

Investigating the Effects of Perceived and Actual Body Ratings on Marital Life

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Abstract

Objective: Though research findings have revealed that body image is associated with several mental, psychological, and behavioral deficiencies in life, the effect of this construct on variables of marital quality of conflicting couples has been rarely investigated.

Method: The current research was an attempt to investigate the relationship between body image disturbance (BID) and two of its related sub-constructs, i.e. perceived partner's ideal beauty (PPIB) and actual partners rating (APR) with sexual self-esteem (SEE) and quality of marital relationship (QMR). To this aim, 73 conflicting couples were selected through convenience and purpose sampling methods from a population referred to a counseling center in Qom. These participants were administered appropriate scales on different variables. The data were collected and analyzed through SPSS.

Results: The results of Pearson's correlation revealed a strong negative correlation between the BID and the SEE, which was statistically significant ($r = -.897$, $n = 73$, $p = .000$). Also, a multiple regression analysis showed that both PPIB and APR statistically significantly predicted SSE, $F(2, 70) = 145.927$, $p < .0005$, $R^2 = 0.807$ and QMR, $F(2, 70) = 97.758$, $p < .0005$, $R^2 = 0.736$.

Conclusion: It was concluded that despite a meager difference between husbands' and wives' views about body image, this variable and the two sub-constructs associated with it correlated with SEE and served as statistically significant predictors of SEE and QMR. These findings have implications for psychologists, psychotherapists, and counselors.

Keywords: Actual Beauty, Disturbance, Perceived Beauty, Physical Disorders, Sexual Self-Esteem.

Introduction

The body and its distinctive characteristics are the critical elements of human personal identity and the principal components of the human sense of self (Corno et al., 2018). Clapp and Syed (2021) postulated that body image is a critical cognitive perception that affects sexual self-esteem.

Furthermore, Harrington and Overall (2021) concluded that body image has a direct correlation between self-esteem and romantic affair among women. Stewart and Williamson

(2004) hold that the way human beings assess the physical characteristics of their own body and the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, perceptions, and even the behavior associated with it is a sophisticated phenomenon which, according to Cash and Smolak (2011), might bring about several severe dysfunctions in perception, cognition, and emotion. This, in turn, might cause more severe deterioration such as mal-functional and maladaptive behaviors in different aspects of social and individual life. Due to the weight of body image, women try to adopt positive cognitive strategies to alleviate some of these effects (Evens, Stutterheim & Alleva, 2021). A review of the literature reveals that the term was first coined in the discipline by Schilder (1950), that described body image

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as the impression of the body formed in the mind while Slade (1994) provided a more comprehensive definition that embraced both attitudinal and perceptual dimensions of the phenomenon and stated that body image, in addition to the impression in mind, involves the impression in our feeling. More recently, Han et al. (2010) expanded the definition to include the behavioral dimension and stated that it is the mental picture of the human body, attitudes about its appearance, and its state of health as well as its sexual functioning.

According to Cash (2011), this body image disturbance is a multi-dimensional construct that involves different facets including cognitive-affective, perceptual, and behavioral. In the cognitive-affective dimension, Stice, Marti, and Durant (2011) postulated that body image affects self-evaluation, which in turn exerts influence on attitudes and feelings and results in physical and cognitive disorders such as self-esteem, self-worth, and, eating disorders, a phenomenon which is also proposed by Sharpe et al. (2018). In the perceptual dimension, also, the image might bring about several serious difficulties such as disturbance in visual perception or unintended overestimation of size (Gardner & Brown, 2014), distortion in tactile processing (Spitoni et al., 2015), distorted body image representations (Guardia et al., 2012) and reduced perceptual processing (Gadsby, 2017). According to Glashouwer et al. (2019), body image disturbance might also generate behavioral difficulties such as hypervigilant body monitoring. Body avoidance - refraining from confronting body shape and size - was also reported by Reas and Grilo (2004).

