



A randomised-controlled trial investigating potential underlying mechanisms of a functionality-based approach to improving women's body image

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on body functionality is a promising technique for improving women's body image. This study replicates prior research in a large novel sample, tests longer-term follow-up effects, and investigates underlying mechanisms of these effects (*body complexity* and *body-self integration*). British women ($N = 261$) aged 18–30 who wanted to improve their body image were randomised to *Expand Your Horizon* (three online body functionality writing exercises) or an active control. Trait body image was assessed at Pretest, Posttest, 1-week, and 1-month Follow-Up. To explore whether changes in body complexity and body-self integration 'buffer' the impact of negative body-related experiences, participants also completed beauty-ideal media exposure. Relative to the control, intervention participants experienced improved appearance satisfaction, functionality satisfaction, body appreciation, and body complexity at Posttest, and at both Follow-Ups. Neither body complexity nor body-self integration mediated intervention effects. Media exposure decreased state body satisfaction among intervention and control participants, but neither body complexity nor body-self integration moderated these effects. The findings underscore the value of focusing on body functionality for improving body image and show that effects persist one month post-intervention.

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1. Introduction

Negative body image is characterised by negative feelings, cognitions, behaviours, and perceptions regarding an individual's own body (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Negative body image is common among women (e.g., approximately 30% of women report body dissatisfaction; Fallon, Harris, & Johnson, 2014) and can have serious consequences across key areas of living, including psychological and physical health (e.g., disordered eating, physical inactivity), social life and relationships (e.g., social anxiety, avoidance of social activities), and education and work (e.g., curtailed academic achievements and career aspirations; Cash, Jakatdar, & Williams, 2004; Cooley & Toray, 2001; Grogan, 2006; Halliwell, Diedrichs, & Orbach, 2014; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer,

Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006). For these reasons, negative body image has been considered a public health concern, and governments and researchers have called for the dissemination of effective interventions (Paxton, 2015).

Recent research suggests that recognising and appreciating the functionality of one's body can be a fruitful approach for improving body image (Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015). *Body functionality* describes everything that the body is able to do, encompassing functions related to the domains of (a) internal processes (e.g., digesting food, healing from a cold), (b) physical capacities (e.g., walking, swimming), (c) bodily senses and sensations (e.g., seeing, experiencing pleasure), (d) creative endeavours (e.g., dancing, gardening), (e) self-care (e.g., sleeping, eating), and (f) communication with others (e.g., body language, shared laughter; Alleva, Martijn, Van Breukelen, Jansen, & Karos 2015). Given that the majority of extant intervention techniques designed to improve body image focus on aspects related to physical appearance (Alleva, Sheeran, Webb, Martijn, & Miles, 2015), complementing these techniques

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with those emphasising body functionality could lead to more effective interventions.

The present research had two aims: (a) to investigate whether focusing on body functionality leads to improvements in body image; and (b) to investigate mechanisms that could explain *how* focusing on body functionality leads to improvements in body image. We discuss each of these aims in turn, below.

1.1. Focusing on body functionality to improve body image

Initial evidence for the benefits of focusing on body functionality comes from qualitative and correlational research. Interviews with children and women with a positive body image have shown that they emphasise the functionality of their body and strive to take care of their bodies to keep them functioning well (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; McHugh, Coppola, & Sabiston, 2014; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). Further, based on her interviews with girls and women across the lifespan, Piran (2016) identified positive experiences of body functionality (e.g., engaging in joyful physical activity) as fundamental to the development and maintenance of positive embodiment. Scholars have also proposed that fitness and yoga-based programmes, as well as some forms of dance, lead to improvements in body image by shifting individuals' focus to their body functionality (e.g., Cook-Cottone, Kane, Keddie, & Haugli, 2013; Mahlo & Tiggemann, 2016; Swami & Tovée, 2009; Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014). Alleva, Tylka, and Kroon Van Diest (2017) have also shown that appreciating the functionality of one's body is associated with various aspects of a more positive body image and well-being (e.g., broadly conceptualising beauty, self-esteem), and is inversely associated with various aspects of a more negative body image and ill-being (e.g., self-objectification, depression).

