



# Effects of the exposure to self- and other-referential bodies on state body image and negative affect in resistance-trained men



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## ABSTRACT

Previous body image research suggests that first, exposure to body stimuli can negatively affect men's body satisfaction and second, body concerns are associated with dysfunctional gaze behavior. To date, however, the effects of self- vs. other-referential body stimuli and of gaze behavior on body image in men under exposure conditions have not been investigated. Therefore, 49 weight-trained men were presented with pictures of their own and other bodies of different builds (i.e., normal, muscular, hyper-muscular) while being eye-tracked. Participants completed pre- and post-exposure measures of body image and affect. Results indicated that one's own and the muscular body negatively affected men's body image to a comparable degree. Exposure to one's own body also led to increased negative affect. Increased attention toward disliked own body parts was associated with a more negative post-exposure body image and affect. These results suggest a crucial role of critical self-examination in maintaining body dissatisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Body dissatisfaction manifests itself by an unfavorable evaluation of one's own body, comprising derogatory appearance-related thoughts and negative feelings (Grogan, 2008). Given that in Western societies, men's body dissatisfaction has risen steadily over time (Gray & Ginsberg, 2007), male body image concerns have increasingly moved into the focus of psychological research (Mayo & George, 2014). Studies have shown both muscularity and body fat concerns to be central factors (Jones & Crawford, 2005; Tylka, 2011). The past few decades have seen an observable change in the male body ideal towards a mesomorphic V-shaped body with increased muscularity and considerably reduced body fat (Dakanalis et al., 2015; Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001), which is almost impossible to achieve naturally for most men (Kouri, Pope, Katz, & Oliva, 1995). According to findings by Hildebrandt and Walker (2006), the anthropometric characteristics of an idealized muscular male body (i.e., 1.83 m; 84 kg; 9.4% body fat) even go well beyond those of a body figure that both men and women rated to be the most attractive to females (i.e., 1.8 m; 79 kg; 14% body fat). There is also evidence that body dissatisfied-men tend to deceptively represent their own body features (e.g., lean mass) to peers

(Hildebrandt, Shiovitz, Alfano, & Greif, 2008). Additionally, portrayals of attractive male bodies in daily media (e.g., magazines, TV, movies) have become increasingly prevalent (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005; Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2001), suggesting a close relationship between appearance, masculinity, and success as well as the need for physical enhancement (Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010). In line with this, the number of gym-goers in Western countries is on the rise (International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, 2015). Striving for a more muscular build does not necessarily have to be seen through a pathological lens, as it may even promote psychological and physical health (Parent, 2013; Reel et al., 2007). Nevertheless, studies have shown that an excessive preoccupation with muscularity and body weight is clearly linked to depressive symptoms (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004), eating pathology (Pritchard, 2014), exercise dependence (Chittester & Hausenblas, 2009), and the intake of anabolic-androgenic steroids (Hildebrandt, Harty, & Langenbucher, 2012).

With respect to the psychological mechanisms maintaining muscularity- and weight-related body image concerns, theory and empirical research suggest that appearance- and body-related social comparison plays a crucial role by mediating the relationship between sociocultural factors (e.g., media exposure) and body dissatisfaction or the engagement in body-modifying behaviors, respectively (Karazsia & Crowther, 2009; Stratton et al., 2015; Tylka & Andorka, 2012). Accordingly, meta-analytical data indicate

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global negative effects of social comparison on men's body satisfaction, with effect sizes ranging from small to moderate (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Myers & Crowther, 2009; but also see Ferguson, 2013). In particular, the tendency to perform upward comparison—i.e., comparing one's standing on an appearance-related dimension to someone who is perceived as being superior on that dimension – seems to be associated with a more negative body image than the tendency to perform downward comparison – i.e., comparing one's standing on an appearance-related dimension to someone who is perceived as being inferior on that dimension (O'Brien et al., 2009).

Although men tend to engage less often in appearance-related upward comparison than women (Franzoi et al., 2012), experimental studies in men found that upward comparison significantly predicted an increase in body dissatisfaction after exposure to muscular male bodies (Galioto & Crowther, 2013; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). However, a more muscular comparison target does not seem to automatically increase body dissatisfaction. Arbour and Martin Ginis (2006) showed that only the exposure to idealized muscular models (i.e., athletic and V-shaped bodies with well-defined muscles) but not hyper-muscular models (i.e., body-builders with exceedingly large muscles) had a negative effect on men's body image. The authors attributed this finding to the fact that the latter body stimuli were less close to the sociocultural body ideal than the former.

In addition to a possible influence of the muscularity of comparison stimuli (Arbour & Martin Ginis, 2006), there is also evidence that not all men are equally affected by social comparison and media exposure (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004). For example, some findings indicate that the negative impact of exposure to idealized body images is strengthened by pre-existing appearance- and muscle-related body dissatisfaction (Blond, 2008) and by higher appearance orientation (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). These findings emphasize the need for a conceptual differentiation between body image as a relatively invariant trait-like characteristic, and body image as a situational state that is sensitive to exposure to body- and appearance-related stimuli (Cash, 2011).

