

Self-Esteem and the Flexibility of Romantic Standards

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Abstract

The present study examined the association between self-esteem and the flexibility of romantic standards. Previous research has shown that individuals who view themselves positively on specific domains tend to be less flexible in their standards for potential romantic partners. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether the flexibility of romantic standards was associated with self-esteem and ideal romantic standards. Participants (N = 189) were asked to complete a measure of self-esteem and consider their minimum, ideal, and maximum standards for potential romantic partners across various levels of relational involvement ranging from a single date to marriage. The results of the present study found that higher levels of self-esteem were associated with more flexible standards for potential relationship partners but only for those with relatively low ideal standards.

What role does self-esteem play in the determination of ideal standards for romantic partners? That is, does an individual's feelings of self-worth influence whether potential partners are considered *out of one's league* or *not good enough*? Social exchange models have often served as the basis for considering these sorts of issues. At the most basic level, these models propose that individuals seek the highest quality mates they believe they are capable of attracting based on their ability to exchange their own assets for those possessed by potential romantic partners (e.g., Befe, 1977; Blau, 1964; Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985; Homans, 1961; Murstein, Cerreto, & MacDonald, 1977; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). For example, individuals who possess desirable traits (e.g. physical attractiveness, financial stability, intelligence) are often thought to seek relationships with other individuals who also possess desirable traits (Hatfield et al., 1985; Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). The result of this social exchange process is that individuals often form relationships with partners who are roughly comparable to themselves in terms of mate value (e.g., Walster & Walster, 1969)

Self-appraisals are thought to serve an important role in these social exchange processes because it is necessary for individuals to evaluate their own mate value before determining their standards for potential partners. That is, the self-evaluations of individuals

should focus their attention on potential romantic partners who possess similar mating assets so that individuals do not waste their efforts in the futile pursuit of partners who possess too many social resources (i.e., out of one's league) or settle for partners with too few resources (i.e., not good enough; Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995; Kenrick et al., 1993; Sloman & Sloman, 1988). This suggests that self-evaluations may be associated with the latitude along which potential partners are allowed to vary. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether self-esteem was associated with the flexibility of standards that individuals establish for potential romantic partners.

Minimum standards refer to the lowest level of certain qualities that individuals would consider acceptable for prospective relationship partners. These standards are often determined by asking respondents about the lowest levels of qualities for which they are willing to settle across various dimensions (e.g., physical attractiveness, intelligence) and levels of relational involvement (e.g., single date, marriage; Kenrick et al., 1993). Self-evaluations have been shown to be closely associated with the minimum standards that individuals set for potential romantic partners (e.g., Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, & Kenrick, 2002; Kenrick et al., 1993; Regan, 1998a, 1998b; Zeigler-Hill, Campe, & Myers, 2009). However, this association depends on the level of relational involvement. For relationships that require considerable investment, domain-specific self-evaluations have been found to be associated with minimum standards such that individuals with less positive self-evaluations are willing to settle for less than those with more positive self-evaluations. For low investment relationships, however, the answer is somewhat more complex because the associations between self-evaluations and minimum standards are weaker among men than among women (e.g., Kenrick et al., 1993). That is, women who view themselves positively often set higher minimum standards for potential partners than other women. In

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contrast, men who view themselves positively do not set particularly high minimum standards for low investment relationship partners. Men may be less discriminating than women when considering partners for these sorts of relationships because they have the option of withholding investment in any offspring that may result from encounters with low quality partners (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Daly & Wilson, 1983; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Trivers, 1972).

In contrast to minimum standards, ideal standards concern the qualities that individuals would prefer their potential romantic partners to possess. It is believed that ideal standards guide the evaluations of potential relationship partners such that individuals tend to select – and are more satisfied with – partners who most closely resemble these ideal standards (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Consistent with social exchange models, previous research has shown that individuals with positive self-views tend to establish higher ideal standards for their romantic partners (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Hester, 1996; Murray et al., 1996). Although it has received relatively little attention, it has been noted that individuals differ with regard to the flexibility of these standards such that some individuals are more willing than others to compromise their standards for romantic partners (Campbell et al., 2001; Regan, 1998b). This flexibility is important given that most potential romantic partners may be unable to meet these ideal standards. Not surprisingly, individuals have been found to report low levels of relationship satisfaction when their partners fail to live up to their rigidly maintained ideal standards (e.g., Campbell et al., 2001).

