

# Body Satisfaction in Individuals with Low and High Self-Esteem: The Role of Romantic Partners

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## Abstract

Having a healthy body image is related to self-worth, confidence, and well-being. Studies have found that individuals who report poor body image are likely to suffer from self-esteem, eating disorders, depression, and anxiety. Other studies suggest that romantic partners are protective against physical and psychological health conditions, less is known about how partners affect perceptions of body image. Here, we investigated the effect of body satisfaction in 75 romantic couples. The results indicated a significant three-way interaction of gender, self-esteem by partner influence on body satisfaction. Higher body satisfaction was discovered in individuals who reported lower partner influence to improve exercise and eating habits than individuals with high partner influence. This pattern of results suggests a complex association between body satisfaction and self-esteem in interpersonal context that is not predicted or explained by current theoretical models and thus deserves further empirical attention.

## Background

- Body dissatisfaction is related to self-esteem and psychological adjustment, such as eating disturbances, expression, social anxiety, and social functioning (Halliwell & Ditmar, 2006).
- Compared to men, women report greater body dissatisfaction (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998), are psychologically more invested in their appearance, report greater negative affective consequences of body dissatisfaction, and are more likely to suffer from eating disorders (Eating Disorders Association, 2000).
- It is therefore not surprising that body image research has focused mainly on women, but recent work demonstrates that young men are increasingly affected by body dissatisfaction (Cafri et al., 2005), suggesting that they, too, deserve attention.

**Focus:** To understand the association between self-esteem and partner influence on body satisfaction across men and women.

**Hypothesis:** We predicted a significant two-way interaction between self-esteem and partner influence, such that individuals with high levels of self-esteem and high reoccurrence of partner influence would be linked to lower levels of body satisfaction than individuals with low reoccurrence of partner influence. Gender was added as an exploratory predictor to our analyses.

## Methods

### Procedures:

Couples who agreed to participate were asked to complete an online self-report questionnaire.

### Participants:

$N = 75$  romantic couples with an average of 26 years of age.

### Measures:

- Self-Esteem: 2-item scale ranging from 1 (very unhappy with who I am) to 5 (very happy with who I am),  $\alpha = .70$ . Example item includes: "In general I am ..."
- Partner Influence: 8-item scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (almost everyday),  $\alpha = .78$ . Example item includes: "My partner tried to make me feel guilty."
- Body Satisfaction: 4-item scale ranging from -3 (very dissatisfied) to 3 (very satisfied),  $\alpha = .90$ . Example item includes: "How satisfied are you with your current overall appearance."
- Length of relationship was included as a control variable. Some items were desirably reverse coded before analysis.

### Data Analysis:

A multilevel dyadic model was conducted to account for sources of interdependence established from couple data in R programming.