Another cognitive-behavioral aspect of body image that is conceptually similar to social comparison processes – but is even more directly focused on one's own body – is body checking. Although this aspect is frequently investigated in the context of eating disorders (e.g., Kraus, Lindenberg, Zeek, Kosfelder, & Vocks, 2015), it is also found to be common in non-clinical samples (e.g., Haase, Mountford, & Waller, 2011)—even in men (Walker, Anderson, & Hildebrandt, 2009). Body checking comprises any kind of behavior (e.g., mirror checking, weighing, comparing oneself to others) with the aim of evaluating global or specific body- and appearance-related features of one's own body (Alfano, Hildebrandt, Bannon, Walker, & Walton, 2011). Walker et al. (2009) reported that in a non-clinical male sample, body checking was associated with increased shape and weight concerns, symptoms of muscle dysmorphia, depression, and the use of appearance- and performance-enhancing drugs. Beyond this, the authors found that checking oneself in the mirror was one of the most frequently used strategies in men. In accordance with these findings, in an experimental study, Walker, Murray, Lavender, and Anderson (2012) found that men who checked their bodies in a mirror experienced an immediate increase in state body dissatisfaction—irrespective of whether they were instructed to focus on disliked body parts or to examine their bodies in a nonjudgmental manner. However, in a comparable study in women, body dissatisfaction only increased in subjects who were asked to scrutinize their bodies in a critical way (see Shafran, Lee, Payne, & Fairburn, 2007). In sum, findings suggest that exposure not only to idealized other-referential bodies but also to one's own body can have a negative impact on men's body image.

Most of the previously reported results on the effects of media exposure, social comparison, and body checking derive from studies comparing the level of (state-) body dissatisfaction before and after participants were exposed to different kinds of bodies (e.g., one's own and/or other bodies of various builds). However, another approach to investigate social comparison and critical self-examination comprises the detection of gaze behavior towards body stimuli via eye-tracking, since eye movements are closely linked to cognitive-attentional processes (Duc, Bays, & Husain, 2008). In accordance with cognitive-behavioral theories (Williamson, White, York-Crowe, & Stewart, 2004), it is assumed that body-dissatisfied women and men display attentional biases (e.g., increased attention towards idealized bodies or disliked aspects of one's own body) when confronted with body- and appearance-related stimuli, which should further maintain body image concerns.

In this line, Cho and Lee (2013) found that body-dissatisfied men who were simultaneously exposed to computer-generated pictures of thin, normal, muscular, and corpulent male bodies performed more upward social comparisons in terms of elongated dwells on muscular stimuli compared to non-dissatisfied men. With respect to one's own body, Tuschen-Caffier et al. (2015) revealed that women with an eating disorder showed a more dysfunctional gaze pattern, since they mainly focused on body parts with which were most dissatisfied, whereas healthy controls showed a more balanced gaze behavior. In the same vein, Jansen, Nederkoorn, and Mulken (2005) investigated the gaze behavior of women towards their own and other bodies, and found that women with increased eating disorder symptoms displayed an attentional bias towards disliked parts of their own body and attractive parts of other women's bodies. Healthy controls showed the opposite gaze behavior.

Taken together, studies on media exposure, social comparison, and body checking suggest that being presented with body stimuli might have immediate negative consequences for state body image, and that this effect seems to be moderated by pre-existing trait body satisfaction (Blond, 2008) and stimulus characteristics (i.e., degree of muscularity; Arbour & Martin Ginis, 2006). However, the studies do not address how men look at these stimuli and whether their gaze patterns might influence state body image outcomes. Moreover, there is still a lack of research concerning the differential effects of self- and other-referential stimuli on state body image and mood, as the vast majority of studies focused either on idealized other bodies (e.g., Galioto & Crowther, 2013) or on one's own body (e.g., Walker et al., 2012), but not on both. Furthermore, while the growing number of attentional bias studies have found that trait-like body image concerns are expressed through dysfunctional gaze patterns while looking at body stimuli, these studies either did not measure changes in state body image and/or mood at all (e.g., von Wietersheim et al., 2012) or – due to the simultaneous presentation of self- and other-referential stimuli – were unable to investigate their differential effects on these state measures (e.g., Blechert, Nickert, Caffier, & Tuschen-Caffier, 2009).

Therefore, the present study combined a body exposure paradigm with measurements of eye movements, with the aim of analyzing and comparing the immediate impact of pictures of one's own body and pictures of three other men's bodies of various builds (i.e., normal, muscular, hyper-muscular) on state body image and negative affect in men. Additionally, it was investigated whether attention allocation to self-defined attractive and unattractive areas of the different bodies predicts changes in state body image and mood. To increase the likelihood of reaching men with increased body image concerns (i.e., muscularity and/or body weight), a weight-training sample was recruited, as the literature indicates that body dissatisfaction is more widespread within this population (see Olivardia, 2001; Waldorf et al., 2014).

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