p. 19). As might be predicted by the gender socialization literature, prior research indicates more body image concerns among women than men (e.g., Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Sondhaus, Kurtz, & Strube, 2001). A growing body of literature, however, attests to the prevalence of body dissatisfaction in men (Cafri & Thompson, 2004; Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky, & Perry, 2004). Indeed, recent data reveal that men's body image concerns are far more prevalent than commonly assumed (e.g., Grogan & Richards, 2002; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004), and these concerns may be exacerbated by sociocultural pressures from peers and family members (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). In addition, societal norms may discourage men from voicing their dissatisfaction (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). Thus, men's body esteem requires further research attention.

### Gender, Body Image and Romantic Relationships

Previous researchers have examined gender differences in the importance of physical attractiveness in dating (Berscheid, Dion, E. Walster, & G. W. Walster, 1971) and sexual behavior (McGuirl & Wiederman, 2000). Most studies indicate a stronger association between romantic popularity and physical attractiveness for women than for men (see Feingold, 1990, for meta-analyses across various research paradigms). This finding is corroborated by research on personal advertisements: Men seeking women emphasize slenderness and sexiness (conventional expressions of physical attractiveness), whereas women seeking men mention physical attractiveness less frequently and focus more on status, permanence, and affluence (Child, Graff, McCormick, & Cocciarella, 1996). Hence, these personal advertisements reflect traditional expectations that women be objects of beauty and men be providers of security.

Nezlek (1999) employed a different approach to the study of body image and relationships. Using a diary method, he tracked men's and women's social interactions and assessed their body image with the Body–Self Relations Questionnaire. He observed that individuals with better body image (measured as greater self-perceived attractiveness) had more intimate encounters than did their counterparts with poorer body image. Furthermore, women's, but not men's, confidence in social interactions was linked to their ratings of attractiveness. These data highlight the need to explore further the unique relationships between body image, romantic interactions, and gender.

One way to examine the relationship between body image and romantic love experiences is through their shared association with self-esteem. Extensive research documents positive correlations between self-esteem and body image (e.g., Befort et al., 2001; Lerner, Karabenick, & Stuart, 1973; Sondhaus et al., 2001; Stowers & Durm, 1996): Men and women with greater self-esteem report more positive body images than do their counterparts with lower self-esteem. Similarly, the association between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction has also received considerable attention in psychological research (e.g., K. K. Dion & K. L. Dion, 1985; Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001). For instance, K. K. Dion and K. L. Dion (1975) observed that low self-esteem individuals exhibited greater love, liking, and trust for their partners, evaluated their romantic partners more positively, and found their romantic experiences to be more rewarding than did their high self-esteem counterparts. In contrast, Murray et al. (2001) argued that individuals with negative models of self are troubled by self-doubt and are excessively cautious in their romantic relationships. They found that individuals who experienced self-doubt tended to underestimate the intensity of their partner's love and to provide less positive evaluations of their partners. Thus, extant data offer conflicting information about the relation between body image and self-esteem as well as the relation between romantic relationships and self-esteem.

Less is known about how romantic love experiences relate to an individual's body image. Past studies suggest that romantic relationships can have both positive and negative effects on an individual's body image. For instance, in an ethnographic examination of college women, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) observed that being in romantic relationships validated women's attractiveness, which increased their self-image and popularity. More recently, in a study of communication and body-focused criticism among married couples, Pole, Crowther, and Schell (2004) found that, for married women, perceived negative evaluation by one's partner was an important predictor of body dissatisfaction. Further, one's perceptions of a partner's body ideal preferences may also influence one's own body image. For instance, Tantleff-Dunn and Thompson (1995) demonstrated that the discrepancy between how a woman sees herself and how she perceives her partner's ideal woman was predictive of her body dissatisfaction and general psychological functioning (Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995). C. N. Markey, P. M. Markey, and Birch's (2004) recent empirical examination of married couples indicated that women who believed that their husbands were satisfied with their bodies also tended to be satisfied with their own bodies. In sum, these findings showcase the interpersonal dimension of women's body satisfaction.

