



Body appreciation, sexual relationship status, and protective sexual behaviors in women



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ABSTRACT

The relationship between body appreciation and sexual risk reduction behavior in women is under-explored. This cross-sectional study examined the relationships between body appreciation, male condom use, and sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing among a community-based sample of women ($n = 285$). Logistic regression results revealed that after controlling for age, BMI, and sexual orientation, having more than one sexual partner moderated body appreciation and current male condom use ($OR = 4.21, p < .01, CI = 1.510–11.726$). Body appreciation was not a significant predictor of STI testing in the previous 12 months. This suggests that women with higher body appreciation may be more likely to engage in some protective sexual health behaviors. Interventions that seek to improve body appreciation instead of body size change such as weight loss or gain may encourage certain protective sexual behaviors in women.

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Introduction

The majority of research into body image in women has focused on women's negative feelings about their bodies. However, exploration solely of negative attitudes toward the body leaves out important information about whether the correlates and outcomes of positive feelings toward one's body are different (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). One area that is important to investigate is the potential relationship between body appreciation and sexual behavior, particularly behaviors that may reduce the risk of negative sexual health outcomes.

Existing research into the relationships between body image and sexual behavior has primarily been conducted with adolescent girls (Kvalem, vos Soest, Traeen, & Singsaas, 2011; Vasilenko, Ram, & Lefkowitz, 2011; Wingood, DiClemente, Harrington, & Davies, 2002) and college women (Faith & Schare, 1993; Gillen, Lefkowitz, & Shearer, 2006; Lerner, Blodgett Salafia, & Benson, 2012; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005; Wiederman & Hurst, 1998). In studies of adolescent and young adult women, researchers have repeatedly found that body dissatisfaction in women is associated

with a greater likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviors, such as earlier sexual initiation (Lundin Kvalem, vos Soest, Traeen, & Singsaas, 2011), less frequent and inconsistent condom use (Littleton, Radecki Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2005; Wingood et al., 2002) and higher risk of unplanned pregnancy (Algars et al., 2011). The research findings concerning adolescent and young women's sexual health and behaviors has the potential to impact policy and practice around women's sexuality (Boynton, 2003). Therefore, the lack of research on body image and sexuality in community-based (as opposed to university- or clinic-based) samples as well as women of a wide range of ages should be addressed.

The construct of body appreciation has recently become a focus of exploration into women's sexual experiences (Satinsky et al., 2012). Contrary to measures of bodily dislike and dissatisfaction which solely encompass evaluative dimensions of body image (Cash, 2011), body appreciation as a construct includes numerous facets of respecting and enjoying one's body, such as: holding favorable opinions of one's body; acceptance of one's body regardless of its actual shape, size, weight, and flaws; engaging in health behaviors as an indication of respect for one's body; and refusing to internalize unrealistic images of women's bodies portrayed in mainstream media (Avalos et al., 2005). Therefore, the outcomes of a scale that measures not only the continuum of body like and dislike, but instead looks at several aspects of positive bodily regard may be different than measures of dis/satisfaction. Body appreciation has also been explored with regard to sexual function: Body appreciation was positively associated with arousal, orgasm, and satisfaction (Satinsky et al., 2012). Other studies have

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found that women with high body satisfaction have less unprotected sex (Gillen et al., 2006; Schooler et al., 2005) and adolescents with more positive self-concept report more frequent refusals of unprotected sex (Salazar et al., 2004). However, the direct measure of body appreciation, as opposed to measures of the higher end of a body satisfaction/dissatisfaction spectrum have not been conducted with regards to potential relationships with protective sexual behaviors.

Similar to the focus on negative outcomes in the study of body image, much of the current literature around sexual health focuses on negative sexual health behaviors and their correlative negative sexual health outcomes (Arakawa, Flanders, Hatfield, & Heck, 2012; Satinsky, Rosenberger, Schick, Novak, & Reece, 2011). However, there have been calls in the field of sexual health to promote and research positive views of sexuality and sexual behavior, including protective sexual behaviors (Galinsky & Sonnenstein, 2011; Halpern, 2010). The examination of positive traits and protective behaviors may require alternate methods, and the results of research from these perspectives may have implications for different forms of intervention, education, and empowerment in sexual health. An extension of strengths-based research into sexual health practices includes investigation into the ways that women in particular are engaging in protective sexual behaviors that ultimately help them avoid negative sexual health outcomes. Current estimates of sexual behavior in the United States indicate that the majority of women ages 25–39 report engaging in vaginal intercourse during the past month (Herbenick et al., 2010), and less than half of women in this age group who report a casual vaginal sex partner used a condom during their most recent vaginal intercourse event (Reece et al., 2010). Estimates of STI testing among sexually active women in the United States vary, though multiple studies report that around 40% of eligible women are screened (Chorba, Scholes, Bluespruce, Operskalski, & Irwin, 2004; Tao, Tian, & Peterman, 2007). Though researchers have demonstrated relationships between body satisfaction and condom use, the relationship between body appreciation and condom use has not been explored in existing literature. Additionally, body image constructs' effects on STI screening have not yet been investigated. Thus, this study seeks to add to the literature in unique ways.