Previous research has shown that individuals who view themselves positively and establish high ideal standards may be at least somewhat inflexible with regard to these standards (Campbell et al., 2001; Regan, 1998b). That is, individuals who believe they possess desirable characteristics and who set high standards for their potential partners are relatively uncompromising with regard to these standards. It is not terribly surprising that individuals who believe they deserve to be with high quality partners are unwilling to compromise their standards. The previous research concerning the flexibility of romantic standards has concerned domain-specific self-evaluations (Campbell et al., 2001; Regan, 1998b) rather than global self-esteem. Although self-esteem is associated with domain-specific self-evaluations, there are important distinctions between the two constructs that stem from the fact that domain-specific self-evaluations are more specific than global self-esteem (e.g., Bernichon, Cook, & Brown, 2003; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Marshall, 2006; Dutton & Brown, 1997). This leaves open the possibility that self-esteem may have a somewhat different association with the flexibility of romantic standards

than has been observed in previous studies using domain-specific self-evaluations.

The flexibility of ideal standards has been shown to depend on the degree of investment required by the relationship (Regan, 1998b), so we examined ideal standards at various levels of relational involvement ranging from a single date to marriage. Our predictions for high investment relationships (e.g., marriage) were that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem would set higher ideal standards for potential romantic partners than individuals with low self-esteem. We also predicted that the high standards established by individuals with high self-esteem would be relatively inflexible. Our rationale for this prediction was that individuals with high self-esteem tend to perceive themselves as having greater mate value than those with low self-esteem (e.g., Hamida, Mineka, & Bailey, 1998) which, in turn, leads to the adoption of higher and more rigidly maintained standards for potential romantic partners (e.g., Kenrick et al., 1993; Surbey & Brice, 2007). For low investment relationships, our predictions were less certain. On one hand, it was possible that individuals with high self-esteem would continue to set high ideal standards that were relatively inflexible. On the other hand, it seemed possible that high self-esteem individuals may report more flexible standards than low self-esteem individuals for low investment relationships. This latter possibility would be consistent with the low minimum standards reported by men with high levels of self-esteem when considering potential partners for low investment relationships (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2009).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 189 students (69 men and 120 women) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses who participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. The mean age of participants was 20.35 years ($SD = 3.47$). The racial/ethnic composition was 67% White, 25% Black, 3% Asian, 2% Hispanic, and 3% Other. The majority of participants were single or casually dating (59%). For the 41% of participants who were in committed romantic relationships (i.e., seriously dating, engaged, or married), the average length of these relationships was 29.43 months. Participants were asked to complete measures of self-esteem and romantic standards during a laboratory session.

Self-Esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item measure of global self-esteem. Participants were instructed to complete the scale according to how they typically or generally feel about themselves. Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The RSES has been shown to be a well-validated and reliable measure of global self-regard (Blaskovich & Tomaka, 1991; Demo, 1985;

Rosenberg, 1965; Silber & Tippett, 1965). For the present sample, the internal consistency of the RSES was .84.

Ideal Romantic Standards. The basic procedure used to measure ideal standards was based on the procedure used in previous research to determine minimum relationship standards (e.g., Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990, Kenrick et al., 1993; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2009). That is, participants were asked to consider their ideal romantic standards for the following levels of relational involvement: a single date, a one-night stand, recurring sexual relations, steady dating, and marriage. Participants were asked to indicate the level of various attributes they would find ideal for partners at each level of relational involvement by identifying a specific percentile range (i.e., 1st – 10th, 11th – 20th, 21st – 30th, 31st – 40th, 41st – 50th, 51st – 60th, 61st – 70th, 71st – 80th, 81st – 90th, 91st – 99th). The attributes included in the present study were taken from previous research concerning relationship standards (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Kenrick et al., 1990, 1993; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2009):

dominant, powerful, aggressive, high social status, ambitious, wealthy, educated, good earning capacity, physically attractive, sexy, healthy, wants children, good housekeeper, religious, easygoing, friendly, kind and understanding, popular, exciting personality, good sense of humor, wants to be with others, creative and artistic, intelligent, cultured, intellectual, conscientious, punctual, and careful.

