

Links Between Body Satisfaction and Relationship Satisfaction in a Sample of Young Adult Women in Lithuania

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Abstract. *The aim of the present study was to examine links between young adult women satisfaction with their bodies and romantic relationships. The study involved 162 young adult women aged 20–35. One hundred and nineteen women indicated that they currently had a partner and the remaining 43 participants indicated that they were single.*

Body satisfaction was measured using the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ, Cash, 2000). Relationship satisfaction was assessed using the Couple's Satisfaction Scale (Čepukienė, 2019).

Results of the study indicated that adult women who had a romantic partner valued their appearance as more physically attractive and were more satisfied with their appearance than young adult women without a romantic partner. Those with a partner were more satisfied with individual body parts than women without a romantic partner. On the other hand, those in a relationship were more concerned about their body weight than single women. Satisfaction with a body and satisfaction with a romantic relationship were partly related. A more favorable assessment of one's appearance and satisfaction in individual parts of one's body was associated with satisfaction with emotion- and behavior-oriented interactions, as well as overall satisfaction with romantic relationships.

Keywords: *body satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, women, young adults.*

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Introduction

The body image is a person's perception of their physical appearance, which can be related to how they are perceived by others (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Both the evaluation of one's own body and the efforts made to take care of it are associated with psychological functioning (Dotse & Asumeng, 2015). In today's society, there is a prevailing cult of the young, healthy, and lean body, shaping and influencing people's evaluation and attitudes towards their own and others' physical appearance. For this reason, problems related to body image are becoming more frequent and relevant. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, 70 million people worldwide are living with eating disorders (National Eating Disorders Association, 2020). Previous studies by this association show that even 89% of girls under the age of 17 have tried various diets. Another study reveals that the highest risk group for developing eating disorders is women from adolescence to young adulthood (Smink et al., 2012).

Discomfort with one's body and eating problems hinder healthy development, negatively affect overall well-being and quality of life, and affect all areas of life (Robert-McComb & Massey-Stokes, 2014). Attitude towards one's body influences a person's behavior, contributes to decision making, choices, and attitudes formation. One of the important areas of life that can be influenced by the attitude towards one's body is romantic relationships.

Research shows that attitude towards one's body may be related to satisfaction with romantic relationships. According to Meltzer and McNulty (2010), individuals who are dissatisfied with their appearance are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their romantic relationships. Women who are dissatisfied with their appearance are more likely to think that their partners are also dissatisfied with their body, and such beliefs have a negative impact on the couple's relationship (Lee, 2016). Satisfying and stable romantic relationships can act as a protective factor for physical and mental health, so it is important to understand and study factors that harm the quality of romantic relationships (Lunstad, Birmingham & Jones, 2008). High satisfaction with relationships is a key aspect that distinguishes happy couples from unhappy ones (Graham, Diebels, & Barnow, 2011). For this reason, it is very important to delve into factors that affect the quality of these relationships.

It is noted that the relationship between attitude towards one's body and romantic relationships is poorly studied not only in Lithuania but also in other scientific literature, it is often noted that this area is still underexplored (Laus, Almeida & Klos, 2018; Razmus, 2018). It has been proven that satisfaction with one's body is formed not only by parents, social environment, psychological characteristics, and media but also by romantic partners (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006).

Previous research investigating factors affecting body image also investigated its links to having a romantic partner, attitudes towards appearance held and comments voiced by a romantic partner (Paap & Gardner, 2011; Boyes & Latner, 2009; Ogden

& Taylor, 2000). It is still unclear whether being in a romantic relationship may act as a protective factor in relation to body image (Razmus, 2018). Results of the study by Friedman et al. (1999) suggested that being married or in a romantic relationship does not protect from dissatisfaction with own body. Hoyt and Kogan (2001) concluded that both single and married participants were equally satisfied with their appearance and physical attractiveness, but those with less positive romantic relationship experiences and poorer sexual life were less satisfied with their overall appearance.