Other factors that may affect the relationship between body image and sexual behaviors include age, sexual orientation, body size/BMI, and relationship status. It is understood that women experience body image, specifically appearance evaluation, differently across the lifespan (Cash & Henry, 1995). A systematic review of existing literature on aging and body image found that younger samples attribute more importance to physical appearance; however, body dissatisfaction does not disappear among older women, and maintains a relationship with physical and mental health into older age (Roy & Payette, 2012).

Research on body image and sexual orientation is conflicting. In a test of objectification theory by sexual orientation, researchers found that lesbian women experience body surveillance and body shame differently than heterosexual women (Engeln-Maddox, Miller, & Doyle, 2011). Similarly, researchers found that lesbian women reported more positive attitudes toward their bodies than their heterosexual counterparts. This study concluded that lesbian women have higher resistance to social norms around body size and type, leading to more positive body evaluation (Bergeron & Senn, 1998). However, a meta-analysis comparing body satisfaction across genders and sexual orientations found that in women, body satisfaction does not significantly differ between heterosexual and sexual minority women (Morrison, Morrison, & Sagar, 2004). The construct of body appreciation has not yet been given significant attention in the literature to determine whether the construct manifests differently based on sexual orientation. Due to the relationships between body image and sexual orientation as well as

the lack of research on the relationship between body appreciation and sexual orientation, all analyses in this study control for sexual orientation.

The findings on the relationship between body size and sexual behavior are similarly conflicting. Women of higher weights were more likely to engage in sex with casual partners (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Lust, 2005) and more likely to be intoxicated at last sexual intercourse than their lower weight counterparts (Ratcliff, Jenkins, Reiter-Purtill, Noll, & Zeller, 2011; Eisenberg et al., 2005). However, when psychosocial variables, such as self-esteem (Kinzl et al., 2001), body appreciation (Satinsky et al., 2012) or fat pride (Gailey, 2012; Satinsky, Dennis, Reece, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2013) are included in analyses, women's feelings about their bodies are more salient in explaining and contributing to sexuality outcomes than actual body size. Due to established relationships between body size and sexual behaviors, this study controls for BMI.

A woman's sexual relationship with her partner also impacts her body image and sexual behaviors. Partner type has a direct influence on protective sexual behaviors: as relationship length or level of commitment increases, the likelihood of using condoms to protect against STIs or unintended pregnancy decreases (Civic, 1999; Umphrey & Sherblom, 2007). This may be partially attributed to the belief that STI risk is much lower in monogamous relationships than in casual relationships (Bolton, McKay, & Schneider, 2010; East, Jackson, O'Brien, & Peters, 2007). Additionally, as trust develops in a relationship, the decision to use condoms is often associated with pregnancy risk rather than STI risk (East et al., 2007). Because of the different ways in which STI risk is viewed, the authors expect the influence of body appreciation on condom use and STI testing to vary based on sexual relationship status. Thus, this study will test for a moderation effect to determine if the impact of body appreciation on protective sexual behaviors depends on sexual relationship status.

Though the relationship between body appreciation and sexual function has been explored (Satinsky et al., 2012), body appreciation has not been examined with regard to whether it influences, or is influenced by, specific sexual behaviors. This study seeks to explore the relationships between body appreciation and two protective sexual behaviors, male condom use and STI testing, in a community sample of adult women while controlling for age, sexual orientation, and body size/BMI and testing for a moderation effect with sexual relationship status. While male condom use and STI testing are not comprehensive measures of protective sexual behaviors, they are the most frequently promoted by health education and public health. We tested three hypotheses in this study. Hypothesis 1 was that higher body appreciation would predict higher rates of current condom use with male sexual partners. Hypothesis 2 was that higher body appreciation would predict an increased likelihood of STI testing in the previous 12 months. Hypothesis 3 was that sexual relationship status would moderate the relationship between body appreciation and protective sexual behaviors, in that women in non-monogamous sexual relationships may be more likely to have been tested for STIs in the previous year and use condoms in sexual encounters with male partners.

Method

Procedure

During March of 2010, the study team posted advertisements on email listserves related to sexuality or women's health, with a recruitment script and the link to the study, and invited anyone receiving the email to disseminate the study link to their friends and colleagues. Additionally, the researchers placed a paid ad on

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