For example, participants were asked to rate the ideal level of “dominance” a prospective partner would have for a “single date”. An overall ideal romantic standard score was determined for each level of relational involvement by averaging the ratings of these attributes ($\square_{\text{single date}} = .94$; $\square_{\text{one-night stand}} = .97$; $\square_{\text{sexual relations}} = .96$; $\square_{\text{steady dating}} = .95$; $\square_{\text{marriage}} = .95$).

Flexibility of Romantic Standards. After identifying the ideal standard for each attribute, participants were asked to select the minimum and maximum percentile ranges they would find acceptable for that attribute. This process was repeated for each level of relational involvement (e.g., participants were asked about their minimum and maximum standards for “punctuality” for a single date, a one-night stand, and so on). Previous research has often focused on the idea of *minimum* standards (e.g., Kenrick et al., 1993) but *maximum* standards have received very little attention. The idea underlying maximum standards is that individuals may also set an upper-boundary on their desire for certain qualities such as “aggressive” (e.g., a woman may be attracted to men who are modestly aggressive but not men who are hyper-aggressive) or “physical attractiveness” (e.g., a man may be insecure about dating a woman who is far more attractive than he is). The flexibility of these romantic standards was determined

by subtracting the minimum acceptable level from the maximum acceptable level for each attribute and then averaging these difference scores within each level of relational involvement. This measure of ideal standard flexibility was based on the method employed by Regan (1998b).

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the measures in the present study. Self-esteem was found to be positively correlated with ideal romantic standards at each level of relational involvement ($r_s > .23$, $p_s < .01$) but was not associated with the flexibility of romantic standards ($|r_s| < .05$, ns).

Table 1
Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Self-Esteem	—										
2. Ideal Standard for a Single Date	.19**	—									
3. Ideal Standard for a One-Night Stand	.29***	.46***	—								
4. Ideal Standard for Sexual Relations	.30***	.63***	.70***	—							
5. Ideal Standard for Steady Dating	.23**	.73***	.50**	.81***	—						
6. Ideal Standard for Marriage	.24***	.71***	.44**	.72***	.90***	—					
7. Flexibility for a Single Date	.02	-.36***	-.07	-.08	-.15*	-.10	—				
8. Flexibility for a One-Night Stand	.05	-.09	-.21**	-.12	-.08	-.07	.53***	—			
9. Flexibility for Sexual Relations	.05	-.14	-.17*	-.20**	-.16*	-.14	.58***	.87***	—		
10. Flexibility for Steady Dating	.01	-.25***	-.12	-.17*	-.29***	-.22**	.70***	.63***	.70***	—	
11. Flexibility for Marriage	-.02	-.33***	-.14	-.19**	-.34***	-.35***	.69***	.51***	.63***	.83***	—
Mean	3.92	7.92	7.06	7.73	8.13	8.35	3.21	3.75	3.22	2.75	2.35
Standard Deviation	0.76	0.90	1.64	1.17	0.95	1.00	1.53	2.32	1.89	1.45	1.34

$p < .05$; * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

Self-Esteem and Ideal Romantic Standards

The association between self-esteem and ideal standards was examined using hierarchical multiple regression. Although we predicted a main effect association between self-esteem and ideal standards, we included gender as a potential moderator in these analyses because of its role in previous research concerning self-esteem and minimum relationship standards (e.g., Zeigler-Hill et al., 2009). All continuous predictor variables were centered for the purpose of testing interactions (Aiken & West, 1991). The main effect terms for self-esteem level and gender were entered on Step 1 and the interaction term for self-esteem and gender was entered on Step 2.