However, a study by Razmus (2018) indicated that being in a romantic relationship may indeed act as a protective factor with regard to body satisfaction, as a person may feel that his or her partner is accepting him or her regardless of body weight. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) suggest that when a partner perceives that he or she is appreciated not only for the physical characteristics and feels that his or her body is accepted as it is, he or she becomes less sensitive to changes in own body weight or appearance, but also tends to take more care of the body. These authors have also concluded that having a partner may operate as a positive protective body image factor, meaning that romantic relationships may help to develop a more positive body image. Tom et al. (2005) found that body dissatisfaction may affect both married and single people to a similar extent, but single women placed more importance on ideal body than married women did and concluded that marriage reduces importance of slim and ideal-like body. Another study of recently married couples has indicated that concerns about gaining weight or being overweight are reduced after marriage (Bove & Sobal, 2011).

On the other hand, Tiggemann (2015) suggested that people with a positive body image are more self-confident, which results in having more social relationships and higher availability of partners, who also see their bodies positively. Thus, the positive body image is seen as predating having a relationship rather than being a result of it.

Metzler and McNulty (2010) believe that women, who are less satisfied with their bodies are less likely to look for romantic partners and are more likely to be dissatisfied with them. On the other hand, those with higher body satisfaction are more likely to trust their partners and believe that partners see them as sexy and attractive. Furthermore, those less satisfied with their bodies are more concerned about possible partner infidelity as they believe that their partners may not desire them as sexual partners.

However, some studies produced seemingly contrary results. For example, Howard & Tawanna (2014) found that lower body satisfaction was linked to higher relationship quality. The authors interpreted this finding speculating that a person dissatisfied with his or her body may put more effort into a relationship and into pleasing the partner.

Results of the studies by Eastwick and colleagues (e.g., Eastwick, Eagly, Finkel, & Johnson, 2011; Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014) indicate that women tend to associate physical attractiveness with ideal romantic relationship suggesting that they perceive appearance as important factor in relationship satisfaction. Various authors

(e.g., Bedford & Johnson, 2006; Murnen, 2011) suggest that such beliefs may be formed by social environment, including media and family. Juarez and Pritchard (2012) found negative correlation between body dissatisfaction and trust and support. Cash, Theriault, & Amis (2004) found that body weight concerns were linked to insecure attachment in romantic relationships. Other research found that romantic relationship dissatisfaction was linked to body dissatisfaction (Hochgraf & McHale, 2019; Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Krisher, 2020).

Almost of all the research reviewed above has been conducted with North American and Western European samples. Unfortunately, very few research of links between body satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction has been conducted with samples of Eastern European women. Previous research of body satisfaction among young women in Lithuania focused mostly on its links to physical activity (Balčiūnienė, Jankauskienė, Bacevičienė, 2022) and eating patterns (Jankauskienė & Bacevičienė, 2019) and only one study (Bacevičienė, Jankauskienė, Balčiūnienė, 2020) linked body satisfaction to overall life satisfaction. However, close relationships play a crucial role in people's lives and investigation of the interplay between body satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction can provide important insights to our understanding of body image development in young women in Lithuania. To fill this gap, the aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between young adult women's body satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction in a sample of Lithuanian women.

Research hypotheses:

1. Young adult women in romantic relationships experience greater body satisfaction than those who are not in romantic relationships.
2. As young adult women's body satisfaction increases, their satisfaction with romantic relationships also increases.

Method

Participants

A total of 162 young adult women participated in the study, their ages ranged from 20 to 35 years, with a mean age of 24.52 years and a standard deviation of 4.45432. The overall characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, almost half of the participating women in the study, i.e. 143, indicated that they have higher education (incomplete higher education/currently studying, nonuniversity higher education or university degree). The remaining women, i.e. 19 respondents, indicated that they do not have higher education, i.e. they have incomplete secondary, secondary or vocational education. Analyzing the distribution of participants according to having a romantic partner, it can be seen that the majority of women in the study currently have a partner, i.e. a total of 119 respondents, who indicated that they currently have a partner with whom they do not live together/live

Table 1*Demographic characteristics of the participants (n=162)*

Demographic characteristics		Number of participants	Percentage
Education	Incomplete secondary	3	1.9%
	Secondary	9	5.6%
	Vocational education	7	4.3%
	College	24	14.8%
	Incomplete university education	74	45.7%
	University	45	27.8%
Relationship status	Has a romantic partner, but not living together	42	25.9%
	Cohabiting with a romantic partner	49	30.2%
	Married	28	17.3%
	No partner	43	26.5%
Relationship duration (months)	1 month – 48 months	71	43.8%
	49 months or more	48	29.6%

together or are married. The remaining 43 respondents indicated that they are currently single. Table 1 also shows the distribution of participants according to the duration of their relationships (in months). It can be seen that the majority of women in the study are currently in a relationship for 1 to 48 months (a total of 71 respondents). The remaining women are currently in a relationship for 49 months or more (a total of 48 respondents). Total sample average was 48.87 months, standard deviation was 42.80.

