



Review article

Physical activity and body image among men and boys: A meta-analysis



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ABSTRACT

Three meta-analytic reviews have concluded that physical activity is positively related to body image. Historically, research regarding physical activity and body image has been disproportionately focused on female samples. For example, the most recent meta-analysis (2009) extracted 56 effect sizes for women and only 12 for men. The current paper provides an update to the literature regarding the relationship between physical activity and body image among men and boys across 84 individual effect sizes. The analysis also provides insight regarding moderator variables including participant age, and physical activity type and intensity. Overall, physical activity was positively related to body image among men and boys with various moderator variables warranting further investigation. Pragmatic implications are discussed as well as the limitations within existing research and need for additional research to further understand moderator and mediator variables.

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1. Introduction

Body image is a multidimensional construct referring to the “psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one’s physical appearance” (Cash, 2004, p. 1). Body image reflects how individuals think, feel, see and act toward their bodies (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Multiple dimensions of body image have significant implications for one’s physical and mental health (for a detailed review, see Martin Ginis, McEwan, & Bassett, 2013). For example, body dissatisfaction is related to lower self-esteem (Miller & Downey, 1999), as well as higher levels of depression and anxiety (Stice & Whitenton, 2002), eating disorders (Polivy & Herman, 2002) and muscle dysmorphia (Pope, Gruber, Choi, Olivardia, & Phillips, 1997). It has been suggested that body image concerns and body image dissatisfaction have increased over recent decades (for a review, see Cash, 2004) with research suggesting that rates of body dissatisfaction could be as high as 72% among women and 61% among men in North America (Kruger, Lee, Ainsworth, & Macera, 2008). Although there is great variability around the rates of body dissatisfaction reported based on sample characteristics, the operationalization of body dissatisfaction and study design (Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2014), there is clear evidence that body dissatisfaction is a prevalent issue with important implications.

Early research focused on body image as an issue relevant primarily to women and girls (hereafter ‘women’) (Thompson, Penner, & Altabe, 1990), with a mistaken belief that men and boys (hereafter ‘men’) were largely immune to the experience of body dissatisfaction (Cash & Brown, 1989). Subsequent research has demonstrated that body dissatisfaction is indeed present among men (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Several rationales have been offered to explain earlier findings which suggested that men were generally satisfied with their bodies (e.g., Rozin & Fallon, 1988). For example, researchers have often operationalized body dissatisfaction in relation to a desire to be thinner (for a review see McCreary & Sasse, 2000), which is far too simplistic to capture body image ideals for men. That is, the (westernized) ideal of an ultra-thin physique is pervasive in women leading to a linear relationship between BMI and body dissatisfaction (Kostanski, Fisher, & Cullone, 2004). However, the relationship between BMI and body dissatisfaction is curvilinear among men such that underweight and overweight men experience body dissatisfaction (Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Kostanski et al., 2004; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Muth & Cash, 1997).

Improved understanding of the complexity of body image in recent years has allowed for a better appreciation of the prevalence of body dissatisfaction among men. Relatedly, improved measures of various dimensions of body image relevant to men have been developed and psychometrically evaluated (for a review see, Cafri & Thompson, 2004). For example, the Drive for Muscularity scale (McCreary & Sasse, 2000) has shown validity and reliability in assessing men’s thoughts (e.g., “I wish that I were more muscular”) and behavior (e.g., “I lift weights to build up muscle”) in relation to muscularity to allow for assessment of body image unrelated to desire for thinness. Similarly, the development and substantial psychometric evaluation of the Male Body Attitudes Scale has demonstrated its value for body image assessment among men (Tylka, Bergeron, & Schwartz, 2005).

Research has also advanced such that other nuances of body image among men have been exposed. For example, gender-role orientation (i.e., the extent to which a man identifies with stereotypically masculine traits) is likely to impact body image experiences with regard to pursuing muscular ideals (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Moreover, men may place greater value on the physical capabilities of their bodies whereas women may place more importance on the physical appearance of their bodies

(Martin Ginis, Eng, Arbour, Hartman, & Phillips, 2005). In addition, particular aspects of body dissatisfaction may be more or less pronounced among men compared to women. For example, the domain of discontent is likely to differ between men and women (see Cafri & Thompson, 2004; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006) such that men may experience less dissatisfaction with certain domains of their bodies (e.g., dissatisfaction with hips/thighs; Fiske et al., 2014) and more dissatisfaction in other domains (e.g., dissatisfaction with muscularity/upper torso; Garner, 1997). Indeed, substantial research has accumulated over recent decades to demonstrate the complexity of body image among men (e.g., Frederick et al., 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Men with body dissatisfaction are also at risk for previously discussed physical and mental health complications (for a review, see McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004) including muscle dysmorphia (Pope et al., 1997) and health compromising behaviours such as steroid use or unhealthy dieting (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004). Hence, there is great value in understanding interventions and strategies to support healthy body image among men.

One proposed intervention to improve body image is exercise or physical activity (PA). There has been a substantial amount of research focus on PA and body image. Three previous meta-analyses have concluded that PA is positively related to body image (Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009; Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006; Reel et al., 2007). The large majority of the studies included in these meta-analyses (e.g., >80%; Hausenblas & Fallon, 2009) operationalized body image within the subjective evaluation domain (e.g., body satisfaction or dissatisfaction). Correlational data have indeed demonstrated a positive relationship between PA and body image across a variety of samples. Experimental research has further demonstrated a positive relationship such that those who engage in PA experience healthier body image (e.g., more body satisfaction or less body dissatisfaction) compared to those who do not engage in PA. Although the existing meta-analyses have been informative in understanding many aspects of the PA-body image relationship in general, there are several factors that limit our full understanding of the impact of PA on body image among men.

Research regarding PA and body image has been disproportionately focused on women. For example, the most recent meta-analysis (Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009) extracted 56 effect sizes for women and only 12 for men. Since the publication of the last meta-analysis in 2009, at least 20 studies have been published regarding the relationship between PA and body image among men. Thus, there is value in updating the meta-analytic evidence to include this relatively large number of studies that has focused on men.

Previous meta-analyses have also found equivocal evidence regarding the moderating role of sex or gender on the relationship between PA and body image. Although an earlier meta-analysis (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006) found a larger effect size among women compared to men, the most recent meta-analysis (Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009) found no significant difference in the effect size for women and men. The moderating role of sex in the PA-body image relationship remains unclear. And although it is accepted that the relationship between PA and body image is positive for women and men (e.g., Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009), generalizing the overall findings of meta-analyses that are disproportionately focused on women should be cautioned. For instance, there is little known about the moderators of the PA-body image relationship among men as existing meta-analyses have failed to separate female and male samples for moderator analyses. Given the nuances of body image for men and women (e.g., different idealized bodies), there are possible differences in moderating variables that impact the relationship between PA and body image for women and men, respectively. Previous research has considered various moderating variables (for a review see Martin Ginis

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