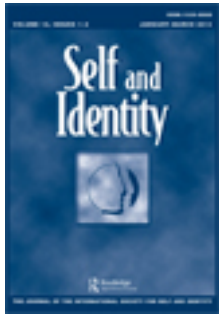


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# Self-esteem and Evaluations of Targets with Ostensibly Different Levels of Self-worth

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Individuals with high self-esteem are often perceived to be desirable romantic partners. The aim of the present study was to examine the moderating effect of the self-esteem of participants on their evaluations of opposite-gender targets with randomly assigned self-esteem designations on dimensions that are relevant for selecting relationship partners, their willingness to engage in particular types of uncommitted relational activities with these targets, and the consequences that participants anticipated for themselves resulting from interactions with the targets. A randomized experimental two-wave design was used to examine whether the self-esteem possessed by Israeli community participants ( $N = 799$ ) would moderate the attractiveness ratings they assigned to opposite-gender targets with ostensibly different levels of self-esteem. Our results found that targets with relatively high levels of self-esteem were perceived to be highly attractive and desirable romantic partners. This general pattern was moderated by the self-esteem of the participants such that participants with high self-esteem found targets with somewhat high levels of self-esteem to be more desirable than other targets including those targets with very high levels of self-esteem. The present findings are discussed in the context of the implicit theory of self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Self-esteem; Implicit; Status; Attraction; Romantic.

An implicit theory refers to a set of beliefs concerning the covariation of characteristics (e.g., Asch, 1946; Bruner & Tagiuri, 1954; Jones & Thibaut, 1958; Kelly, 1955; Ross, 1989). Implicit theories link characteristics in such a way that the presence of one characteristic in a target predisposes individuals to perceive a second characteristic. For example, there is an implicit theory concerning physical attractiveness such that beautiful people are often assumed to possess an array of positive qualities (e.g., social competence) simply because they are attractive (e.g., Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). That is, people tend to believe that physical attractiveness covaries with positive qualities resulting in the general belief that *what is beautiful is good*. Implicit theories such as the one concerning physical attractiveness are important because they exert considerable influence over the way that individuals process information about targets in their social environment.

Recent studies have examined the possibility that there is an implicit theory concerning self-esteem such that individuals with high self-esteem are generally assumed to have

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other positive characteristics in a manner that is similar to the halo effect for physical attractiveness (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2009, 2011). Many of these studies have directly manipulated the ostensible self-esteem of the targets through means such as providing personality profiles that mention how the targets appear to feel about themselves (e.g., “I get the feeling that this person thinks extremely highly of himself and possesses a very positive attitude toward himself”). The results of these studies have supported the existence of an implicit theory of self-esteem by showing that individuals who are believed to possess high self-esteem tend to be seen as possessing other desirable traits.

The first set of studies concerning the implicit theory of self-esteem found that participants were generally more willing to consider voting for the political candidates they believed to possess relatively high self-esteem during the 2008 presidential primary contests (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2009). This basic effect emerged whether participants were simply asked to report their perceptions of the self-esteem of the candidates (e.g., “Do you see Barack Obama as someone who has high self-esteem?”) or if the ostensible self-esteem of the candidates were manipulated by assigning self-esteem designations to the candidates that were supposedly derived from extensive studies of the candidates (e.g., “Linguistic analyses of his speeches show that Barack Obama has high self-esteem”). The pattern of results showed that there was a tendency for participants to be more likely to consider voting for candidates when they believed those candidates possessed high self-esteem. However, the advantage that accompanied ostensibly high levels of self-esteem did not materialize for each of the candidates. The most striking exception to this general pattern emerged for Hillary Clinton such that participants were actually *less* willing to consider voting for her when they believed she possessed high self-esteem. Consistent with these results, women who exhibit strong agentic leadership qualities have been shown to receive more negative evaluations from others (Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1996). The negative evaluations that emerge for self-assured and confident women may be due to the belief that they are violating prescriptive gender norms concerning female modesty and niceness (e.g., Cann & Siegfried, 1990; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001). This explanation seems especially likely if opposite-gender participants interpret high self-esteem differently for women than they do for men. It may be the case, for example, that women with high self-esteem may be assumed to be at least somewhat narcissistic, whereas the same assumption may not be made for men with comparable self-esteem.

The implicit theory of self-esteem has also been shown to have implications for romantic desirability. For example, the perceived self-esteem of targets has been shown to have an impact on judgments concerning their desirability as potential mates (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011). This pattern emerged consistently across six studies that used various techniques to manipulate the ostensible self-esteem of the targets by providing information about the targets such as their e-mail address (e.g., Email: [confidenceissexy@gmail.com](mailto:confidenceissexy@gmail.com) vs. Email: [justaloser2007@hotmail.com](mailto:justaloser2007@hotmail.com)) or the reward they selected for their participation in an earlier session (e.g., choosing a t-shirt with either “I Love Myself” or “I Hate Myself” emblazoned across the front). As expected, participants showed a tendency to rate targets with higher self-esteem as more romantically desirable and were more willing to engage in relational activities with these targets but important exceptions to this basic pattern emerged in these studies. One exception was that men with moderate self-esteem were not always viewed more positively than those with low self-esteem. This pattern shows that women may not always view men with moderate self-esteem in a very positive manner which may explain why men often appear to be focused on attaining—or at least conveying—high self-esteem, rather than avoiding low self-esteem. In contrast, men rated women with moderate self-esteem as more desirable than those with either low or high self-esteem. That is, it appears that men often find moderate self-esteem optimally attractive for women.

