

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From body image to bonding: The role of intimacy in enhancing relationship satisfaction among Malaysian adults

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of body image on intimacy and relationship satisfaction among Malaysian adults in romantic relationships, with a specific focus on intimacy as a potential mediator. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted with 245 Malaysian participants and the correlational analyses revealed positive associations between body image and intimacy, body image and relationship satisfaction, and a particularly strong positive correlation between intimacy and relationship satisfaction. Mediation analysis confirmed a significant indirect effect, indicating that intimacy fully mediated the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that individuals with higher satisfaction in body image are more likely to experience greater emotional closeness with their partners, which in turn contributes to higher relationship satisfaction. The results emphasize the crucial role of intimacy in shaping relationship quality and suggest that the impact of body image on relationship satisfaction operates through this emotional bond. Mental health professionals in Malaysia may benefit from incorporating these insights into culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions aimed at improving intimacy and communication in couples facing body image concerns.

Keywords: body image; intimacy; relationship satisfaction; romantic relationship; Malaysia

1. Introduction

Romantic relationships are characterized by emotional and physical connections that may develop into long-term commitments. Sustaining a healthy or a fulfilled relationship is essential, as it enhances overall life satisfaction and well-being^[1]. In fact, relationship satisfaction plays a crucial role in mental health, emotional stability, and happiness, ultimately contributing to greater life satisfaction^[2,3]. However, numerous factors can hinder relationship satisfaction, including poor communication^[4], lack of intimacy^[5], incompatibility, mistrust, lack of support, unhealthy dependency^[6], and body image issues^[7]. Among these, body image emerges as a significant yet underexplored factor, significantly influencing self-esteem and interpersonal dynamics, which in turn impacts relationship satisfaction. This study seeks to investigate the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships, focusing on the mediating role of

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intimacy.

Once considered a private struggle, body image issues have emerged as a significant public health concern, particularly among women during adolescence and young adulthood^[8]. In recent years, the growing prevalence of body image concerns has drawn considerable global attention. Body image refers to an individual's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their physical appearance^[9]. While a positive body image reflects satisfaction with one's physical self, a negative body image is associated with dissatisfaction. Alarmingly, a Global Health and Wellbeing Survey 2015 survey found that 75.19% of adults aged 16 to 25 reported experiencing negative body image, with distress levels increasing with age^[10]. Despite extensive research on body image, its role in romantic relationships and impact on relationship satisfaction remains underexplored. Negative body image has been strongly linked to adverse health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders^[11], which may indirectly contribute to dissatisfaction in romantic relationships. For instance, individuals with negative body image may experience anxiety or depression that inhibits sexual activity and other forms of intimacy, ultimately affecting relationship satisfaction. Research supports this connection: Sandoval et al.^[12] found that body dissatisfaction was significantly associated with lower relationship satisfaction among same-sex female couples in the U.S., while Gillen and Markey^[13] reported consistent links between negative body image and dysfunctional relationship dynamics.

Several studies have identified intimacy as a key mediator in the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction^[14,15]. Intimacy, defined as feelings of closeness and connection in romantic relationships, manifests in various forms, including emotional, sexual, social, and intellectual intimacy^[16]. A positive body image fosters emotional and physical connections and encourages vulnerability, while negative body image may lead to low self-esteem, self-consciousness, or feelings of inadequacy that create barriers to intimacy. Cash et al.^[17] found that body image dysfunction was associated with reduced emotional intimacy and greater anxious attachment in both men and women. Similarly, Afshari et al.^[18] identified body image as a major predictor of sexual intimacy among heterosexual couples. Recent findings by Bentsen et al.^[19] highlighted that cancer patients often avoided physical intimacy due to feeling unattractive, underscoring the link between body image and intimacy. These findings align with the sociometer theory proposed by Leary and Baumeister^[20], which emphasizes the role of self-evaluation in emotionally vulnerable behaviours, such as self-disclosure, essential for emotional intimacy and relationship quality.

