



Universiteit Utrecht

Master Thesis Clinical Psychology

The Association of Body Positivity with Sexual Satisfaction Through the
Resistance of Thin Ideal Internalization and Positive Body Image in Young
Heterosexual Women

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Abstract

Research indicate that a large number (15.2% - 50.4%) of young women are not fully satisfied with their sex life, while sexual satisfaction is an important factor for the overall quality of life. Previous research indicated that the resistance of thin-ideal internalization was indirectly related to sexual satisfaction through a more positive body image. This study explores body positivity (i.e. a contra movement against the current Western based beauty standard) and thin-ideal internalization as factors preceding the established association between positive body image and sexual satisfaction. In a cross-sectional design, 1683 Dutch females completed an online survey measuring body positivity (BPV-1), thin-ideal internalization (SATAQ-4), body appreciation (BAS-2) and sexual satisfaction (NSSS-S). A simple regression analyses was conducted to show the relationship between the different constructs. A multiple regression analyses was then conducted revealing that higher levels of body positivity in the media were related to less thin-ideal internalization, a more positive body image, and greater sexual satisfaction. A direct effect of body positivity on sexual satisfaction was also found. These findings indicate that more exposure to body positivity in the media, including women of all shapes and sizes, could result in less thin-ideal internalization and a more positive body image, thus shifting away from the current Western ideal beauty standard resulting in more sexual satisfaction in young women.

Keywords: sexual satisfaction, positive body image, body positivity, thin-ideal internalization

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Introduction

For most individuals – including young women – pleasurable sexual experiences play an important role in emotional and physical health and is strongly associated with overall quality of life (Bridges et al., 2004; Moin et al., 2009; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010). These pleasurable sexual experiences lead to experiencing *sexual satisfaction* (Pascoals et al., 2014). Sexual satisfaction consists of various concepts, such as positive feelings, frequency of sexual activity, and excited orgasms (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). Considering the fact that 15.2%-50.4% of women are not (fully) satisfied with their sex life and the fact that sexual satisfaction plays an important role in overall quality of life, identifying determinants and underlying mechanisms is important (Shahhosseini et al., 2014).

An important determinant of sexual satisfaction is *positive body image* (Van den Brink et al., 2013). Positive body image is defined as the concept of the love and respect for one's own body, as well as the appreciation of the unique beauty of one's body and feeling beautiful, confident, and comfortable in one's own body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). A positive body image is inversely related to body dissatisfaction, body image avoidance, body shame, and internalization of societal appearance ideals (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Women with positive body image have reported lower disordered eating, higher self-esteem, higher self-ratings of attractiveness, more proactive coping styles, and more sexual satisfaction (Avalos et al., 2005 ; Van den Brink et al., 2013). *Objectification theory* (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) is a theoretical framework that can explain these findings. The objectification theory proposes that because of the sexual objectification of women and the female body– for example in the media or pop-culture – women tend to internalize an observer perspective on their bodies. Because of this, women view themselves as objects to be appreciated by others. This process of objectification is called *self-objectification* (Steer & Tiggemann, 2008).

Evidence of self-objectification in women can be found in current media (Moradi & Huang, 2008) , where women tend to be sexualized for men's pleasure (Fredrickson & Roberts,

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1997). This self-objectification also seem to happen during sexual activity. Steer and Tiggemann (2008) state that self-objectification and negative thought about one's body during sexual activity is linked to a decrease in women's sexual functioning. Other research has also shown that self-objectification in women is related to lower sexual satisfaction in heterosexual women (Hill et al., 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and that positive body image is a protective factor from self-objectification. This derives from the idea that it protects women from self-objectification during sexual activity and therefore have less distracting thoughts about appearance while engaging in sexual activities, resulting in greater sexual satisfaction (Woertman & Van den Brink, 2012). Given the important link between positive body image and sexual satisfaction, it is likely that factors contributing to positive body image may in turn affect sexual satisfaction. In this thesis, *body positivity* and *thin-ideal internalization* are investigated as potential factors preceding the relationship between positive body image and sexual satisfaction.

