

The Role of Romantic Relationships in Body Image.

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Abstract

Body image dissatisfaction is an increasing problem in society, with many people of all ages experiencing some level of body dissatisfaction. Body image dissatisfaction can lead to negative psychological outcome for many, highlighting the need to understand the factors that both positively and negatively influence body image. Romantic Relationships have been identified as a potential factor offsetting the negative outcomes that result from poor body image perceptions and in promoting body positivity. Romantic relationships have been directly linked in an increase in body satisfaction and many factors that are related to romantic relationships, such as length and satisfaction have been directly linked to an increase in both body satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The aim of the current study was to address these contradictions relating to the influence that romantic relationships have on body image in existing literature, while also attempting to identify gender differences in body image satisfaction regardless of relationships status. Data was collected from participants (N = 90) via an online Google Forms survey where they were asked for demographic information and to complete two surveys: the Body Image Concern Inventory and the Relationship Assessment Scale. The results indicated that while there are significant gender differences in body image satisfaction, factors such as relationship status, length and satisfaction do not appear to have the same influence on body image. Further research should prioritise longitudinal studies, aiming to gather a more diverse sample of participants.

Key words: body image, romantic relationships, body dissatisfaction, length, satisfaction.

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Introduction

Body Image

Body image is complex and multifactorial, under the influence of many different gender, ethnic and sociocultural factors (Bailey et al., 2017). There have been many different definitions and conceptualisations of body image as our understanding evolves and research is conducted. A current definition of body image encapsulates the perceptions, emotions, feelings and attitudes an individual holds regarding their appearance and body (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Body image dissatisfaction has been linked to the development of depressive symptoms (Bornioli et al., 2021), anxiety (Luqman & Dixit, 2017), and disordered eating (Brechan & Kvalem, 2015). While efforts have been made to promote body positivity, with many making use of the growing popularity of social media networking sites (Lazuka et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2021), body image dissatisfaction remains a serious issue that is increasing in prevalence worldwide (Milton et al., 2021; Jiménez-Limas et al., 2022; & Bhatia, 2023). The My World Survey 2 study concluded that 44% of young people living in Ireland suffer with some form of body image dissatisfaction (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2019). Body image dissatisfaction is not a young person specific problem, with many studies showcasing the existence of body dissatisfaction across the lifespan (Quick et al., 2013; Gruszka et al., 2022), with a survey conducted by the Mental Health Foundation revealing how 73% of adults living in the UK held some form of negative feelings or perceptions about their own body image (Mental Health Foundation, n.d.).

A number of different reasons exist that explain why there has been an apparent increase in body dissatisfaction within society, including but not limited to sociocultural factors, self-esteem and morals (Cafri et al., 2005; Rieke et al., 2016). Particularly in developed nations, the rise of the internet and social media networking sites has directly contributed to the development of positive and negative body image perceptions in many

(Franchina et al., 2018; Vandebosch et al., 2022) due to the extreme pressures that people feel are often placed upon them to conform to appearance standards as seen within society or on the internet (Cash, 2012; Fardouly et al., 2016; de Valle et al., 2021). By placing an emphasis on appearing thin or muscular, society contributes to the struggles of many who attempt to fit these rigid boundaries of what is considered ‘attractive’ (Green & Prtichard, 2003; Bardone-Cone et al., 2008; Grabe et al., 2008). Studies show that overall wellbeing and life satisfaction can directly influence body image satisfaction (Donaghue, 2009). An important variable in life satisfaction and wellbeing for many people that has also been shown to influence body image is healthy romantic relationships (Leak & Cooney, 2001; Facio & Resett, 2014; Kansky, 2018).

Romantic Relationships and Body Image

In general, romantic relationships are important for many as they can serve the purpose of maintaining both lifelong happiness, satisfaction and preventing loneliness (Kansky, 2018; Londero-Santos et al., 2021). Existing evidence suggests that healthy and properly functioning romantic relationships can positively influence an individual’s body image satisfaction as they can help to create and maintain body positive perceptions in both men and women (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Laus et al., 2018; Frederick et al., 2020). Romantic relationships that are satisfying and high quality contribute to an individual’s overall happiness and wellbeing (Demir et al., 2008), with relationship satisfaction also playing a role in the maintenance of positive body image perceptions. Poorer perceptions of body image were associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction in both men and women (Friedman et al., 1999; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; van den Brink et al., 2018). While Van den Brinks et al. (2018) study showcases how romantic relationships play a role in promoting body image satisfaction, the sample consisted of predominantly college aged

couples who had relatively short relationship durations. This means that although the study had positive results, the age of participants and relatively short duration of the relationships included brings the generalisability of the results into question. Despite the apparent positive association between relationship satisfaction and body image satisfaction, there is a need for further analysis as very few studies have examined this particular factor (Hockey et al., 2022).

Another important feature of lasting and properly functioning romantic relationships which contributes to overall relationship satisfaction and quality is partner support. Levels of Support provided by one romantic partner to another has been linked to increased relationship satisfaction (Fivecoat et al., 2015), and another factor that potentially can influence an individual's perceived body image. Higher levels of body image dissatisfaction were related to lower levels of perceived support from a partner in multiple studies (Weller & Dziegielewska, 2005; Juarez & Pritchard, 2012). Everyday neutral and purposeful positive messages from partners to their spouses were found to have a significant influence on body image, resulting in an increase in confidence, self-acceptance, and sexual empowerment (Goldsmith & Byers, 2016). However, the sample for this study mainly consisted of young undergraduate students making it difficult to generalise to other age groups. Cairo Notari et al. (2017) had an interesting finding in which they discovered that high levels of relationship satisfaction have a positive influence on body image on women undergoing breast cancer treatment. While there is a significant amount of research to suggest that higher levels of relationship satisfaction are related to higher levels of body satisfaction, a large amount was conducted on predominantly women and younger populations. Despite this, these studies highlight the importance of positive and healthy romantic relationships, showing how they may positively impact a person's body image.