The main effect of self-esteem emerged for each level of relational involvement such that higher levels of self-esteem were consistently associated with higher levels of ideal standards ($\square_s > .20$, $p_s < .01$). The only gender difference to emerge for these analyses was at the level of a one-night stand such that men reported lower ideal standards than women ($\square = -.20$, $p < .01$). The interaction of self-esteem and gender failed to reach conventional levels of significance at any level of relational involvement.

Self-Esteem and the Flexibility of Ideal Romantic Standards

The association between self-esteem and the flexibility of romantic standards at each level of relational involvement was also examined using hierarchical multiple regression. Ideal romantic standards were included because it has been shown that

individuals who establish higher ideal standards tend to be less willing to compromise these standards than other individuals (Campbell et al., 2001). The main effect terms for self-esteem level, gender, and ideal standards were entered on Step 1. On Step 2, the two-way interactions of the main effect terms were entered and the three-way interaction of the main effect terms was entered on Step 3. These regression analyses were followed by the simple slopes tests recommended by Aiken and West (1991) to describe the interaction of continuous variables.

Table 2
Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Ideal Romantic Standards onto Self-Esteem and Sex

	Single Date		One-Night Stand		Sexual Relations		Steady Dating		Marriage	
	R ²	ΔR ²	R ²	ΔR ²	R ²	ΔR ²	R ²	ΔR ²	R ²	ΔR ²
Step 1	.04 [*]	.04 [*]	.15 ^{***}	.13 ^{***}	.10 ^{***}	.10 ^{***}	.05 ^{**}	.05 ^{**}	.06 ^{**}	.06 ^{**}
SE		.20 ^{**}		.27 ^{***}		.29 ^{***}		.23 ^{**}		.25 ^{***}
Sex		.09		-.20 ^{**}		-.08		.04		.08
Step 2	.05 [*]	.01	.14 ^{***}	.01	.10 ^{***}	.00	.06 ^{**}	.01	.07 ^{**}	.01
SE x Sex		-.13		.14		.03		-.13		-.12

Note. SE = Self-Esteem.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The main effect of self-esteem failed to reach conventional levels of significance for any level of relational involvement. Gender differences emerged for the flexibility of romantic standards at the levels of a one-night stand ($\beta = .21, p < .01$), recurring sexual relations ($\beta = .19, p < .01$), and steady dating ($\beta = .15, p < .01$) such that men reported greater flexibility than women. The main effect of ideal standards emerged at each level of relational involvement such that individuals who reported higher ideal standards reported less flexibility ($\beta < -.20, ps < .01$). However, the main effect for ideal standards was qualified by its interaction with self-esteem at each level of relational involvement ($|\beta| > .14, ps < .05$). The predicted values for each of these interactions were very similar, so we will only describe the pattern that emerged for a single date (see Figure 1). Simple slopes tests found that self-esteem was associated with a significant increase in the flexibility of romantic standards among those with relatively low levels of ideal standards ($\beta = .31, p < .01$) but was not associated with the reported flexibility for those with high ideal standards ($\beta = .00, ns$).

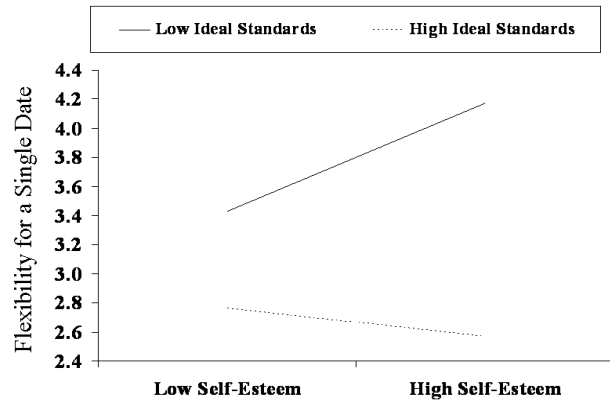


Figure 1. Predicted values for the flexibility of romantic standards for a single date, illustrating the interaction of self-esteem and ideal romantic standards at values that are one standard deviation above and below their respective means.

