



## Does exposure to erotica reduce attraction and love for romantic partners in men? Independent replications of Kenrick, Gutierrez, and Goldberg (1989) study 2<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Three preregistered, high-powered replications of Kenrick et al. (1989)
- Exposed men and women in committed relationships to opposite sex erotica
- After exposure assessed ratings of attractiveness and love for partner
- Effects of original and replication studies were meta-analyzed
- Across the three studies we did not find support for the original finding.

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### ABSTRACT

Kenrick, Gutierrez, and Goldberg (1989; Study 2) demonstrated that men, but not women, in committed relationships exposed to erotic images of opposite-sex others reported lower ratings for their partner's sexual attractiveness ( $d = 0.91$ ) and less love for their partner ( $d = 0.69$ ) than men exposed to images of abstract art. This research has implications for understanding the possible effects of erotica on men in relationships, but has not been replicated. We conducted three preregistered, high-powered close replications, and meta-analyzed the effects of the original and replication studies. We did not find support for the original finding that exposure to attractive images of opposite-sex others affects males' ratings of their partners' sexual attractiveness or love for their partner.

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Research by Kenrick et al. (1989) demonstrated that males exposed to attractive images of nude women (i.e., Playboy and Penthouse centerfolds) reported that their female romantic partner was less sexually attractive and reported less love for their romantic partner than those exposed to abstract art (a contrast effect). Females exposed to attractive images of nude men (i.e., Playgirl centerfolds), however, did not report that their male romantic partner was less sexually attractive or indicate less love for their male romantic partner compared to women exposed to abstract art. Guided by an evolutionary approach to human mating suggesting that physical appeal is relatively more important in mates for men

than women, Kenrick et al. (1989) concluded that men, but not women, compare the physically attractive centerfolds to their current partner and potentially view these women as possible alternative partners. An outcome of this comparison process for men is that they reduce their ratings of sexual attractiveness and feelings of love for their partner.

Since its publication, Kenrick et al.'s (1989) paper has been cited 249 times on Google Scholar, over 100 times on PsycINFO, and is a part of a growing body of work suggesting that ecological factors (e.g., social and physical ecology) have direct and immediate effects on psychological judgements about relationships. The finding that men exposed to female centerfolds show more of a contrast effect than women exposed to male centerfolds suggests a strong disadvantage of exposure to erotica for males and their romantic commitments (though see also Amelang & Pielke, 1992). The effects reported by Kenrick et al. (1989) were fairly large, with effect sizes expressed as Cohen's  $d$  equalling 0.91 for ratings of their partner's sexual attractiveness and 0.69 for participants' reported love for their partner. Given the relatively small

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number of men in the study (30 in total) the 95% confidence intervals of these effects are very wide: 0.16–1.66 for ratings of partner's sexual attractiveness and  $-0.04$ – $1.43^2$  for reported love for the partner. The reported effects can therefore be potentially very large or fairly small.

The purpose of the current research was to conduct independent (close) replications of Kenrick et al.'s (1989; Study 2) findings to provide additional estimates of how strongly exposure to erotica affects males' ratings of their partner's sexual attractiveness and their love for their partner. For this purpose, three high-powered (estimated power of 0.95) and pre-registered independent replications were conducted using approximately the same manipulations and measures as the original study. We anticipated that the results of the original study would replicate, such that males who were exposed to female nude centerfolds would report that their romantic partner is less attractive, and report less love for their partner, than if they were exposed to abstract art. Also consistent with the original study, we anticipated no significant effects of the type of stimuli presented on females' ratings of their partner's attractiveness and their love for their partner. As per Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn (2012), for all three of our replication attempts "we report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study" (p. 1).

## 1. Studies 1 and 2

### 1.1. Methods

#### 1.1.1. Power analysis

A power analysis indicated that a sample size of 210 would be needed to find a statistically significant interaction in a 2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA) assuming a medium effect size ( $f = 0.25$ )<sup>3</sup> with a power level of 0.95 (power estimated using G-Power 3.1; Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). This is consistent with a developing norm for replication research that suggests obtaining a sample that is at least 2.5 times the size of the original sample to have adequate power to detect the originally reported effect (Simonsohn, 2015). Kenrick et al.'s (1989) sample size was 65 participants, indicating at least 163 participants were required for each replication study. Thus the sample size was selected to be 210, and critically, we did not conduct any analyses until we achieved at least 210 complete data points.