On the one hand, Tantleff-Dunn and Thompson (1995), along with several reflected appraisal theorists, maintain that the malfunctions associated with body image disturbance bring about several perceived and actual disparities in

feelings and behaviors. These disparities might include clinical difficulties such as alexithymia as well as sexual-romantic problems. Standing firm behind this postulation is acceptable shreds of evidence in humanities and clinical studies. From symbolic interactionist theory in philosophy (Mead, 1934) to clinical findings of Ridolfi (2013), Patterson (2019), and Burkert et al. (2019) among many others, suggest that people see themselves from the perspectives of others, and thus, their perceived attributes such as physical attractiveness are significantly dependent on and conditioned by the reactions generated from more significant others in their immediate environment. Thus, the way couples react as well as their perceived reactions to the physical appearance of their mates is influential in many cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of their relationship. On the other, Mohammadi et al. (2020) concluded that a couple's relationship necessitates the fulfillment of intellectual, emotional, and physical needs, and therefore the formation of sexual identity and sense of sexual acceptability results from the way the aforesaid needs are met. Besides, according to Darjazini and Moradkhani (2017) unfulfilled needs, especially emotional ones, might engender some disorders such as "Alexithymia" which in turn result in problems in describing feelings to a partner, problems in recognizing feelings, and failure in distinguishing between feelings, physical sensation and affective arousal and deficient imagination processes as postulated by De Vries et al. (2016).

Iranian couples are also affected by media and social environment and their attitude toward an ideal body is drastically changed which, consequently, becomes manifest in the way they express opinions about their mate which affects different aspects of the marital relationships (Einifar & Kosari, 2020). Thus there seems to be a

close relationship between components of body image disturbance and marital deficiencies such as sexual self-esteem since they are all related to cognitive, affective, attitudinal, and perceptual facets which can exert influence on the quality of marital life. Despite this close hypothesized relationship and the effect sexual issues have on the quality of marital relationships and marital satisfaction, this area of research is almost intact, and little evidence-based research is conducted on the dissatisfaction related to the physical aspects of appearance. Thus, the current research investigated the relationship between the components of the sophisticated construct of body image disturbance and a common disorder positively associated with marital conflicts, i.e. low sexual self-esteem among conflicting couples in an Iranian context. Thus, this research intended to investigate any relationship between body image disturbance and sexual self-esteem in Iranian women involved in a marital conflict. Also, it was intended to examine which type of body Image rating (perceived Partners' Ideal Body and Actual Partners' Rating) is a significant predictor of self-image and marital satisfaction.

According to Heinberg (1996), theories generated around body image are categorized in a trichotomy of perceptual, developmental, and sociocultural theories. Based on perceptual theories, as the name suggests, the body image is tightly related to the accuracy of the perception of an individual's physical and bodily appearance, which might be perceived incorrectly due to some intellectual, visual-spatial, or an array of obtained disorders (Weller & Dziegielewska, 2005). According to a report by the American psychiatrist association (2000, p. 583), this category of theories is diagnostic and is used clinically for recognizing difficulties associated with body image disturbance such

as anorexia nervosa. Developmental theories, however, investigate the roots of body image disorders in different occasions of life and generally hold that sensitive maturation levels of life, as well as negative sexual and teasing experiences in the past, and current feelings of self-disgust, correlate positively with body image disturbance in adolescence (Thompson, 1996; Akram et al., 2022). These, last but not least, are sociocultural theories according to the attributes of an ideal body manufactured by the social environment. Based on these theories, a more successful professional career, marital satisfaction, and social interaction are positively correlated with ideal physical attributes and goodness (Weller & Dziegielewska, 2005, p.76). This final category of theories is the most used one in empirical studies in the past decades. In a study entitled "perfectionism dimensions, appearance schemas and body image disturbance in community members", Sherry et al., (2009) conducted research on the relationship between a self-presentational style and body image disturbance and found that concealment of imperfection physical attributes affects body image disturbance which in turn affects the way they appear in their social interactions and relationships. In the same year, Frei (2009) in "neurocognitive correlates of body image disturbance" reported that the disturbance exerts an effect on patterns of neuropsychological functioning and bring about some complications such as eating disorder. By the same token, Goldov (2011) used meditational therapies for body image disturbance in "the effect of movement therapy on body image in women with breast cancer". It was revealed that the interventions involving planned behavior changes reduce symptoms of body image disturbance. Ridolfi (2013), also, in a study entitled "The relationship between body image disturbance and health