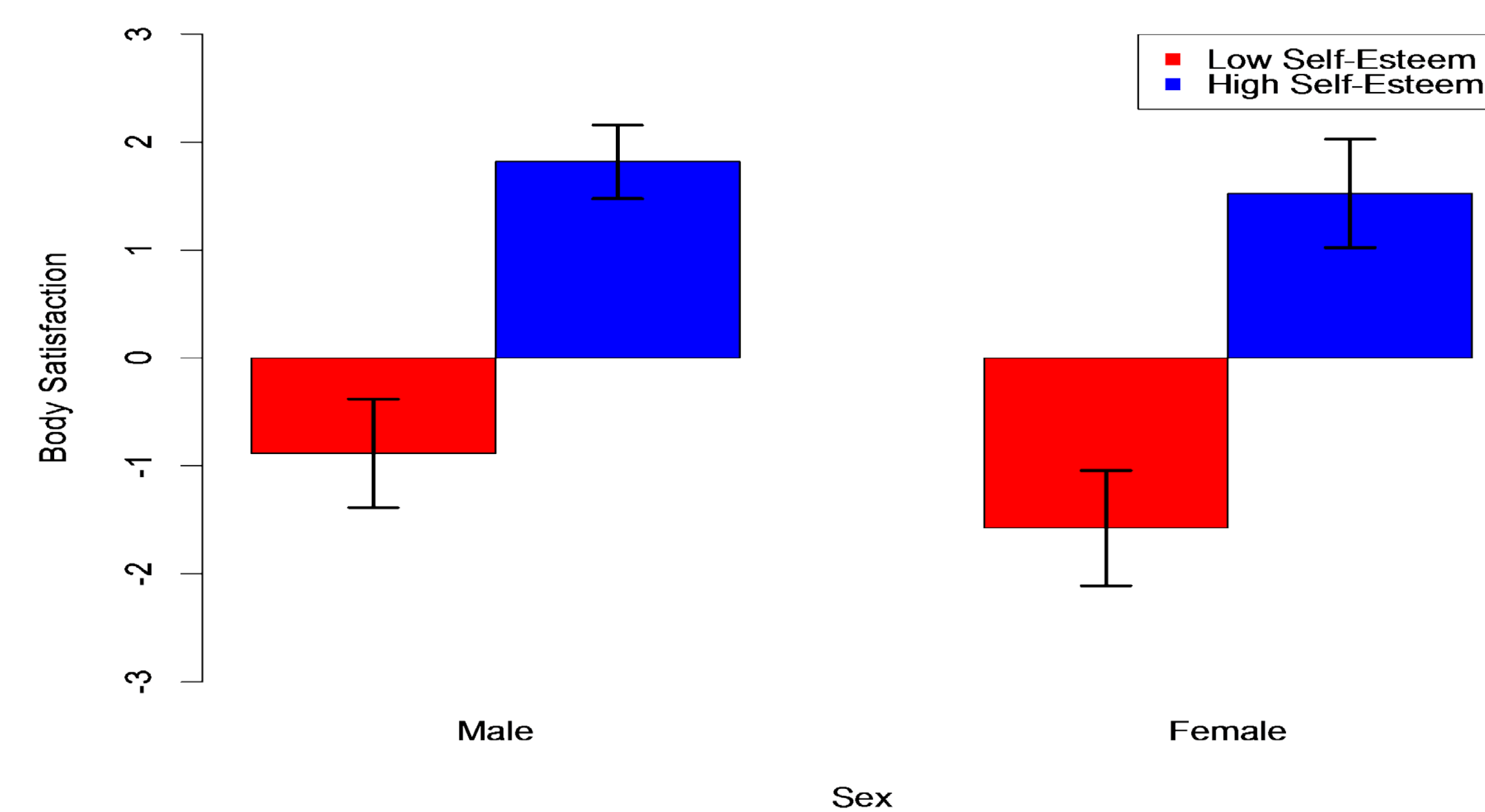
## Results

Table 1. Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics for All Variables in 75 Heterosexual Romantic Couples

Variables	Male Mean (SE)	Female Mean (SE)
Age (years)	27.3 (.89)	25.7 (.88)
Relationship Length (years)	1.08 (1.03)	1.08 (1.03)
Body Satisfaction	-.47 <sup>a</sup> (.17)	.20 <sup>b</sup> (.18)
Self-Esteem	3.59 <sup>a</sup> (.09)	3.93 <sup>b</sup> (.09)
Partner Influence	.74 <sup>a</sup> (.07)	.71 <sup>a</sup> (.07)