Taken together, the results of the previous studies concerning the implicit theory of self-esteem suggest that targets' self-esteem may have different implications for the perception of men and women such that women generally assume that men with high self-esteem possess a range of desirable traits, whereas men are more likely to have mixed evaluations of women with high self-esteem. However, these previous studies did not account for individual differences among the participants such as their own level of self-esteem. Differences in the self-esteem levels of the participants may be important to studies of this sort because it is quite likely that participants may differ in their responses to targets that ostensibly possess different levels of self-esteem depending not only on the gender and ostensible self-esteem levels of the targets but also on the feelings of self-worth possessed by the participants. Our focus for the present study was to examine whether the pattern of results that has emerged in previous studies would be moderated by the self-esteem levels of the participants in the same way that feelings of self-worth have been found to moderate gender differences in areas such as minimum relationship standards (Zeigler-Hill, Campe, & Myers, 2009).

### *Overview and Predictions*

The primary goal of the present study was to examine whether the self-esteem levels of participants would influence how they evaluate opposite-gender targets that ostensibly possess different levels of self-esteem. We chose to focus on the self-esteem level of the participants because we believed that their feelings of self-worth may influence how they evaluate targets with various levels of self-esteem. The evaluations of the targets focused on their romantic desirability, the willingness of the participants to engage in relational activities with the targets (e.g., go on a single date with the target), and the consequences that participants anticipated for themselves resulting from interactions with the targets (i.e., would they feel better about themselves if they interacted with the target?). Our prediction was that male participants would generally evaluate targets more favorably than female participants but that the feelings of self-worth possessed by these individuals may moderate this effect. More specifically, we wanted to examine whether the less positive evaluations of female targets who possessed high self-esteem would be restricted to those male participants with low self-esteem. Our rationale for this possibility was that men who are uncertain about their own self-worth may be less attracted to female targets appearing to have positive attitudes about themselves in part because of concerns among these men that they may actually start to feel worse about themselves if they spend time with confident and self-assured women. In contrast, we thought that men with high self-esteem may feel good enough about themselves to not be intimidated or threatened by female targets with high self-esteem. We also examined whether feelings of self-worth would be important for the evaluations that women provided but we did not have clear predictions so we included these effects for exploratory purposes. In summary, we examined the moderating effect of the self-esteem of participants on their evaluations of opposite-gender targets with randomly assigned self-esteem designations on dimensions that are relevant for selecting relationship partners, their willingness to engage in particular types of uncommitted relational activities with these targets, and the consequences that participants anticipated for their own feelings of self-worth resulting from interactions with the targets.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants were 799 Jewish Israeli community participants (380 men, 419 women) who responded to requests that were posted in various public areas (e.g., clubs, hotels,

restaurants, shops) asking for volunteers to take part in a study concerning attributes relevant to the selection of potential mates. Participants were unmarried heterosexual adults in their mid-20s ( $M = 24.26$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ) who had more than 12 years of formal education ( $M = 13.05$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ). Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were not compensated for their participation.

### *Procedure*

The study was conducted across two separate laboratory sessions with participants reporting their own self-esteem at Time 1 and returning six days later at Time 2 to read one of four randomly assigned personality profiles of the target and complete their evaluations of the target. Participants reported individually to the laboratory and all questionnaires were administered in Hebrew after being translated from the original English versions using the back-translation method. Potential order effects were controlled by presenting the questionnaires in a random order. An interval of six days between the sessions was selected because it is long enough to allow us to separate the assessment of self-reported self-esteem from the experimental manipulation but it was still short enough to keep track of participants and minimize attrition.

At Time 2, participants were asked to read one of four randomly assigned personality profiles taken from Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, and Swann (2003). This profile was ostensibly written by a clinical psychology graduate student to describe an opposite-gender target who had ostensibly participated in a previous study (see appendix). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions and asked to rate the romantic desirability of the target who possessed either *Very Low Self-esteem* (e.g., “I suspect this person has a fairly negative attitude toward himself a lot of the time”; 99 men, 105 women), *Somewhat Low Self-esteem* (e.g., “It seems to me that maybe this person has some difficulty with liking himself—perhaps he tends to have a negative attitude toward himself at times”; 96 men, 103 women), *Somewhat High Self-esteem* (e.g., “It seems that this person feels pretty good about himself, and he probably feels deserving of the affection of others”; 94 men, 105 women), or *Very High Self-esteem* (e.g., “I get the feeling that this person thinks extremely highly of himself, and possesses a very positive attitude toward himself”; 91 men, 106 women). This approach has been used in previous research to manipulate the ostensible self-esteem levels of targets (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011).

