



Yoga and positive body image: A test of the Embodiment Model



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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to test the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image (Menzel & Levine, 2011) within the context of yoga. Participants were 193 yoga practitioners (124 Iyengar, 69 Bikram) and 127 university students (non-yoga participants) from Adelaide, South Australia. Participants completed questionnaire measures of positive body image, embodiment, self-objectification, and desire for thinness. Results showed yoga practitioners scored higher on positive body image and embodiment, and lower on self-objectification than non-yoga participants. In support of the embodiment model, the relationship between yoga participation and positive body image was serially mediated by embodiment and reduced self-objectification. Although Bikram practitioners endorsed appearance-related reasons for participating in yoga more than Iyengar practitioners, there were no significant differences between Iyengar and Bikram yoga practitioners on body image variables. It was concluded that yoga is an embodying activity that can provide women with the opportunity to cultivate a favourable relationship with their body.

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Introduction

The field of psychology has traditionally emphasised a pathology-based view of the human conditions it seeks to understand, diagnose, and treat. Recently, there has been a shift in focus to identifying the protective and health-promoting factors that foster resilience, support well-being, and allow individuals to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This shift in focus is evident within the literature concerning body image. Body image research has traditionally focused on issues related to negative body image such as body dissatisfaction and problematic body perception and attitudes (Grogan, 2008). Over the last decade, however, interest has turned to both the theoretical conceptualisation and subjective experience of *positive* body image.

Positive body image refers to accepting, appreciating, respecting, and having favourable opinions of one's body, including its unique characteristics, functionality, and capabilities (Tylka, 2011, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). Individuals with positive body image are comfortable, confident, and happy with their bodies. They have a high regard and appreciation for the diversity of shapes and sizes of the human form, and are more able to recognise and challenge

unhealthy or unrealistic societal appearance standards, such as the Western female thin ideal (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Tylka, 2011, 2012; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

Research investigating positive body image was initially limited by lack of an appropriate assessment tool. In response, Avalos, Tylka, and Wood-Barcalow (2005) developed the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS), a psychometrically valid and reliable measure of positive body image, distinct from extant measures of negative body image. The BAS has since become the most established and widely used measure of positive body image (Halliwell, 2015). The most current version of the scale is the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a) which has been revised to reflect more contemporary positive body image research. Over the last decade, research using the BAS and the BAS-2 has shown that body appreciation is positively associated with psychological well-being (Swami, Begum, & Petrides, 2010), subjective happiness (Swami, Tran, Stieger, & Voracek, 2015), self-compassion (Homan & Tylka, 2015), and adaptive eating attitudes and behaviours (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015a; Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Avalos & Tylka, 2006). Body appreciation has also been shown to be protective against negative environmental appearance messages (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015b; Halliwell, 2013). Importantly, a number of studies demonstrate that body appreciation is uniquely associated with a range of attributes (e.g., self-esteem and intuitive eating) over and above negative body image (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016; Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a), thus indicating that positive body image is a separate construct from negative body image.

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Researchers interested in the development of positive body image have focused on identifying the environmental conditions and physical and psychological experiences that provide positive ways of connecting with the body (Cook-Cottone, 2015; Menzel & Levine, 2011; Piran, 2002, 2015; Piran & Teall, 2012; Tylka, 2011, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). In particular, Piran (2002, 2015) proposes that *embodiment* is a process of inhabiting the body that provides a close, connected, and intimate relationship with the body through which one can effectively know, respect, and voice bodily experiences and needs. An embodied individual experiences their body as a vital and integral part of their self-expression and power, and as central to their overall well-being. Furthermore, according to Piran's Developmental Theory of Embodiment (for an overview, see Piran, 2015), pleasurable engagement in physical activities can enhance the experience of embodiment and help cultivate a positive body connection.

Following the work of Piran (2002, 2015), Menzel and Levine (2011) have recently proposed the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image. This model identifies participation in *embodying activities* as a key factor in the development of positive body image. Embodying activities are those that encourage awareness of and attentiveness to the body, a sense of physical empowerment and competence, and involve a state of flow or deep absorption in one's current activity (Menzel & Levine, 2011). In addition to a direct relationship between embodying activities and positive body image, Menzel and Levine outline an indirect pathway through *embodiment* and *reduced self-objectification*. Embodying activities are said to lead to embodiment, or mind-body integration, characterised by a feeling of being within and 'at one' with the body. Embodiment is then proposed to be protective against taking an external perspective of the self, or of objectifying the self. Self-objectification refers to imagining and evaluating the physical appearance of one's body from a third-person perspective, or as an object (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and is known to be linked with a multitude of maladaptive mental health consequences (for a review, see Tiggemann, 2011).