That is, higher levels of self-esteem were associated with greater flexibility for those with low ideal romantic standards. In contrast, individuals with high ideal romantic standards reported very little flexibility in their standards regardless of whether they had low or high levels of self-esteem. The simple slopes tests were similar for the other levels of relational involvement such that the association between self-esteem and the flexibility of romantic standards was significant for those with low ideal standards ($\beta > .31, ps < .01$) but not for those with high ideal standards ($|\beta| < .19, ns$).

The interaction of gender and ideal romantic standards also emerged for the high investment relationships of steady dating ($\beta = -.23, p < .001$) and marriage ($\beta = -.16, p < .05$). The predicted values for these interactions are displayed in Figure 2.

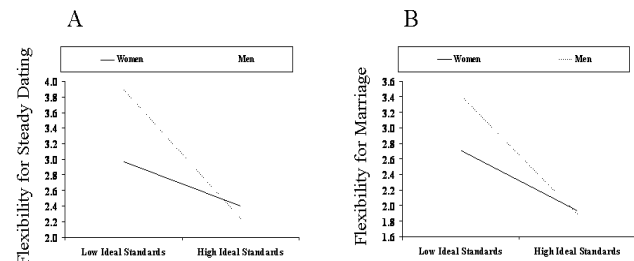


Figure 2. Predicted values for the flexibility of romantic standards for steady dating (Panel A) and marriage (Panel B), illustrating the interaction of self-esteem and ideal romantic standards at values that are one standard deviation above and below their respective means.

Table 3
Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of the Flexibility of Romantic Standards onto Self-Esteem, Sex, and Ideal Romantic Standards

	Single Date		One-Night Stand		Sexual Relations		Steady Dating		Marriage	
	R ²	ΔR ²	R ²	ΔR ²	R ²	ΔR ²	R ²	ΔR ²	R ²	ΔR ²
Step 1	.14 ^{***}	.14 ^{***}	.10 ^{***}	.10 ^{***}	.09 ^{***}	.09 ^{***}	.12 ^{***}	.12 ^{***}	.14 ^{***}	.14 ^{***}
SE		.10		.13		.13		.10		.09
Sex		.10		.21 ^{**}		.19 ^{**}		.15 ^{**}		.13
Ideal		-.38 ^{***}		-.20 ^{**}		-.22 ^{**}		-.32 ^{***}		-.38 ^{***}
Step 2	.17 ^{***}	.03	.22 ^{***}	.12 ^{***}	.17 ^{***}	.08 ^{***}	.20 ^{***}	.08 ^{***}	.24 ^{***}	.10 ^{***}
SE x Sex		-.11		-.10		-.13		-.06		-.07
SE x Ideal		-.14 [*]		-.40 ^{***}		-.33 ^{***}		-.22 ^{***}		-.26 ^{***}
Sex x Ideal		.07		-.05		-.07		-.23 ^{***}		-.16 [*]
Step 3	.17 ^{***}	.00	.22 ^{***}	.00	.17 ^{***}	.00	.20 ^{***}	.00	.24 ^{***}	.00
SE x Sex x Ideal		.01		.17		-.16		-.01		-.02

Note. SE = Self-Esteem; Ideal = Ideal Romantic Standards.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Simple slopes tests found that higher ideal romantic standards for steady dating relationships were associated with less flexibility for men ($\beta = -.53, p < .001$) but not for women ($\beta = -.16, ns$). A similar pattern emerged for marital relationships except for the fact that higher ideal standards were associated with less flexibility for both men ($\beta = -.58, p < .001$) and women ($\beta = -.28, p < .01$). Taken together, these results suggest that men with relatively low ideal standards for high investment relationships report the greatest flexibility when partners for high investment relationships.

Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that self-esteem is associated with ideal standards for romantic partners regardless of the level of relational involvement that is being considered. In essence, individuals with high self-esteem tend to want more from their relationship partners across all types of relationships than individuals with low self-esteem. This is consistent with social exchange theory which suggests that individuals should pursue the highest quality partners they believe they can attract. That is, individuals with high self-esteem tend to view themselves positively which may lead them to establish higher ideal standards for potential partners because they believe they can attract higher quality partners.