### *Measures*

#### ***Self-reported Self-esteem Level of the Participant***

The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) served as the measure of self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale is a well-validated measure of global self-esteem (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991) that consists of 10 items (e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”). 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*). For the present study, the internal consistency of this measure was  $\alpha = .83$ . The internal consistency estimate was calculated across targets/conditions.

#### ***Romantic Desirability of the Target***

The romantic desirability of the targets was assessed using the Partner Ideal Scale (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999) which consists of 17 items that assess various features that have been shown to be important for evaluating potential partners (e.g.,

supportive, sexy, potential to achieve financial security;  $\alpha = .90$ ). Participants were asked to evaluate the target using scales ranging from 1 (*Does not appear to describe this person very well*) to 7 (*Appears to describe this person very well*). This measure has demonstrated good internal reliability, test–retest reliability, convergent validity, and predictive validity in past studies (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999).

### ***Willingness of the Participant to Engage in Relational Activities with the Target***

As a conceptual replication of Clark and Hatfield (1989), participants were asked to imagine that the target approached them and said he or she had noticed them around. This was followed by the target issuing one of the following invitations: “Would you go out on a date with me?”; “Would you come back to my apartment with me?”; and “Would you have sex with me?” Participants were asked to report how they would respond to each of these three invitations using scales ranging from 1 (*I would definitely say NO*) to 9 (*I would definitely say YES*). The internal consistency estimate for these items was  $\alpha = .82$ .

### ***Anticipated Consequences of Interacting with the Target for the Self-esteem of the Participant***

Participants were asked to imagine how interacting with the target would influence their own self-esteem using a scale ranging from 1 (*My self-esteem would decrease*) to 9 (*My self-esteem would increase*).

### ***Data Analytic Strategy***

The main purpose of our analyses was to determine whether the self-esteem of the participants and the ostensible self-esteem of the targets had an impact on the perceived romantic desirability of the targets. This was accomplished by conducting hierarchical multiple regression analyses in which the ratings of the targets were regressed onto the ostensible self-esteem level of the target, the gender of the participant (*Male* = 1, *Female* = -1), and the self-esteem level of the participant. Three orthogonal polynomials were created to distinguish between the four ostensible self-esteem levels assigned to the targets. The first of these orthogonal polynomials was a *linear* term that was coded as follows: *Very Low Self-esteem* [-3], *Somewhat Low Self-esteem* [-1], *Somewhat High Self-esteem* [+1], and *Very High Self-esteem* [+3]. The second orthogonal polynomial was a *quadratic* term that was coded as follows: *Very Low Self-esteem* [+1], *Somewhat Low Self-esteem* [-1], *Somewhat High Self-esteem* [-1], and *Very High Self-esteem* [+1]. The third orthogonal polynomial was a *cubic* term that was coded as follows: *Very Low Self-esteem* [-1], *Somewhat Low Self-esteem* [+3], *Somewhat High Self-esteem* [-3], and *Very High Self-esteem* [+1]. For these analyses, the main effect terms for the ostensible self-esteem level of the target (i.e., linear, quadratic, and cubic effects), the gender of the participant, and the self-esteem level of the participant were entered on Step 1. The two-way interactions of the ostensible self-esteem levels of the targets (i.e., linear, quadratic, and cubic effects) with participant gender and participant self-esteem were entered on Step 2 and the three-way interactions of these variables were entered on Step 3. These regression analyses were followed by simple slopes tests that are used to describe interactions involving continuous variables (Aiken & West, 1991).

## **Results**

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for our measures are presented in Table 1. It is important to note that the self-esteem levels of the men were more strongly

associated with the attractiveness ratings they assigned to the targets than was observed for the women. This suggests that the way men feel about themselves may play a larger role in how they view potential romantic partners than is the case for women. This pattern is consistent with the fact that men are often socialized to serve as relationship initiators whereas women are more likely to serve a gatekeeper function in relationships (e.g., Lott, 1987).

**TABLE 1** Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for the Self-esteem of the Participant and the Evaluations of the Target