While body image and relationship satisfaction have been extensively studied in Western contexts, there is limited research in Asian regions, particularly Malaysia. Most studies in Malaysia focus on the prevalence of body image concerns or factors affecting it among adolescents, with limited exploration of their impact on romantic relationships. Additionally, research predominantly targets women, neglecting the male perspective. This study addresses these gaps by examining both male and female experiences in body image concerns. Furthermore, this study aims to investigate individuals in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships in Malaysia, addressing a gap in previous studies across Asia that have primarily focused on heterosexual relationships. Given that Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country where same-sex relationships are prohibited, exploring this topic is crucial for understanding the dynamics between the above-mentioned variables and providing appropriate support. In summary, this study seeks to examine the influence of body image on intimacy and overall relationship satisfaction. It also aims to determine whether intimacy mediates the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction among Malaysian adults.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This current study employed a cross-sectional online study among Malaysian adults who were currently in a romantic relationship. The data collection was administered in 2024. The questionnaire link was disseminated through social media platforms and university memo boards. An informed consent form was provided prior to the questionnaire, and a debrief form was included at the end.

Participants

A total of 267 participants were recruited through convenience sampling method, however upon screening only 245 participants fulfilled the inclusion criteria and were eligible to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria of this study are i) Malaysian ii) aged 18 and above iii) currently in a romantic relationship, whereas the exclusion criteria are i) currently receiving psychological treatment.

2.2. Measures

The online questionnaire consists of demographic information such as age, gender, race, academic qualification, employment status, sexual orientation and duration of relationship and three instruments: Body Image State Scale (BISS), Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), and Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) .

Body Image State Scale (BISS)^[21]

BISS is a 6-item instrument that is designed to measure one's current body experience. The scale consists of items on (1) dissatisfaction–satisfaction with one's overall physical appearance; (2) dissatisfaction–satisfaction with one's body size and shape; (3) dissatisfaction–satisfaction with one's weight; (4) feelings of physical attractiveness–unattractiveness; (5) current feelings about one's looks relative to how one usually feels; and (6) evaluation of one's appearance relative to how the average person looks. The items are rated on a 9-point Likert scale. Higher scores on the BISS scale indicates higher levels of satisfaction on body image. This instrument displayed a good test-retest reliability of .75 and an acceptable Cronbach's Alpha value of .77 ^[21]. The Cronbach's Alpha value for the current study is .91.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS)^[22]

RAS is a 7-item instrument that is designed to measure relationship satisfaction in terms of how fulfilled they feel regarding their needs, expectations, and love within the relationship. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scores range from 7 to 35 where higher scores on the RAS indicate higher relationship satisfaction. This instrument displayed a good test-retest reliability and a good Cronbach's Alpha value of .80^[22]. The Cronbach's Alpha value for the current study is .91.

Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR)^[23]

PAIR is a 36-item scale that is designed to measure relationship intimacy. PAIR is comprised of five subscales containing six items each: Emotional Intimacy (feeling closeness, ability to share feelings, and be supported without defensiveness), Social Intimacy (having common friends and social network), Sexual Intimacy (sharing affection, touching, physical and sexual closeness), Intellectual Intimacy (sharing ideas and experiences about life and work), and Recreational Intimacy (sharing of experiences, common pastimes and involvement in activities). The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(does not describe my relationship at all) to 5 (describes my relationship very well). Higher scores on PAIR indicates higher levels of relationship intimacy. This instrument displayed a good test-retest reliability of .70 and a good Cronbach's Alpha value of .77 ^[24]. The Cronbach's Alpha value for the current study is .98.

2.3. Data analysis

Statistical analysis for this study was computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 29, to achieve the objectives of this study. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated in this study. The data was analysed using the Pearson product-moment correlation test to determine if a correlation between body image, intimacy and relationship satisfaction exist. Tests were run separately for body image and intimacy, body image and relationship satisfaction and intimacy and relationship satisfaction with a total of 3 correlation coefficients. The p value threshold used was set to <0.05. Furthermore, a mediation analysis was performed to examine whether intimacy mediates the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction through regression tests.

