

An Examination of the Links between Body Image and Infidelity

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Abstract

In the current study, we examined links between individuals' ratings of body satisfaction and their reasons for cheating on a romantic partner. Five hundred and forty six individuals (282 female, 264 male, age range = 17 – 78 years) participated in this study. Results indicate that higher levels of body satisfaction are associated with particular reasons for cheating on a romantic partner. In particular, individuals with high body satisfaction are most likely to cheat on their partners when they are dissatisfied with the relationship. Findings can advance previous research examining body image in the context of romantic relationships and will be discussed in the context of evolutionary theory.

Introduction

- Sociocultural correlates of body image have long been explored, but only recently has body image been considered in the context of romantic relationships (Markey & Markey, 2006).
- Romantic partners have been found to contribute to body satisfaction among both men and women (Markey & Markey, 2006; Goins, Markey, & Gillen, 2011).
- Further, when women report feeling sexually attractive, marital satisfaction for both partners in the marriage has been shown to be higher (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010).
- In contrast, poor body image among both men and women has been linked to anxious romantic attachments (Cash, Theriault & Milkewicz Annis, 2004).
- To date, research has yet to examine how body image may be associated with the falling out of a relationship, or specifically the act of infidelity.
- In the current study, we examine men's and women's body image in relation to their reports of infidelity, specifically, the reasons they provide for being unfaithful to their romantic partners.

Participants

- 546 individuals (282 female, 264 male) recruited from 2 northeastern universities/surrounding areas
- Aged 17-78 years (M = 24; SD = 10.28), 86% were never married
- 234 participants (133 women and 101 men) reported ever cheating on a partner
- (The following analyses are based on these participants.)

Procedures and Measures

- Participants were asked to voluntarily complete a brief survey about romantic relationships and infidelity in relationships for no compensation.
- Participants who had reported ever being unfaithful to a romantic partner (N=234) in a previous question were asked to select among a series of possibilities as to why they were unfaithful.

Researchers categorized these reasons into four categories.

Dissatisfaction with the relationship contained four items:

- “I was unhappy in my relationship.”
- “I was bored in my relationship.”
- “My relationship was about to end.”
- “I wanted to end my relationship.”

Attractive alternatives, contained 3 items:

- “An opportunity presented itself, so I took it.”
- “I was attracted to my cheating partner.”
- “My cheating partner made me feel attractive.”

Dissatisfaction with partner contained 3 items:

- “My partner has cheated.”
- “My partner was no longer attractive to me.”
- “My partner no longer excited me sexually.”

Finally, no reason for cheating, which contained 1 item:

- “There was no real reason why I cheated.”

- Participants completed a 20-item survey assessing body image (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt, 1973), which began, “Most of the time, I feel anxious, tense or nervous about...”
- Each item addressed a different body part (i.e. thighs, buttocks, height, stomach, etc.).
- Responses were made using a 5-point likert scale (0 being “Not at all” and 4 being “Exceptionally so”). Ratings were coded and used to compute a single overall body satisfaction score.

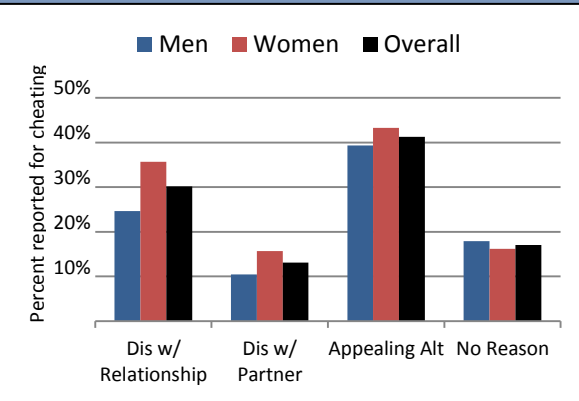
Results

- Individuals who reported higher body satisfaction were more likely report cheating due to dissatisfaction with their relationship ($r = .17$, $p < .05$) and due to dissatisfaction with their partner ($r = .24$, $p < .01$), especially women ($r = .29$, $p = .015$).
- Results did not support a relationship between body satisfaction and cheating due to attractive alternatives.

Reason for cheating	Body Sat	Sig.
Dissatisfaction with current relationship	.173*	.045
Appealing Alternatives	.109	.208
Dissatisfaction with current partner	.240**	.005
No reason for cheating	.003	.971

Why people cheat:

Reasons for which men and women report being unfaithful



Discussion

- These findings indicate that individuals' satisfaction with their bodies is associated with their particular reasoning for being unfaithful in their relationships.
- Interestingly, body satisfaction was only linked with reasons that pertained to some sort of dissatisfaction with their relationship or partner. Body satisfaction was not correlated with cheating on a partner because an attractive alternative presented itself. This finding suggests that individuals who have higher body satisfaction may be generally more secure with themselves; they are not looking to extra-relationship affairs to bolster their sense of self.
- Instead, individuals who are secure with their bodies are looking to partners outside of their relationship only when they feel dissatisfaction with their current partners and relationships. This suggests that these individuals have the courage to leave the security of their current relationships to find relationships with partners that may make them happier.
- These findings should be considered in the context of evolutionary theory. Women, for example, may engage in a mating strategy conducive to finding a partner more compatible than her current partner who will share in child-rearing responsibilities or provide resources for child-rearing (Buss, 2002). Women with higher body satisfaction may be most apt to successfully find new partners.