



Considerations of positive body image across various social identities and special populations



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ABSTRACT

Although the study of body image has been dominated by a focus on negative aspects, recent research interest has turned towards positive body image. The purpose of the present paper is to provide an integrative review of empirical research on the positive body image of individuals across a range of social identities beyond the typical college student. In particular, the review focuses on research exploring age, culture, gender, and special populations. Overall, the review finds that positive body image seems to confer benefit and operate similarly across a range of populations, although it may be expressed uniquely in different contexts. These results contribute to a more complete account of positive body image, but also raise a number of important additional questions and challenges for future research.

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Introduction

Although body image has long been acknowledged as a complex and multifaceted construct encompassing many aspects of how people experience their bodies (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002), thus far both theorizing and research have been largely pathology driven (Smolak & Cash, 2011), with a particular focus on body dissatisfaction. However, contemporary research attention has finally turned toward positive, as opposed to negative, body image. Broadly defined, 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 (see Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). In addition, Tylka (2011, 2012) has presented a more detailed conceptualization of the core features of positive body image, as well as factors that promote (e.g., unconditional acceptance from important others), maintain (e.g., filtering negative body-related information), and emerge (e.g., inner positivity) from it.

Until recently, however, work in this field was hampered by the lack of any psychometrically valid measurement tool to assess positive body image. In response, Avalos, Tylka, and Wood-Barcalow (2005) developed the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) to measure favourable opinions, acceptance of, and respect toward the body.

Although the BAS does not incorporate all elements of positive body image, it does focus on some core features, and has demonstrated reliability and validity (see Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015). Importantly, it has enabled the considerable expansion of research into positive body image. In particular, a small but growing number of studies have shown body appreciation to be uniquely associated with a range of positive outcomes, e.g., optimism and self-esteem, over and above negative body image (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2014b; Avalos et al., 2005). Thus, the present paper focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on studies that have used the BAS as their measure of positive body image.

Although the study of positive body image, like the study of negative body image (Tiggemann, 2004), originated in samples of college women and adolescent girls, it has diversified much more quickly. Thus, despite its recency and smaller absolute quantity, the research on positive body image has been conducted with a wide range of individuals of varying characteristics. This pattern might reflect the breadth and salience of the construct itself, and/or researchers' increased awareness of the inherent limitations (e.g., gender, age, and educational level) of investigating only the experience of college women. The present integrative review aims to bring together in one place existing research that has addressed positive body image in samples other than college women. In particular, it focuses on research exploring age, culture, gender, and special populations. For each social identity, the literature review will be followed by a more speculative consideration of which of the core and enabling features identified by Tylka (2011, 2012) might be most salient, as well as how the expression of positive body

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image might be impacted by that identity; in other words, what positive body image might “look like” for different groups. Hopefully, this can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of both the experience of different individuals, and of the construct itself. Finally, limitations, challenges, and future research directions will be identified.

Positive Body Image and Age

Although, as indicated above, the earliest studies of positive body image using the BAS were of college student samples, the correlates of positive body image have now been measured in much more diverse samples of community women. Such samples contain much more variability in demographic variables such as socioeconomic status, educational level, and importantly, age. Collectively, the studies have now investigated positive body image in adult women ranging in age from 18 to 90 years. In the main, these studies have shown similar relationships to positive outcomes as have been shown in college samples (e.g., [Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012](#); [Swami, Tran, Stieger, & Voracek, 2014](#)). One step further, [Augustus-Horvath and Tylka \(2011\)](#) explicitly compared the acceptance model of intuitive eating in three different age cohorts of women: emerging adulthood (18–25 years), early adulthood (26–39 years), and middle adulthood (40–65 years). The acceptance model postulates that women who experience high levels of perceived support and body acceptance by others will be able to resist adopting an observer’s perspective of their bodies (i.e., they will experience lower levels of self-objectification), all of which will predict greater appreciation of their own bodies (positive body image). Positive body image will, in turn, be associated with healthier and more internally responsive eating patterns (intuitive eating). Their study found that the acceptance model explained the data well for all three age cohorts, confirming that these postulated predictors and consequences of positive body image are not just limited to young college women.