There has been contradictory research published in relation to the influence that length of a romantic relationships has on a partner's body image satisfaction. A great amount of research literature suggests that long term relationships lead to a decrease in body satisfaction among women (Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995; Markey & Markey, 2006; Morrison et al., 2009). Carriere and Kluck (2014) more recent finding that examined the duration of time a couple spent together, found that those who were together longer had an increased likelihood of being satisfied with their body and appearance. In contrast to all of these findings, the results of the more recent meta-analysis (Stiles et al., 2023) suggested that relationship length had no impact on body image dissatisfaction and relationship quality. However, only twenty four of the fifty-six studies included in their meta-analysis included length of romantic relationships, leaving the influence that length of a relationship has on body image satisfaction and relationship quality uncertain. Similarly to relationship length, there is some conflicting literature on the influence that relationship status has on body image. Some evidence points to the conclusion that those who have a romantic partner are more likely to be satisfied with their bodies (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Frederick et al., 2020) while other suggests those in relationships are more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies (Markey & Markey, 2006; Morrison et al., 2009). For those who do not have a partner, a consistent conclusion that has been drawn is being single increases a person's likelihood of being unhappy with their appearance, having body image concerns and less likely to engage with relationships (Tom et al., 2005; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; Carriere and Kluck, 2014). However, Laus et al. (2018) found that while single people are at an increased likelihood of being dissatisfied with their body, they care less about their appearance compared to those in romantic relationships. As well as this, other research has found that that body image dissatisfaction occurs equally across relationship status, with married and single individuals

suffering similarly (Friedman et al., 1999) and that body dissatisfaction exists across relationship status but is significantly higher in single people (Tom et al., 2005).

Gender and Body Image

In terms of the relationship between gender identity and body image, there are significant gender differences in body image satisfaction that are consistent across literature (Pingitore et al., 1997; Austin et al., 2009). It appears that women across age groups tend to be more dissatisfied or unhappy with their appearance overall compared to men as a result of factors including societal pressures, and regardless of relationship status (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Kipela et al., 2015). Body image dissatisfaction has been linked to the onset of depression and disordered eating among women of all ages (Wardle et al., 2001; Samuels et al., 2019), with the severity of symptoms related to lower body image satisfaction (Pastore et al., 2011). Women who were not experiencing dysphoria as a result of body image dissatisfaction had lower levels of self-esteem and assertiveness compared to women who held a more positive perception of their body image (Weaver & Byers, 2006), highlighting the importance of body image satisfaction in wellbeing. With regards to relationship status, women in relationship care more about their appearance and its value on their worth whereas importance given to appearance, with body image dissatisfaction being significantly lower among single women (Laus et al., 2018). Participants that took part in this study were predominantly married meaning despite the positive results, the application of the results to other relationship status' is uncertain. Regardless of this, these findings contradict evidence suggesting that romantic relationships can both improve a person's perceptions of their body image and maintain this positive change throughout the duration of the relationship (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Laus et al., 2018; van den Brink et al., 2018), showcasing the need for further analysis. Relationship length has also been identified as playing a significant

role in body image satisfaction, with women who are in long term relationships having lower levels of body dissatisfaction that is seemingly caused both by men desiring a change in their partners appearance or women believing that they want them to change (Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995; Markey & Markey, 2006; Morrison et al., 2009).

There are very few studies examining the prevalence of negative body image perceptions among men and the factors that influence it compared to the large quantity of research available on female body image. A Meta analysis of existing literature (Fiske et al., 2014) revealed that the prevalence of body image dissatisfaction among the male population ranged anywhere between 8% to 61%, compared to the prevalence among the female population which ranged between 11% to 72%. While there are clear differences in how body dissatisfaction appears across genders, it is evident that the prevalence of body dissatisfaction among men is still significant. Men often struggle in similar ways to women as a result of societal pressures that imprint the belief in men that they must appear muscular or thin to be considered attractive by society (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Cohane & Pope Jr, 2001; McCreary & Sadava, 2001; Grogan & Richards, 2002). Similarly to women, body image dissatisfaction in men has been directly linked to the development of negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety and depression (Barnes et al., 2020), again research in this area is lacking. With reference to romantic relationships, there is evidence to suggest that men are more likely to be satisfied with their bodies if they perceive their partners to be (Goins et al., 2012). Paap and Gardener (2011) found that men were more likely to be dissatisfied or unhappy with their romantic partners body size compared to females. The sample again was limited to predominately college aged participants, reducing the generalisability to older male populations. All of these findings showcase the need for further studies on the factors influencing male body image as high levels of body image dissatisfaction is prevalent among the male population despite not existing at the same rates as in the female population.

Transgender and nonbinary individuals have been heavily discriminated against in scientific research due to bigoted belief systems, so far less literature exists on the prevalence of negative body image and factors that influence body image satisfaction within this population. A meta-analysis (Witcomb et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2018) revealed that body image dissatisfaction is a common struggle for many transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Many other studies have mirrored these findings, highlighting the high rates of body dissatisfaction within the transgender and nonbinary population (Witcomb et al., 2015; McGuire et al., 2016; Peterson et al., 2017). Within romantic relationships, there is limited information on how body image is influenced by a number of different factors related to relationships. Narula et al. (2019) study revealed that transgender and cisgender individuals experience similar levels of relationship satisfaction.