Very low Self-Esteem Target				
	1	2	3	4
1. Self-esteem of participant	—	.02	-.11	.04
2. Romantic desirability of target	-.06	—	.18	.17
3. Willingness to engage with target	.01	.26**	—	-.03
4. Anticipated consequences for self-esteem	-.13	.15	.27**	—
$M_{\text{Women}}$	3.12	3.14	2.21	4.91
$SD_{\text{Women}}$	0.26	1.00	0.98	1.64
$M_{\text{Men}}$	3.09	3.76	5.19	5.00
$SD_{\text{Men}}$	0.26	1.02	1.92	1.87
Somewhat low self-esteem target				
	1	2	3	4
1. Self-esteem of participant	—	.33***	.28**	-.04
2. Romantic desirability of target	.25*	—	.45***	-.02
3. Willingness to engage with target	.22*	.25*	—	-.06
4. Anticipated consequences for self-esteem	.21*	-.11	.11	—
$M_{\text{Women}}$	3.12	3.30	2.61	5.21
$SD_{\text{Women}}$	0.25	1.05	1.29	1.38
$M_{\text{Men}}$	3.07	3.75	5.31	5.30
$SD_{\text{Men}}$	0.28	1.09	1.69	1.70
Somewhat high self-esteem target				
	1	2	3	4
1. Self-esteem of participant	—	-.02	-.06	-.10
2. Romantic desirability of target	.32***	—	.34***	.06
3. Willingness to engage with target	.18	.43***	—	-.11
4. Anticipated consequences for self-esteem	.11	.22*	.24*	—
$M_{\text{Women}}$	3.10	4.39	3.69	5.58
$SD_{\text{Women}}$	0.27	0.93	1.26	1.88
$M_{\text{Men}}$	3.11	4.42	6.55	4.87
$SD_{\text{Men}}$	0.28	0.97	1.82	1.89
Very high self-esteem target				
	1	2	3	4
1. Self-esteem of participant	—	.00	-.10	-.05
2. Romantic desirability of target	.00	—	.49***	-.11
3. Willingness to engage with target	-.13	.34***	—	-.07
4. Anticipated consequences for self-esteem	.00	.01	.02	—
$M_{\text{Women}}$	3.15	4.27	3.49	5.20
$SD_{\text{Women}}$	0.24	0.96	1.64	1.73
$M_{\text{Men}}$	3.08	4.18	6.69	4.82
$SD_{\text{Men}}$	0.25	0.94	1.82	1.65

Notes: Correlations for women are presented above the diagonal and correlations for men are presented below the diagonal. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



*Romantic Desirability of the Target*

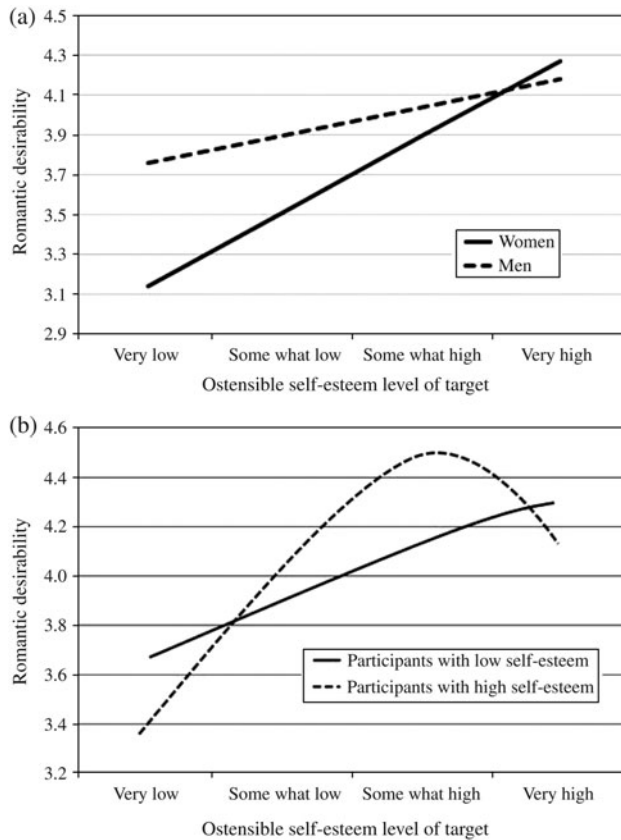
The results of the analysis concerning the romantic desirability of the target found both linear ( $b = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t = 10.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and cubic ( $b = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t = -5.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ) associations between the ostensible self-esteem levels of the target and their perceived romantic desirability (see Table 2). These associations revealed that although there was a general linear trend in the data (i.e., targets with high self-esteem were rated as more romantically desirable than those with low self-esteem), there was also a cubic trend which indicates there were two prominent points in the trend curve in which directional changes were evident (i.e., two bends). Probing of this cubic trend revealed that there was no significant difference between the romantic desirability ratings given to targets with very low self-esteem and targets with somewhat low self-esteem ( $b = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t = 0.83$ ,  $p = .41$ ), which indicates no directional change between these two points. The first directional change reflects the increase in romantic desirability that was observed between targets with somewhat low levels of self-esteem and targets who possessed somewhat high levels of self-esteem ( $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t = 3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The second directional change in the data reflects the decrease in romantic desirability that was observed between targets with somewhat high levels of self-esteem and targets with very high self-esteem ( $b = 0.41$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t = 3.07$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Additional main effects emerged for the gender of the participant ( $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t = 3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the self-esteem of the participant ( $b = 0.41$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t = 3.07$ ,  $p = .002$ ) such that men rated female targets as more romantically desirable than women rated male targets, and participants with high levels of self-esteem rated targets as more romantically desirable than these targets were rated by participants with low levels of self-esteem.