Measures

Body satisfaction. Body satisfaction was measured by means of 5 appearance-related subscales of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ) developed by Cash (2000). The permission to translate the MBSRQ was obtained from the author. The questionnaire was adapted to the Lithuanian language using a double-translation procedure by the authors of the present study. Items are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Internal consistence of the subscales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (see Table 2) and was very similar to the one reported by Cash (2000) for normative samples, except for Body Areas Satisfaction, which was higher in the present study (.86 in the present study vs. .73 reported by Cash (2000)). Subscale scores are computed as average of item scores. The following MBSRQ subscales were used in the present study.

- *Appearance Evaluation* – Self-perception of one’s appearance as physically attractive or unattractive, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one’s appearance. A high score indicates a positive attitude towards one’s physical appearance, while a low score indicates a negative attitude. A sample item for the subscale is, “I like my looks just the way they are.” The subscale consists of 7 items.
- *Appearance Orientation* – Concern for and investment into one’s appearance. A high score indicates that a person pays a lot of attention, time, and effort to nurturing their appearance, while a low score suggests that the individual does not devote much attention to their appearance and takes little care of it. A sample item for the subscale is, “I take special care with my hair grooming.” The subscale consists of 12 items.
- *Overweight Preoccupation* – Monitoring of weight changes, concern about potential weight gain, adherence to diets, dietary restrictions. A high score indicates that the individual is more concerned about their weight. A sample item for the subscale is, “I am very aware of small changes in my weight.” The subscale consists of 4 items.
- *Self-Classified Weight* – assessment of one’s weight from “overweight” to “underweight.” A higher score indicates that the participant sees her weight as higher. The subscale consists of 2 statements.
- *Body Areas Satisfaction* – Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with specific body areas. A high score indicates satisfaction, while a low score indicates dissatisfaction with one’s body areas. Participants are asked to rate different body parts separately, such as the face, hair, waist, etc. The subscale consists of 9 items.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire Subscales

MBSRQ sub-scales	Number of items	Cronbach’s alpha	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Appearance Evaluation	7	0.862	2.667	3.753	21.9074	6.49874
Appearance Orientation	12	0.823	2.864	4.377	41.5185	8.26068
Overweight Preoccupation	4	0.750	2.235	3.370	10.7840	4.07952
Self-Classified Weight	2	0.882	3.346	3.636	6.9815	1.79534
Body Areas Satisfaction	9	0.862	2.654	4.080	29.0309	7.50190

Romantic relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction with romantic relationships was measured using the Couple Relationship Satisfaction Scale (CRSS, Čepukienė, 2019).

The scale is freely available online, and the Lithuanian version was obtained from the author of the scale. The scale consists of 13 items that encompass various aspects of romantic relationships, which contribute to and determine satisfaction with romantic relationships. For example, participants are asked to rate their satisfaction with mutual trust, shared leisure time, general satisfaction with the relationship, and other related aspects. Participants rate each item on a 10-point scale, where 1 represents “totally dissatisfied,” 10 represents “totally satisfied,” and 0 represents “not applicable.” A higher rating on the scale indicates greater satisfaction with the particular aspect of romantic relationship. The items were then combined into two subscales – Satisfaction with emotion-focused relationship and Satisfaction with behavior-focused relationship. Cronbach’s alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the subscales and the questionnaire (see Table 3), and was found to be even higher than the ones reported in the original validation studies by Čepukienė (2019), which were also conducted in Lithuania.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of the Couple Relationship Satisfaction Subscales

CRSS	Number of items	Cronbach’s alpha	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Satisfaction with emotion-focused relationship	5	0.983	4.951	5.673	26.858	19.298
Satisfaction with behavior-focused relationship	8	0.969	3.494	5.759	40.525	28.889
Total relationship satisfaction score	13	0.984	3.494	5.759	67.383	47.546

Sociodemographic information. The questionnaire also included sociodemographic questions about the participants’ age and education. Additionally, participants were asked whether they had a romantic partner. If they indicated having a romantic partner, respondents were asked to provide information about the duration of their relationship, whether they live together or separately.