The Current Study

Body image dissatisfaction is an issue that has been widely researched, with ties to the onset of various different psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression (Wardle et al., 2001; Pastore et al., 2011; Barnes et al., 2020) which develop as a result of external societal pressures placed upon individuals to look a particular way (Green & Prichard, 2003; Bardone-Cone et al., 2008; Grabe et al., 2008; de Valle et al., 2021). It appears that women suffer significantly higher levels of negative body image perceptions (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Kipela et al., 2015) compared to men and transgender or nonbinary individuals regardless of their relationship status or age. This stark difference may be a direct result of researchers primarily focusing on female body image and completely disregarding the existence of male body dissatisfaction. Existing literature available while scarce suggests that there are still relatively high rates of body image dissatisfaction among the male (McCreary & Sadava, 2001; Grogan & Richards, 2002), transgender and nonbinary population (Witcomb et al.,

2015; Peterson et al., 2017). While it may not be as intense or as severe as that experienced by women, it is still prevalent within society (Fiske et al., 2014) which highlights the need for further research in this area.

Romantic relationships contribute to an individual's wellbeing and overall life satisfaction, offsetting the influence that negative external pressures place on body image satisfaction and promoting the development of positive body image perceptions (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Facio & Resett, 2014; Kansky, 2018; Laus et al., 2018). Relationship satisfaction and quality are essential components in maintaining happiness within romantic relationships, with lower levels of relationship satisfaction related to body dissatisfaction across gender identities (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; van den Brink et al., 2018). Factors such as partner support are also related to increased body satisfaction (Weller & Dziegielewska, 2005; Juarez & Pritchard, 2012), with positive messages significantly influencing body image (Goldsmith & Byers, 2016). Many of the studies included had restricted samples consisting of predominantly women, overweight and college age participants resulting in the generalisability of the result to a larger or older populations with varying body sizes difficult. Other areas of interest within romantic relationships are how relationship status and length or duration have on body image perceptions. Some research suggests that the duration of romantic relationships directly influences body image, with longer relationships leading to decreased body image satisfaction (Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995; Markey & Markey, 2006; Morrison et al., 2009), while others suggest that relationship length improves (Carriere & Kluck, 2014) or has no influence on body image (Stiles et al., 2023). With regards to relationship status, the influence that this relationship factor has on body image is again unclear. For those in romantic relationships, there is evidence to suggest that healthy and satisfying relationships can improve an individual's body image (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010) while other research suggests that body image dissatisfaction

occurs equally across relationship status (Friedman et al., 1999) or that single people suffering significantly worse than those in romantic relationships (Tom et al., 2005; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; Carriere and Kluck, 2014),

While there has been a substantial deal of evidence and research that showcases how romantic relationships can influence an individual's body image, contributing to the development of positive body image perceptions, the mixed and contradictory findings in relation to the influence that relationship status, length and satisfaction/quality have on body image satisfaction highlight the need for further analysis. The current study aims to further explore the apparent gender differences that are evident in existing literature in relation to perceived body image, attempting to bridge the gap on how body image impacts men and women both in and out of romantic relationships. The study also aims to understand how other factors related to romantic relationships, including length and satisfaction/quality, play in both the improvement and worsening of body image satisfaction. So, based on preexisting literature, it is hypothesised that:

1. *There will be significant differences in perceived body image based on current relationship status.*
2. *There will be significant gender differences in perceived body image.*
3. *There will be significant a difference in body image based on the interaction between gender and relationship status.*
4. *Among those in a romantic relationship; gender, length of the relationship and relationship satisfaction will predict differences in perceived body image.*

Method

Participants

The sample for the current study consisted of 90 individuals over the age of 18, with ages ranging from 18 to 63. The Regression Rule of thumb (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013) was utilised to determine the minimum number of participants required for the current study. This was done as one of the methods of statistical analysis that was utilised was a standard multiple regression. This rule determined that the minimum number of participants that were needed for the study was 82; $50 + (8 \times 4) = 82$. Participants were recruited for the current study using a combination of two different nonprobability sampling methods, convenience and snowballing sampling. An online post was made on the social media networking site 'Instagram', which included a short description of the current study including eligibility criteria and a link to access the study (see Appendix D). The study was also sent around to numerous different WhatsApp groups again alongside a short description of the study and the eligibility criteria for participation (see Appendix E). Participants who took part were kindly asked to refer the study to other people they knew, with the ultimate aim to recruit more participants from a variety of different backgrounds. No incentives to participate were used throughout the data collection process.

Study Design

The current study had a cross-sectional analytical design. The impact of relationship status, gender, length and satisfaction of a romantic relationship on perceived body image were being examined. For hypotheses one through three, the Dependent variable was body image. The Independent variables were gender and relationship status. For the final

hypothesis, the Dependent variable was scores on the BICI. The independent variables were gender, relationship length and scores on the RAS.

Materials

Demographics.

Participants were asked to identify their gender identity (Man, Woman, Non-binary, Prefer to self-describe, Other) and their age. Participants were then asked to indicate if they were currently in a romantic relationship. If answered “YES”, they were asked to indicate how long have they been in said romantic relationship (see Appendix F).

The Body Image Concern Inventory (BICI).

The BICI was the first psychometric measurement tool that was utilised to collect data throughout this study (see Appendix G). The BICI is a 5-point Likert-scale that consists of 19 questions with purpose of measuring an individual’s dysmorphic concern (Littleton et al., 2005). Participants are asked to rank each statement from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always) based on how much it applied to them. Scores range from 19 to 95, with higher scores indicating greater body image concern and poorer body image satisfaction. The BICI is a valid and reliable measurement scale, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.9 ($\alpha = 0.93$) (Littleton et al., 2005). For this particular sample, an internal consistency test was performed to determine the reliability and validity of the BICI scale. It was found to have a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.9 ($\alpha = .94$), suggesting the BICI has excellent internal consistency.