Similarly, the converse question—how body image relates to an individual's romantic relationships—has also received little attention. Pope et al.'s (2000) research on muscle dysmorphia revealed the negative impact of weightlifting preoccupations on romantic relationships. Studies have also documented how body image may shape one's sexual experiences. For instance, Wiederman (2000) reported that approximately 35% of the heterosexual women in his study experienced body self-consciousness while engaging in sexually intimate behaviors with their male partners. In another recent study, Cash and his colleagues (Cash, Thériault et al., 2004) observed that an anxious romantic attachment style was a strong predictor of poor body image; men and women with high levels of body dissatisfaction tended to be less securely attached in their romantic relationships. Their study uniquely addressed attachment in *romantic* relationships, in contrast to prior investigations, which focused primarily on parental attachment. Indeed, with the exception of the study conducted by Cash and his colleagues, we do not know of any published studies of relationships between romantic love experiences and body image among men.

In the current study we sought to understand the relation between body esteem and romantic love experiences among both men and women. Although we know that gender socialization greatly influences body image and romantic relationships, how body image and romantic relationships relate as a function of gender socialization remains unclear. Our analyses focus on one key hypothesis: Although women will report less body esteem than men, body esteem and romantic love satisfaction will be correlated for both men and women. We further hypothesized that this correlation would be more pronounced for women than for men.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were male ( $n=107$ ) and female ( $n=113$ ) undergraduate students at a small midwestern liberal arts college. The participants were predominantly first year students who received Introductory Psychology course credit for their participation in the study. Other participants were recruited from various locales on campus, including psychology classes, the student center, and the library. The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 25 years ( $M=20.13$ ,  $SD=1.47$ ). Of the participants who responded to the question about race/ethnicity (77.8%), 108 (48.9%) identified themselves as white/European-American, 6 (2.7%) as black/African-American, 10 (4.5%) as Latin American/

Hispanic, 16 (7.2%) as Asian American, and 29 (13.1%) as "other" racial/ethnic background. With reference to nationality, 67 participants (30.3%) identified themselves as "international" (i.e., foreign) students, and 153 (69.5%) identified themselves as "domestic" (i.e., U.S.) students. As shown in Table 1, men and women did not significantly differ in age or BMI [ $BMI = \text{weight (kg)}/\text{height (m}^2\text{)}$ ] scores. No significant differences were detected between the international and domestic students in their responses to the questionnaires; thus, the samples were combined in subsequent analyses.

Mann–Whitney (non-parametric) tests did not detect gender differences in current relationship status (i.e., single, casually dating, or involved in a committed long-term relationship) or sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or other),  $p$ 's=0.14 and 0.38, respectively. Forty-six percent of the female respondents were single, 12.4% were casually dating, and 41.6% were in serious relationships. Male respondents were predominantly single (52.3%), but others were casually dating (18.7%) or in serious relationships (29%). Most participants (86.7% of women and 89.8% of men) identified themselves as heterosexual.

### Measures

**Body Esteem Scale (BES)** The BES (Franzoi & Shields, 1984), a 35 item inventory, uses a 5-point scale (1=strong negative feelings, 5=strong positive feelings) and requires participants to indicate the magnitude (strong, moderate) and type (positive, negative) of feelings they have toward their body parts and functions. The inventory is divided into three subscales that differ by gender. For women, the BES subscales are "sexual attractiveness," "weight concern," and "physical condition." For men, the BES subscales are "physical attractiveness," "upper body," and "physical condition." Higher scores on the subscales indicate more positive outlooks towards their bodies. For example, a higher score on the weight concern subscale indicates a *lack* of weight concern. Following Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, and Rodin (1988) and McKinley (1998), we summed the BES to create a single score. Cronbach's alphas suggested adequate score reliability in the present sample: 0.91 (women) and 0.94 (men).

