

CHECK HER OUT! DOES VIEWING SEXY INDIVIDUALS AFFECT PERCEPTIONS OF SELF AND PARTNER?

Lydia Moua, Hua Xiong-Her, and April Bleske-Rechek
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

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, Gutierrez, & 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 atypical 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 sexual 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 115 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 1.3 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 is wildly in love with me;" "It is possible that someday I would cheat on my partner.") Responses were made on nine-point Likert-type rating scales.

Sample Stimuli

Men



Art



Women



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 (Mishra, Clark, & Daly, 2007), researchers showed that men's perceptions of average-attractiveness women were negatively affected by exposure to footage of an attractive female interviewee 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 the 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.

Primary Findings

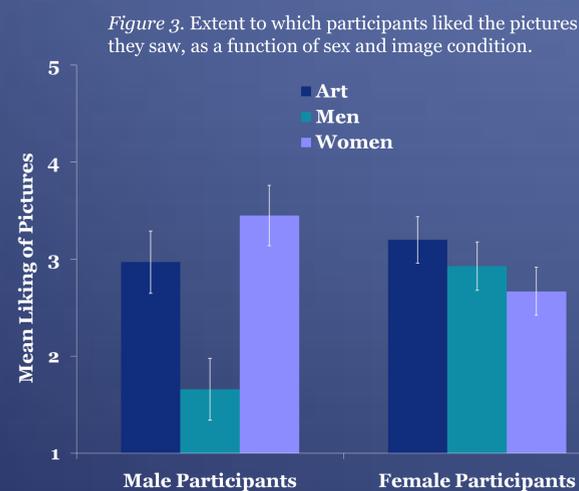
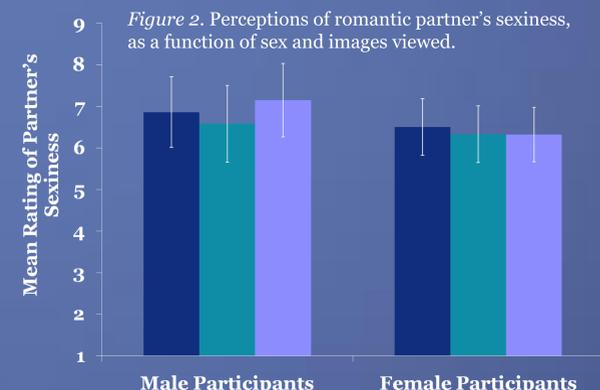
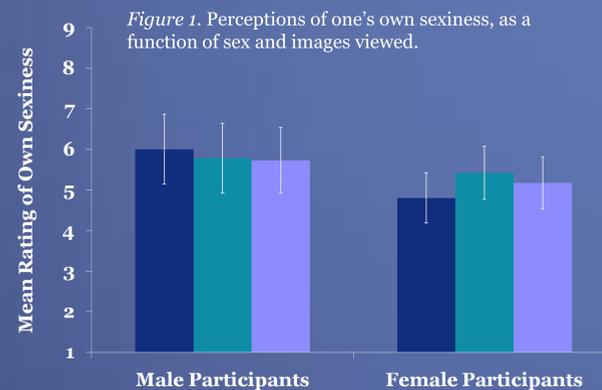


Table 1. Associations between interest in short-term mating and perceptions of (a) partner's sexiness, (b) relationship (cheating), and (c) enjoyment of viewing attractive pictures of the opposite sex.

	Interest in Short-Term Sex	Perception of Partner's Sexiness	Likelihood of Cheating on Partner	Liking of Opposite-Sex Images
Interest in Short-Term Sex	---	.36*	.39*	.80**
Perception of Partner's Sexiness	-.16	---	.16	.02
Likelihood of Cheating on Partner	.31*	-.28*	---	.25
Liking of Opposite-Sex Images	.25	-.22	.23	---

Note. Correlations for men are above the main diagonal; for women below. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Note. In all figures, error bars represent 95% confidence interval of the mean.

References

- Cash, T. F., Cash, D. N., & Butters, J. W. (1983). Mirror, mirror, on the wall...? Contrast effects and self-evaluations of physical attractiveness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 9*, 351-358.
- Kenrick, D. T., Gutierrez, S. E., & Goldberg, L. L. (1989). Influence of popular erotica on judgments of strangers and mates. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 25*, 159-167.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by funding from the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

