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The protective role of body appreciation against media-induced body dissatisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the protective role of positive body image against negative effects produced by viewing thin-idealised media. University women ($N = 68$) completed trait measures of body appreciation and media protective strategies. At a subsequent session, participants viewed 11 thin-ideal advertisements. Body dissatisfaction was assessed before and after advertisement exposure, and state measures of self-objectification, appearance comparison, and media protective strategies were completed. Results indicated that body appreciation predicted less change in body dissatisfaction following exposure, such that participants with low body appreciation experienced increased body dissatisfaction, while those with high body appreciation did not. Although state appearance comparison predicted increased body dissatisfaction, neither state self-objectification nor appearance comparison accounted for body appreciation's protective effect. Trait and state media protective strategies positively correlated with body appreciation, but also did not account for body appreciation's protective effect. The results point to intervention targets and highlight future research directions.

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Introduction

The body image field has recently experienced a shift from a strong emphasis on negative aspects of body image to a broader focus and understanding of different elements of body image (Tylka, 2011). Specifically, researchers have begun to examine positive body image and the ways in which it may foster well-being. Positive body image can be defined as a foundation of love, respect, appreciation, and acceptance of the appearance and functionality of one's body (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). Positive body image is conceptualised as more than merely the absence of body dissatisfaction (Tylka, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), and is most commonly operationalised as body appreciation (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005). Previous research demonstrates that body appreciation correlates with a broad range of positive well-being indices including self-esteem (e.g., Avalos et al., 2005), adaptive

coping (Avalos et al., 2005; Lobera & Ríos, 2011), self-compassion (Wasylkiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012) and optimism (Avalos et al., 2005; Dalley & Vidal, 2013).

Tylka (2011) sets out a number of core characteristics of positive body image based on findings from qualitative and quantitative research. One identified characteristic is "protective filtering" (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), which involves schema activation that allows negative body-related information to be rejected and positive information to be accepted. Negative information can potentially be received from a variety of sources, including family members or peers, but the most likely source is the mass media, a major transmitter of sociocultural messages regarding unattainable standards of appearance, in particular the thin ideal (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Both experimental and correlational research shows that exposure to thin-ideal media images is linked to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (for meta-analyses, see Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). One potential strategy to counter the negative effects of media exposure on body image is increased media literacy, which Tylka (2012) proposes is an important component of protective filtering. Media literacy involves critically evaluating the media's depiction of appearance ideals, for example, by being aware of portrayed narrow ideals of beauty and the widespread digital modifications of media images (Levine & Smolak, 2001). People with positive body image are proposed to be able to better protect their body image from potentially

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harmful appearance messages by engaging in protective filtering and media literacy (Tylka, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

As yet, only one study has experimentally examined the protective effect of body appreciation against thin-ideal media exposure. Halliwell (2013) compared the responses of young women with high and low body appreciation (groups created by median split). For women high in thin-ideal internalisation, the low body appreciation group reported larger and more salient appearance-discrepancies (i.e., difference between ideal and actual appearance) after viewing advertisements with models versus products, relative to the high body appreciation group. The present study aimed to extend this research by examining whether body appreciation protects against increases in body dissatisfaction, the construct most commonly measured in studies of media effects on body image (Grabe et al., 2008), in response to viewing thin-ideal advertisements. In addition, we conceptualised body appreciation as a continuous dimension (as opposed to low/high categories, Halliwell, 2013), in order to assess prediction by degree of body appreciation.

The second aim of the current study was to begin the investigation of possible mechanisms to explain body appreciation's protective effects. Specifically, decreased self-objectification and decreased social appearance comparison were examined for their ability to account for body appreciation's protective role against negative effects on body image after exposure to thin-ideal images. Recent correlational research has shown that body appreciation is associated with reduced self-objectification and appearance comparison at the trait level (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015). We reasoned that women who approach their appearance with acceptance and appreciation should be less likely to feel the need to compare and evaluate their appearance to other people when confronted with appearance-based stimuli. These women should also engage in less state self-objectification because they respect and appreciate their body, in spite of perceived flaws, and thus do not need to monitor outward appearance. Thus, lower levels of engagement in self-objectification and appearance comparison were proposed as explanatory concepts in the protective role played by body appreciation on body dissatisfaction.