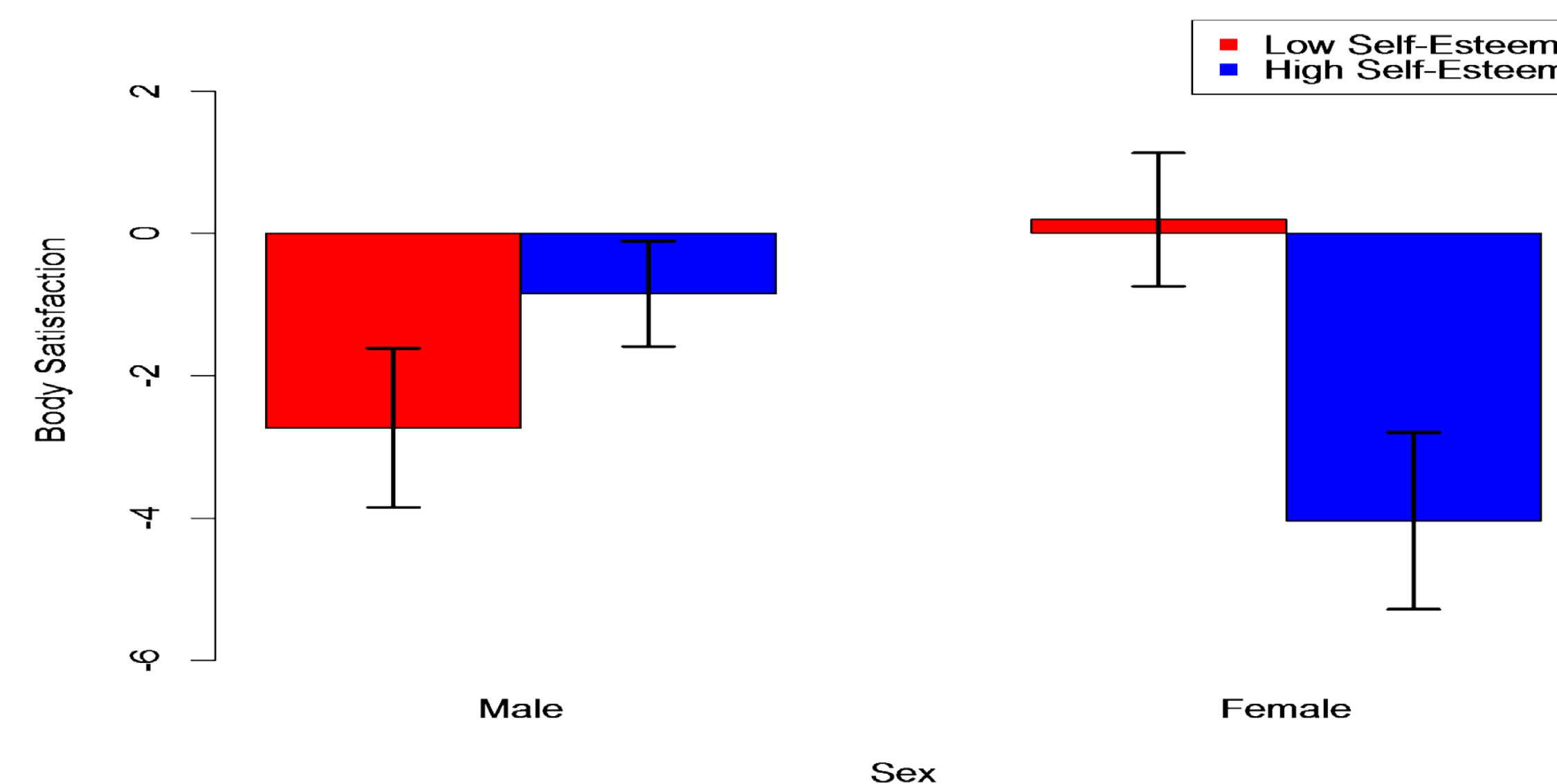
Note. Means in columns with distinctive subscripts indicate significant differences at  $p < .01$ , two tailed.

Figure 1. Three-way Interaction of Sex, Self Esteem, and Low Partner Influence on Body Satisfaction



Note. Standard deviation error bars that do not overlap are significantly different,  $p < .05$ .

Figure 2. Three-way Interaction of Sex, Self Esteem, and High Partner Influence on Body Satisfaction



Note. Standard deviation error bars that do not overlap are significantly different,  $p < .05$ .

## Conclusions

### Findings:

- A two-way interaction of body satisfaction and self-esteem  $F(1, 77) = 6.49, p < .01$  was further qualified by a three-way interaction of body satisfaction, self-esteem, and gender  $F(1, 74) = 3.80, p = .05$ .
- Post-hoc t-test revealed that when partner influence was low to improve exercise and eating habits, greater body satisfaction was discovered in individuals who reported high self-esteem than those with low self-esteem, while controlling for relationship length.
- Unexpectedly, when partner influence was high and not low, women with low self-esteem (.19) reported higher body satisfaction levels than men with high self-esteem (-.84), and similarly women with high self-esteem (-3.00) reported lower body satisfaction than men with low self-esteem (-2.73).

### Implications:

- These findings have important implications for understanding body satisfaction in the context of romantic relationships particularly, the influence of romantic partners and ego threat on self-esteem and self-doubt of both men and women (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Ruhm, 2012).
- Our findings highlight the importance of significant others to achieve optimal results in health promotion, prevention, and treatments for romantic couples (Lee, Atta, & Brannick, 2014; Finch & Tomiyama, 2015).
- More research is needed to eliminate the stereotype that body dissatisfaction is a "female exclusive" issue (Tomiyama, 2014; Zellner, 2006).
- Further research is needed to assess the relationship of how men feel about their bodies and threats to masculine and feminine characteristics.
- Further research is needed to examine the role of romantic partners in each other's physical health (e.g., smoking, meditation, etc.) (Skoyen, Mehl, & Butler, 2014).

### Limitations:

1. Future studies should broaden this exploration to include individuals from other ethnic backgrounds, gay couples, clinical populations, and ages.
2. Future studies should examine longitudinal data to determine average levels of body satisfaction and partner influence across time.

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- A PDF version of this academic poster is available at: <http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/posters>