Over the last years, we have seen a growth in an online trend called *body positivity*. Currently, there are almost 7 million posts on Instagram using the hashtag #bodypositivity (Instagram, 2021). Body positivity is a contra movement against the current Western-based beauty, which focuses on being thin and/or having an athletic body without any flaws (Cohen et al., 2020). An example of body-positivity is showing that you have cellulitis or showing your natural stretch marks. Body positivity is a trend that challenges dominant societal appearance ideals and promotes acceptance and, most of all, appreciation of all different body types and appearances (Cohen et al., 2019). Body positivity is found to be related to a more positive body image (Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). More and more magazines and brands are changing the way they portray female bodies in the media. Since body positivity focuses on embracing all types of women's bodies, this can lead to less internalization of the current western beauty standard

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and self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This can therefore be related to less *thin-ideal internalization*.

When individuals do internalize Western beauty beliefs, such as the importance of being thin, negative emotions tend to arise, leading to a phenomenon called thin ideal internalization (Morton et al., 2020). Thin ideal images in the media are related to disturbances in women's body image (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2012; Robert & Roberts, 2015). Since the mainstream media glamourizes a societal and cultural ideal mainly focused on being thin, where models are on average 20% underweight, it is not surprising that women tend to meet this thin criteria and internalize this ideal (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). In line with objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997), internalization of this current thin-ideal often leads to a less positive body image (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2012) and has been connected to sexual dysfunction (van Diest & Perez, 2013). Considering the fact that body positivity focusses on embracing one's own body, even though it may not be in line with the current beauty standard, body positivity could be related to less thin-ideal internalization. Therefore, body positivity may be related to a more positive body image and subsequently more sexual satisfaction (Pujols et al., 2010; Halliwell, 2013). Previous research supports this assumption by providing empirical evidence for this relationship (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2012; Diest & Perez, 2013).

The relationships between body positivity, thin-ideal internalization, positive body image and sexual satisfaction has not yet been researched as a unity. Since sexual satisfaction plays such an important role in overall well-being and quality of life (Bridges et al., 2004; Moin et al., 2009; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010), it is important to identify factors that can contribute to this relationship. Research states that feminist beliefs contribute to more sexual satisfaction in heterosexual women, through similar constructs like resistance of thin-ideal internalization and positive body image (Schick et al., 2008). Based on the fact that body positivity derives

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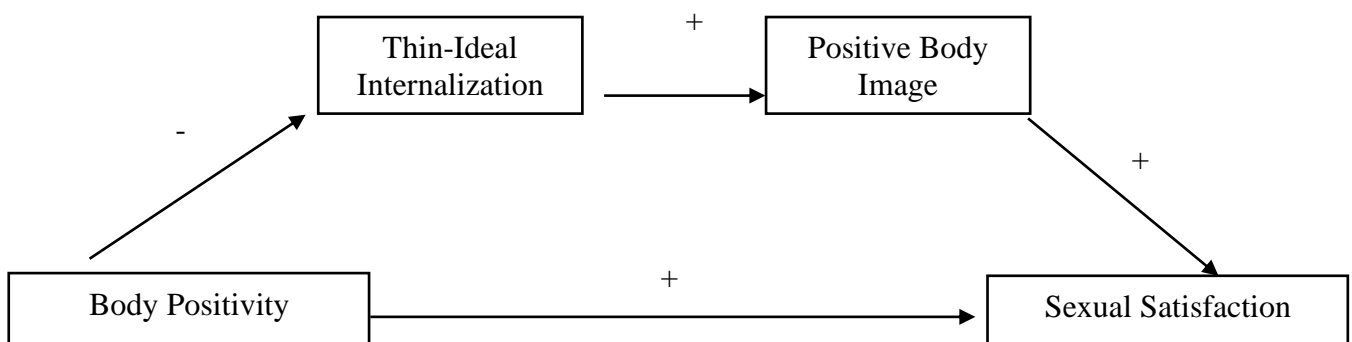
from feminist beliefs and ideology, it seems highly plausible that body positivity indeed can play an important preceding role in this relation.