3. Results

A total of 245 participants were recruited in this study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 ($M = 32.06$, $SD = 7.87$). As stated in **Table 1**, the sample consisted of 50.6% of males and 49.4% of females. The majority of the participants were Malaysian Indians (41.2%), followed by Malaysian Chinese (33.9%), Malays (19.2%) and Others (5.7%). Furthermore, majority of the participants were also currently in a heterosexual relationship (66.1%) and 33.9% of the participants were in a homosexual relationship. The majority of participants reported being in a romantic relationship lasting between 3 to 6 years (25.7%).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants (N = 245).

Demographic characteristics	Mean (M)	Standard (SD)	Deviation	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	32.06	7.87			
Gender					
Male				124	50.6
Female				121	49.4
Sexual Orientation					
Heterosexual				162	66.1
Homosexual				83	33.9
Duration of romantic relationship					
Less than 6 months					9.0
6 months to 1 year				22	14.7
1 to 3 years				36	24.1
3 to 6 years				59	25.7
6 to 10 years				63	11.0
More than 10 years				27	15.5
				38	
Race					
Malay				47	19.2
Chinese				83	33.9
Indian				101	41.2
Others				14	5.7
Academic Qualification					
Diploma				32	13.1
Bachelors				105	42.9
Masters				82	33.5
PhD				23	9.4
Others				3	1.2
Employment Status					
Full time				154	62.9

Demographic characteristics	Mean (M)	Standard (SD)	Deviation	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Part time				31	12.7
Freelance				17	6.9
Self employed				20	8.2
Not employed				23	9.4

Table 1. (Continued)

3.1. Descriptive analysis of body image, intimacy and relationship satisfaction

The overall mean score of body image is 35.24 (SD = 9.8), which illustrates a moderate level of satisfaction on body image among participants. The overall mean score of intimacy is 132.87 (SD = 31.65) which displays a higher level of relationship intimacy among participants. Meanwhile, the overall mean score of relationship satisfaction is 26.47 (SD = 6.19). which portrays a higher level of relationship satisfaction.

3.2. The correlation between body image, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction

Three Pearson product-moment correlation tests were conducted to examine the relationships among body image, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction among Malaysians currently in a romantic relationship. **Table 2** presents the correlation analysis results. The first Pearson correlation was run to determine the relationship between body image and intimacy. The analysis revealed a statistically significant weak positive correlation ($r(245) = .318, p < .001$), indicating that as body image satisfaction increases, the level of intimacy in romantic relationships also increases. The second Pearson correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction. The results showed a statistically significant weak positive correlation ($r(245) = .275, p < .001$), suggesting that higher body image satisfaction is associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Lastly, a Pearson correlation was performed to explore the relationship between intimacy and relationship satisfaction. The findings indicated a statistically significant strong positive correlation ($r(245) = .874, p < .001$), demonstrating that higher intimacy levels correspond to higher relationship satisfaction.

Table 2. Correlation between body image, intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Body image	245	35.24	9.8	1.00		
2. Intimacy	245	132.87	31.65	.318	1.00	
3. Relationship satisfaction	246	26.47	6.19	.275	.874	1.00

3.3. The mediating role of intimacy between body image and relationship satisfaction

A mediation analysis was conducted through multiple regression tests to examine whether intimacy mediates the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction. **Figure 1** shows that body image significantly predicted intimacy ($B = 1.03, p < .001$), and intimacy significantly predicted relationship satisfaction ($B = 0.17, p < .001$). A regression analysis was also conducted to examine the direct effect of body image on relationship satisfaction. **Figure 1** indicates that the direct effect was not statistically significant ($B = -0.002, p = .923$), suggesting that body image did not have a direct impact on relationship satisfaction. Moreover, the indirect effect of body image on relationship satisfaction through intimacy was tested using the Sobel test, which confirmed statistical significance ($z = 5.15, p < .001$), indicating that intimacy significantly mediated the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction. This means that individuals with higher body image satisfaction tend to experience higher intimacy, which in turn enhances relationship satisfaction.