**Romantic Love Experience Scale (RLES)** Participants completed subscales from the RLES (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) that measured happiness, friendship, trust, and jealousy. Participants rated their level of agreement on a 4-point Likert-type scale with 16 items pertaining to their most important romantic relationship (present or past), including items such as "My relationship with \_\_\_\_\_ made/makes me

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics.

|             | Women  |         | Men    |         | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|-------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
|             | Mean   | (SD)    | Mean   | (SD)    |          |           |          |          |
| Age (years) | 20.06  | (1.51)  | 20.20  | (1.44)  | −0.74    | 218       | 0.46     | −0.1     |
| BMI         | 22.98  | (4.11)  | 22.92  | (3.3)   | 0.10     | 212.83    | 0.92     | 0.01     |
| BES         | 113.27 | (17.99) | 122.95 | (21.18) | −3.66    | 210       | <0.01    | 0.51     |
| Happi       | 12.61  | (2.34)  | 11.67  | (2.58)  | 2.74     | 202.56    | <0.01    | 0.39     |
| Friend      | 13.68  | (2.24)  | 12.94  | (2.48)  | 2.26     | 202.45    | 0.03     | 0.32     |
| Trust       | 12.81  | (2.59)  | 12.38  | (2.81)  | 1.17     | 203.57    | 0.25     | 0.16     |
| Jealous     | 9.14   | (2.60)  | 9.15   | (2.52)  | −.02     | 206.96    | 0.98     | <−0.1    |
| Romstat*    | 1.96   | (0.94)  | 1.77   | (0.88)  | n/a      | n/a       | 0.14     | n/a      |
| Sexorien*   | 1.23   | (0.79)  | 1.15   | (0.51)  | n/a      | n/a       | 0.38     | n/a      |

*d*=Cohen's *d*.

BES refers to BES sum scores; Happi, Friend, Trust, and Jealous represent sum scores of the RLES scales happiness, friendship, trust, and jealousy, respectively; Romstat refers to *current dating status* (i.e., single, casually dating, or long-term committed relationship); Sexorien refers to sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or other).

\*Group mean differences were assessed with the Mann–Whitney test.

very happy,” “I felt/feel complete trust in \_\_\_\_\_,” “I considered/consider \_\_\_\_\_ one of my best friends,” and “I loved/love \_\_\_\_\_ so much that I often felt/feel jealous.” In the present sample, Cronbach's alphas for the RLES items were 0.83 (women) and 0.88 (men).

**Qualitative data** Participants wrote responses to the following two open-ended questions: “How do you think your *body image* has influenced your experiences (or lack of) in *romantic relationships*?” and “How do you think your *experiences in romantic relationships* (or lack of) have influenced your *body image*?” Of the study participants, 63.2% responded to these qualitative questions. Independent samples *t*-tests assessed for differences among those who chose to respond to the qualitative questions versus those who opted not to respond. No significant differences emerged on age, ethnic background, gender, current romantic status, sexual orientation, BMI, BES scores, or the RLES subscales friendship, trust, and happiness. However, responders were slightly younger in their year of college ( $M=2.39$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ) than nonresponders ( $M=2.77$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ),  $t(219)=-2.24$ ,  $p=0.03$ , and had lower scores ( $M=8.83$ ,  $SD=2.32$ ) on the RLES jealousy subscale than nonresponders did ( $M=9.7$ ,  $SD=2.85$ ),  $t(207)=-2.4$ ,  $p=0.02$ .

We developed a coding scheme derived from common themes in the qualitative responses; descriptions of these themes appear in the [Appendix](#). We independently developed lists of possible coding themes by reviewing the responses and then came to a consensus regarding the most frequently emerging themes. Next, a team of four indepen-

dent raters was trained in the coding scheme through oral, written, and group instruction by the first author. The raters first coded a set of hypothetical responses; once the raters reached an acceptable level of agreement on the coding for the hypothetical responses, they began to code the actual data. These strategies, recommended by Orwin (1994), were employed to reduce error in the data coding. All four independent coders were blind to the hypotheses. Each qualitative response could be coded for multiple themes. Thus, for example, a participant who described the influence of body image in mate selection and quality of sexual relations received positive codes for both “choice” and “quality of sex.” Internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) across all four coders was assessed separately for the two qualitative questions, in accordance with the item-by-item reliability approach advocated by Orwin. Cronbach's alpha was 0.79 and 0.87 for the first and second questions, respectively, which suggests adequate inter-rater agreement.

## Results

### Gender differences in body esteem and romantic love satisfaction

Several independent samples *t*-tests assessed differences across gender based on age, BMI, BES score, and RLES friendship, trust, happiness, and jealousy scores. Means and standard deviations appear in Table 1. As expected, men reported significantly higher BES sum scores than did women,  $t(210)=-3.65$ ,  $p<0.01$ . Men reported significantly lower RLES happiness scores,  $t(202.56)=2.74$ ,  $p<0.01$ ,



and RLES friendship scores,  $t(202.45)=2.26$ ,  $p=0.03$ , than women did. Men and women did not significantly differ in RLES trust or RLES jealousy ( $p$ 's $>0.05$ ).