The current study

This study explores body positivity and thin-ideal internalization as factors preceding the established association between positive body image and sexual satisfaction. First, in line with previous findings (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2012; Cohen et al., 2019; Woertman & Van den Brink, 2012), it is hypothesized that positive body image will be related to more sexual satisfaction. Second, based on previous findings (Cohen et al., 2019; Woertman & Van den Brink, 2012), it is hypothesized that positive body image and thin-ideal internalization will mediate the relationship between body positivity and sexual satisfaction. More specifically, it is expected that body positivity will be related to less thin-ideal internalization and more positive body image, and therefore also be associated with greater sexual satisfaction. The proposed hypotheses can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Hypothesized Relationship between Body Positivity and Sexual Satisfaction through Resistance of Thin-Ideal Internalization and Positive Body Image



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Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited through social media via a poster and a short video on TikTok and Instagram. Participants were also recruited via the university website listing ongoing research project of the department of social sciences at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Heterosexual women who are sexually active with a male partner were invited to take part in an online study on "Body Image and Sexual Satisfaction in Women". A short description of the study and a direct link to the online questionnaire were given. Interested women could access the online questionnaire via that link on Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2020). After opening the link, participants had to complete an informed consent form (by ticking a box), in which voluntary participation and anonymity were highlighted and guaranteed. Social sciences students from Utrecht University received course credit for participation. All other participants were not compensated for participation. On average, it took 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University, the Netherlands (FETC # 20-0374).

A total of 2368 women participated in the study and 1683 finished the questionnaire and met the including criteria (i.e., heterosexual women, age 18-30 years old, one solid sexual relationship). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 with a mean age of 20.54 ($SD = 2.72$). Highest reported level of achieved education in the sample was split between university (13.5%, $n = 228$), university of applied sciences (27%, $n = 454$), higher vocational training (32.7%, $n = 551$), pre-university education (19.8%, $n = 334$), and pre-vocational secondary education (6.9%, $n = 116$). 95.8% of the participants in this study were born in The Netherlands ($n = 1613$), 1% was born in a non-Western country ($n = 17$), and 3.1% in a Western country other than The Netherlands ($n = 53$). Given the fact that being in a heterosexual relationship was an inclusion criterion, all women participating in the study were in a sexual relationship.

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Approximately 2.9% ($n = 48$) were in a sexual relationship for less than 2 months, 11.1% ($n = 186$) were in a relationship for 2 to six months, and 17.2% ($n = 290$) were in a relationship for six months to a year. 26.7% ($n = 450$) were in a relationship between one and two years and 42.1% ($n = 709$) were in a relationship for two years or longer.

Measures

Body positivity. Body positivity was measured with the 8-item Body Positivity Questionnaire (BPV-1). This questionnaire consists of 8 items designed for the current study. All items can be found in Appendix A. Items were answered on a 5-point scale from 1 = definitely disagree to 5 = definitely agree. One example item is “When women show their imperfections on social media, I feel relieved about myself”. An exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring and oblique rotation was conducted on the items (Costello & Osborne, 2005). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy ($KMO = .791$) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity, $\chi^2(28) = 5167.12$, $p < .001$, suggested that the items had adequate common variance and the correlation matrix was factorable. Results further revealed a unidimensional solution accounting for 66% of the total item variance and high item-factor loadings (i.e. .79 - .82) except from the ‘feeling insecure’ items (i.e. item four = -.36 and six = -.32) which were therefore removed (Phakiti, 2018). Item 5 (‘I can identify myself with the current beauty standard as portrayed in the media’) seems to be ambiguous for interpretation and therefore could not be assigned to any of the identified factors and is therefore removed as well. Therefore the BPV-1 questionnaire consist of 5 questions. Mean scores were calculated to obtain body positivity scores, with higher scores indicate higher body positivity scores. Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was $\alpha = .88$.

Thin ideal internalization. The subscale of the Dutch version (Schaefer et al., 2015) of the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire – 4 (SATAQ-4; Schaefer et al., 2015) was used to measure thin ideal internalization. One example item is “I want my body to

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look very thin”. The five items were answered on a 5-point scale from 1 = definitely disagree to 5 = definitely agree. Mean scores were calculated to obtain thin ideal internalization scores, with higher scores indicate higher thin ideal internalization. Research has supported the reliability and psychometric validity of the SATAQ-4 (Schaefer et al., 2015). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was $\alpha = .84$.