Procedure

The study was conducted in March and April of 2021. The questionnaire was designed and administered digitally using the “Google Forms” platform. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, data

usage, anonymity, and the option to withdraw from the study. Those who wished to participate had to confirm their understanding of the study conditions and their consent to participate. It took approximately 7 minutes for an individual to complete the questionnaire. Women aged 18 to 35 were invited to participate in the study. The study was disseminated through personal social media platforms such as Facebook, in groups with a female audience, and on Instagram.

Results

To test the hypothesis that young adult women in romantic relationships experience higher body satisfaction compared to young adult women who are not in romantic relationships, a comparison of mean differences was conducted using the Mann–Whitney U test. A nonparametric test was selected because scores of the MBSRQ subscales used in the present study to assess body satisfaction were not normally distributed. The participants were divided into two groups: those who had a romantic partner, consisting of those participants who indicated that they currently have a partner with whom they do not live/live or are married (a total of 119 participants), and the remaining 43 participants who indicated that they are currently single, forming the group of young adult women without romantic relationships. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

A comparison of body satisfaction between participants with a romantic partner (n=119) and participants without a romantic partner (n=43)

Indicators	Women with a romantic partner	Women without a romantic partner	U	p
	Mean rank	Mean rank		
Body satisfaction				
Appearance evaluation	88.12	63.19	1771.000	<0.01
Appearance orientation	78.45	89.94	2195.500	>0.05
Overweight preoccupation	77.11	93.63	2036.000	<0.05
Self-classified weight	79.67	86.56	2341.000	>0.05
Body areas satisfaction	88.50	62.12	1725.000	<0.01

The data presented in Table 4 indicates a statistically significant difference between young adult women with a romantic partner and those without a romantic partner in terms of their appearance evaluation ($p < 0.01$), overweight preoccupation ($p < 0.05$), and satisfaction with body areas ($p = 0.01$). It can be observed that young adult women with a romantic partner perceive themselves as physically attractive and are more satisfied with their appearance compared to those without a romantic partner. The results also indicate that young women with a romantic partner are less concerned about their body weight than women without a partner. Additionally, the results show that women with a romantic partner are more satisfied with specific body areas compared to those without a romantic partner. Therefore, the hypothesis that young adult women in romantic relationships experience higher body satisfaction than those without romantic relationships is partially supported.

The next step was to test the hypothesis that increasing body satisfaction among young adult women is associated with higher satisfaction in romantic relationships. This hypothesis was tested only within the group of women who have a romantic partner. Since the obtained results showed that both body satisfaction and satisfaction in romantic relationships variables were not normally distributed, the Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the relationship. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

The associations between body satisfaction and satisfaction in romantic relationships among young adult women ($n=119$)

		Appearance evaluation	Appearance orientation	Overweight preoccupation	Self-classified weight	Body areas satisfaction
Satisfaction with emotion-focused relationship	r	0.335**	0.116	-0.126	-0.142	0.482**
	p	<0.01	>0.05	>0.05	>0.05	<0.01
Satisfaction with behavior-focused relationship	r	0.220**	0.051	-0.041	-0.107	0.360**
	p	<0.01	>0.05	>0.05	>0.05	<0.1
Total relationship satisfaction	r	0.276**	0.083	-0.077	-0.124	0.438**
	p	<0.01	>0.05	>0.05	>0.05	<0.01

Note: ** - $p < 0.01$

As seen from the results presented in Table 5, the satisfaction with one's body and satisfaction in romantic relationships are partially related. It is evident that a more favorable evaluation of one's appearance is associated with greater satisfaction in emotion-focused relationship ($p < 0.01$), behavior-focused relationship ($p < 0.01$), and overall satisfaction in romantic relationships ($p < 0.01$). Although the correlations obtained are weak, they are statistically significant. The results also indicate that higher satisfaction with specific body areas is associated with greater satisfaction in emotion-focused relationship ($p < 0.01$), behavior-focused relationship ($p < 0.01$), and overall satisfaction in romantic relationships ($p < 0.01$). On the other hand, no statistically significant links were found between relationship satisfaction measures and appearance orientation, overweight preoccupation, and self-classified weight. Therefore, the hypothesis that an increase in body satisfaction among young adult women is associated with greater satisfaction in romantic relationships is partially supported.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between young adult women's body satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction and to investigate any differences in body satisfaction based on romantic relationship status. Therefore, it is important to review and compare how the results obtained in this study correspond to findings in the literature.

