Predicting body appreciation in young women: An integrated model of positive body image

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examined a range of predictors, based on previous theoretical models, of positive body image in young adult women. Participants were 266 women who completed an online questionnaire measuring body appreciation, activity participation, media consumption, perceived body acceptance by others, self-compassion, and autonomy. Potential mechanisms in predicting body appreciation assessed were self-objectification, social appearance comparison, and thin-ideal internalisation. Results indicated that greater perceived body acceptance by others and self-compassion, and lower appearance media consumption, self-objectification, social comparison, and thin-ideal internalisation were related to greater body appreciation. An integrated model showed that appearance media (negatively) and non-appearance media and self-compassion (positively) were associated with lower self-objectification, social comparison, and thin-ideal internalisation, which in turn related to greater body appreciation. Additionally, perceived body acceptance by others was directly associated with body appreciation. The results contribute to an understanding of potential pathways of positive body image development, thereby highlighting possible intervention targets.

Introduction

Body image is widely accepted to be a complex and multifaceted construct (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002). Increasingly, research is reflecting this understanding with a shift from a sole focus on the negative aspects of body image to a broader investigation of other facets, including positive body image (Tylka, 2011). Generally, positive body image can be defined as holding love, confidence, respect, appreciation, and acceptance of one's physical appearance and abilities (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010), and is distinct from an absence of body dissatisfaction (Tylka, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Positive body image has been investigated thematically in qualitative studies (e.g., Bailey, Gammage, van Ingen, & Ditor, 2015; Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; McHugh, Coppola, & Sabiston, 2014; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), but is now most often

operationalised as body appreciation using the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS, Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; BAS-2, Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). The BAS measures positive opinions and acceptance of one's body, provision of attention to bodily needs, and engagement in a style of cognitive processing that protects against potentially harmful body-image related messages (Avalos et al., 2005).

There is now considerable evidence linking body appreciation to a wide range of positive psychological constructs and indicators of good health. In women, body appreciation has been shown to be associated with factors related to well-being such as self-esteem, adaptive coping, life satisfaction, positive affect, and optimism (Avalos et al., 2005; Dalley & Vidal, 2013; Swami, Stieger, Haubner, & Voracek, 2008; Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2013). Body appreciation is also related to positive health outcomes including intuitive eating (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Avalos & Tylka, 2006; Iannantuono & Tylka, 2012; Oh, Wiseman, Hendrickson, Phillips, & Hayden, 2012), sexual functioning (Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012), and sun protection and cancer screening behaviours (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016; Gillen, 2015). In addition, experimental studies have demonstrated evidence of a protective effect of body appreciation against media-induced body dissatisfaction in young women (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015a; Halliwell, 2013).

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Despite the increasing interest in positive body image, to date, only a handful of studies have examined predictors of positive body image (Andrew et al., 2016; Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Avalos & Tylka, 2006; Iannantuono & Tylka, 2012; Oh et al., 2012). Yet the identification of predictors is important for both the theoretical conceptualisation of positive body image, as well as for locating potential points for intervention.

In the present study we sought to utilise a range of relevant empirically-supported models of general body image in order to develop an integrated model of positive body image. Predictors and postulated mediating processes were drawn from the tripartite influence model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), the acceptance model of intuitive eating (Avalos & Tylka, 2006), objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), embodiment model of positive body image (Menzel & Levine, 2011; Piran, 2001, 2002), and also from the process of emotional regulation, in particular, self-compassion (Neff, 2003a). The included predictors cover both everyday activities and psychological constructs that may predict positive body image.

The first everyday activity was participation in sports and physical activity. This potential predictor is relevant to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which proposes that repeated sexual objectification, including through visual appearance-based media, socialises women and girls to adopt an observer's perspective and to engage in self-monitoring of their appearance, a process known as self-objectification. Importantly, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) propose that one way in which girls might be protected from self-objectification is to play sports and engage in physical activity. In support, time spent in organised sports has been shown to predict subsequent lower self-objectification one year later in adolescent girls (Slater & Tiggemann, 2012). Relatedly, Menzel and Levine's (2011) embodiment model of positive body image, which is rooted in Piran's (2002) investigations of embodiment, theorises that engagement in embodying activities such as sports is key for positive body image. Embodying activities (those that involve mind–body integration) are proposed to have both a direct and indirect influence (via reduced self-objectification) on positive body image. Thus far, this model has held in women who participate in belly dance (one example of an embodying activity), who were shown to have higher body appreciation than non-belly dancers, mediated by reduced self-objectification (Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014). In addition, as suggested by Halliwell (2015), participation in engaging hobbies (e.g., playing a musical instrument) that allow individuals to be 'in' the body (Piran, 2002) was examined as a predictor of positive body image.