Relationship Assessment scale (RAS).

The RAS was the second and final psychometric measurement tool that was utilised (Dicke & Hendrick, 1998) (see Appendix E). The RAS is a five-point generic scale consisting of 7 questions used to measure relationship satisfaction. Items 4 and 7 on the RAS are reverse scored. Participants are asked to rate each item from 1 to 5 based on which best answers the item for them. Scores range from 5 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction within a relationship and lower scores indicating poorer satisfaction. The RAS is a valid scale that has reliable internal consistency, with several studies demonstrating that it has a minimum Cronbach's alpha of 0.8 ($\alpha = 0.828$) (Maroufizadeh et al., 2018; Rivera, 2020). An internal consistency test performed to determine the reliability and validity of the RAS for this particular sample determined that the RAS has a Cronbach's alpha of ($\alpha = .83$), making it a valid and reliable scale.

Procedure

Data was collected via an online Google Forms survey that had been posted to the online social networking site Instagram. A link was provided alongside a description about the nature of the study (see Appendix D). The survey was also sent to various different WhatsApp groups, with a short description detailing the premise of the study and the eligibility criteria for participation (see Appendix E). The first page presented of the Google Forms survey included a Participant information leaflet (see Appendix A). This contained a detailed description of the nature of the study, potential triggering topics that were going to be included throughout the survey, contact information for both the author and the supervisor if additional information was required, and finally the eligibility criteria for participation. Participation in the current study was voluntary, and this was communicated to the

participants through the information leaflet by acknowledging that they could withdraw consent at any time during the survey by exiting out of the browser. It was also communicated that while participation could be withdrawn at any time during the survey, this was not possible once the survey was submitted as their data would be unidentifiable and anonymised.

Once acknowledged and understood, participants clicked “next” which brought them through to the consent form (see Appendix B). The consent form again documented their right to withdraw at any moment during the study and the data protection procedures that are in place to protect the data collected throughout the duration of this study. Participants could not move forward with the survey if they did not agree to the conditions of the study, including being aged 18 years old and that they were voluntarily agreeing to take part. The participant was prohibited from moving forward with the questionnaire until they had given informed consent.

Following this, participants were asked for their age, gender, relationship status and length of relationship if applicable (see Appendix F). The first of the two questionnaires were then presented to participants, and it was the BICI (Littleton et al., 2005). Next the participants were presented with the RAS (Dicke & Hendrick, 1998). Note that only participants that reported being in a relationship were asked to answer this questionnaire. Those that reported not being in a relationship were instructed to skip this section which was facilitated by making the questionnaire not a requirement to move forward.

Following the completion of the questionnaires, the participants were thanked for their time through a debriefing sheet (see Appendix C). The debriefing document almost provided participants with the contact details for both me and my project supervisor. Appropriate resources such as website links to Body Whys and Samaritans were provided

alongside the phone number to SPUNOUT at the end due to the sensitive topics that were discussed throughout the survey.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The total sample size yielded 90 participants. 71.1% of participants were Female, 26.7% of participants were male and 2.2% were nonbinary. 67.8% of participants responded YES to the question ‘are you currently in a romantic relationship’ while 32.2% responded NO (see Table 1). Inferential statistics were performed to determine that the mean age was 30 ($M = 30.37$, $SD = 11.024$) with ages ranging from 18-62 years old. The mean length of relationships from participants who took part was 5 years ($M = 5.70$; $SD = 8.44$). The mean score on the BICI scale was 55 ($M = 55.69$; $SD = 17.5$) and the mean score for the RAS was 29 ($M = 29.46$; $SD = 4.154$). The BICI has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.94 and the RAS has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.83 (see Table 2).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for gender and relationship status of participants.

Variable	Frequency	Valid %
Gender		
Female	64	71.1%
Male	24	26.7%
Non-Binary	2	2.2%
Are you currently in a romantic relationship?		
Yes	61	67.8%
No	29	32.2%

Table 2

Inferential statistics for Age, relationship length, BICI and RAS scores of participants.

Variable	<i>M</i> [95% CI]	<i>SD</i>	Range	α
Age	30.69 [28.06 – 32.68]	11.03	18 - 62	
Relationship Length	5.70 [3.93 – 7.46]	8.44	.0 - 32	
BICI Scores	55.78 [52.08-59.48]	17.66	19 - 92	0.83
RAS Scores	25.95 [25.23–26.67]	2.81	20 - 35	0.94

Note. Relationship Length in years.

Two-way Anova

A two-way between groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of gender and relationship status on scores on the Body Image Concern Inventory. Participants were divided into three groups according to their gender (Male; Female; and Non-binary). Participants were also classified as either currently in a romantic relationship or single. The interaction effect between gender and relationship status was not significant ($F(1, 85) = .053$, $p = .819$). There was a statistically significant main effect for gender, ($F(2, 85) = 9.49$, $p < .001$), and the effect size was large (partial eta squared = .183). Overall, scores on the BICI were highest among non-binary participants ($M = 86.5$, $SD = 7.78$) compared to women ($M = 58.91$, $SD = 17.04$) and men ($M = 44.87$, $SD = 13.21$). The main effect for relationship status did not reach statistical significance, $F(1, 85) = .002$, $p = .963$. Women who reported being in romantic relationships scores were slightly higher ($M = 59.22$, $SD = 17.63$) than women who reported being single ($M = 58.11$, $SD = 15.89$). Scores on the BICI were higher among men who reported being single ($M = 45.27$, $SD = 10.59$) compared to men in relationships ($M = 44.54$, $SD = 15.52$).

Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score on the BICI for women ($M = 58.91$, $SD = 17.04$) was significantly higher ($p = .001$) than men ($M = 44.87$, $SD = 13.21$) but significantly lower than non-binary participants ($p = .052$; $M = 86.5$, $SD = 7.78$). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test also indicated that the mean score on the BICI for non-binary participants scores was significantly higher than men ($p = .002$).

Standard Multiple Regression for Body Image

Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine how well scores on the BICI could be explained by three variables including gender, relationship length, and relationship satisfaction. Preliminary analysis was performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. The correlations between the predictor variables were examined (see Table 3 for full details). The predictor variables were assessed, and the r values ranged from $-.201$ - $.423$. Tests for multicollinearity also indicated that all Tolerance and VIF values were in an acceptable range. These results indicate that there was no violation of the assumptions of multicollinearity, and that the data was suitable for examination through multiple regression analysis

Table 3

Inter-correlations (Pearson's r) between model variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Body image	*			
2. Gender	.423	*		
3. Relationship Length	-.04	-.072	*	

4. RAS Scores	-.147	-.114	-.201	*
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Note. Statistical significance: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Since no a priori hypothesis had been made to determine the order of entry of the predictor variables, a direct method was used for the analysis. The three predictors explained 19% of the variance in BICI scores ($F(3, 56) = 4.38, p = .008$). Only one of the three variables was found to uniquely predict scores on the BICI to a statistically significant degree, gender ($\beta = .41, p = .001$). Relationship length was found to be the weakest predictor of scores on the BICI ($\beta = -.032, p = .79$) (See Table 4 for full details).

Table 4

Standard multiple regression table for body image.

Variable	R^2	B	SE	β	t	p
1. Model	.19**					
2. Gender		16.38	4.88	.409	3.36	.001
3. Relationship Length		-.066	.252	-.032	-.262	.794
4. Relationship Statis		-.705	.818	-.107	-.862	.392

Note. Statistical significance: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Discussion

Body image is a multifactorial concept that is well-documented and widely researched (Cafri et al., 2005; Rieke et al., 2016; Bailey et al., 2017). Many attempts have been made to promote positive body image perceptions, many making use of the rise of social media networking sites, (Lazuka et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2021) Despite the many efforts, body image dissatisfaction continues to remain prevalent within society (Milton et al., 2021; Jiménez-Limas et al., 2022; & Bhatia, 2023), resulting in a number of different negative psychological outcomes for a lot of people (Brechan & Kvalem, 2015; Luqman & Dixit, 2017; Bornioli et al., 2021). With this in mind, the goal of the current study was to determine how romantic relationships influence body image satisfaction across gender identities. A number of different variables related to romantic relationships including relationship status, length and satisfaction/quality were examined to further extend our understanding of if these factors contribute to the development of both positive and negative body image across the lifespan.

The initial aim of this study was to investigate if there were significant differences in perceived body image based on current relationship status. Despite predicting in the first hypothesis that there would be significant differences based on relationship in the first hypothesis, no significant relationship between gender and relationship status in predicting perceived body image was found. is not in line with the first hypothesis. This finding contradicts the mountain of literature in which it is suggested that romantic relationships can both improve and maintain positive body image perceptions (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Laus et al., 2018; van den Brink et al., 2018). Rseults were in line with the meta-analysis (Friedman et al.,1999), in which it was found that there were no signifcant differences in body image satisfaction based on relationships status. An explanation of this differing result

is that it may likely be due to 61% of participants reporting that they were in relationships, compared to only 29% of participants reporting that they are single.

Another one of the research aims was to determine if there are differences in body image satisfaction based on gender identity. Based on existing research which found that women suffer from significantly higher rates of body dissatisfaction compared to men (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Kipela et al., 2015; Fiske et al., 2014), it was hypothesised that there would be significant gender differences in perceived body image. As expected, gender was found to be a significant predictor of negative body image perceptions in non-binary and female participants, who scored significantly higher on measures of body image dissatisfaction. While nonbinary participants had the highest levels of body image concerns among this particular sample, there were only two individuals who identified as non-binary that participated. Regardless of the significant difference in scores, it is evident that male participants who participated in this study also suffer from significant body image dissatisfaction, further highlighting the existence of body image disturbances among the male population (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; McCreary & Sadava, 2001). An explanation for the significant difference in findings was that there were a disproportionate number of male and non-binary participants that took part in this study compared to females. Women accounted for 71.1% of participants compared to 28.9% which were male and nonbinary. This means that the apparent gender differences in body image that were found in this sample may have been the result of more women participating.

Next, the interaction between gender identity and relationship status was investigated. The aim was to determine if body image satisfaction could be predicted by two variables: gender and relationship status. There was not significant relationship between gender and relationship status. Women in relationships scored higher on measures of body image concerns compared to single women, initially suggesting that they have poorer body

satisfaction however the difference in scores were small and not significant. In contrast, men who were single were found to have higher scores compared to men in romantic relationship and similar to the last finding, the differences in scores were not significant. Both non-binary participants indicated that they were in relationships, meaning the a comparison for this gender identity was not possible. These results contradict existing literature that have identified romantic relationships as an essential component in promoting body image satisfaction across genders (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; van den Brink et al., 2018). Results from all gender identities are in line with that of Friedman et al. (1999), who found that body image satisfaction occurs across genders regardless of relationship status. Finally, the differences in scores for both genders and relationship status were not large, indicating that this result may also solely be influenced by the gender disparities among participants.