In terms of flexibility, higher levels of self-esteem were found to be associated with a broader range of acceptability for those with low ideal standards but not for those with relatively high standards. This suggests that individuals with high self-esteem who set their ideal standards somewhat low give potential romantic partners more latitude. For individuals who establish high ideal standards, self-esteem is not associated with the flexibility of romantic standards. Taken together, these results may suggest that individuals with high self-esteem may be willing to consider a broad range of potential partners when their ideal standards are somewhat low but not when their standards are high. This flexibility would allow individuals with high self-esteem to consider higher quality partners even if their ideal standards were somewhat low. This may reflect the willingness of those with high self-esteem to take more risks than those with low self-esteem (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Brown, 1998; Josephs, Larrick, Steele, & Nisbett, 1992; Landau & Greenberg, 2006; Spencer, Josephs, & Steele, 1993). An interesting area for future research is to explore the role that markers of secure vs. fragile self-esteem (see Kernis, 2003, for a review) may play in determining romantic standards. This may be important because these markers have been shown to moderate the association between self-esteem level and other important elements of relationships such as satisfaction (Zeigler-Hill, McLemore, & Fulton, in preparation) and mate retention strategies (Zeigler-Hill & Fulton, in preparation).

Individuals with low self-esteem, in contrast, may anchor themselves more closely to their ideal standards as a result of their tendency to avoid risk. This is true even when their ideal standards are relatively low. One explanation for this is that low self-esteem individuals may believe that their mate value is relatively low, so they narrow their acceptable range to include only those potential partners who are also of low quality. This may be the result of low self-esteem individuals believing that high quality partners may require too much effort to retain. For example, an individual with low self-esteem

may believe that he or she may need to make a concerted effort to keep an extremely attractive partner from eventually dissolving the relationship in order to form a more equitable relationship with someone more attractive.

The lower and less flexible standards reported by some individuals with low self-esteem may be an attempt by these individuals to avoid rejection by selecting partners they believe to possess mate values comparable to their own. This is consistent with the tendency for low self-esteem to worry about failing to live up to standards of their partners (e.g., Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996; Bellavia & Murray, 2003). These low standards may be part of the reason that individuals with low self-esteem tend to report somewhat negative views of their relationship partners (Graham & Clark, 2006; Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994), low levels of relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Murray et al., 1996), and high rates of relationship dissolution (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988).

It is important to note that the association between self-esteem and the flexibility of romantic standards did not depend on the level of relational involvement. That is, high self-esteem individuals who establish relatively low ideal standards were more flexible across all types of relationships. However, the level of relational involvement was important for the association between gender and the flexibility of romantic standards that emerged. More specifically, men with low ideal standards were more flexible than women when considering partners for high investment relationships (i.e., steady dating and marriage). Future research should examine the underlying reasons for the greater flexibility of men with low ideal standards relative to women with similar ideal standards. For example, this pattern may be due to women with low ideal standards being more concerned than men with finding partners who possess mating assets similar to their own.

The present study has at least two important limitations. First, romantic standards were assessed using self-report. This is a limitation because individuals may lack introspective awareness of their actual standards for relationship partners. For example, Eastwick and Finkel (2008) recently found that ideal

preferences for potential romantic partners failed to predict who individuals were actually attracted to during a speed-dating event. This suggests that the standards individuals establish for potential partners may not be as closely related to their actual choices as researchers often assume. Future researchers should consider incorporating actual choices about potential relationship partners such as those that are made in speed-dating studies. Second, the participants in the present study were college students. This limits the extent to which we can generalize the present results beyond young adulthood. For example, the association between self-esteem and the flexibility of romantic standards may differ for individuals in either middle or late adulthood.

In summary, the results of the present study demonstrate that self-esteem is associated with the flexibility of romantic standards but only among those who set relatively low ideal standards for potential romantic partners. That is, higher levels of self-esteem are associated with greater flexibility in terms of considering potential partners when individuals establish low ideal standards. Basically, low self-esteem individuals constrain themselves by only considering relatively low quality partners, whereas high self-esteem individuals are more willing to consider a broader range of partners. These findings extend previous research by demonstrating that self-esteem is associated with the flexibility of romantic standards.

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