The main effects of participant gender and participant self-esteem were qualified by the interactions that emerged: linear  $\times$  participant gender ( $b = -0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t = -4.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f^2 = 0.02$ ) and quadratic  $\times$  participant self-esteem ( $b = -0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t = -3.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f^2 = 0.02$ ). The predicted values for these interactions are presented in Figure 1. Simple slopes tests for the linear  $\times$  participant gender interaction revealed that there was a significant linear association between the ostensible self-esteem of the target and the perceived romantic desirability of the targets as reported by both women ( $b = 0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t = 10.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and men ( $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t = 4.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but this linear association was stronger for women than it was for men. Simple slopes tests for the quadratic  $\times$  participant self-esteem interaction revealed that there was a significant quadratic association between the ostensible self-esteem levels of the targets and their romantic desirability as rated by the participants with high levels of self-esteem ( $b = -0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = -3.07$ ,  $p = .002$ ) but not for those participants with low levels of self-esteem ( $b = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = 0.77$ ,  $p = .44$ ). This quadratic trend indicates there was a prominent point in the trend curve in which a directional change was evident (i.e., a single bend). Additional probing of this quadratic trend revealed that participants with high levels of self-esteem perceived targets with somewhat low levels of self-esteem as more romantically desirable than targets with very low self-esteem ( $b = 1.11$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t = 7.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and that targets with somewhat high self-esteem were viewed as more romantically desirable than those with somewhat low self-esteem ( $b = 0.70$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t = 4.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The directional change reflects the fact that participants with high self-esteem rated targets with very high self-esteem as less romantically desirable than targets with somewhat high self-esteem ( $b = -0.31$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t = -2.25$ ,  $p = .03$ ). In contrast, participants with low self-esteem rated targets with somewhat low self-esteem as more romantically desirable than targets with very low self-esteem ( $b = 0.81$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t = 5.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and targets with somewhat high self-esteem as more desirable than

**TABLE 2** Regressions of the Evaluations of the Targets on the Ostensible Self-esteem Level of the Target (Linear, Quadratic, and Cubic), Gender of the Participant, and the Self-esteem Level of the Participant

	Romantic desirability of target			Willingness to engage in relational activities with target			Anticipated consequences for self-esteem		
	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$b$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$b$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$b$
<i>Step 1</i>									
Self-esteem of target (linear)	.17***	.17***	0.16***	.51***	.51***	0.26***	.03	.03	0.01
Self-esteem of target (quadratic)			-0.07			-0.08			-0.13*
Self-esteem of target (cubic)			-0.09***			-0.11***			0.01
Gender			0.13***			1.47***			-0.11
Self-esteem of the participant (SEP)			0.41**			0.24			0.02
<i>Step 2</i>									
Linear $\times$ Gender	.21***	.04***	-0.07***	.52***	.01*	0.02	.08***	.05***	-0.06
Linear $\times$ SEP			-0.02			-0.14			-0.01
Quadratic $\times$ Gender			0.00			0.06			0.03
Quadratic $\times$ SEP			-0.43***			-0.68***			-0.26
Cubic $\times$ Gender			0.02			0.00			0.05
Cubic $\times$ SEP			0.10			0.11			0.09
Gender $\times$ SEP			0.07			0.22			0.28
<i>Step 3</i>									
Linear $\times$ Gender $\times$ SEP	.21***	.00	0.06	.52***	.00	-0.02	.14***	.06***	0.11
Quadratic $\times$ Gender $\times$ SEP			-0.14			-0.14			-0.46*
Cubic $\times$ Gender $\times$ SEP			-0.11			-0.14			0.04

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**FIGURE 1** Predicted values for the romantic desirability of the target that illustrate the interaction of the ostensible self-esteem level of the target (linear) and participant gender (Panel A) and the interaction of the ostensible self-esteem level of the target (quadratic) and participant self-esteem (Panel B).

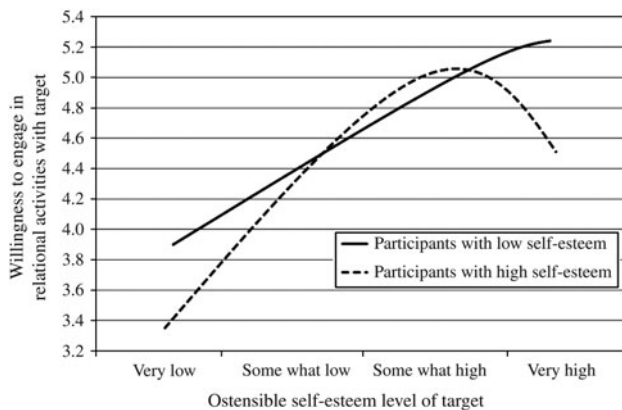
those with somewhat low self-esteem ( $b = 0.81, SE = 0.14, t = 5.86, p < .001$ ). However, participants with low self-esteem did not perceive any difference in the romantic desirability of targets with somewhat high self-esteem and targets with very high self-esteem ( $b = 0.05, SE = 0.14, t = 0.32, p = .75$ ).