### Predictors of body esteem

Multiple regression analyses assessed whether the four indicators of romantic love satisfaction predicted body esteem for men and women. As hypothesized, the overall regression model with all four predictors was statistically significant for men,  $F(4, 101)=2.97$ ,  $p<0.05$ , and for women,  $F(4, 106)=6.01$ ,  $p<0.01$ . An examination of the individual predictors indicated that for women, trust,  $t=2.08$ ,  $pr=0.20$ ,  $p<0.05$ , and jealousy,  $t=-2.49$ ,  $pr=-0.24$ ,  $p=0.01$ , were significant predictors of body esteem. Moreover, the relationship between trust and body esteem was significant even after controlling for the effects of BMI (partial  $r=0.30$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Similarly, the association between jealousy and body esteem also remained significant after controlling for the effects of BMI (partial  $r=-0.37$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). For men, however, none of the individual predictors was statistically significant. Bivariate correlation coefficients are presented in Table 2.

Given the participant variability in current romantic status (i.e., single, casually dating, or in a serious relationship), we also assessed whether the relationship between RLES variables and BES was maintained after taking into account the participants' relationship status. A stepwise regression analysis indicated that, even after we

controlled for the variance associated with current romantic status, the patterns of relationship between the BES and the RLES scales remained unchanged.

In summary, analyses of the data support our hypothesis that body esteem and romantic love experiences are related, especially for women. To develop a more nuanced understanding of this relationship, we conducted several qualitative analyses. These analyses categorized participants' impressions of how body image influences their romantic relationships and how romantic relationships influence their body image. By allowing participants to respond in their own words and by inquiring about both directions of causality, the open-ended questions offer information missing from the quantitative data.

### Qualitative data analyses

We randomly selected one of the four raters' responses for closer examination of the data. As shown in Table 3, several important themes were described by both genders. Large proportions of men (35.5%) and women (61%) described the role of romantic relationships in boosting self-esteem and/or body image. For example, one woman stated: "[My current boyfriend] taught me to love my body. Now I see myself through his eyes, and I feel beautiful." Similarly, one man stated his beliefs as follows: "When you are in a good relationship, your self-esteem is much higher and you have a better body image." In describing the impact of body image in shaping romantic relationships, several women (15.6%) and men (17.7%) specifically mentioned the role of confidence; for example, one man responded: "Having a positive view of my body or being satisfied with my own body has given me confidence in casual romantic relationships." On the other end of the spectrum, some individuals (15.6% of the women and 6.5% of the men) described the influence of insecurities in shaping their romantic experiences. One woman stated: "I think my lack of confidence in my body image and overall attractiveness has really influenced my general lack of relationship experience." One man stated: "I think my insecurities, which come a lot from my body image, affect my 'pursuit' of romantic relationships and my behavior when in them." Further, the ability of body image to restrict individuals in their romantic relationships was highlighted by 9.1% of the women and 12.9% of the men. For example, one man stated: "I think that at times my body image has given me hesitations about going after certain girls. The idea that 'she is out of my league' and that she wouldn't go out with or date me." The reverse, the suggestion that an absence of romantic relationships decreases body esteem, was also highlighted by 16.9% of the women and 9.7% of the men, as elucidated by one woman's comment: "Often

**Table 2** Correlations among hypothesized predictors of body esteem for men and women.

|         | BES | Happi  | Friend | Trust  | Jealous |
|---------|-----|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| BES     |     |        |        |        |         |
| Men     | —   | 0.25** | 0.32** | 0.28** | 0.13    |
| Women   | —   | 0.12   | 0.27** | 0.35** | -0.36** |
| Happi   |     |        |        |        |         |
| Men     |     | —      | 0.74** | 0.78** | 0.18*   |
| Women   |     | —      | 0.68** | 0.64** | 0.02    |
| Friend  |     |        |        |        |         |
| Men     |     |        | —      | 0.76** | 0.16    |
| Women   |     |        | —      | 0.82** | -0.30** |
| Trust   |     |        |        |        |         |
| Men     |     |        |        | —      | 0.19*   |
| Women   |     |        |        | —      | -0.35** |
| Jealous |     |        |        |        |         |
| Men     |     |        |        |        | —       |
| Women   |     |        |        |        | —       |

BES represents the sum scores of the Body Esteem Scale; Happi, Friend, Trust, and Jealous represent sum scores of the RLES scales happiness, friendship, trust, and jealousy, respectively.