In addition, we wished to explore some more specific protective strategies that participants may engage in while viewing thin-ideal media images, an important next step, as suggested by Halliwell (2015). We investigated both strategies that women might use generally (i.e., trait-level dispositions) and also those that they actually engage in while viewing thin-ideal images (i.e., state-level strategies). Although there are some measures assessing general reactions to body-related threats (see Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015), there is no existing measure of body image protective strategies against media images. Thus, we constructed a media-specific measure to examine behavioural and cognitive techniques related to protective filtering as identified in qualitative positive body image studies (Tylka, 2011; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Such strategies included being conscious of the fact that images may have been digitally altered, being aware that the media present only a narrow view of beauty, and understanding that substantial time and professional assistance is required for models to look the way they do (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

In sum, the present study had two major aims. The first was to determine whether degree of body appreciation protects against increases in body dissatisfaction after viewing thin-ideal media images. The second was to begin the examination of potential mechanisms to explain this protective effect, in particular, reduced state self-objectification and appearance comparison. In addition, more specific strategies that women may engage in when exposed to thin-ideal media were explored.

Method

Participants

Participants were 68 women aged 18–29 years ($M = 20.03$, $SD = 3.02$) who were students at an urban university in South Australia. Participants' mean body mass index (BMI) was 21.76 ($SD = 4.43$), which falls within the "normal range" according to the World Health Organization (2015). The majority of participants identified as Caucasian or White (77.9%), with 17.6% Asian, and 4.5% identifying as "other."

Measures and Materials

Experimental stimuli. A set of 15 full-page magazine advertisements printed on high quality photographic paper was presented in a folder to replicate the format of a typical fashion magazine. In a separate study, this particular set of advertisements led to greater body dissatisfaction than a set of control advertisements (Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013). There were 11 advertisements representing the thin ideal that contained the face and at least three-quarters of a thin and attractive female model's body, plus four product only advertisements. The advertisements were sourced from common locally-available Australian fashion magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*.

Body appreciation. Body appreciation was assessed by the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) of Avalos et al. (2005) which measures the acceptance, respect, and attention towards bodily needs and favourable opinions towards one's body. The 13 items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). Exemplar items are "Despite my flaws, I accept my body for what it is," and "I am attentive to my body's needs." Scores are averaged to range from 1 to 5, with higher scores reflecting greater body appreciation. Scores on the BAS have been found to conform to a unidimensional factor structure and demonstrate evidence of internal reliability ($\alpha = .91$–$.94$), 3-week test–rest reliability ($r = .90$), and convergent validity with samples of U.S. college women (Avalos et al., 2005). In a previous sample of Australian women (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013), scores on the BAS were found to have high internal reliability ($\alpha = .90$). This was also the case in the present sample ($\alpha = .93$).

Trait media protective strategies. A small focus group was conducted with five young adult women (M age = 24 years) who were university educated, of average socio-economic status, who indicated that they had positive body image. They were asked to describe general hypothetical strategies (cognitive, behavioural, and emotional) that they used to deal with information from the media that could negatively impact on their body image. Two overarching themes emerged from the focus group discussion. The first theme involved avoidance and encompassed strategies that the women used to intentionally limit exposure to media featuring the thin ideal, including limiting reading of fashion magazines and not paying attention to photos on social media. The second theme involved use of protective processing strategies and included women reminding themselves that it is a model's job to look the way she does and that images are constructed, altered, and manipulated in a number of ways. On the basis of the focus group, a questionnaire consisting of four strategies for the theme of media avoidance and eight strategies for the protective processing theme was constructed. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) and scores were averaged to create media avoidance and protective processing scales. The internal reliability for the media avoidance subscale was low ($\alpha = .36$). However, omitting the one negatively worded item improved internal reliability to a somewhat higher level for