To complement these analyses, we also examined the simple effect of self-esteem when the somewhat high self-esteem condition was used as the reference group. This analysis revealed a significant effect ( $b = 0.51, SE = 0.25, t = 2.01, p = .05$ ) such that participants with high self-esteem rated targets with somewhat high levels of self-esteem as more romantically desirable than they were rated by participants with low self-esteem. It is also important to note that the interaction of the self-esteem level of the participant and condition was significant when restricting the analyses to the somewhat high self-esteem and very high self-esteem conditions ( $b = 0.59, SE = 0.24, t = 2.44, p = .02$ ). Taken together, these analyses revealed a quadratic association between the ostensible self-esteem levels of the targets and their perceived romantic desirability such that the targets with somewhat high levels of self-esteem were rated as the most romantically desirable by those with high levels of self-esteem.

*Willingness to Engage in Relational Activities with the Target*

The results of the analysis concerning the willingness of participants to engage in relational activities with the targets found both linear ( $b = 0.26$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t = 10.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and cubic ( $b = -0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t = -4.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ) associations between the ostensible self-esteem levels of the target and the willingness of participants to engage in these activities (see Table 2). Similar to the results concerning the romantic desirability of the targets, these associations revealed that although there was a general linear trend in the data (i.e., participants were more willing to become involved with targets with higher levels of self-esteem compared to those with lower levels of self-esteem), there was also a cubic trend which indicates two directional changes. Probing of this cubic trend revealed that there was no significant difference in the willingness of participants to interact with targets who possessed very low self-esteem and targets with somewhat low self-esteem ( $b = 0.27$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $t = 1.71$ ,  $p = .09$ ) which indicates no directional change between these two points. The first directional change reflects the increase in the willingness of participants to interact with targets who possessed somewhat high levels of self-esteem compared with targets who possessed somewhat low levels of self-esteem ( $b = 1.42$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $t = 9.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The second directional change in the data reflects the decrease in the willingness to interact with targets who possessed very high levels of self-esteem compared to targets with somewhat high levels of self-esteem ( $b = 1.16$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $t = 7.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). An additional main effect emerged for the gender of the participant ( $b = 1.47$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = 26.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ) such that men were much more willing than women to become romantically involved with the targets.

The quadratic  $\times$  participant self-esteem interaction also emerged from this analysis ( $b = -0.68$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $t = -3.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f^2 = 0.02$ ). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Figure 2. Simple slopes tests revealed that there was a significant quadratic association between the ostensible self-esteem levels of the targets and their perceived romantic desirability for the participants with high levels of self-esteem ( $b = -0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = -3.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not for those participants with low levels of self-esteem ( $b = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t = 0.47$ ,  $p = .64$ ). Additional probing of this quadratic trend revealed that participants with high levels of self-esteem reported



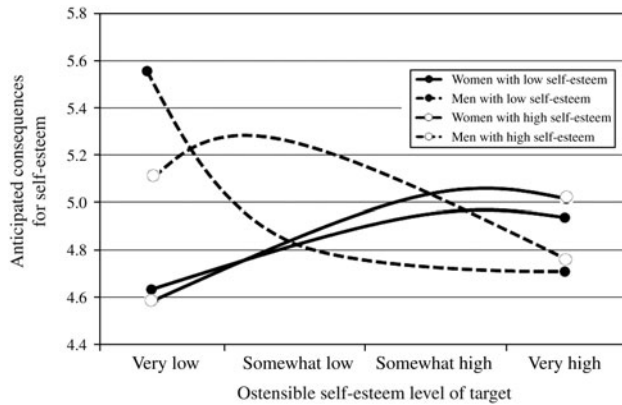
**FIGURE 2** Predicted values for the willingness to engage in relational activities with the target that illustrate the interaction of the ostensible self-esteem level of the target (quadratic) and participant self-esteem (at values that are one standard deviation above and below its mean).

greater willingness to interact with targets who possessed somewhat low levels of self-esteem compared to those targets with very low self-esteem ( $b = 1.57$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ,  $t = 7.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and that these participants were more willing to interact with targets who possessed somewhat high self-esteem compared to those with somewhat low self-esteem ( $b = 0.89$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ,  $t = 4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The directional change reflects the fact that participants with high self-esteem were more willing to interact with targets who possessed somewhat high self-esteem than those with very high self-esteem ( $b = 0.47$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ,  $t = 2.04$ ,  $p = .04$ ). In contrast, participants with low self-esteem were more willing to interact with targets who possessed somewhat low self-esteem than targets with very low self-esteem ( $b = 1.26$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ,  $t = 5.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and that these participants were more willing to interact with targets who possessed somewhat high self-esteem compared to those with somewhat low self-esteem ( $b = 1.26$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ,  $t = 5.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, participants with low self-esteem did not differ in their willingness to interact with targets who possessed somewhat high self-esteem compared to those targets who possessed very high self-esteem ( $b = 0.31$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ,  $t = 1.36$ ,  $p = .18$ ).