The impact of focusing on body functionality has also been tested experimentally. In two initial studies, Alleva, Martijn, Jansen, and Nederkoorn (2014) delivered a single brief online writing exercise to female and male undergraduates and women aged 30–50. Participants were either asked to describe what their body can do (functionality focus), what their body looks like (appearance focus), or their route to the university or shopping centre (control focus) using at least 100 words. Undergraduate men who described their body functionality experienced improved functionality satisfaction at immediate Posttest. Further, the 30- to 50-year-old women in the functionality group experienced improved functionality satisfaction at 1-week Follow-Up. In contrast, the undergraduate women did not experience any improvements as a result of describing their body functionality. Alleva et al. proposed that a stronger manipulation might be necessary for college-aged women, who may be more accustomed to viewing their body from an appearance-based perspective (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

In a third study, Alleva, Martijn et al. (2015) developed a more elaborate one-week programme, *Expand Your Horizon*, comprised of three online writing exercises, wherein participants describe the various functions of their body and why they are personally meaningful. Each writing exercise focused on two different domains of body functionality. In this study, women aged 18–30 who were screened for having a negative body image were randomised to *Expand Your Horizon* or an active control programme. Relative to the control, women who completed *Expand Your Horizon* experienced improved appearance satisfaction, functionality satisfaction, and body appreciation at immediate Posttest and 1-week Follow-Up. Further, at Posttest and 1-week Follow-Up, they also experienced reductions in trait *self-objectification*: the tendency to view and evaluate one's body based predominantly on its physical appearance, from a third-person observer perspective (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Last, in a recent experiment by Mulgrew, Stalley, and Tiggemann (2017), women aged 17–35 were randomised to complete a single brief online exercise wherein they wrote 10 positive statements about either their body functionality or their physical appearance, and its contribution to their well-being. The body functionality task covered the domains of physical capacities, internal processes, and communication with others. Mulgrew et al. found that women in both groups experienced improved appearance satisfaction and functionality satisfaction at immediate Posttest (no control group or Follow-Up measurements were included in this study).

Collectively, these findings suggest that focusing on body functionality is both related to a healthier body image and can also *cause* improvements in body image. The present study will extend this research by testing the *Expand Your Horizon* programme in a different sample (women based in England), and so will determine the replicability of this programme in a sample outside the Netherlands (Alleva et al., 2014; Alleva, Martijn et al., 2015). It will also examine the sustainability of the effects by testing whether the effects of focusing on body functionality persist at 1-month Follow-Up.

1.2. Mechanisms that could explain how focusing on body functionality improves body image

In addition to investigating whether focusing on body functionality can improve body image, it is important to explore *how* these improvements may occur. Investigating the potential underlying mechanisms could help us to better understand how body image is shaped and how it can more effectively be improved. Alleva et al. (2014), Alleva, Martijn et al. (2015) proposed that, in line with *objectification theory* (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), focusing on body functionality could improve body image by counteracting the harmful tendency to view one's own body based predominantly on its physical appearance rather than its functioning. In the current research, we investigated two additional possible mechanisms. Namely, that focusing on body functionality leads to improvements in body image via increased body complexity and body-self integration.

The first mechanism is inspired by research on self-complexity, where it is assumed that knowledge about the self is represented by multiple cognitive structures referred to as *self-aspects* (Linville, 1985, 1987). *Self-complexity* is a structural property of the self-concept and concerns the number of distinct self-aspects that comprise the self-concept (Linville, 1985, 1987). Linville (1985, 1987) proposed that individuals can vary in their level of self-complexity. For example, a woman lower in self-complexity might view herself in terms of being a researcher and mother, whereas a woman higher in self-complexity might view herself in terms of being a researcher, mother, activist, gamer, painter, etc. Linville also proposed that higher levels of self-complexity can be beneficial because they can 'buffer' the impact of negative experiences on the self-concept. To demonstrate, if the woman lower in self-complexity receives a rejection letter from a journal, she is likely to feel more negatively given that her role as a researcher comprises a proportionally larger part of her self-concept. If the woman higher in self-complexity were to receive the same letter, she would likely feel less negatively about herself given that her role as a researcher comprises a proportionally smaller part of her self-concept. Thus, individuals higher in self-complexity will respond with smaller fluctuations in affect or self-appraisal following unpleasant experiences compared to individuals lower in self-complexity (Linville, 1985, 1987). Research on self-complexity has largely confirmed Linville's predictions (see Koch & Shepperd, 2004, for a review).

Scholars have proposed that knowledge about the *body* can also be represented in terms of multiple cognitive structures, or body-aspects, collectively comprising the *body-concept* (Cash, 2011). In line with the construct of self-complexity, individuals may vary in

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