\* $p<0.05$ .

\*\* $p<0.01$ .

**Table 3** Frequencies of theme endorsement.

|   | Women                     |        | Men                       |        |
|---|---------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|
|   | Number (% of respondents) |        | Number (% of respondents) |        |
| Question 1: How does body image influence romantic relationships? |                           |        |                           |        |
| Confidence  | 12                        | (15.6) | 11                        | (17.7) |
| Insecurity  | 12                        | (15.6) | 4                         | (6.5)  |
| Choice  | 4                         | (5.2)  | 6                         | (9.7)  |
| Negative experiences  | 1                         | (1.3)  | 2                         | (3.2)  |
| Quality of sex  | 17                        | (22.1) | 0                         | (0)    |
| No influence  | 13                        | (16.9) | 14                        | (22.6) |
| Important at the beginning  | 6.7                       | (7.8)  | 6                         | (9.7)  |
| Restricting   | 7.8                       | (9.1)  | 8                         | (12.9) |
| Question 2: How do romantic relationships influence body image?   |                           |        |                           |        |
| Self-esteem   | 47                        | (61)   | 22                        | (35.5) |
| Hinder  | 13                        | (16.9) | 6                         | (9.7)  |
| Little/no influence   | 9                         | (11.7) | 15                        | (24.2) |
| Partner behaviors   | 14                        | (18.2) | 6                         | (9.7)  |
| Efforts   | 3                         | (3.9)  | 7                         | (11.3) |

Please refer to the [Appendix](#) for descriptions of each of these themes.

when I am not in a relationship I question whether I should lose weight.” Finally, the role of partner behaviors, such as compliments or criticism, seemed to play an important role in influencing body image, as suggested by 18.2% of the women and 9.7% of the men. As one woman said: “Being in a relationship made me feel really good about my body image—because I constantly received positive feedback about the way I looked.”

Although men’s and women’s responses converged in many areas, as indicated in Table 4, they diverged in

several areas as well. Women identified the role of romantic relationships in boosting self-esteem and/or body image with significantly greater frequency than did men,  $z=-2.98$ ,  $p<0.01$ . Another gender difference emerged in the proportion of participants who described the role of body image in sexual relations,  $z=-3.94$ ,  $p<0.01$ ; whereas 22.1% of the women suggested that body image, including body consciousness, influences sexual relations in romantic relationships, none of the men alluded to this theme. For instance, one woman described her experiences as follows: “It [my body

**Table 4** Mean rates of theme endorsement (qualitative data).

|   | Women |        | Men  |        | Z-statistic | p     |
|---|-------|--------|------|--------|-------------|-------|
|   | Mean  | (SD)   | Mean | (SD)   |             |       |
| Question 1: How does body image influence romantic relationships? |       |        |      |        |             |       |
| Confidence  | 0.16  | (0.37) | 0.18 | (0.39) | −0.34       | 0.74  |
| Insecurity  | 0.16  | (0.37) | 0.06 | (0.25) | −1.67       | 0.10  |
| Choice  | 0.05  | (0.22) | 0.10 | (0.30) | −1.01       | 0.31  |
| Negative Experiences  | 0.01  | (0.11) | 0.03 | (0.18) | −0.77       | 0.44  |
| Quality of Sex  | 0.22  | (0.42) | 0    | (0)    | −3.94**     | <0.01 |
| No Influence  | 0.17  | (0.38) | 0.23 | (0.42) | −0.84       | 0.40  |
| Important at the Beginning  | 0.08  | (0.27) | 0.10 | (0.30) | −0.39       | 0.70  |
| Restricting   | 0.09  | (0.29) | 0.13 | (0.34) | −0.72       | 0.47  |
| Question 2: How do romantic relationships influence body image?   |       |        |      |        |             |       |
| Self-esteem   | 0.61  | (0.49) | 0.35 | (0.48) | −2.98**     | <0.01 |
| Hinder  | 0.17  | (0.38) | 0.10 | (0.30) | −1.23       | 0.22  |
| Little/No Influence   | 0.12  | (0.32) | 0.24 | (0.43) | −1.93*      | 0.05  |
| Partner Behaviors   | .18   | (.39)  | .10  | (.30)  | −1.42       | .16   |
| Efforts   | 0.04  | (0.19) | 0.11 | (0.32) | −1.67       | 0.10  |

