



# Body appreciation in British men: Correlates and variation across sexual orientation

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## ABSTRACT

Investigations of positive body image among men and across various social identities are lacking, and could contribute to a more complete understanding of the construct, including how positive body image can be improved. This study addressed this gap by investigating correlates of *body appreciation* – a key facet of positive body image – in men, and testing whether levels of body appreciation vary across sexual orientation. Data from a British community sample of 439 men ( $M_{\text{age}} = 39.13$ ) showed that body appreciation inversely correlated with conformity to masculine norms and upward appearance-based social comparisons, and positively correlated with physical activity. Body appreciation was lower among sexual minority compared to heterosexual men, and athletic appearance-ideal internalisation and upward appearance-based social comparisons mediated this relationship. Replicating prior research among men, body appreciation positively correlated with body satisfaction, and inversely correlated with perceived appearance pressures from media and eating pathology. These findings have implications for interventions addressing body image among men.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, research within the field of body image has been pathology-driven, focusing primarily on aspects of negative body image, such as body dissatisfaction (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Yet within the past decade, more research has emerged on positive body image. *Positive body image* refers to “love and acceptance of one’s body (including aspects inconsistent with societally-prescribed ideals) and appreciation of its uniqueness and the functions it performs” (Tiggemann, 2015, p. 168). Collectively, extant research has shown that positive body image is an adaptive construct, associated with aspects of psychological and physical health, and inversely correlated with aspects of negative body image and psychological and physical ill-health (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Importantly, positive body image is distinct from negative body image – the two are not opposite ends of the same spectrum (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). For example, positive body image has been uniquely associated with aspects of well-being, self-care, and eating behaviour, after extracting shared variance with neg-

ative body image (Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b), and individuals can experience a positive body image while still experiencing aspects of a negative body image (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013). Thus, research on positive body image is fundamental for achieving a more complete understanding of body image.

An important direction for research on positive body image is to investigate positive body image across various social identities, such as genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, geographical regions, physical capacities, and professions (Tiggemann, 2015). For example, studies have shown that men tend to have higher levels of body appreciation compared to women (Lobera & Ríos, 2011; Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008; Swami, Stieger, Haubner, & Voracek, 2008; Tylka, 2013). *Body appreciation* is the most widely-researched facet of positive body image, and refers to appreciating the features, functionality, and health of one’s body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Men may have higher levels of body appreciation given that appearance ideals tend to be more flexible for men and because they may have greater access to societal and individual resources that promote positive body image (e.g., greater financial resources to support adaptive self-care and physical activities; Swami, Stieger et al., 2008). Investigating positive body image across social identities is essential for obtaining a more nuanced understanding of individuals’ experiences and the construct itself (Tiggemann, 2015), which, in turn, could help to inform the con-

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tent of interventions designed to enhance positive body image. This is particularly important among men, because although they tend to have a more positive body image than women, a significant proportion of men have body concerns (e.g., approximately 30% experience body dissatisfaction; Fallon, 2014) and few effective body image interventions for men have been identified (Alleva, Sheeran, Webb, Martijn, & Miles, 2015; Jankowski et al., 2017). Yet, research into positive body image is in its infancy, particularly among men, and many questions remain unanswered.

The present study will contribute to filling this gap by (a) investigating the correlates of body appreciation in men, (b) exploring whether levels of body appreciation differ across sexual orientation, and (c) if so, what explains these differences. Concerning aspect (a), we will focus on correlates that are pertinent to men's body image but that have not been tested previously among men. Further, to replicate findings from prior literature, we will also include additional correlates that have been supported by previous research on body appreciation among men. To the best of our knowledge, this study will be the first to investigate aspects (b) and (c). Each of these aspects is discussed in turn, below.

### 1.1. Correlates of body appreciation in men

Compared to the number of studies that have investigated positive body image in women, relatively few studies have included men. Collectively, these studies have shown that body appreciation is positively correlated with aspects of men's well-being (e.g., self-esteem, optimism) and inversely correlated with aspects of their ill-being (e.g., eating pathology, depression), similar to what has been found for women (see Tiggemann, 2015, for a review). The current study will extend these findings by investigating whether body appreciation in men is related to conformity to masculine norms, social comparison tendencies, and levels of physical activity.