maintenance behavior” adopted a positive glance and found that the relationship is both positively and negatively correlated with indifferent individuals because some people adopt an avoidance strategy toward their physical screening due to the disturbance. In the same line of research, Weller and Dziegielewski (2005) in “the relationship between the romantic partner support styles and body image disturbance” found that higher levels of body image dissatisfaction inversely correlated with romantic support perception. Besides, Charles and McLean (2017) in their study entitled “body image disturbance and skin bleaching” found that skin bleaching in colored women is not related to body image disturbance, and inborn physical attributes are not strong correlates of the disturbance. In another study entitled “assessing the relationship between attitudinal and perceptual component of body image disturbance” Corno et al. (2018) employed virtual reality to examine the association between different components of body image disturbance. It was found that two different perceptual and attitudinal mechanisms are involved in the disturbance. Also, adopting a sociocultural perspective, Saiphoo and Vahedi (2019) in “a meta-analysis review of the relationship between social media and body image disturbance” found that the variables are significantly correlated. It was also revealed that race, ethnicity, age, and geography moderate the relationship. Finally, Crerand et al. (2020) in “sex differences in perceived stigmatization, body image disturbance, and Satisfaction with facial appearance and Speech among adolescents with craniofacial conditions” concluded that this type of disturbance in women is much stronger than in men.

Method

Considering the objectives of the study, a

quantitative research design that involved correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis was used. The assumptions of the tests were taken into account by the research team.

Participants

In the present study, 191 couples who reported being involved in marital conflict were identified and selected through a convenience sampling procedure. These couples had been referred to a public counseling center in the city of Qom from 2020 to 2021. Wives in this earlier sample were administered a general body image disturbance scale (see 3.2) and 73 wives with the disturbance, along with their husbands, were identified for the final stage of the research.

Ethical statement

Primary ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Before administrating the questionnaires, the researchers informed the participants about the goals of the current study. The participants were assured that their privacy would be warranted and their identities and their responses to the questions would be kept confidential. Furthermore, the couples participating in this study signed an informed consent form in Persian. The researchers tried to create a positive and facilitative atmosphere to assist the subjects express their perceptions with ease. Moreover, the participants were told that they could withdraw from the study whenever they wished. It was tried to avoid any social, ethnic, or religious bias during data collection and analysis.

Measures

Based on the variables of the research, a number of instruments were employed in this study.

A. Sexual self-esteem questionnaire: Derived from the sexuality scale developed and validated by Snell and Kilimnik (2011, p.446), the questionnaire encompasses 10 items that

measure the sexual self-esteem construct. The scale results in a score between 10 and 50 where the greater number represents the greater sexual self-esteem. This instrument was translated into Persian at the Department of English at Shahid Mahallati Faculty in the city of Qom. Also, a panel of language experts at the Islamic Azad University of Qom was consulted for the accuracy, face validity, and wording of the instrument and required amendments were carried out. Besides, the reliability was calculated in a pilot study with a Cronbach alpha of 0.82 for a female sample and 0.78 for a male sample in the city of Qom.

B. Body Image Disturbance Scale: This scale is a questionnaire developed by Cash et al. (2004) and validated by Cash and Grasso (2005), which evaluates the attributes of body image disturbance. The validity of the revised instrument was affirmed in the original study by 603 participants (Cash et al., 2004, pp.311-313). This scale encompasses subjects' concerns regarding their bodies as being attractive or unattractive as well as distress and other psychological and social/interpersonal dysfunctions associated with it. This scale was also translated into Persian by the researchers. This instrument was translated into Persian at the Department of English at Shahid Mahallati Faculty in the city of Qom. Similarly, the same panel of language experts was consulted for the accuracy, face validity, and wording of the instrument and required amendments were carried out. The reliability was also calculated through Cronbach Alpha in a pilot study ($r=0.79$) of male/female samples.