The above data were coded on a dichotomous scale, such that “yes”=1, and “no”=0. The Mann–Whitney non-parametric test was used to assess gender differences in theme endorsement. Refer to [Appendix](#) for descriptions of each of the above themes.

\* $p\leq 0.05$ .

\*\* $p<0.01$ .

image] has made me more timid about advancing the relationship sexually.” Finally, men and women differed in the extent to which they explicitly stated that romantic relationships have little or no influence on their body image,  $z=-1.93$ ,  $p=0.05$ ; men (24.2%) endorsed this theme with significantly greater frequency than women (11.7%).

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to assess the intersection of gender, body image, and romantic love experiences. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses, we sought to understand the impact of an individual’s body image on his or her romantic love experiences, and vice versa, and we also assessed gender differences in these relationships.

Overall, our quantitative data suggest that body image and romantic relationships are related for both men and women, but that, for women only, trust and jealousy are significantly associated with body esteem. Perhaps for women, body shape and weight concerns lead to questioning of their partners’ fidelity; they may selectively attend to “evidence” of cheating, such as flirting behavior, thus fueling the experience of jealousy and eroding trust. The qualitative data, however, suggest caution in accepting this interpretation. Very few participants, male or female, spontaneously identified a strong connection between jealousy and body image.

Another possible explanation for the jealousy and trust findings focuses on the role of self-confidence: Perhaps women with poor body images also have low self-confidence, an insecurity that carries over to their experiences in romantic relationships. One woman, for example, described her experiences as follows: “[My body image] made me insecure, jealous easily. Always thought he’d want someone thinner than myself... sometimes I think being too fat is the reason why I’ve had so few romantic relationships.” Indeed, significantly greater proportions of women than men referred to the theme of “self-esteem” in describing the role of romantic relationships in shaping body esteem, which may explain the gender discrepancy in the role of jealousy. Future researchers might want to explore more directly the connections among self-confidence, body image, and romantic relationships, especially for women.

The qualitative data suggest subtle gender differences in the dynamics of the body esteem/romantic love interaction. For instance, more women than men acknowledged the role of romantic relationships in boosting self-esteem and the impact of body image on sexual behavior. Nearly two-thirds of the women spontaneously mentioned that romantic relationships influence their self-esteem, in contrast to one-

third of men. These findings echo Nezlek’s (1999) results and support gender socialization theories regarding the importance of relationships for women’s sense of self.

Although we are not able to address the direction of causality definitively, the two open-ended questions offer an intriguing glimpse of participants’ anecdotal impressions of the body–relationship connection. When asked about how body image affects relationships, less than 20% of men and women asserted that confidence or self-esteem was at play; there were no gender differences in this pattern. In contrast, when asked about how relationships affect body image, a much larger proportion of participants—especially women—pointed to self-esteem as a pivotal factor. As one female respondent wrote: “I tend to be more secure with my body when I’m in a relationship because the other person is attracted to it, providing reassurance.” After examining the asymmetries in response patterns to these two questions, we speculated that romantic relationships provide many women with body affirmation that enhances their well-being and that body esteem, per se, is less determinative of relationship status. This conjecture awaits further research.

As noted above, more men explicitly asserted that romantic relationships had little to no influence on their body image, and none of the male respondents disclosed that body image influenced their sexual behavior. One possible explanation is that male participants may have been more reluctant to disclose sexual problems, particularly in the presence of a female researcher. Alternately, it is possible that, for women but not for men, body image concerns engender body consciousness during sexual behaviors (cf. Wiederman, 2000). More broadly, the data suggest that body esteem plays a less central role in men’s romantic and sexual relationship experiences than in women’s. This supposition coheres with objectification theory, in which women are taught that their bodies are commodities that will allow them—or deny them—access to social goods, including romantic relationships (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002).

