



# “This body is me” Discovering the ways in which the body is salient in people’s identities



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## ABSTRACT

Although previous research has revealed associations between negative body image and identity problems, there are sound theoretical reasons to assume much greater diversity in relations between body image and identity. The aim of the present qualitative study was to explore the ways people find the body salient to their identities. Young adults ( $N = 121$ ; 51% women) were interviewed, and four main themes were found: identification with the body, body functionality in identity-relevant tasks, appearance and identity in social interactions, and identity-relevant bodily engagement. Both positive and negative ways in which the body is salient in identity were described and descriptions included functionality, embodied experiences, and social environments. Gender differences were not found with one exception: more women than men described experiences of identifying with their bodies. These novel results have implications for the understanding of the interconnection between body image and identity and may open avenues for continued research.

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of the body to people’s identities has long been theoretically inferred (Erikson, 1968). People suffering from negative body image have been found to have more identity problems than others, and this is especially prominent in patients with eating disorders (e.g., Verschueren et al., 2017). However, very little is known about *how* the body is salient to identity, and studies in community samples are rare. Discovering the diversity of the body’s salience to people’s identities, rather than focusing on identity problems in relation to negative body image as in previous research (Daniels & Gillen, 2015), may uncover new ways to understand both body image and well-being. This study adopted perspectives from Erikson’s (1950, 1968, 1980) identity theory and the developmental theory of embodiment (Piran, 2016; Piran & Teall, 2012) to explore people’s individual perceptions of the ways their bodies matter to their identity.

According to Erikson (1950, 1968, 1980), identity refers to an individual’s sense of sameness and continuity with the past, present, and future and across social roles. Identity is initially formed in adolescence, but its ongoing integration and maintenance

continues throughout the lifespan (Erikson, 1980), and the body is very important to identity throughout the life course. Erikson (1968) described identity development as the gradual integration of different self-images. This process occurs in close relation to the social environment and includes an aspect of the self grounded in the experience of one’s body, the *body-self*. Erikson (1968, p. 165) emphasized the salience of the body to identity in his description of an optimal identity as “a feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of ‘knowing where one is going,’ and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count.” Erikson (1968) also described experiences of “identity loss” or confusion when the body undergoes rapid change. This identity loss is presumed to spark exploration that may lead to a new integration of the personal identity into a coherent whole, but may also lead to identity problems (Erikson, 1950; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Wang, & Olthuis, 2009). Although Erikson mainly wrote about adolescent experiences in this area, identity loss can also arise through a wide range of physical changes in adulthood such as pregnancy, substantial weight gain or loss, or losing body functions through health problems (e.g., Cast, Stewart, & Erickson, 2013; Piot-Ziegler, Sassi, Raffoul, & Delaloye, 2010; Watson, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, Broadbent, & Skouteris, 2015). Young adulthood is generally considered a time of identity consolidation (Carlsson, 2015), and young adults are very likely to have experienced different body-related events that have effected their integration and maintenance of a sense of identity (Erikson, 1980). Therefore, young adulthood is an ideal

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time to investigate in what ways people perceive their bodies to be salient in their identities.

Psychological research on the physical body is usually referred to as body image research and includes a person's body- or appearance-related perceptions, thoughts, and feelings (Cash & Smolak, 2011). In this article, body image is referred to in a slightly broader sense, including both an "inside-out" and a social perspective. The inside-out perspective comprises individuals' feelings within their body, while the social perspective includes the role of the body in social environments. This broader definition of body image is related to Erikson's (1968) notion that identity develops in interaction with the sociocultural context, but it is also closely connected to the developmental theory of embodiment (Piran & Teall, 2012).

The developmental theory of embodiment moves beyond the dominant body image construct by emphasizing the importance of attunement to inner states as well as to social structures in people's experiences of their bodies (Piran, 2016; Piran & Teall, 2012). Hence, while the dominant definition and assessment of body image usually includes negative cognitive evaluations of one's body and associated negative affective reactions (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), the term "embodiment" includes a wider range of experiences (Piran, 2016). These experiences can be both positive (e.g., body comfort, self-care and attunement) and negative (e.g., body dissatisfaction, neglect, and self-harm; Piran, 2016). Hence, the embodiment construct serves as a bridge between positive and negative experiences when studying the ways that people inhabit their bodies (Piran, 2016), which is essential in relation to the current study's aim of exploring *different* ways that the body is salient in people's identities.