When examining the relationship between young adult women's body satisfaction and relationship status, it was hypothesized that women who have a romantic partner would be more satisfied with their bodies than those who are currently single. Analyzing the research data revealed a statistically significant difference between young adult women who have a romantic partner and those who do not in terms of their evaluation of appearance, concern about body weight, and satisfaction with specific body areas. The results indicated that women in romantic relationships have a more favorable evaluation of their appearance and less concerns about being overweight compared to women without a romantic partner. Additionally, the results showed that women in romantic relationships are more satisfied with specific areas of their bodies compared to those without a romantic partner. These findings support the information presented in the literature, suggesting that being in a relationship can act as a protective factor for positive body image (Razmus, 2018). Previous studies (e.g., Laus, Almeida & Klos, 2018) have also found that single women evaluated their appearance less positively than those having a romantic partner and tended to invest into own appearance less.

It may be that having a romantic partner has a validating effect on perception of own appearance resulting in higher body satisfaction among those in a romantic relationship compared to single women (Lee, 2016). Tom et al. (2005) have concluded that being married reduces importance of slim or ideal body as well as significance of conformity to beauty standards. Furthermore, Razmus (2018) suggests that women who are in a

romantic relationship feel more accepted by their partners regardless of their weight and thus tend to be less concerned by it. Similarly, in their study of recently married couples Bove and Sobal (2011) have found that concerns about gaining weight or being overweight tend to subside after marriage.

Examining the links between young adult women's body satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction, a hypothesis was proposed that an increase in young adult women's body satisfaction would be linked to an increase in satisfaction with romantic relationships. The results showed that women who had a more positive perception of their appearance were also more satisfied with the emotional and behavioral aspects of their romantic interactions, and they also experienced higher overall relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the results revealed that higher satisfaction with specific body areas was associated with satisfaction with emotional and behavioral relationship and overall greater satisfaction with romantic relationships. This means that a connection can be observed between body satisfaction and satisfaction with romantic relationships. The findings are similar to results of the research conducted by other authors. Metzler and McNulty (2010) observed that women who were satisfied with their bodies exhibited greater trust in their partners and believed they were attractive to them. Another study also demonstrated a significant association between body image and romantic relationship satisfaction (Paap & Gardner, 2011). The authors of that study also noted that women who were satisfied with their marriages were less likely to criticize and judge their bodies, emphasizing a positive relationship between body satisfaction and romantic relationships. Paap and Gardner (2011) suggest that this may be because satisfying relationships can serve as a protective factor against sociocultural pressures to have a perfect body. In another study, the results also indicated that body satisfaction is an important factor determining the level of couples' marital satisfaction (Givi & Setayesh, 2018).

The present study provided evidence from Lithuania supporting results of a number of previous research that having a romantic partner and having higher relationship satisfaction was linked to higher satisfaction with at least some aspects with ones own body among young women in Lithuania. As intended, this complements the available body of scientific evidence with additional data from a different cultural environment, thus strengthening a claim, that the positive links between body satisfaction and having a romantic partner and being satisfied in that relationship cross the cultural boundaries of the Western Europe and North America.

The key limitation of the present study is its correlational nature, which precludes us from making evidence-based inferences concerning the direction of causality in the links between the study variables. Further, longitudinal research is necessary to investigate causal aspects of the links between body satisfaction, romantic relationship status, and romantic relationship satisfaction of young women. Also, both health psychology and marital counseling practitioners would benefit from knowledge how these links change as women become older.

Conclusions

1. Young adult women who are currently in romantic relationships have a more favorable evaluation of their appearance and higher satisfaction with specific body parts (such as breasts, abdomen, thighs) compared to young adult women who are single. The results also indicated that young adult women in romantic relationships are less concerned about their body weight than women who do not have a romantic partner.
2. Body satisfaction and romantic relationships are partially related. Women who have a positive evaluation of their appearance are also more satisfied with the emotional and behavioral aspects of their romantic relationships, and they experience greater overall satisfaction with their relationships. Furthermore, higher satisfaction with specific body areas is associated with satisfaction with emotions, behaviorally oriented interactions, and overall greater satisfaction with romantic relationships.

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