



# Perceived impact of body feedback from romantic partners on young adults' body image and sexual well-being



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the messages individuals receive from their partners about their bodies and their perceived impact on body image and sexual well-being. Young adult men ( $n = 35$ ) and women ( $n = 57$ ) completed open-ended questions identifying messages they had received from partners and the impact of these messages on their body image and sexual well-being. Content coding revealed three verbal (expressions of approval and pride, challenging negative beliefs, expressions of sexual attraction/arousal/desire) and two nonverbal (physical affection, physical expressions of sexual attraction/arousal/desire) positive messages as well as one verbal (disapproval/disgust) and two nonverbal (rejection, humiliation) negative messages. Some participants reported gender-related messages (muscularity/strength, genital appearance, breast appearance, weight, and comparison to others). Positive messages were seen to increase confidence, self-acceptance, and sexual empowerment/fulfillment, whereas negative messages decreased these feelings. Our findings suggest that even everyday, seemingly neutral messages are perceived to have an important impact on young adults.

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## Introduction

Body image includes a person's perceptions, emotions, and attitudes about their own body (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Many young adult women and men report body image concerns. Indeed, among young adult women in Western cultures, body image concerns associated with the pressure to be thin are so pervasive that they can be considered normal, sometimes termed "normative discontent" (Cash, 2011; Cash & Henry, 1995; Parent, 2011; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984). There has been a rise in body image concerns among young adult men, which are associated with the pressure to conform to muscular, lean ideals portrayed in the media (McCreary & Sadava, 2001; Schooler & Ward, 2006), leading researchers to extend the concept of normative discontent to men (Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes, & Larose, 2011). These findings are troubling because poor body image has been linked to a host of negative outcomes including, but not limited to, lower self-esteem, poorer psychological functioning, and poorer interpersonal functioning (Darby, Hay, Mond, Rodgers, & Owen, 2007). It also is associated with poorer sexual well-being (Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2012; Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012; Weaver

& Byers, 2006; Weaver & Byers, 2013). It is important to identify factors that may contribute to the body image of young adults specifically, because young adulthood is a critical period for sexual exploration and the development of sexual self-esteem and positive sexual functioning (Arnett, 2000; Patrick, Maggs, & Abar, 2007).

According to social comparison theory, individuals compare themselves to media standards of physical appearance in order to enhance their understanding of themselves (e.g., to evaluate their appearance, place themselves in a beauty hierarchy; Thompson, Covert, & Stormer, 1999). Western media propagates highly unrealistic portrayals of ideal beauty. As a result, young adult men and women who consume more popular media report greater body dissatisfaction (Anschutz, Engels, Becker, & van Strien, 2008; Brown & Dittmar, 2005). However, some researchers have suggested that everyday interactions with close individuals may have an equal or stronger influence than the media on body image, especially for young women (Cossrow, Jeffery, & McGuire, 2001; Nichter & Nichter, 1991). There is some evidence to support this view. Gillen and Lefkowitz (2009) found that young adult women and men receive messages about their bodies from their family, peers, school, and the media. Furthermore, Herbozo and Thompson (2006) found that the frequency and perceived impact of positive and negative body-related verbal comments from a range of individuals in young women's lives was associated with their body image. However, neither of these studies assessed nonverbal feedback and/or

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feedback from romantic partners specifically. Yet, during adolescence and young adulthood in Western cultures, romantic partners emerge as highly influential and important sources of information about oneself, including about one's body (Holsen, Jones, & Birkeland, 2012). Thus, it is likely that young adults' body image is influenced by messages from a romantic partner. Little is known about the specific messages individuals receive from their partners about their body—that is, what partners actually say and do. Therefore, the goal of this study was to identify the verbal and nonverbal feedback young adults receive from their partners about their body and the impact young adults perceive these messages have had on their body image and sexuality.

This study was guided by nonverbal communication theories. According to these theories, individuals use verbal and nonverbal, positive and negative actions to communicate with one another about a wide range of personal attributes (Keating, 2016; Patterson, 1983, 2001). Research on both positive and negative messages has focused narrowly on comments about weight, even though it is likely that people receive other types of messages from their partners. For example, in terms of verbal feedback, Murray, Touyz, and Beaumont (1995) found that approximately 25% of young men and women reported that their partner had made a negative comment about their weight during the course of their relationship. Similarly, Sheets and Ajmere (2005) found that in the previous three months, 14% of women and 24% of men had been told by their romantic partner to gain or lose weight. It is likely that people perceive behaviors such as their partner cuddling, kissing, or pushing them away as reflecting their partner's views about their body. However, we could find no studies on the nonverbal ways in which individuals receive information about their bodies from their partners. This is an important omission because people tend to feel better about their bodies when they perceive that their partner is satisfied with it (Goins, Markey, & Gillen, 2012; Weaver & Byers, 2013).