C. Outer-Personal Body Image Rating: This scale was adopted from Stead et al. (2004) and translated into Persian ($r=76$) at the Department of English at Shahid Mahallati faculty of Qom. The instrument was concerned with interpersonal dimensions of body image

which relate to features of attractiveness from an outer-personal perspective through ten items. The scale entails affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions to provide an actual realist rating of husbands regarding the image of their wives.

D. Body Self Relations Questionnaire: this scale encompasses sixteen items one of which was adopted from Brown et al. (1990) and evaluates subjects' judgment (perception) about their appearance and body area satisfaction. The construct and predictive validity of the instrument were affirmed in the original research (p.139). It is reported that scale is a predictor of some dimensions of a romantic relationship (Weller & Dziegielewski, 2005, p.78). The Persian-translated version of the scale resulted in a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.81 in a sample of conflicting females ($N=37$). The translation underwent an accuracy check, face validity, and wording control through a similar procedure.

E. Marital Relationship Quality: adopted from Maroufizadeh et al., (2018), the instrument encompassed 10 items of self-report inventory to calculate marital quality. The tool was already translated and piloted in a Safaiyeh Mental Health Center in the city of Qom (reliability was reported to be 0.992). The construct validity of the questionnaire was approved by the original developer (Fowers & Olson, 1993, p.176).

Procedures

From a large population with marital conflict ($N=191$), 73 wives were identified as suffering from body image disturbance after administering the body image disturbance scale (instrument B). This sample was also administered a sexual self-esteem questionnaire (instrument A). The correlation between the two sets of data was measured through a correlation analysis in SPSS (Version 23). In the next phase of the research, to fulfill

the second objective of the research, an outer-personal body image rating (instrument C) was administered to husbands to collect actual partners' ratings of their wives' bodies. Also, a body self-relations questionnaire (instrument D) was administered to women to measure their perception of their husband's ideal bodies. A regression analysis was conducted in SPSS (Version 23) to investigate which sub-scale of body image is a stronger predictor of body image disturbance and sexual self-esteem.

Results

In order to investigate the relationship between body image disturbance and sexual self-esteem, a Pearson's Product-Moment correlation was carried out because the data collected on both scales were parametric in nature. Other assumptions of the correlation involving the existence of a linear relationship, normal distribution of observations, and non-existence of a significant outlier were met. The results of this test are presented in the following table: As can be seen in Table 1, a Pearson product-

moment correlation was carried out to determine the relationship between body image disturbance and sexual self-esteem amongst wives of conflicting couples in the sample of this study. There was a strong, negative correlation between the variables studied, which was statistically significant ($r = -.897$, $n = 73$, $p = .000$).

After establishing a strong and significant relationship between body image disturbance and sexual self-esteem, a multiple regression analysis was run to fulfill the second objective of the research which was intended to see whether perceived partners' ideal body or actual partners' ratings - two major sub-components of body image disturbance - is a stronger predictor of sexual self-esteem and marital relationship quality. The results of these analyses are reported in the following tables. As it is indicated in Table 2, the multiple regression coefficient, which is a measure of the quality of the prediction of sexual self-esteem, has a strong value ($r = 0.898$) which is a high prediction value denoting that both

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Pearson Correlation

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
BID	66.79	17.323	73
SSE	28.19	10.229	73

Table 2 Pearson's Product Moment Correlation between Sexual Self-Esteem (SSE) and Body Image Disturbance

		BID	SSE
BID	Pearson Correlation	1	-.897**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	73	73
SSE	Pearson Correlation	-.897**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	73	73

Table 3 Model Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis (Dependent Variable: Sexual Self-Esteem)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. E of Estimate
1	.898a	.807	.801	4.398

a. Predictors: (Constant), APR, PPIB

subcomponents of body image disturbance, are good predictors of the level of the dependent variable. Also, the coefficient of determination ($r^2 = 0.807$) shows that both the perceived body image of wives and the actual rating of their husbands explain 80.7 percent of the variation in sexual self-esteem in wives of these conflicting subjects.