The second every day predictor examined was media consumption. This is an important component of the tripartite influence model (Thompson et al., 1999) which has been used to explain body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (e.g., Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004). The model contends that three sociocultural influences (peers, parents, and the media) influence body image and eating disturbance both directly and via two mediational processes: internalisation of the thin ideal and social appearance comparison (Thompson et al., 1999). Support for the model has been shown in samples of young women and adolescent girls (Keery et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002). We chose to examine the particular influence of appearance-based media, which is a major source of messages regarding appearance standards and unhealthy beauty ideals, in particular the thin ideal (Levine & Chapman, 2011). Correlational and experimental research has shown that exposure to thin-ideal media images is linked to body image disturbance and endorsement of disordered eating (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Therefore, women who consume more media containing appearance messages (e.g., fashion magazines) would be expected to be more critical and less accepting of their own appearance and body. On the other hand, consumption of media that are not focused on appearance (e.g., information-based shows) might be protective of positive body image.

A range of psychological predictors was also investigated. The first, perceived body acceptance by others, has previously been investigated as part of the acceptance model of intuitive eating (Avalos & Tylka, 2006). In this model, perceived body acceptance by others is conceptualised as leading to increased body appreciation, and in turn, greater intuitive eating. Of particular relevance here, individuals who perceive that others accept their body as it is, despite any perceived flaws, are more likely to be accepting and appreciative of their own body (Avalos & Tylka, 2006). Cross-sectional examinations of the acceptance model of intuitive eating have shown that perceived acceptance of one's body by others predicts higher body appreciation, both directly and indirectly via reduced self-objectification and social comparison (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015b; Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Avalos & Tylka, 2006; Oh et al., 2012). Thus we included perceived body acceptance by others as a potential psychological predictor.

Two other psychological variables were also examined as potential predictors, namely, self-compassion and autonomy. Self-compassion is an adaptive and useful emotional regulation strategy (Neff, 2003b). Previous research has demonstrated a positive association between self-compassion and body appreciation in women (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2015; Wasylkiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012). Individuals with self-compassion treat themselves with non-judgemental kindness when personal inadequacies are brought to attention (Neff, 2003a). In relation to appearance, self-compassionate women who become aware of appearance-based short comings should respond with non-judgement and acceptance (Wasylkiw et al., 2012). Thus, we should expect self-compassion to be predictive of greater body appreciation.

Autonomy was the final psychological variable to be examined as a predictor of positive body image. Autonomy has not previously been investigated in relation to body appreciation or to body image more generally. However, those who are self-determined and autonomous act on the basis of personal choice and not the influence of others (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Such individuals may be less receptive to outside negative appearance messages that emphasise beauty standards. In qualitative studies, adolescent girls and boys with positive body image report not placing importance on negative appearance comments (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010) or societal appearance ideals (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012). These qualitative findings may be indicative of a greater level of autonomy allowing independent evaluation of appearance messages, which may contribute to greater appreciation of one's body.

In order to better understand *how* different factors may lead to enhanced positive body image, the current study also sought to examine potential mechanisms involved in relationships between predictors and body appreciation. The first mechanism tested was self-objectification, suggested by objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), the embodiment model of positive body image (Menzel & Levine, 2011), and the acceptance model of intuitive eating (Avalos & Tylka, 2006). The other two mechanisms, social comparison and thin-ideal internalisation, were drawn from the tripartite influence model (Thompson et al., 1999). These three variables have been shown to be inter-correlated (e.g., Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012), and all relate essentially to the importance placed on appearance or the way appearance is processed. Self-objectification refers to the surveillance and self-monitoring of one's own appearance from an outsider's perspective (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Social appearance comparison involves gathering information for self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954)