To complement these analyses, we also examined the simple effect of self-esteem when the somewhat high self-esteem condition was used as the reference group. The simple effect of self-esteem level was not significant ( $b = 0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.40$ ,  $t = 1.08$ ,  $p = .28$ ). The interaction of the self-esteem level of the participant and condition was significant when restricting the analyses to the somewhat high self-esteem and very high self-esteem conditions ( $b = -1.25$ ,  $SE = 0.63$ ,  $t = -1.99$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Taken together, these analyses revealed a quadratic association between the ostensible self-esteem levels of the targets and the willingness of participants to engage in relational activities with the targets such that participants with high levels of self-esteem were the most willing to engage in these activities with targets possessing somewhat high levels of self-esteem.

#### *Anticipated Consequences of Interaction with Target for the Self-esteem of the Participant*

The results of the regression analysis for the anticipated consequences of interaction with the target for the self-esteem of the participant are presented in Table 2. These results revealed a quadratic association between the ostensible self-esteem levels of the target and the anticipated consequences of interacting with the target for the self-esteem level of the participant ( $b = -0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = -2.14$ ,  $p = .03$ ). This quadratic effect was qualified by its three-way interaction with the gender of the participant and the self-esteem level of the participant ( $b = -0.46$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ,  $t = -2.00$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $f^2 = 0.07$ ). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Figure 3. As suggested by Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), this interaction was probed by first examining whether the two-way interaction of the quadratic effect and participant self-esteem was significant for men and women separately. These analyses found that this two-way interaction emerged for men ( $b = 0.73$ ,  $SE = 0.34$ ,  $t = -2.15$ ,  $p = .03$ ) but not for women ( $b = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.32$ ,  $t = 0.62$ ,  $p = .54$ ). Simple slopes tests were then conducted which found that the quadratic association emerged for men with low self-esteem ( $b = 0.30$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t = 2.23$ ,  $p = .03$ ) but not for men with high self-esteem ( $b = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $t = -0.74$ ,  $p = .46$ ). Additional probing of this quadratic trend revealed that men with low levels of self-esteem believed that interacting with targets who possessed very low levels of self-esteem would have a positive impact on their own feelings of self-worth compared to interacting with targets who possessed somewhat low self-esteem ( $b = 0.81$ ,  $SE = 0.34$ ,  $t = 2.38$ ,  $p = .02$ ). However, it is important to note that men with low self-esteem did not believe that interacting with targets with somewhat low self-esteem would be any more beneficial for their own feelings of self-worth than interacting with targets



**FIGURE 3** Predicted values for the anticipated consequences of interacting with the target on the self-esteem of the participant are depicted that illustrate the interaction of the ostensible self-esteem level of the target participant's gender and level of self-esteem (at values that are one standard deviation above and below its mean).

with somewhat high self-esteem ( $b = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.30$ ,  $t = 0.72$ ,  $p = .47$ ) nor did they perceive a difference between targets with somewhat high self-esteem and those with very high self-esteem ( $b = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.30$ ,  $t = 0.01$ ,  $p = .99$ ). Taken together, these results show that men with low self-esteem anticipated the most improvement in their feelings of self-worth when interacting with female targets possessing very low levels of self-esteem.

## Discussion

The present results provide additional support for the existence of an implicit theory of self-esteem using a community sample from Israel. That is, the ostensible self-esteem of the targets and the self-esteem levels of the participants were found to impact the judgments they provided concerning the targets. For example, participants with high self-esteem reported that targets with very high levels of self-esteem were less romantically desirable than targets with somewhat high levels of self-esteem. Similar results showed that participants with high self-esteem were less willing to interact with targets possessing very high levels of self-esteem compared to those with somewhat high levels of self-esteem. This suggests that possessing higher self-esteem may not always translate into greater attractiveness and romantic desirability. It is possible that there is an upper-boundary on the attractiveness of high self-esteem such that confidence may be considered to be attractive but narcissistic tendencies may not be viewed as particularly desirable. This pattern suggests that individuals with high self-esteem may be primarily concerned with avoiding partners who lack sufficient self-esteem resources to cope with the adversities of life rather than being especially attracted to those with unusually high levels of self-esteem.

We also found that the self-esteem levels of the participants were associated with the anticipated consequences of interacting with the targets for their own feelings of self-worth. Previous research has suggested that men often evaluate women with high self-esteem less positively than those with more moderate levels of self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2009, 2011) and the present study extends and clarifies these previous results by showing that men with low self-esteem may believe that interacting with women who possess low self-esteem may make them feel better about themselves. This pattern is consistent with the argument proposed by Zeigler-Hill and Myers (2009, 2011) that some men—such as those who are uncertain about their own feelings of self-worth—may be somewhat intimidated by the self-

confidence and self-assuredness that characterizes women with relatively high levels of self-esteem. These results are important because they extend our understanding of the implicit theory of self-esteem by showing that the feelings of self-worth possessed by an individual may influence their expectations for encounters with romantic partners who possess different levels of self-esteem. However, it is important to note that men with low self-esteem still preferred interacting with women who possessed high levels of self-esteem even though these interactions would not make them feel better about themselves. This suggests that there may be a trade-off between the women whom men with low self-esteem find desirable and the women whom they believe would make them feel better about themselves. It may be important for future studies to gain a better understanding of this trade-off for men with low self-esteem in their actual relationships.

