



Emphasizing appearance versus health outcomes in exercise: The influence of the instructor and participants' reasons for exercise



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ABSTRACT

The objectifying nature of exercise environments may prevent women from reaping psychological benefits of exercise. The present experiment manipulated self-objectification through an exercise class taught by an instructor who emphasized exercise as either a means of acquiring appearance or health outcomes. The purpose of this study was to test for interactions between the class emphasis and participants' reasons for exercise (i.e., appearance, health) predicting participants' state self-objectification, state social physique anxiety, exercise class enjoyment, and future intentions of returning to a similar exercise class. Results, obtained via pre- and post-exercise questionnaires, revealed a significant interaction between class emphasis and health reasons for exercise predicting state self-objectification. Participants with lower health reasons for exercise reported greater state self-objectification in the appearance-focused class compared to those with higher health reasons for exercise. Adopting stronger health reasons for exercise may buffer exercise participants from the more objectifying aspects of the group exercise environment.

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Introduction

In Western cultures, women tend to be valued more for their physical appearance than what they are capable of achieving and, in some ways, their body tends to be viewed as representative of their entire identity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Hill & Fischer, 2008). The term cultural sexual objectification refers to the societal practice of treating women as merely a body or object valued primarily for its use to others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), designed to describe how women internalize this ambush of objectifying images in the media, suggests that objectifying the female body in this way not only encourages onlookers to view a woman's body as an object, but also socializes girls and women to value their own bodies as such and, thus, engage in self-objectification (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Henry, Anshel, & Michael, 2006; Hill & Fischer, 2008). Self-objectification refers to taking on the perspective of an observer and tends to encourage women to place higher value on the way their body appears to others rather than how it functions or performs. This shift in awareness typically results in habitual

appearance monitoring that can either be a general tendency (i.e., trait self-objectification) or be triggered as a result of situational factors (i.e., state self-objectification). Regardless, it is usually paired with constant comparisons of one's body to others or to a cultural ideal, increasing one's risk for negative psychological, emotional, and behavioral consequences (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson et al., 1998; Greenleaf, 2005; Tylka & Sabik, 2010).

A common negative psychological consequence of self-objectification is body dissatisfaction (Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson et al., 1998; Greenleaf, 2005). Frequent comparisons to the unattainably thin, Western cultural ideal usually results in an awareness of the impossibility of measuring up to that ideal. This discrepancy between what one desires to look like and current physical self-evaluations is the degree to which women experience body dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Lox, Martin Ginis, & Petruzzello, 2010). When women feel that these perceived shortcomings are being evaluated by others, they are more likely to experience negative emotions such as shame or social physique anxiety (i.e., apprehension or distress about others negatively evaluating one's body; Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989) along with the desire to hide it from further evaluation and possible scrutiny. In such cases, it is also common for women to avoid situations where their body is at risk for being on display all together (Breines et al., 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson et al., 1998; Greenleaf, 2005). Overall, self-objectification, along with its associated negative cognitions and affective responses, can motivate women to

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engage in corrective behaviors such as dieting, excessive exercise, or plastic surgery in an attempt to approximate their perceived body ideal. Over time, these behaviors can lead to physical and mental health risks such as disordered eating or depression (Breines et al., 2008; Calogero et al., 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson et al., 1998; Greenleaf, 2005; Hill & Fischer, 2008).

Due to the negative consequences associated with self-objectification, it is important to differentiate between lifestyle factors that may intensify or reduce it. One such factor is participation in exercise. In terms of self-objectification, exercise may serve as a double-edged sword for women. At times, it has been found to improve the way women feel about their body (Lox et al., 2010), but it has also been shown to reinforce self-objectification and, as a result, make women feel worse about their body (Greenleaf, 2005). There are several characteristics of exercise that appear to moderate the effect it has on women's tendency to self-objectify.

The first of these characteristics is the different reasons why women choose to engage in exercise. Women exercising for appearance-related reasons, or to modify weight or change the shape of their body, have been found to experience significantly higher levels of self-objectification and lower levels of adherence to exercise (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005, 2008; Strelan, Mehaffey, & Tiggemann, 2003). This finding is likely due to the fact that, for women, attaining their ideal body is impossible through exercise alone and often leads to disappointment and discouragement (Lox et al., 2010; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Strelan et al., 2003). Women who exercise for health-related reasons, or to improve the fitness or function of their body, however, have been found to experience significantly lower levels of self-objectification and higher levels of exercise adherence (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005, 2008; Strelan et al., 2003). These findings are likely due to the fact that adopting a functional view of the body has been associated with higher levels of body satisfaction and clearer observations of personal progress and success, which in turn have been associated with higher enjoyment during the activity the woman is engaging in (Lox et al., 2010; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Raedeke, Focht, & Scales, 2007; Strelan et al., 2003). These research findings support the role of reasons for exercise in predicting self-objectification; however, the environment in which exercise takes place is another important factor to consider.