The final aim was to determine if gender, length of relationship and relationship satisfaction would predict differences in perceived body image among those in romantic relationships. It was hypothesised that above variables would predict significant differences in body image satisfaction across genders for those currently in romantic relationships as existing literature suggests this to be the case (Carriere and Kluck, 2014). However, the only variable out of the three that was found to predict body image to a statistically significant degree was gender, again corresponding with the mountain of evidence suggesting there are apparent gender differences in body image (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Kipela et al., 2015). Like previously mentioned, there was a larger number of women that took part compared to men and non-binary participants which may have impacted the results. Relationship length was found to be the weakest predictor of perceived body image among couples. This correlated with the recent finding of Stiles et al. (2023), where their meta-analysis uncovered that length of a romantic relationship has no direct influence on body image satisfaction. Finally, a new finding that was discovered through this study was that relationship satisfaction appears to

have a weak relationship with body image satisfaction, which does not correspond with preexisting evidence suggesting that romantic satisfaction maintains and promotes the development of positive body image perceptions (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Cohane & Pope Jr, 2001; McCreary & Sadava, 2001).

Despite only one of the hypotheses proved to be correct, the findings presented further cement the apparent gender differences in body image and the existence of high levels of male body image dissatisfaction that has been evident across existing literature, making this study an important contribution. In relation to romantic relationships, findings presented suggest that they do not appear to have a direct influence on perceived body image across gender identities, which is not in line with existing research on body image. These differing results suggest that additional analysis needs to further validate the influence that romantic relationships have on body image, while also further exploring the apparent gender differences in body image.

Limitations and Future research

The current study had several strengths, the first notable one is related to the nature of the study. The cross-sectional analytical design allowed for the data to be collected from participants in a quick and inexpensive manner using an online Google Forms survey. This enabled the collection of larger quantity of participants across different gender identities and age groups, increasing the generalisability of the study to the wider population. While there were few ethical risks associated with the present study, the quick and simple nature of the study also limited the amount and time that participants were exposed to sensitive and triggering information. Another notable strength is that present study is a novel contribution to the existing knowledge, expanding on what is currently understood about the influence that

romantic relationships have one an individual's body image satisfaction. This is especially important right now as body dissatisfaction is rapidly increasing in the modern world due to factors such as the rapid expansion of the internet. While no correlation between relationship status, length or satisfaction were found, this study highlighted again the existence of body image concerns across different gender identities. This study added to the growing literature surrounding men's relationship with body image. While it appears based on the results that men do not suffer as significantly as women, it is still apparent in the male population.

Despite the many strengths, there were some limitations present. Due to the cross-sectional nature, results were collected at one period of time. This means that it is not possible to determine the cause-and-effect of the variables included as the participants responses may have been influenced by various other external factors, resulting in the direction of causality between gender, relationship status, relationship length and satisfaction to be left uncertain. Other limitations were related to sample that was gathered for the study. Firstly, there were only ninety participant that took part. This makes generalising findings very difficult as ninety participants are not representative of the larger population. Like previously mentioned, 71.1% of participants identified themselves as females. One of the major findings in this study was that there were significant gender differences in body image, with women suffering most severely. This finding may have been due to there being significantly less male and non-binary participants compared to women. In addition to this, 67.8% of participations reported that they were in relationships while only 22.4% reporting that they were single. For future research, I would recommend a longitudinal study as it would provide more clarity and validity to the results. The same sample of people can also be observed over a longer period of time, reducing the potential that responses being influenced by other factors not being measured. I would also recommend researchers aim to gather a

larger sample of participants from different gender identities, to observe if this potentially changes the outcome of the study and increases generalisability.

Conclusion

Body image dissatisfaction is an issue that continues to grow as society expands and modernises. The current study comes at an important time where the age of social media is in full swing, influencing the body image of millions of people worldwide in both positive and negative ways. This means that from a research point of view, understanding the factors that contribute to overall body satisfaction is especially important as body image dissatisfaction can lead to the development of depression and disordered eating in many. The aim of this research project was to expand on and provide further clarity to the current state of understanding on how a number of different relationship factors influence an individual's body image. While this study failed to find a correlation between body image satisfaction and romantic relationships, the findings provide additional evidence for the existence of body image dissatisfaction across different gender identities, more specifically in men and non-binary participants. These findings highlight the need for further analysis of the factors that influence and predict body image satisfaction in men, transgender and non-binary folk, as women focused body image research dominates existing literature. For future research, researchers should aim to conduct longitudinal studies to examine if relationship status, length and satisfaction/quality have an influence on gender related body image concerns over a longer time frame which could potentially allow for the development of prevention programmes to tackle the rising body image concerns across different groups in society.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Participant Information sheet

Participant information leaflet

The role of Romantic relationships on body image.

You are being asked to take part in a research study that examines the effect of romantic relationships on body image. Before coming to a decision, please take time to read this document containing all appropriate information regarding this study. If you have any further questions that have not been answered by this information sheet, please feel free to contact me using the provided details at the end of this document.

What is this study about?

I am a final year Psychology student at National college of Ireland. Part of our degree requires us to conduct an independent research project on a topic of our choice. For my project, I have decided to investigate whether romantic relationships influence levels of perceived body Image.

What will taking part in the study involve?

If you decide to take part in this research study, you will be asked demographic questions (age, gender), whether you are in a relationship or not and if so, for how long and two questionnaires. One will measure your perceived body image and the other will measure satisfaction within a romantic relationship. The questionnaires should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete and can be completed in one session.

Note that if you answer NO to “are you currently in a romantic relationship” you do not have to complete the romantic relationship satisfaction questionnaire. This will be facilitated by the questionnaire not being a requirement to move forward.

Who can take part?

Anyone over the age of 18 can take part in this study. While one of the aims of this study is looking at the influence romantic relationships have on perceived body image, another of the aims is to determine if there are differences in perceived body image between people in romantic relationships and those who are not.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you do not have to take part. If you decide not to take part, there will be no consequences for you. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw your participation at any time during the questionnaire by closing out of the browser window. Once your answers have been submitted, it will not be possible to withdraw your data from the study due to the anonymity of the responses.