*Conformity to masculine norms* concerns the extent to which an individual meets the societal expectations for what constitutes masculinity in one's public and private life (Mahalik et al., 2003). It is important to investigate conformity to masculine norms given that broader sociocultural factors can shape how men experience their body. For example, conformity to masculine norms is associated with body dissatisfaction and male appearance-related attitudes and behaviours, including drive for leanness and muscularity (Holmqvist Gattario et al., 2015; Martin & Govender, 2011). Therefore, greater conformity to masculine norms might also be related to lower levels of body appreciation, but prior to this study this relationship has not been tested. Conformity to masculine norms might prevent men from having experiences that could foster body appreciation, such as adaptive appearance investment or engaging in physical activities that they truly enjoy, rather than those that are deemed acceptable for men (Piran, 2002; Piran & Teall, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Men who conform to masculine norms might also be more likely to consume media, like men's fitness magazines, that encourage striving for gendered appearance ideals (e.g., emphasising physical strength but also dominance and power; Murnen & Don, 2012), rather than appreciating their body regardless of whether it meets these ideals. Further, conforming to masculine norms could prevent men from accessing social resources or interactions that promote body appreciation, such as seeking other body-positive individuals or expressing inner positivity and body pride (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Conversely, individuals with a positive body image show acceptance and compassion toward their body and are critical of societal ideals (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a); these perspectives are not in line with conformity to external norms for how men should think, look, or behave. Thus, higher levels of body appreciation should be related to less conformity to masculine norms.

Social comparison tendencies play a role in the aetiology and maintenance of negative body image. According to *social comparison theory* (Festinger, 1954), upward social comparisons are those made with an individual who is perceived to be superior on the target of comparison (e.g., intelligence) and can lead to lower feelings of self-worth. Within the context of body image, *upward appearance-based social comparisons*, in which one compares one's own body to a self-perceived superior other (e.g., a professional athlete), contribute to body dissatisfaction in both women and men (see Myers & Crowther, 2009, for a review). Likewise, higher levels of body appreciation are related to lower levels of appearance comparisons in women (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015; Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016), but this relationship has not yet been studied in men. However, qualitative research has shown that women and men with a positive body image engage in *protective filtering*, a process whereby information that can positively affect their body image is 'filtered in' (e.g., body-positive imagery) and information that can negatively affect their body image is 'filtered out' (e.g., beauty-ideal imagery; Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). This protective filter could discourage individuals with a positive body image from engaging in upward appearance-based social comparisons that could threaten their body image. As such, higher levels of body appreciation might also correlate with lower levels of upward appearance-based social comparisons in men.

Concerning *physical activity*, Andrew et al. (2016) found that engaging in physical activity predicted higher levels of body appreciation in women. In line with the *developmental theory of embodiment* (Piran, 2002; Piran & Teall, 2012), pleasurable engagement in physical activity can contribute to positive body image by helping individuals to develop a more positive body connection. Engaging in physical activity could also encourage individuals to adopt a more functionality (vs. appearance) based orientation toward their body (Martin & Lichtenberger, 2002), and focusing on one's body functionality has been shown to cause improvements in body appreciation in women (Alleva, Martijn et al., 2015). Similarly, body appreciation in men might be associated with higher levels of physical activity, though this relationship has not been investigated previously.

To replicate findings from prior literature, this study will include additional correlates that have been supported by previous research on body appreciation among men and that are pertinent to body image. Namely, body appreciation among men has been related to higher levels of *body satisfaction*, and lower levels of *appearance-ideal internalisation*, *drive for muscularity and leanness*, and *media consumption* (Gillen, 2015; Swami, Hadji-Michael et al., 2008; Swami, Stieger et al., 2008; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). These findings reflect that individuals with a positive body image take a positive perspective toward their own body, are critical of societal ideals, and may consciously limit their exposure to media given the omnipresence of potentially harmful appearance-related imagery and messages (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Conversely, lower levels of media consumption may reduce an individual's exposure to such appearance-related imagery and messages, thereby preventing decreases in body appreciation. Body appreciation among men has also been related to lower levels of *perceived appearance pressures* from others (Kroon Van Diest & Tylka, 2010; Tylka & Homan, 2015), perhaps because individuals with a positive body image choose to surround themselves with others who have also adopted a positive body image and express acceptance toward others' bodies (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). On the other hand, perceiving that others accept one's own body as is could also enhance body appreciation. Indeed, Tylka and Homan (2015) have shown that perceived unconditional acceptance of one's body is key for fostering body appreciation. Last, body appreciation among

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