In terms of positive messages, a few studies have investigated the positive feedback men and women receive about their bodies. In their qualitative investigation of adult community women, Satinsky, Dennis, Reece, Sanders, and Bardzell (2013) found that several of the women reported receiving positive comments about their body from a romantic partner. Another study found that adolescent boys report receiving positive verbal praise and compliments from their friends and parents, and they perceived that this communication affected their body satisfaction (Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000). Furthermore, women report more positive partner perceptions than self-perceptions of their bodies (Markey & Markey, 2006; Markey, Markey, & Birch, 2004), suggesting that partners may communicate their positive views. However, it remains unclear what specific positive messages (both verbal and nonverbal) men and women receive about their bodies.

Nonverbal communication theories suggest that close individuals have the most influence on an individual's emotions and behavior (Keating, 2016; Patterson, 1983, 2001). Therefore, we expected that men and women would report that they had received impactful positive and negative, verbal and nonverbal messages about their body from their partners as well as perceived these messages to have affected their body image. Indeed, there is some evidence that positive and negative messages from romantic partners are related to body image (Collins & Laursen, 2000). For example, researchers have found that men and women who report more frequent weight-related negative comments have poorer body image (Evans & Stukas, 2007; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). Conversely, Satinsky et al. (2013) found that many of their participants placed a high value on the positive feedback they had received from their partners about their appearance and perceived that these positive comments improved their body image and self-confidence. However, this investigation included women who were

mostly over the age of 25; therefore, the results may not capture the experience of younger women or men.

It is likely that people perceive that body-related feedback from romantic partners affects their sexual functioning. There is some indirect evidence to support this view. For example, positive body image is associated with a broad range of aspects of sexual well-being among women including higher sexual esteem, perceived sexual desirability, levels of sexual desire, and sexual frequency, and lower sexual avoidance, sexual anxiety, and sexual dysfunction (Satinsky et al., 2013; Weaver & Byers, 2006; Weaver & Byers, 2013). Furthermore, researchers have shown that perceptions of the partner's views of the body are associated with sexual well-being. For example, Weaver and Byers (2013) found that women who report larger differences between how they thought their partner viewed them and the way they thought their partner wanted them to look reported poorer sexual well-being. Similarly, Gagnon-Girouard et al. (2012) found that both men and women who perceived that their partner saw their body more negatively had lower relationship and sexual satisfaction. Barelds-Dijkstra and Barelds (2008) posited that perceiving that one's partner holds negative views about one's body may adversely affect sexuality by increasing self-consciousness during sexual intimacy. However, none of these researchers assessed the perceived impact of specific partner messages. Nonetheless, it is likely that men and women perceive messages about their body from their partner as impacting their sexual life.

We expected that both young adult men and women would identify positive and negative partner messages about their bodies. However, according to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), partner perceptions would be especially salient and memorable to women, such that women would be more likely than men to report having received impactful messages (Collins & Laursen, 2000). That is, although both men's and women's bodies are objectified in the media (Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Parent & Moradi, 2011), the media (and society in general) presents a narrower range of body types for women than for men and objectifies women's bodies to a greater extent than men's bodies (Buote, Wilson, Strahan, Gazzola, & Papps, 2011; Jankowski, Fawcner, Slater, & Tiggemann, 2014). This results in women being especially likely to become more preoccupied with their physical appearance, engage in self-objectification, and experience more body and appearance-related cognitive distractions that interfere with sexual functioning (Oehlhof, Musher-Eizenman, Neufeld, & Hauser, 2009; Purdon & Holdaway, 2006; Quinn, Kallen, & Cathey, 2006; Szymanski & Henning, 2007).

We also expected gender differences in the types of messages men and women report, because Western culture and media promote gender-specific appearance ideals purporting ideal representations of femininity and masculinity. Specifically, in North America, thinness and femininity are emphasized for women, whereas muscularity and masculinity are emphasized for men (McCreary & Sadava, 2001; Schooler & Ward, 2006). Perhaps as a result, men tend to be more concerned about muscularity than women (e.g., McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Pope, Philips, & Olivardia, 2000). Therefore, we expected that more men would report muscularity-related messages. In addition, we expected that more men than women would describe comments about their genitals because men tend to see penis size as a reflection of their masculinity or sexual prowess (Pope et al., 2000), and many men report dissatisfaction with the size of their penis (Lever, Frederick, & Peplau, 2006; Tiggemann, Martins, & Churchett, 2008). In keeping with cultural ideals, we expected that women would be more likely to receive (or recall) weight-related messages. Additionally, we expected that women would report messages about their breasts that had impacted them, because breasts are associated with feelings of femininity and sexuality (Millsted & Frith, 2003),

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