Positive Body Image. The 10-item Dutch version (Alleva, Martijn, Veldhuis, & Tylka, 2016) of the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS-2; Tylka & Wood-Barlow, 2015) was used to measure positive body image. One example item is: “I feel good about my body”. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always. Mean scores were calculated to obtain positive body image scores, with higher scores indicate greater positive body image. Research has supported the reliability and psychometric validity of the BAS-2 (Avalos et al., 2005). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was $\alpha = .91$.

Sexual satisfaction. The Dutch translation (Schlaman, 2015) of the 12-item version of the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale – Short (NSSS-S; Štulhofer, Buško, & Brouillard, 2011) was used to measure sexual satisfaction. One example item is: “The quality of my orgasms”. The items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = totally not satisfied to 5 = extremely satisfied. Mean scores were conducted to obtain an overall sexual satisfaction score, with higher scores indicate greater sexual satisfaction. Research has supported the reliability and psychometric validity of the NSSS-S (Fisher et al., 2010). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was $\alpha = .89$.

Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed with IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. First, bivariate associations between the study variables were analysed using Pearson correlation coefficients. Second, a simple regression analyses was conducted to identify the relationship between body positivity and thin-ideal internalization. After that, a multiple regression analyses

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was conducted to identify the relationship between body positivity, thin-ideal internalization and positive body image. Lastly, a serial mediation analysis was conducted with body positivity as independent variable, thin ideal internalization and positive body image as sequential mediators, and sexual satisfaction as dependent variable. The mediation analysis comprised a number of sub-analyses that estimated the total, direct, and indirect effects of body positivity on sexual satisfaction. The total and direct effects were estimated by means of a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, in which body positivity was entered in the first step and thin ideal internalization and positive body image were entered in the second step. The total effect refers to the relationship between body positivity and sexual satisfaction (step 1), and the direct effect refers to the relationship between body positivity and sexual satisfaction while controlling for thin ideal internalization and positive body image (step 2).

As recommended by Hayes (2013), the specific indirect effects of body positivity on sexual satisfaction through thin ideal internalization and positive body image and their significance were determined by means of bootstrap analyses with 5000 bootstrap samples and bias corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals (BCa 95% CI. Specifically, the total indirect effect, and the indirect effect via mediator 1 (i.e. thin ideal internalization, IND1), both of the mediators (i.e. thin ideal internalization and positive body image, IND2) and via mediator 2 (i.e. positive body image, IND3) were assessed, and compared (pairwise) if significant. The serial mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' Process Macro model 6 (Hayes, 2015). All coefficients will be reported in completely standardized form.

Results

Bivariate correlations between body positivity, thin-ideal internalization, positive body image and sexual satisfaction

The results of the correlation analyses of the study variables are presented in Table 1. In line with the expectations, positive body image was significantly positively related to greater

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sexual satisfaction. Also, thin ideal internalization and positive body image were significantly related to sexual satisfaction, where less thin-ideal internationalization was associated with greater sexual satisfaction and more positive body image.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables (N = 1683)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Body Positivity	3.44	0.79	-		
2. Thin-Ideal Internalization	2.67	0.92	-.08**	-	
3 Positive Body Image	3.37	0.64	.16**	-.44**	-
4. Sexual Satisfaction	3.57	0.56	.11**	-.16**	.31**

Note. Higher scores indicate greater levels of the construct they measured *Note.* * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Total, direct, and indirect effects of body positivity on sexual satisfaction through thin-ideal internalization and positive body image

The assumptions of multiple regression analysis (i.e., normality, linearity, homoscedasticity) were tested, and all were met. The results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis are displayed in Figure 2. A significant total effect (step 1) of body positivity on sexual satisfaction was found, indicating that higher scores on body positivity were associated with more sexual satisfaction when the mediators were not taken into account. A total of 12% of the total variance in sexual satisfaction could be explained by body positivity, $F(1, 1681) = 20.37, p < .001$. A significant direct effect (step 2) of body positivity on sexual satisfaction was found, $\beta = .061, t = 2.59, p = .010$, as well as a significant direct effect (step 2) of positive body image on sexual satisfaction. There was also a non-significant direct effect from thin-ideal internalization on