The present findings may have important implications for the role that self-esteem plays in interpersonal relationships. These results are consistent with the status-signaling model of self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Myers, Southard, & Malkin, *in press*), which proposes that self-esteem may serve as a means for individuals to communicate their standing on various dimensions to those constituting their social environments. The implicit theory of self-esteem is a vital component of the broader status-signaling model because it is concerned with the fact that individuals who are seen as possessing certain levels of self-esteem are often assumed to possess other characteristics believed to be associated with that particular level of self-esteem. Claiming the social benefits that accompany certain levels of self-esteem may be one of the reasons that individuals are often so interested in sending appropriate self-esteem signals to the social environment.

Despite the strengths of the present research (e.g., large sample of community members, two-wave design, manipulation of the ostensible self-esteem levels of the targets, examination of nonlinear trends), this study had a number of potential limitations. The first limitation of the present research is the manner in which the self-esteem level of the target was conveyed to the participants. We used personality profiles that overtly identified how the target felt about himself or herself. Although this approach allowed us to easily and clearly manipulate the ostensible self-esteem levels of the targets in this laboratory setting, this is not typical of how individuals communicate their feelings of self-worth to their social environments in everyday life. Rather, self-esteem is most likely communicated in the real world through a combination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Although previous studies have examined the interpersonal transmission of self-esteem (e.g., Srivastava & Beer, 2005; Vazire, 2010; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000), it is surprising that so little is known about the mechanisms by which self-esteem and similar constructs are communicated between individuals. It is important for future research to focus on gaining a better understanding of the behaviors that are used to convey self-esteem in interpersonal contexts (e.g., verbalizations, eye gaze, body posture) in much the same way that recent research has examined the nonverbal behaviors that accompany feelings of pride (Tracy, Shariff, & Cheng, 2010). As researchers develop a better understanding of the behaviors that signal feelings of self-worth, future research should manipulate these features in order to convey the desired levels of self-esteem rather than relying on relatively blunt strategies such as the personality profile approach that was utilized in the present study. It may also be informative for future studies to allow pairs of participants to interact so that the impressions created by actual individuals could be examined rather than relying on the ostensible self-esteem levels of artificial targets.

The second limitation of this research concerns its generalizability. Our participants were relatively young (mid-20s) and unmarried so it is an open empirical question as to whether similar results would emerge in older (or younger) samples with different levels

of experience with evaluating potential romantic partners. Our sample was Israeli so it would also be helpful if future researchers extended these results to different countries so that the possible moderating role of culture could be examined. It is also important to note that the participants in the present sample were heterosexual. As a result, it is important for future studies to extend these results by examining the connection between self-esteem and target evaluations for gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals.

The third limitation of the present research concerns the strength of the effects that emerged from these analyses. In most cases, the present effects were relatively small. For example, the quadratic  $\times$  participant self-esteem interaction that emerged for the willingness to engage in relational activities with the target only explained an additional 1% of the variance in the outcome variable beyond what was explained by the main effects. The fourth limitation of the present research is that we did not control for some of the other potential explanations for these effects such as depressive symptoms or other mood-related outcomes reported by the participants. Future studies concerning this topic should take additional participant characteristics into account.

An important direction for future research in this area is to consider whether markers of fragile self-esteem (e.g., self-esteem instability) further moderate the link between the self-esteem level of individuals and their evaluations of targets with different levels of self-esteem. It is possible, for example, that individuals with secure high self-esteem may evaluate targets with high self-esteem much more favorably than they would be evaluated by individuals with fragile high self-esteem. We think this may shed additional light on the role that self-esteem plays in the perception of potential romantic partners because recent studies have illustrated the importance of differentiating between secure and fragile forms of high self-esteem when considering interpersonal outcomes such as relationship appraisals (Zeigler-Hill, Fulton, & McLemore, 2011), mate retention strategies (Zeigler-Hill, Fulton, & McLemore, 2012), and interpersonal style (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Beckman, 2011).

## Conclusion

The present study provides additional support for the existence of an implicit theory of self-esteem such that the ostensible level of self-esteem possessed by a target influences how he or she is perceived by others. Participants with high levels of self-esteem rated targets with very high levels of self-esteem as less romantically desirable than targets with somewhat high levels of self-esteem. Similarly, participants with high self-esteem were less willing to engage in romantic interactions with targets who possessed very high levels of self-esteem compared to those who possessed somewhat high levels of self-esteem. It is also important to note that men with low self-esteem believed that interacting with women with very low levels of self-esteem would lead them to feel better about themselves. These results suggest that the evaluations that individuals assign to targets are influenced by the self-esteem of the targets as well as the way these individuals feel about themselves.

## Note

1. A pilot study was conducted in which six independent judges who were blind to the aims of the study rated these profiles in a random order concerning their capacity to evoke the four levels of self-esteem using scales ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*). The level of agreement among the judges was acceptable across the profiles (ICCs > .94).



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