In their initial conceptualisation, Menzel and Levine (2011) used the theoretical example of competitive athletics to illustrate the embodiment model. They outlined how the concentration, strength, stamina, coordination, and skill required of athletes gives rise to an internally oriented experience of the body through more frequent states of mind-body integration, increased awareness of and attentiveness to the body, and an overall sense of physical empowerment and competence. Menzel and Levine also suggest further examples of embodying activities such as hiking, rock climbing, scuba diving, martial arts, and yoga (see also, Piran, 2015). Of these, yoga offers the ideal context as an embodying activity to test the model due to its explicit emphasis on mind-body integration, body awareness, and body responsiveness. Specifically, it is proposed here that the practice of yoga represents an embodying activity that has the potential to nurture a sense of embodiment, combat self-objectification, and promote positive body image.

The word yoga derives from the Sanskrit 'yuj' which means 'to yoke', or join, illustrating the central notion of unifying mind, body, and spirit (Hewitt, 1977). As practised in modern-day Western settings, emphasis is placed on moving, stretching, and balancing through a series of poses (known as *asana*), awareness of the breath (*pranayama*), and cultivating the mind-body connection. Interestingly, the practice of yoga is increasingly being integrated within intervention programmes for the prevention and treatment of eating disorders (Cook-Cottone, 2016; Cook-Cottone, Beck, & Kane, 2008; Klein & Cook-Cottone, 2013; Neumark-Sztainer, 2014, 2016; Scime & Cook-Cottone, 2008; Sjöstrom & Steiner-Adair, 2005). Yoga is included in such programmes with the specific intention of fostering mind-body awareness and connection, and promoting an appreciation for the body based on functionality, competence, and

pleasure (Douglass, 2009; Levine & Smolak, 2016; Scime & Cook-Cottone, 2008; Scime, Cook-Cottone, Kane, & Watson, 2006; Tylka & Augustus-Horvath, 2011). However, empirical research investigating the specific and direct links between yoga and body image is limited (Klein & Cook-Cottone, 2013; Neumark-Sztainer, 2014, 2016).

A small amount of research suggests that participation in yoga is related to lower self-objectification, less body dissatisfaction, reduced body weight and shape concern, and reduced eating disorder symptomatology (Carei, Fyfe-Johnson, Breuner, & Brown, 2010; Daubenmier, 2005; Impett, Daubenmier, & Hirschman, 2006; McIver, O'Halloran, & McGartland, 2009). To our knowledge, the relationship between yoga and positive body image, as distinct from negative body image, has not yet been investigated. Thus the first aim of the present study was to test the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image (Menzel & Levine, 2011) within the context of yoga.

A secondary aim of the current study was to examine differences between practitioners of two specific styles of yoga, *Iyengar* and *Bikram*. Iyengar yoga is the most prevalent form of yoga practised in Australia (Penman, Cohen, Stevens, & Jackson, 2012). Bikram yoga (otherwise known as 'hot yoga') is another form of yoga that has gained popularity in recent years. In contrast to other yoga styles, Bikram classes are conducted in a very hot room heated to 40 °C (104 °F) with 40% humidity, with the aim of improving flexibility (Bikram Yoga, 2014; Bikram Yoga Australia, 2015). While both Iyengar and Bikram yoga are founded on the traditional yogic philosophy of mind-body-spirit integration, the Bikram yoga studio environment includes some potentially objectifying features such as large full-wall mirrors and the wearing of minimal clothing to allow sweating. In addition, in contrast to other forms of yoga, Bikram yoga is regularly promoted as being good for weight management (e.g., 'hot yoga, hot body'). Although we consider yoga to be an inherently embodying activity, we speculated that the benefits might be somewhat reduced for Bikram yoga practitioners.

In sum, the overarching purpose of the present study was to extend the limited existing knowledge regarding positive body image and the practice of yoga. The primary aim was to test the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image (Menzel & Levine, 2011) within the context of yoga. This was achieved by comparing a group of yoga practitioners with a group of non-yoga university students. Specifically, we predicted that yoga participants would have more positive body image, greater embodiment, and lower self-objectification than non-yoga participants. In accord with the embodiment model, we also predicted that the relationship between yoga participation and positive body image would be serially mediated by embodiment and self-objectification. That is, it was expected that participation in yoga would be associated with greater embodiment which, in turn, would be associated with lower self-objectification, which would then be associated with more positive body image. Our secondary hypotheses were that Bikram practitioners would have less positive body image and embodiment, and more self-objectification, desire for thinness, and appearance-related reasons for participating in yoga, than Iyengar practitioners.

Method

Participants

A total of 320 women from Adelaide, South Australia participated in the study. There were 124 Iyengar yoga practitioners aged between 22 and 75 years ($M=51.16$, $SD=12.34$), and 69 Bikram yoga practitioners aged between 18 and 66 years ($M=36.35$, $SD=11.53$), recruited from three Iyengar Yoga schools and three

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