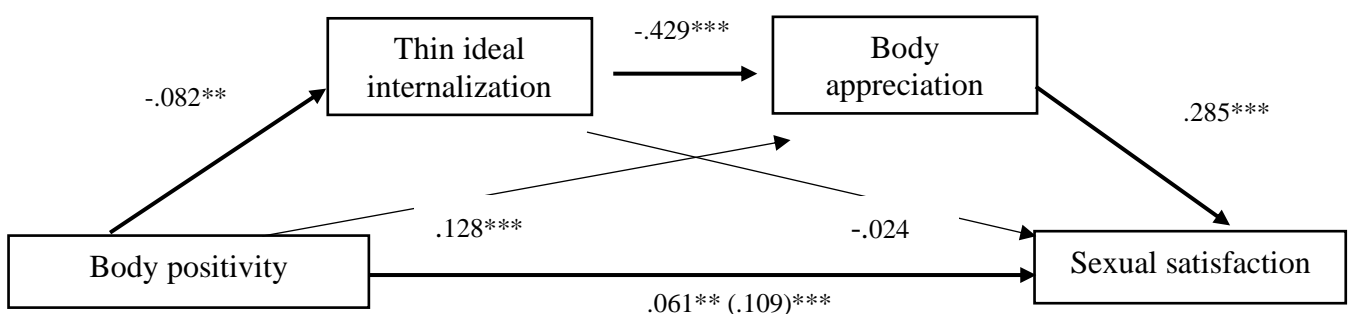
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sexual satisfaction. A total of 31% of the variance of sexual satisfaction was explained by body positivity, thin-ideal internalization and positive body image, $F(3,1679) = 60.44, p < .001$.

The results of the bootstrap analysis revealed a significant total indirect effect, $\beta = .05$, BC 95% CI [.032, .067]. In line with the expectations, the bootstrap analyses revealed a significant indirect effect of body positivity on sexual satisfaction through both thin-ideal internalization and positive body image, $\beta = .010$, BC 95% CI [.004, .017]. As expected, greater body positivity was related to less thin-ideal internalization and therefore a more positive body image which, in turn, was associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Moreover, the indirect effect of body positivity on sexual satisfaction, through positive body image alone has found to be significant, $\beta = .04$, BC 95% CI [.023, .051]. The indirect effect of body positivity on sexual satisfaction, mediated through thin-ideal internalization, was not significant $\beta = .002$, BC 95% CI [-.003, .008].

Figure 2

Results of the Hierarchical Regression Analysis That Was Conducted as Part of the Serial Mediation Analysis Linking Body Positivity With Sexual Satisfaction via Thin-ideal internalization and Body Appreciation.



*Note. The total effect derived from Step 1 of the hierarchical regression analysis is displayed in parentheses. All coefficients are reported in standardized form. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.*

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Discussion

In the current study, body positivity and thin-ideal internalization were investigated as potential factors preceding the relationship between positive body image and sexual satisfaction. As expected and in line with findings from previous studies (e.g., Woertman & Van den Brink, 2012), positive body image was significantly related to sexual satisfaction in heterosexual women. The current study expands previous research on the relationship between positive body image and sexual satisfaction by targeting the role of body positivity and thin ideal internalization in this relation.

The current study revealed that the role of body positivity as portrayed in the media was significantly related to greater sexual satisfaction in heterosexual women via less thin-ideal internalization and therefore a more positive body image. The relationship between thin-ideal internalization, positive body image and sexual satisfaction were in line with the objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) and other previous research (Schick et al., 2008, Woertman & Van den Brink, 2012; Cohen et al., 2019) however new findings on the role of body positivity in this relationship were found in current study .