#### 1.1.2. Sampling

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association. Unlike the original study which was conducted in the lab, participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online crowdsourcing platform that is commonly used for psychological research. Two advertisements (one for males, one for females) were placed on the MTurk website for all MTurk users with active accounts to see, with information about the inclusion criteria (see results) as well as a link to the survey. Eligible and interested participants followed the link that redirected them to a survey hosted on Qualtrics<sup>4</sup>, where the letter of information and consent was presented. Informed consent was received from each participant digitally (each participant indicated they read the consent form and agreed to take part before proceeding).

<sup>2</sup> The original manuscript does not report SDs. We therefore used an approximate estimate of the SDs for the original study by calculating the SDs from the replication attempts (replication 1–3 SDs averaged per condition per group). The pooled SDs were used to approximate the confidence intervals around the effect size estimates.

<sup>3</sup> The authors estimated the power using a smaller effect size than the original manuscript reported.

<sup>4</sup> The Qualtrics QSF file and experimental stimulus available upon request at the following link: <https://osf.io/h7nxf/>

#### 1.1.3. Procedure

The materials and procedure of these studies were conducted in accordance with the input of the first author of the original article, Dr. Douglas Kenrick. Consistent with the original study, participants were informed that the study attempts to address a controversy about whether particular works of art, photography, or cinema are artistically valuable or just offensive to "good taste." We explained that we are studying which characteristics separate "aesthetically pleasing from boring or unpleasant works" and that subjects will judge "materials which have aroused controversy with regard to their aesthetic significance." Since the materials might include nude photographs, subjects were advised to complete the study in a private place, and were reminded that they may withdraw from the study by exiting the screen at any time. The experimental males were exposed to 16 female nude centerfold images from *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, while experimental females were exposed to 16 male nude centerfold images from *Playgirl*. Control subjects viewed 16 abstract art images (e.g., Josef Albers, "Homage to the square", Jackson Pollocks, "Convergence"). Participants first indicated their sex in the demographic questionnaire, and based on this response and their random assignment to either the control or experimental condition, they either saw nude centerfolds of people of the opposite-sex, or images of abstract art. In all conditions, each image was shown for 15 s.

After viewing each image, participants were asked to rate how aesthetically pleasing the image was. After all images were shown and the aesthetic judgments were made, participants were told that there is some controversy about how relationships influence responses to art. They were told that some psychologists believe that being in a stable relationship enhances people's appreciation of art, while others feel that the deep involvement interferes with aesthetic appreciation, and still others believe that it depends on the type of relationship. Participants were then asked to respond to a questionnaire regarding how they rate their relationship. In addition, they were asked to complete a questionnaire assessing their love for their partner. Participants then filled out a suspicion probe, were fully debriefed regarding the true purpose of the study, and were provided a code to claim compensation (\$0.50).

### 1.2. Measures

#### 1.2.1. Demographics

Prior to viewing the stimuli, participants were asked a series of demographic questions. Respondents were asked about their gender, sexual orientation, English fluency, age, and information about their relationship (e.g., relationship status, relationship length, whether the participant lives with their partner).<sup>5</sup> Because the demographics were not reported in the original study, this questionnaire was developed by the current researchers.

#### 1.2.2. Pleasantness

After viewing each image, three-items were used to assess how aesthetically pleasing the images were on 7-point Likert scales. Participants were asked to rate whether the images were considered artistic (1 = highly artistic, 7 = not at all artistic), pleasant (1 = unpleasant, 7 = pleasant), and socially valuable (1 = not at all socially valuable, 7 = socially valuable). Only the ratings for pleasantness were used in the analyses (pleasantness of male centerfolds  $\alpha = 0.96$ ; pleasantness of female centerfolds  $\alpha = 0.96$ ; pleasantness of abstract art  $\alpha = 0.90$ ).<sup>6</sup>

#### 1.2.3. Partner attractiveness

Participants were asked to answer six questions about their current romantic partner on 9-point Likert scales. Three of the questions

<sup>5</sup> For a complete listing of the measures, please view the replication protocol at the following link: <https://osf.io/nrkej/>

<sup>6</sup> Unless specified, procedures and measures were consistent with the original study (Kenrick et al., 1989).

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