Due to body image being a core part of the study, the questionnaire we are using includes items that ask about your perception of your weight and other aspects of your appearance. An example of one of the questions you will answer is: “I feel there are certain aspects of my appearance that are extremely unattractive”. There is a small risk that these questions may cause some individuals upset or distress. If

you feel that these questions may cause you to experience an undue level of distress, you should not take part in the study.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, the results from this study can help us further our knowledge on factors that contribute to the worsening or strengthening of perceived body image.

Like previously mentioned, due to the sensitive nature of the study there may be some questions on the body image questionnaire that may cause distress to some participants. If you experience this, you have the right to discontinue your participation as long as you have not yet submitted your responses. At the end of the questionnaire, there will be support services listed if you or anyone you know is suffering from an eating disorder or if you experience distress while completing this survey.

Will taking part be confidential and what will happen to my data?

All data collected from the questionnaires is treated with the strictest confidentiality and anonymity. It will not be possible to identify a participant based on their responses to the questionnaire as no identifiable data (e.g. name, email address) will be collected.

A unique ID will be allocated to each participant and all data collected will be stored under this unique ID code. It will not be possible to identify individuals based on their ID code.

All responses to the questionnaires collected will be stored securely on NCIs encrypted One Drive servers and also in a password protected file on my computer. Only myself and my project supervisor will have access to the data. It is my responsibility to adhere to ethical guidelines in my dealings with participants and the collection and handling of data.

NCI will have also responsibility for the data generated by the research. All local copies of data saved on personal password protected devices/laptops will be deleted by the student's NCI graduation date or three months after the student exits the NCI psychology programme.

Anonymised data will be stored on NCI servers in line with NCI's data retention policy. It is envisaged that anonymised data will also be uploaded to a secondary data repository to facilitate validation and replication, in line with Open Science best practice and conventions.

What will happen to the results of this study?

The results that are gathered from this study will be presented in my final dissertation. This will be submitted to the National college of Ireland. There is the possibility of the results being presented at the Psychological Association of Irelands conference for students. Results may also be published in an academic journal and presented at other academic conferences.

Who should you contact for further information?

If you have any further questions, you can contact me, Alexandra, at x22319036@student.ncirl.ie or my project supervisor Dr. Lynn Farrell, at Lynn.Farrell@ncirl.ie

Appendix B: Consent Form

In agreeing to participate in this research I understand the following:

The method proposed for this research project has been approved in principle by the Departmental Ethics Committee, which means that the Committee does not have concerns about the procedure itself as detailed by the student. It is, however, the above-named student's responsibility to adhere to ethical guidelines in their dealings with participants and the collection and handling of data.

If I have any concerns about participation, I understand that I may refuse to participate or withdraw at any stage by exiting my browser.

I understand that once my participation has ended, that I cannot withdraw my data as it will be fully anonymised.

I have been informed as to the general nature of the study and agree voluntarily to participate.

All data from the study will be treated confidentially. The data from all participants will be compiled, analysed, and submitted in a report to the Psychology Department in the School of Business.

I understand that my data will be retained and managed in accordance with the NCI data retention policy, and that my anonymised data may be archived on an online data repository and may be used for secondary data analysis. No participants data will be identifiable at any point.

At the conclusion of my participation, any questions or concerns I have will be fully addressed.

Please tick this box if you have read and agree with all of the above information.

☐

Please tick this box to indicate that you are providing informed consent to participate in this study

☐

Appendix C: Debrief sheet

Thank you for your participation in this study that is examining the influence that romantic relationships have on perceived body image.

All information provided is confidential and anonymous therefore once you have submitted your answers, you cannot withdraw them. If you would like to withdraw your data you can close your browser window and not submit your responses.

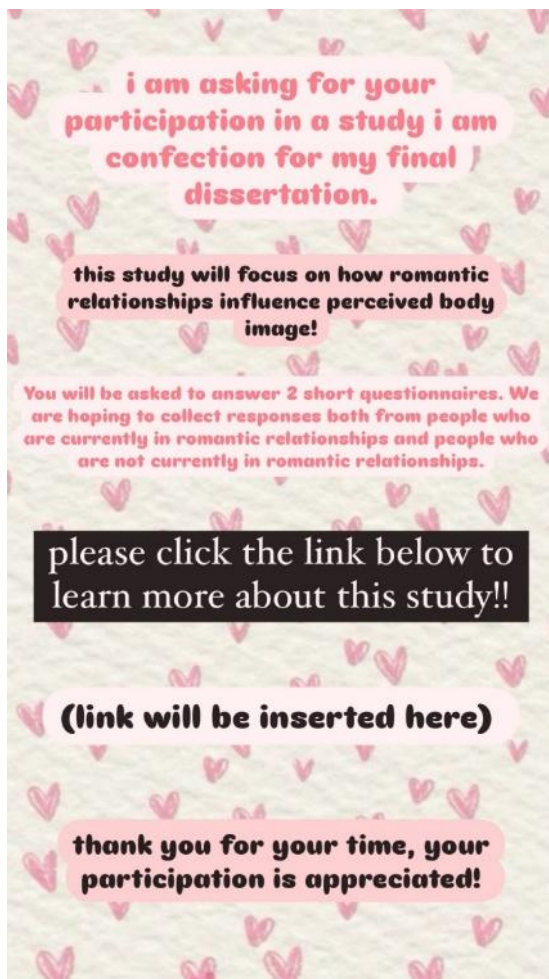
If you require further information or have any questions regarding the nature of the study or the outcome of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Alexandra, at x22319036@student.ncirl.ie or my supervisor Dr. Lynn Farrell at Lynn.Farrell@ncirl.ie

If you or anyone you know is struggling know that you are not alone.