The results suggest that body positivity in the media may enables women to be resistant to thin-ideal internalization, and resulting in a more positive body image and therefore greater sexual satisfaction in young women. Body positivity may serve as a protective factor against self-objectification thoughts while engaging in sexual activities, resulting in more sexual satisfaction among young women. The relationship between body positivity and sexual satisfaction was also found to be significant when only positive body image was taken into account, meaning that body positive content in the media is related to a more positive body image and therefore more sexual satisfaction in heterosexual women. This is in line with findings from previous study on positive body image. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) found

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that positive body image is related to more sexual arousal, pleasurable orgasm and overall sexual satisfaction.

Although the current findings suggest a meaningful role of thin-ideal internalization and positive body image between body positivity and sexual satisfaction, it is important to note that both factors only partially accounted for this association, given the direct effect of body positivity on sexual satisfaction. In addition, the explained variance of sexual satisfaction was limited in the current study. These findings indicate that additional determinants and underlying mechanisms may also contribute to sexual satisfaction. Future studies may include other potentially relevant variables, such as *entitlement to sexual partner pleasure*. This involves possessing the agency to make sexual decisions and take ownership over one's pleasure (Hewitt-Stubbs et al., 2016). Developing a sense of the self as a sexual subject is necessary for young women in order to make active sexual choices that meet one's needs for both sexual pleasure and sexual safety (e.g. condom use). This may lead to less self-objectification during sexual activity and could therefore be an important factor in this relationship (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Grower & Ward, 2021). Another potential relevant factor to take into account is *genital appearance dissatisfaction*. Research from Schick and colleagues (2010) highlights the impact of negative genital perceptions on young women's sexual well-being and sexual satisfaction. This negative genital perception can also be targeted via body positivity in the media, this can lead to a more positive view on own genitalia and therefore more sexual satisfaction in young women.

Implications

Considering the disruptions in women's sexual satisfaction, body positive content in the media may facilitate women's sexual satisfaction (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) by shifting attention away from current Western beauty standards. More exposure to body positivity via social media, where #bodypositivity has over 7 million posts, could result in less thin-ideal

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internalization and a more positive body image among women. Considering the importance of sexual satisfaction in overall quality of life and the role of thin-ideal internalization and positive body image in this relationship (Bridges et al., 2004; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010; Moin et al., 2009), a shift in this movement seems important. Currently there are more and more brands who include different body types in their campaigns and therefore contribute to the ‘body positivity’ movement (i.e. ‘Dove’s Campaigns for Real Beauty; Nike’s Body-Positive Bra Campaign). This can influence the way young women look at their own bodies and can therefore result in more sexual satisfaction.

Limitations

Some limitations need to be acknowledged. Almost all participants ($N = 1613$) were born in the Netherlands, making it difficult to apply the results to other western and non-western countries. Ferguson and colleagues (2008) stated that Dutch adolescents have an overall more open and positive view on sexuality in comparison to adolescents from England. This may prevent generalizability of the results to other populations.

Another limitation of the current study was the possibility of social influencing the results. Even though in the Netherlands there is a lot of open communication about sexuality, there is still social desirability in sensitive/taboo topics like sexuality (Krumpal, 2013). In the current study, women could have felt the need to answer in a socially desired way because they may know what is being researched. Also there could have been a need to stay ‘loyal’ to the partner and therefore the questions may be answered more positively toward the partner, meaning that the questions about sexual performances were answered more positively than they are in reality.

Lastly, given the cross-sectional design of current study, the direction of causality could not be determined. The current study cannot, for example, specify if body positivity leads to more sexual satisfaction, or if sexual satisfaction leads to more internalization of body positive

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content. This is why relationships between constructs have been investigated, rather than causality (Winer et al., 2016). Further longitudinal research is necessary to investigate the direction of the relationships.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the current study adds to the already existing literature of sexual satisfaction in young women. Results revealed that body positivity in the media is positively related to greater levels of sexual satisfaction in young women and that thin-ideal internalization and positive body image partially mediated this relationship. Since sexual satisfaction plays such an important role in the overall quality of life (Bridges et al., 2004; Moin et al., 2009; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010) it is relevant to pay attention to body positive content in the media since it is expected that this will result in greater sexual satisfaction and therefore more overall quality of life (Bridges et al., 2004; Moin et al., 2009; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010).

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