Consistent with previous research in this domain, the women in the present study indicated greater body dissatisfaction than did the men. Although these data might suggest that women continue to face greater social pressures to conform to bodily ideals, there is a potential confound to this interpretation. As Pope et al. (2002) acknowledged, society frowns upon men’s expression of bodily dissatisfaction; “real men” do not whine about their physical appearance. In contrast, it appears that women are encouraged from a young age to voice their attitudes toward their physical appearance and, indeed, to express their body dissatisfaction. Thus, perhaps male participants in the present study modified their responses to match social expectations; their high levels of body satisfaction might be more indicative of the inability of self-report

measures to reveal men's particular concerns than an actual absence of body dissatisfaction among men. Overall, our data highlight the importance of assessing through multiple methods to tap into different facets of such phenomena.

There are several limitations to the present study. First, the age of the sample, although common in studies on this topic, affects the generalizability of our findings. Because few of the participants were in long-term stable relationships, our results pertain primarily to students who are currently single or in casual dating relationships. Furthermore, because participants were instructed to rate past or current relationships, retrospective biases may have influenced their responses. Indeed, significant differences emerged on the RLES between those who reflected on current and those who reflected on past relationships. However, when we statistically controlled for relationship status, the results remained unchanged. Thus, although we urge future researchers to study only participants currently in romantic relationships, we believe our findings are robust.

Another potential limitation involves our measures. A more comprehensive battery of body image measures, especially those developed specifically for men (Cafri & Thompson, 2004), would have yielded more nuanced information. Furthermore, we did not provide a definition for the term "body image", thus participants' responses to the open-ended questions may be confounded by widely divergent interpretations of this concept. In addition, over a third of our participants opted not to complete the open-ended questions. While our analyses suggest few differences between those who responded and those who did not, we cannot assume that the results represent accurately our entire original sample. In addition, the qualitative data highlight the importance of self-esteem and self-confidence in the body-relationship dynamic. Future researchers should certainly assess these important constructs, perhaps using path analytic models to establish the causal connection between body esteem and romantic relationships. Finally, response biases may have skewed our findings; participants' awareness that the study was about relationships and body image may have influenced their responses. Despite these limitations, the present study offers an intriguing glimpse into the gendered nature of the interplay between body image and romantic relationships. The implications of our findings for clinical participants, such as eating disorder clients, warrant closer study. For example, an examination of the impact of partner variables on the body image of eating disorder clients would likely strengthen the therapy process. Future researchers may also opt to explore further the directions of causality hinted at by the qualitative data.

Body image, romantic relationships, and gender each devolve from broader socialization processes. We hope that future researchers will continue to explore their complex interaction.

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## Appendix

### List of Themes

Q1: How do you think your body image has influenced your experiences (or lack of) in romantic relationships?

1. (a) Feeling confident about one's body (or having good self-esteem) makes one more able to engage in relationships. (CONFIDENCE)
- (b) Feeling insecure (low confidence or self-esteem) makes one less able to engage in romantic relationships. (INSECURITY)
2. Body image affects the types of partners one might seek (influences partner choice). (CHOICE)
3. Negative experiences including jealousy, insecurity and fearing abandonment. (NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES)
4. Influential for quality of sexual relations (including body consciousness). (QUALITY OF SEX)
5. Body image has little or no influence on relationships. (NO INFLUENCE)
6. Body image only affects the start of relationships. (IMPORTANT AT THE BEGINNING)
7. Poor body image restricts romantic relationships (no explicit mention of confidence or self-esteem). (RESTRICTING)

Q2: How do you think your experiences in romantic relationships (or lack of) have influenced your body image?

1. (a) Romantic relationships enhance self-image/self-esteem or body image. (SELF-ESTEEM)
- (b) Lack of romantic relationships/experience can hinder self-image/self-esteem or body image. (HINDER)
2. Romantic relationships have little or no influence on body image. (LITTLE/NO INFLUENCE)
3. Partner behaviors (such as compliments or criticism) can influence body image. (PARTNER BEHAVIORS)
4. Desire for relationship leads to efforts to restructure body (diet/fitness). (EFFORTS)



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