As it is revealed in this table, the F-ratio shows

PPIB. These variables statistically significantly predicted SSE, $F(2, 70) = 145.927$, $p < .0005$, $R^2 = 0.807$. However, only APR added statistically significantly to the prediction, $p > .05$.

In addition to that, in order to investigate the same prediction regarding the quality of the marital relationship, another multiple regression analysis was run, the results of which are reported below;

Table 4 Model Data Fit analysis for APR and PPIB Predicting SEE

	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5645.598	2	2822.799	145.927	.000 ^b
	Residual	1354.073	70	19.344		
	Total	6999.671	72			

a. Dependent Variable: SSEM / b. Predictors: (Constant), APR, PPIB

that the overall regression model is a good fit for the data collected from these subjects. This means that the actual partners' ratings and the perceived partners' ideal beauty, statistically significantly predict sexual self-esteem, $F(2, 70) = 145.927$, $p < .0005$, $R^2 = 0.807$. Besides, the independent coefficient for each variable was calculated which is shown in Table 4.

This table reveals that only actual partners'

In Table 5, the multiple regression coefficient was a robust value ($r = 0.858$) which is an almost strong prediction value denoting that both subcomponents of body image disturbance (APR, PPIB), are good predictors of the level of the dependent variable. Also, the coefficient of determination ($r^2 = 0.736$) indicates that both the perceived body image of wives and the actual rating of their husbands explain 73.6 percent of

Table 5 Independent Statistical Significance for APR and PBI Predicting SEE

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	-2.367	2.278		-1.039	.302
	PPIB	.001	.059	.002	.018	.985
	APR	2.692	.285	.897	9.435	.000

rating adds statistically significantly to the prediction, though both variables predict sexual self-esteem. This shows that the actual partners' rating is a stronger predictor for the dependent variables. In sum, a multiple regression was run to predict sexual self-esteem from APR and

the variation in marital relationship quality in the current sample.

As it is indicated in table 6, the F-ratio reveals a good overall regression model fit for the data collected from these variables. This means that, like sexual self-esteem, marital relationship

Table 6: Model Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of APR and PPIB predicting MRQ

	Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. E of Estimate
	1	.858 ^a	.736	.729	7.781

a. Predictors: (Constant), APR, PPIB

Table 7 Model Data Fit analysis for APR and PPIB Predicting MRQ

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	11837.784	2	5918.892	97.758	.000b
	Residual	4238.244	70	60.546		
	Total	16076.027	72			

a. Dependent Variable: MRQ / b. Predictors: (Constant), APR, PPIB

quality can also be predicted by actual partners' ratings and perceived partners' ideal beauty in a statistically significant manner, $F(2, 70) = 97.758, p < .0005, R^2 = 0.736$.

In addition to that, the independent coefficient

investigated through multiple regression analyses which revealed a significant effect and a difference between the studied sub-components. This shows that the men's rating of ideal body image is different from women's

Table 8 Independent Statistical Significance for each Predictor (PPIB&APR)

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	9.533	4.030		2.366	.021
	PPIB	-.176	.104	-.187	-1.688	.096
	APR	4.586	.505	1.008	9.084	.000

for each variable was calculated separately in Table 7. This table shows that both actual partners' rating and perceived partners' ideal beauty adds statistically significantly to the prediction. In conclusion, a multiple regression was run to predict marital relationship quality from APR and PPIB. These variables statistically significantly predicted MRQ, $F(2, 70) = 145.927, p < .0005, R^2 = 0.807$. Also, both variables added statistically significantly to the prediction, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The results of the analyses showed that there is a strong and negative relationship between body image disturbance and sexual self-esteem, which in turn, imposes direct or indirect effects on the marital relationship. Also, the effects of two sub-components of the body image construct, i.e. perceived partners' ideal beauty and actual ratings of partner, on sexual self-esteem and marital relationship quality were