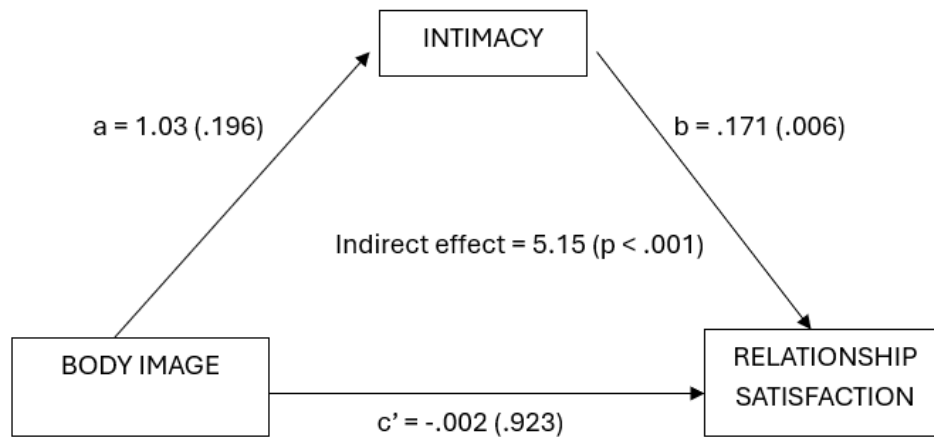


Figure 1. Regression coefficients for the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction mediated by intimacy

This study explored the association between body image, intimacy, and romantic relationship satisfaction among Malaysians who are currently in a romantic relationship. This study also placed significant emphasis on examining whether intimacy served as a mediating factor between body image and relationship satisfaction. These findings offer valuable insights into the complexities of romantic relationships among Malaysians, particularly in relation to body image and various forms of intimacy, and how these elements influence overall relationship satisfaction.

The descriptive findings of this study indicated that Malaysian participants reported a moderate level of body image satisfaction, suggesting that while they are generally satisfied with their physical appearance, there may still be several underlying issues that could influence their self-perception and relationship dynamics. The findings also revealed relatively high levels of intimacy and relationship satisfaction among Malaysian participants. This suggests that, despite only moderate satisfaction with their body image, individuals were still able to maintain strong emotional closeness and fulfillment in their romantic relationships. This indicates that while self-perception of physical appearance plays a role in romantic dynamics, it may not be the most influential factor in determining relationship satisfaction among Malaysians. One possible explanation for this pattern lies in cultural influences. Malaysian society, which is rooted in a collectivistic culture that emphasizes relational harmony and emotional connectedness^[25], may place greater importance on interpersonal relationships than on individual self-image. As a result, personal dissatisfaction with one's appearance is less likely to disrupt romantic relationships, as prioritizing the needs and well-being of others is often seen as more important than focusing solely on oneself^[26].

3.4. The correlation between body image, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction

A total of three correlation tests were conducted. The first test revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between body image and intimacy among Malaysian participants. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that individuals with higher body image satisfaction are more likely to express vulnerability, emotional openness, and connectedness in their romantic lives^[27,28]. One possible explanation for this pattern is that a positive body image is closely linked to higher levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, which are essential for building strong emotional and interpersonal bonds^[29]. For example, individuals who feel good about their physical appearance are less likely to experience feelings of insecurity or shame, making it easier for them to engage in deeper physical, emotional, and even sexual connections with their romantic partners.

Similarly, the second test reported a statistically significant positive correlation between body image and relationship satisfaction among Malaysian participants. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting

that individuals with higher body image satisfaction are more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships^[30,12]. One possible explanation for this pattern is that individuals who are satisfied with their physical appearance often assume that their partners share the same positive perception, regardless of their partner's actual opinion^[30]. Conversely, those with negative body image may project their insecurities onto their partner, believing that their partner also views their body unfavorably. This perception can lead to reduced relationship satisfaction, as individuals may feel unworthy of affection or acceptance. Over time, this negative assumption may contribute to lower self-esteem and overall dissatisfaction within the romantic relationship. Even though a positive correlation was found, it appeared to be weak, indicating that the association between the variables is relatively modest in strength. Although positive correlations were observed between body image and intimacy, as well as between body image and relationship satisfaction, these associations appeared to be weak, indicating that the relationships among the variables are relatively limited in strength. This implies that other underlying factors such as cultural and societal norms, mental health or attachment style^[13] could be influencing the outcome, and the observed relationship might not even be significant despite its statistical presence.