In contrast to the aforementioned study that found that body appreciation decreased slightly with age group ([Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011](#)), we predicted that body appreciation will increase, not decrease, as women grow older ([Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013](#)). We based this prediction on the reasoning that with increasing age, women tend to shift their focus to and become more appreciative of their health and functionality, are less likely to consider their physical appearance as central to their self-worth ([Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001](#)), and use cognitive strategies such as reappraisal to accept body imperfections ([Webster & Tiggemann, 2003](#)). The results bore out our prediction. In our sample of Australian women aged 18–75 years, there was a positive relationship between age and body appreciation; that is, older women had higher levels of body appreciation than their younger counterparts ([Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013](#)). This positive relation between age and body appreciation has since been replicated in a large sample of both U.S. residents and non-U.S. residents ([Swami, Tran, et al., 2014](#)). Interestingly, in our sample, although body appreciation increased across age, body dissatisfaction remained the same (as is usually found – see [Tiggemann, 2004](#), for a review). This difference in trajectory with age confirms body appreciation as something unique beyond the mere absence of body dissatisfaction. In addition, we found that the negative relationship between body appreciation and body dissatisfaction was weaker for older women. This finding suggests that with age it may become increasingly possible for women to simultaneously experience some level of body dissatisfaction but also to appreciate and respect their body in other ways.

Taken together, the above evidence suggests that older women can love and accept their bodies more readily than younger women. At first glance this finding may seem somewhat surprising, given

the undesirable (according to Western cultural standards) changes in appearance (e.g., increased weight, wrinkles, sagging skin) that inevitably accompany natural ageing. For older women, then, the most salient components of positive body image likely are appreciation of the functionality of their body over its appearance, and acceptance of their ageing body’s natural responses. In addition, experiences such as establishing a career, giving birth to a child, and engaging in satisfying relationships, likely contribute to the ability to define oneself by inner authentic qualities. Thus it might be expected that positive body image would be expressed among older women as gratitude for their health and body functionality, a lack of fear of ageing (at least of its appearance-related aspects), and by inner positivity reflected in outer presentation, what [Tylka \(2011\)](#) refers to as “a special glow.” Future research could investigate whether these attributes translate into more self-care behaviours such as engaging in gentle (e.g., mindful, enjoyable) exercise or attending for medical checks, and a lack of endorsement of cosmetic procedures or surgery in response to ageing-related physical changes. Future research could also usefully investigate the influence of specific biological (e.g., pregnancy, menopause) and social milestones (e.g., marriage) on positive body image in adult women.

At the other end of the age spectrum, a few studies have investigated positive body image among adolescents. Major themes emerged from two qualitative studies of 14-year-old Swedish adolescents with positive body image: an acceptance of one’s imperfections, a functional view of the body, lack of appearance conversations in the family, strong criticism of appearance ideals, and a wider perception of beauty ([Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010](#); [Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012](#)). In particular, [Holmqvist and Frisén \(2012\)](#) identified a tendency and ability to process negative appearance-related information in a body protective manner as an important characteristic of positive body image in this age group. In the single quantitative study (using the BAS), [Andrew, Tiggemann, and Clark \(2014a\)](#) showed that the acceptance model of intuitive eating yielded a good fit to the data in a sample of Australian adolescent girls. That is, positive body image was associated with both acceptance of the body by family and friends (an enabling feature) and intuitive eating (an outcome). The study also identified social comparison as a strong (negative) predictor of positive body image. This finding makes sense as girls whose bodies are accepted and appreciated by others and by themselves should have little need to make peer or media comparisons on the basis of appearance, otherwise very common among adolescents ([Jones, 2001](#)). Such social comparisons have been shown to be reliably associated with negative body image consequences (for a meta-analytical review, see [Myers & Crowther, 2009](#)).

In adolescent and young adult women, positive body image would likely be expressed most obviously in healthy eating patterns, whereby women eat freely and intuitively, following internal hunger and satiety cues, rather than in response to external situational or emotional cues. Food is something to be enjoyed, not feared as a source of weight gain. Such an intuitive eating style is in marked contrast to “normal eating” for many girls and women, which is characterized by dieting and a focus on weight control ([Polivy & Herman, 1987](#)). In addition, adolescent girls with positive body image are more likely to engage in pleasurable physical activities, including sports, which many girls otherwise cease participating in around ages 11–14, often for appearance-based reasons ([Slater & Tiggemann, 2010, 2011](#)). It has also been suggested that they might be less likely to engage in smoking, alcohol, or other drug use ([Andrew et al., 2014b](#)).

For adolescent girls, the most important process involved in promoting and maintaining positive body image likely lies in what [Tylka \(2011, 2012\)](#) and [Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath \(2010\)](#) refer to as “protective filtering,” whereby information about the body is interpreted in a self-protective

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