perceptual rating in conflicting couples examined in this research. It was also proved that the rating of each group affects sexual self-esteem differently, though both predict a statistically significant effect. These findings are in line with Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) and Crerand et al. (2020), which state that the difference between men and women resides in the amount of appearance investment and social pressure on female attractiveness. These findings support Swami, Robinson, and Furnham (2021) who reported a strong association between social anxiety related to physical attractiveness among young women and the importance of developing targeted interventions to reduce social physique anxiety and unhealthy appearance orientation in copulations.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study are consistent with Seyed Tabaii et al.'s (2022) which revealed that body image disorders are negatively correlated with many physical

and mental symptoms, including obsessive compulsion, hostility, and paranoid ideation. Also, these findings support Kavehfarsani and Omidian (2021) which underlined the interrelationship between subjects' physical and psychological variables. The same results were reported for the effect of these two sub-components on marital relationship quality. The difference between women's perception and Men's actual rating not only affects the variables studied in the current research but also perpetuates body dissatisfaction and body image disturbance the aggravates the consequences associated with it (Tantleff-Dunn and Thompson, 1995, p.602). This discrepancy suggests that inaccurate beliefs regarding body size preferences between men and their wives play a critical role in the development and maintenance of body image problems in women and marital relationships in general. A diverse number of variables have mediated this effect and brought about this discrepancy among which is social media (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019, p. 31). Supporting these findings, Corno et al, (2018, p.683) hold that the virtual environment brings about a kind of illusion of body ownership and embodiment in the virtual body which can affect the relationship between the subject's attitude and the perception of body image.

Another consequence that originates from body image disturbance is the influence that the disturbance exerts on the communicational patterns and behavior of the sufferers. According to Sherry et al. (2009), people with body image disturbance invest hard to present a perfect image of themselves to others including their romantic partners, and at the same time, try to conceal their perceived imperfection which sequentially affects their marital life. Bartsch (2007) also reports that wives with body image disturbance are more

likely to become preoccupied with excessive expectations from themselves and also perceive unrealistic demands and strict criticisms from their partners. Sherry et al. (2009, p.83) disclosed that some internal variables such as self-criticism, and some external variables, such as social norms and expectations (i.e. not wearing make-up to conceal facial deficiencies), mediate the perception of wives regarding their body image. Another critical finding that is supported by this study is Reas and Grilo (2004) who postulate that women with body image disturbance are repeatedly seeking assurance from their romantic partners and frequently check whether their partners care about them, a condition that conversely affects the marital relationship. More interestingly, Weller and Dziegielewski (2005, p.84) reported that low support from the romantic partner, too, results in increased body image disturbance which uncovers a mutually enhancing condition between the variables. Cobb (2001) had already reported that perceived care and support from the part of the romantic partner is directly related to lower body image disturbances and associated physical and psychological conditions including eating disturbance and anxiety. All these variables are possible moderating and intervening variables for marital relationships.

One more problem that adds to the disturbance is the fact that deficiency or inadequacy in one body part is very likely to be generalized to overall body image (Crandall et al., 2017). Accordingly, a moderate overweight might result in a whole-body feeling of unattractiveness which consequently plays havoc with self-esteem in general, and sexual self-esteem in particular.

Conclusion

A statistically significant relationship was reported between body image disturbance

and sexual self-esteem. Also, it was found that husbands' rating of body image is different from women's perception of their bodies which lays the groundwork for marital conflict. However, both wives' and husbands' ratings on body image statistically significantly predicted sexual self-esteem and marital relationship quality. As it was discussed above, saving that body image at behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions, is a critical predictor of some marital variables which need due care and treatment. Further research is required to examine a wide array of dependent, moderator, and intervening variables that are involved in a healthy marital relationship from different behavioral, perceptual, emotional, cognitive, and even socio-cultural perspectives. According to Alleva et al., (2022), new research is recommended to underline body functionality, which in turn might contribute to improvements in body image and self-kindness among women. To sum up, it seems that body image and the constructs related to it might affect all these dimensions. Since almost all these variables reside in personality types and psychological traits of couples, future research is suggested to employ longitudinal and follow-up studies to examine these variables and the consequences associated with them more profoundly. Also, future research is recommended to include more participants through random selection for further generalizations of findings.

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