CHECK HER OUT! DOES VIEWING SEXY INDIVIDUALS AFFECT PERCEPTIONS OF SELF AND PARTNER?
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Overview
Exposure to atypically attractive women, such as those found in soft-porn magazines, can have a negative effect on view of self and partner. For example, experimentally controlled exposure to nude centerfolds from skin magazines has been shown to lower men’s rating of their current partner’s level of sexual attractiveness (Kenrick, Gutierres, & Goldberg, 1989). Women (but not men) have also been found to experience lower self-assessed bodily appeal after exposure to highly attractive members of the opposite sex (Cash, Cash, & Butters, 1983).

This study aimed to extend existing research in two ways. First, we investigated the effects of non-pornographic, yet atypically attractive, media images – such as those found in high-status store catalogues – on men’s and women’s perceptions of their partners and of themselves. We predicted that, compared to those who view benign images of art, men who viewed images of atypically attractive women would perceive their own partner as less attractive and would report less love and commitment for their partners. We also predicted that women who viewed these images would perceive themselves as less desirable and their partner as less attracted to them.

Second, we investigated the potential buffering (or facilitating) effects of a romantic strategy on the psychological response to viewing such images. We predicted that those who pursue a sexual strategy characterized by an interest in casual sex and low levels of relationship commitment (as opposed to a strategy characterized by relationship commitment and long-term investment, for example) would be more susceptible to the negative effects of attractive media on their perceptions of their partner.

Method
A total of 112 romantically involved college students (43 men, 72 women) from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire participated. Participants ranged from 17 to 31 years of age (mean = 19.21). The typical participant had been in their relationship for 4.5 years.

Students completed a questionnaire under the pretense of researcher interest in links between personality and perceptions of art and beauty. As part of a broader questionnaire, participants completed personality inventories, including a measure of sexual unrestrictedness (interest in, and willingness to engage in, short-term sex). They then viewed 10 images, of either art, attractive men, or attractive women, and rated (on five-point rating scales) the extent to which they perceived each as “art” and the degree to which they liked each image. Next, they completed measures of their own desirability (e.g., “Compared with other women your age, how sexy are you?”) and their partner’s desirability (e.g., “Compared with other men his age, how sexy is your partner?”). Finally, participants evaluated various aspects of their relationship (e.g., “My partner and I are happy and in love with each other,” “It is possible that someday I would cheat on my partner.”) Responses were made on nine-point Likert-type rating scales.

Results and Discussion
We conducted a univariate analysis of variance with two fixed factors to test the effects of sex and photo condition on perceptions of one’s own sexiness. Although across condition men rated themselves as sexier than women did (see Figure 1), F(1, 107) = 5.26, p = .02, there was no significant main effect of photo condition, nor did photo condition interact with sex to affect self-evaluations (ps > .47). Contrary to findings from past research, women who viewed highly attractive same-sex images did not rate themselves less positively than other women did.

As displayed in Figure 2, a second ANOVA revealed no significant effects of sex, photo condition, or sex/photo condition on perceptions of partner’s sexiness (or attractiveness), all ps > .13. Counter to previous research (e.g., Kenrick et al., 1989), men’s perceptions of their partners were not negatively affected by viewing images of highly attractive women. In one recent study (Mishara, Clark, & Daly, 2007), researchers showed that men’s perceptions of average-attractive women were negatively affected by exposure to footage of an attractive female interviewer smiling and acting coy toward the camera. Perhaps men were not negatively affected by the female images we used because the ones we chose did not systematically include an inviting smile and eye-locked gaze toward the camera. Regardless, the men in our sample did enjoy viewing images of highly attractive women (see Figure 3).

We also proposed that men with a general interest in short-term sex would be particularly susceptible to the negative effects of viewing attractive members of the opposite sex. This hypothesis was indirectly supported by a strong association for men between interest in short-term sexual encounters and liking of the female images (see Table 1). This finding is important given that these men also reported a greater likelihood of someday cheating on their partner.

References

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