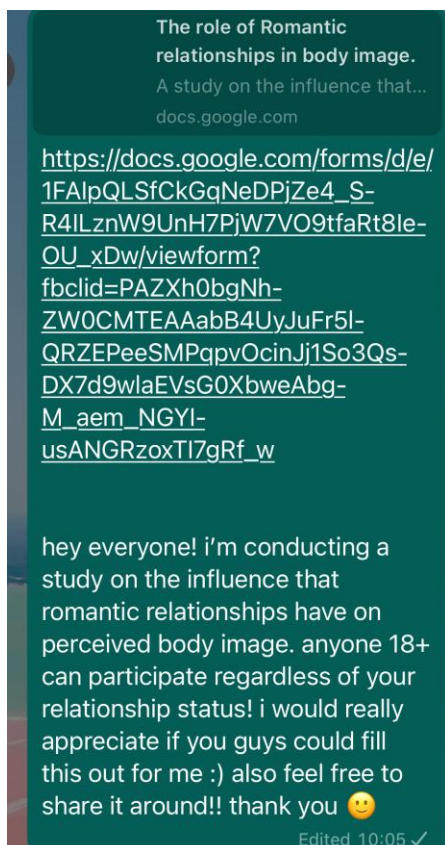
<https://www.bodywhysbodyimage.ie/resources/4useful-links-and-resources> is a free online website that provides young people in Ireland with the appropriate information and resources on improving body image and accessing the appropriate help.

For any other mental health difficulties you are experiencing, Samaritans is a 24 hour, free mental health service aimed at helping anyone who is in distress, lonely, struggling to cope or feeling suicidal. You can find out more about them at <https://www.samaritans.org/ireland/samaritans-ireland/>. Spunout is also another free mental health service you can text for free at **50808** for a free chat with a volunteer.

Appendix D: Sample Social Media Recruitment Poster



Appendix E: WhatsApp Recruitment Message



Appendix F: Demographic Information

Age *

Short-answer text

Gender *

- ☐ Man
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Nonbinary
- ☐ Prefer to self describe
- ☐ Other...

Are you currently in a romantic relationship? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How long have you been in this relationship? (in months)

Only answer if you checked **YES** to the last question.

B *I* U  

Short-answer text

Appendix G: Body image Concern Inventory (Littleton et al, 2005)

Rate each statement from 1 (never) to 5 (always) based on how much it applies to you.

I am dissatisfied with some aspect of my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I spend a significant amount of time checking my appearance in the mirror.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I feel others are speaking negatively of my appearance.

- 1) Never

- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I am reluctant to engage in social activities when my appearance does not meet my satisfaction.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I feel there are certain aspects of my appearance that are extremely unattractive.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I buy cosmetic products to try to improve my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I seek reassurance from others about my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I feel there are certain aspects of my appearance I would like to change.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I am ashamed of some part of my body.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often

- 5) Always

I compare my appearance to that of fashion models or others.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I try to camouflage certain flaws in my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I examine flaws in my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I have bought clothing to try hide a certain aspect of my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I feel others are more physically attractive than me.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I have considered consulting/consulted some sort of medical expert regarding flaws in my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I have missed social activities because of my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I have been embarrassed to leave the house because of my appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I fear that others will discover my flaws in appearance.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

I have avoided looking at my appearance in the mirror.

- 1) Never
- 2) Rarely
- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

Appendix H: Relationship assessment scale (Dicke & Hendrick, 1998)

Based on the response options provided below, choose the number from each item that best reflects your current romantic relationship.

If you answered NO to “are you currently in a romantic relationship” you do not have to complete this section.

1. How often does your partner meet your needs?
 Poor Average Extremely well
 1 2 3 4 5
2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?
 Unsatisfied Average Extremely satisfied
 1 2 3 4 5
3. How good is your relationship compared to most?
 Poor Average Excellent

1 2 3 4 5

4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?
 Never Average Very Often

1 2 3 4 5

5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?
 Hardly at all Average Completely

1 2 3 4 5

6. How much do you love your partner?
 Not Much Average Very Much

1 2 3 4 5

7. How many problems are there in your relationship?
 Very Few Average Very Many

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix I: NCI Ethics Committee Approval Letter



National College of Ireland
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Coláiste Náisiúnta na hÉireann
Sráid an Mhéara, IFSC
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Website: www.ncirl.ie

Date: 30th Oct. 2024

Ref: Ethics Approval Number: 30102024x22319036

Proposal Title: *The role of Romantic relationships on body image.*

Applicant: Alexandra Lewis

Dear Alexandra,

Thank you for your application to the NCI Psychology Ethics Filter Committee, and for responding to clarification requests related to the application. I am pleased to inform you that the ethics committee has approved your application for your research project. Ethical approval will remain in place until the completion of your dissertation in part fulfilment of your BA Honours Degree in Psychology at NCI.

Please note that:

- Students are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their application.
- Students must abide by PSI ethics guidelines in completing their research.
- All procedures and materials should be approved by the supervisor prior to recruitment.
- Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made.

Sincerely,

Dr Robert Fox

Chairperson, Psychology Ethics Filter Committee

Ethics Committee members: *Dr Robert Fox (representative on the NCI Research Ethics Subcommittee), Dr Michelle Kelly, Dr Amanda Kracen, Dr Conor Nolan, Dr Lynn Farrell, Dr Fearghal O'Brien, Dr David Mothersill, Dr Michele Kehoe, Dr Barry Coughlan, Dr Conor Thornberry, Dr Brendan Cullen, Cassandra Murphy, Eden Bryan.*