Exercise settings, such as fitness centers, can induce self-objectification by creating an environment that promotes a focus on outward appearance and unrealistic physical body ideals (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005). Elements of exercise settings that may promote self-objectification include an abundance of mirrors, an emphasis on exercising for weight loss, and the promotion of the cultural female body ideal through promotional materials. Not surprisingly, research shows that time spent exercising in a fitness center is positively correlated with self-objectification, while exercising in other settings, such as the outdoors, is inversely related to self-objectification (Melbye, Tenenbaum, & Eklund, 2007; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005).

Within fitness centers, fitness professionals may impact self-objectification through multiple behaviors that can send messages about the importance of physical appearance. Specifically, group exercise instructors have been found to have a significant impact on outcomes related to self-objectification such as body dissatisfaction (Fox, Rejeski, & Gauvin, 2000; Martin & Fox, 2001; Martin Ginis, McEwan, Josse, & Phillips, 2012; Raedeke et al., 2007; Turner, Rejeski, & Brawley, 1997). For example, when an exercise video instructor's attire was manipulated to either be revealing and "physique-salient" or conservative and "physique non-salient", female participants reported greater body dissatisfaction while exercising with an instructor emphasizing her physique with revealing attire (Martin Ginis, Prapavessis, & Haase, 2008). Since revealing attire is common for group exercise instructors, female

participants may experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction due to social comparison with their instructor in these settings (Martin Ginis et al., 2008).

In addition to the influence of an instructor's clothing choice, research has also shown that the overall exercise climate of the class, created by the instructor, can influence a variety of different responses to exercise among female participants as well as their exercise adherence. For example, Raedeke et al. (2007) found that an exercise instructor's approach to and promotion of exercise, whether it emphasized exercise as a means of appearance modification or health improvement, influenced female participants' exercise enjoyment and future intentions of returning to a similar exercise class. In Raedeke's study, females high in social physique anxiety exercised in either an appearance-focused class with the presence of mirrors, an appearance-focused class without the presence of mirrors, a health-focused class with the presence of mirrors, or a health-focused class without the presence of mirrors. Women exercising in the appearance-focused classes were led by an instructor who emphasized exercise as a means of appearance-modification, by using comments such as "these squats will make your legs toned so they look good," and by wearing revealing clothing. Those exercising in the health-focused classes, however, were led by an instructor who emphasized exercise as a means of improving health, by using comments such as "these squats will make your legs stronger," and by wearing conservative clothing. Women who exercised in the health-focused environment reported enjoying the class more and had higher intentions of returning to a similar exercise class in the future compared to those exercising in an appearance-focused environment (Raedeke et al., 2007). The presence or absence of mirrors had no significant effect on these outcomes. As with reasons for exercise, an exercise instructor's emphasis on health and fitness outcomes appears to lead to the most positive psychological responses to exercise.

Research evidence clearly supports a link between reasons for exercise and self-objectification (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005, 2008; Strelan et al., 2003) and suggests that specific exercise climates may elicit higher or lower levels of self-objectification (Martin Ginis et al., 2008; Segar, Eccles, & Richardson, 2008). Evidence also points to the potential for the exercise instructor's emphasis on appearance versus health to promote more or less positive exercise experiences (e.g., enjoyment; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Raedeke et al., 2007; Segar et al., 2008; Segar, Spruijt-Metz, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2006; Strelan et al., 2003). However, to our knowledge, no research has examined how women's reasons for exercise may interact with an exercise instructor's emphasis on appearance versus health (independent of instructor attire) to predict both state self-objectification and consequent psychological responses in exercise participants. For example, women who have higher appearance-related reasons for exercise *and* have an instructor who emphasizes appearance outcomes may experience the most self-objectification during class and associated consequences (e.g., higher social physique anxiety, lower enjoyment, lower intentions of returning). On the other hand, women who have higher health-related reasons for exercise *and* have an instructor who emphasizes health outcomes may experience the least self-objectification and associated consequences.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to test for potential interactions between women's reasons for exercise (i.e., appearance versus health) and the emphasis a group exercise instructor places on appearance versus health in predicting state self-objectification, state social physique anxiety, exercise class enjoyment, and future intentions of returning to a similar exercise class. Participation in this study was restricted to college-aged females because women are more likely to experience elevated levels of self-objectification compared to men (Breines et al., 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008). It was predicted that participants

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