In both the developmental theory of embodiment (Piran & Teall, 2012) and Erikson's (1968) theory, the body is seen to be important to identity in different ways for different people. However, although there are sound theoretical reasons to assume this diversity in the body's salience to people's identities, research investigating this diversity is lacking.

Only a few studies have examined the associations between body image and identity development (Kamps & Berman, 2011; Nelson, Kling, Wängqvist, Frisé, & Syed, 2017; Wängqvist & Frisé, 2013), and these have shown that people with more negative body images have more identity problems. For instance, Kamps and Berman (2011) found that people who experienced more negative body image also reported higher levels of identity distress. Wängqvist and Frisé (2013) investigated body image in relation to identity processes (ideological and interpersonal explorations and commitments) and found that body image is associated with identity development, with an emphasis on interpersonal aspects in these associations. Although these studies highlighted important associations between body image and identity, they did not explore the different ways the body may affect people's identity.

Some recent studies in clinical samples highlighted associations between disordered eating and identity (e.g., Verschuere et al., 2017; Verstuyf, Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Boone, 2014), and indicated that disruptions in embodiment and identity are associated with pathological eating disorders (Stanghellini, Castellini, Brogna, Faravelli, & Ricca, 2012). For instance, Stanghellini et al. (2012) and Stanghellini et al. (2015) investigated identity, as well as embodiment, in patients with eating disorders. Results from these studies show that disruption in the experience of embodiment and identity is associated with eating disorder psychopathology (Stanghellini et al., 2012), and that feeling extraneous from one's own body is an experience that discriminated between people with and without a clinical eating disorder (Stanghellini et al., 2015). Qualitative studies have also shown that people with eating disorders can experience the disorder itself as either an important part of their

identity or as their entire identity (Ison & Kent, 2010; McNamara & Parsons, 2016). For instance, having an eating disorder has been described as providing a sense a purpose which, in turn, impacts identity (Ison & Kent, 2010), and that the eating disorder can become a social identity when among others with the same disorder (McNamara & Parsons, 2016). Although Ison and Kent (2010) and McNamara and Parsons (2016) provide some insight into people's experiences of the relationship between their bodies and their identities, these understandings are restricted to clinical samples and experiences.

To our knowledge, no previous study has explored the different ways the body is important to identity among people outside clinical settings. To explore such questions and move the research field forward, more in-depth qualitative studies attending to aspects such as gender have been recommended (Daniels & Gillen, 2015).

Gender is an important aspect to consider in the ways feelings about the body contribute to people's identities. Women often characterize the body as a primary aspect of female identity (Kling, Holmqvist Gattario, & Frisé, 2017; Sentilles & Callahan, 2012) and also tend to be socially evaluated based on their body and appearance (Murnen & Don, 2012; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Women generally also have more negative body image than men (e.g., Fallon, Harris, & Johnson, 2014; Frisé, Lunde, & Berg, 2015; von Soest & Wichstrøm, 2009) and are highly overrepresented among patients with eating disorders (Jones & Morgan, 2010). More recently, however, negative body image and strivings to attain unrealistic body ideals have also been identified as pervasive concerns among men (e.g., Cafri et al., 2005; Parent & Moradi, 2011; Tylka, 2011), and there has also been an increase in media representations of the male body as an "identity project" (i.e., the sense that the self is displayed mainly through the appearance; Boni, 2002; Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005). Accordingly, based on theory and previous studies (e.g., Smolak & Murnen, 2011), one may assume that the body plays a more important role in women's sense of identity than in men's, but there are also indications of its importance among men. However, studies focusing on gender differences and similarities in the relation between body image and identity are lacking. To explore more comprehensively the different ways the body may contribute to people's identities, and to unfold potential gender differences, our study included both male and female participants.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to attend to a gap in previous research by exploring the different ways in which young adults experience their bodies as salient in their identities.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

This study was conducted in the 10th wave of the GoLD (Gothenburg Longitudinal study of Development) project at the Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. The GoLD project begun in 1982 with a community sample of 1- to 2-year-old children (Lamb et al., 1988). At the start of the study, the participants were recruited from waiting lists for public childcare in different areas of Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden. Approximately 75% of the families that were contacted agreed to participate. The families came from a variety of backgrounds, and the study group was considered representative of families in Gothenburg (Broberg, 1989). In the present study, 124 women and men (86% of the original sample from 1982) agreed to participate, but due to time constraints, three did not receive questions relating to the body. Hence, a total of 121 women ( $n=62$ ) and men ( $n=59$ ) were included in the present study. Participants' mean age was 33.3 years ( $SD=0.53$ ), 71% ( $n=86$ ) were employed,

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