However, the third test reported a statistically significant and strong positive correlation between intimacy and relationship satisfaction among Malaysian participants, suggesting a substantial and robust connection between these two variables. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that individuals with higher levels of emotional closeness, connectedness and interpersonal bonds are more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships^[31,32]. Notably, this finding aligns with Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, which posits that the strength and quality of a romantic relationship are shaped by the balance of three key components: intimacy, passion, and commitment^[33]. Within this framework, intimacy refers to the feelings of warmth, emotional closeness, and connectedness shared between partners. These are the elements that play a critical role in fostering relationship satisfaction and deepening the emotional bond across diverse populations and relationship types. However, in the Malaysian context, which is rooted in a collectivistic culture, interpersonal harmony is highly valued, making emotional connection especially important in maintaining strong and satisfying relationships.

3.5. The mediating role of intimacy between body image and relationship satisfaction

A mediation analysis was conducted to determine if intimacy plays a mediating role between body image and relationship satisfaction. While body image significantly predicted intimacy and intimacy significantly predicted relationship satisfaction, the direct effect of body image and relationship satisfaction was found to be not significant. This finding suggests that body image, in itself, does not directly affect satisfaction levels in romantic relationships. Rather, its influence is shaped by the level of intimacy within the relationship. This interpretation is supported by the Sobel test, which revealed a significant indirect effect, confirming intimacy as a meaningful mediator in the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction. For example, individuals who have a positive perception of their physical appearance may find it easier to emotionally connect and bond with their partners, which in turn fosters greater intimacy. This heightened level of intimacy contributes to increased relationship satisfaction. This suggests that the strength and quality of intimacy may play a more essential role in determining relational outcomes than individual traits alone. Furthermore, from a cultural perspective, this mediated relationship may be particularly relevant in collectivistic countries like Malaysia. In such cultures, an individual's self-perception is largely shaped by social relationships and one's role within the community^[34]. As a result, personal experiences such as body image are often interpreted and validated through the lens of close interpersonal connections. Consequently, body image may function as a relational facilitator, allowing individuals to feel secure enough to form and sustain intimate bonds.

4. Limitations and recommendations

One limitation of this study is the use of self-reported instruments, which can be subject to social desirability bias given the potentially sensitive content of the items related to body image and intimacy. Participants may provide a more socially desirable response leading to inaccuracies in the data. Additionally, the study did not control for potential confounding factors of negative body image, such as anxiety, depression, or participants' current mental health status, which may have influenced the strength of intimacy as a mediator. Therefore, future research should include measures of anxiety, depression, and stress to more accurately determine the mediating effect. Future research may benefit from adopting mixed methods design to address the limitations of self-reported measures and to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals in romantic relationships. One notable limitation of the current study is the overrepresentation of Malaysian Indian participants, which may not adequately capture the experiences of individuals from other ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia. Given that Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country, a sample heavily composed of Indian participants may not be fully representative of the broader population. To enhance generalizability, future studies should aim for greater ethnic and cultural diversity in their samples. Additionally, examining differences based on gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation could provide valuable perspectives on how body image, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction vary across demographic groups, ultimately contributing to bridging the existing gaps in literature.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study underscores the intricate relationship between body image, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction. The results suggest that body image does not directly impact satisfaction in romantic relationships; rather, its influence is mediated through the development and quality of intimacy. These findings emphasize the crucial role of emotional closeness, connection, and interpersonal bonding as key pathways through which self-perceptions shape relationship outcomes. For Malaysians in romantic relationships, the ability to connect emotionally with a partner appears to be much more poignant on relationship quality than the level of satisfaction with one's body. Mental health professionals in Malaysia may consider incorporating these insights into culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions that focus on addressing communication and intimacy issues linked to body image concerns.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the administration of the questionnaire.

Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Consent for publication

Not applicable

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