



## Brief research report

Body appreciation and attitudes toward menstruation<sup>☆</sup>Joan C. Chrisler<sup>a,\*</sup>, Maria Luisa Marván<sup>b</sup>, Jennifer A. Gorman<sup>a</sup>, Meghan Rossini<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> Connecticut College, New London, CT, USA<sup>b</sup> Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, Mexico

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## ABSTRACT

Menstruation is an important function of the female body, yet it has rarely been included in research on body image. As women's attitudes toward menstruation are so often negative, this study was designed to examine whether women with positive body image would have more positive attitudes toward menstruation. Seventy-two American women, ages 18–45 years, were recruited online to complete the Body Appreciation Scale (Avalos et al., 2005) and the Beliefs about and Attitudes toward Menstruation Scale (Marván et al., 2006) and to answer some questions about their interest in menstrual suppression. Linear regressions showed that higher scores on body appreciation predicted more positive attitudes toward and beliefs about menstruation, but were not related to interest in menstrual suppression. Our findings may be useful in designing interventions to increase women's comfort with their bodies and bodily functions.

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## Introduction

As an embodied experience, menstruation is likely to play a role in women's body image, yet it has rarely been studied by body image researchers. Given that the ideal female body is presented in the media as objectified (i.e., deodorized, sanitized, and otherwise removed from the corporeality of everyday life; Roberts, 2004), the few researchers who have worked on the intersection of these topics have been concerned with connections between self-objectification and negative attitudes toward menstruation. Negative attitudes toward menstruation are common in all cultures in which they have been studied (Marván, Ramírez-Esparza, Cortés-Iniestra, & Chrisler, 2006; World Health Organization, 1981) and appear frequently in popular culture (Rosewarne, 2012).

Feminist psychologists (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Roberts & Waters, 2004; Ussher, 2004) have suggested that menstruation is a stigmatized event that requires women to engage in self-policing (or surveillance) and to change their behavior to hide evidence of their menstrual status from others. For example, Oxley (1998) reported that the women she interviewed said they chose to wear loose clothing and avoided swimming or sexual activities

during menstruation. The communication taboo (i.e., people should not talk about menstruation in polite company; Kissling, 1996) and the sex taboo (i.e., women should not engage in sexual intercourse during menstruation; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005) are likely to contribute to body shame, as they reinforce the idea that women's bodies and normal reproductive functions are disgusting or embarrassing.

Self-surveillance and shame are elements of objectified body consciousness (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) and self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), in which women internalize an objectified image of women, distance their "self" from their body, and evaluate themselves through the critical gaze of others. Indeed researchers have shown that women who tend to self-objectify say that they would prefer not to experience menstruation (Johnston-Robledo, Ball, Lauta, & Zekoll, 2003), report more positive attitudes toward cycle-suppressing medications (Andrist, 2008; Johnston-Robledo et al., 2003), and also report more negative attitudes toward menstruation (Johnston-Robledo, Sheffield, Voigt, & Wilcox-Constantine, 2007; Roberts, 2004; Schooler et al., 2005), natural birthing (Andrist, 2008), menopause (Rubenstein & Foster, 2013), and breastfeeding (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007).

Positive body image has not yet been studied in relation to attitudes toward menstruation. Positive body image is more than the absence of body dissatisfaction (Tylka, 2011). It may include a focus on the functionality of the body, endorsement of a broad and diverse appreciation of beauty, a belief that "inner beauty" can emanate outward (e.g., "glow" or sexy self-confidence), a motivation to care for and pamper the body, rejection of unrealistic media

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images, and choosing to interact with others who are body-positive (Tylka, 2011; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). One approach to positive body image is the study of body appreciation, which is defined as respect and appreciation for the body and a desire to protect it by attending to its needs, accepting its imperfections, and engaging in healthy behavior (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005).

Given that functional aspects of the body, including those related to reproduction (e.g., sexuality, pregnancy, birthing, breast-feeding), can bring women empowerment and joy, it would make sense that women who tend to appreciate their bodies also report more positive attitudes toward menstruation. Previous research on functionality provides some support for this hypothesis. Street dancers have reported higher body appreciation than non-dancers (Swami & Tovée, 2009), women who engage in regular exercise (for non-appearance-related reasons) have higher body appreciation than those who do not (Homan & Tylka, 2014), and body appreciation has been shown to predict higher sexual satisfaction (Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012). In addition, girls with positive body image have been shown to be more critical of unrealistic images of the beauty ideal (Holmqvist & Friesén, 2012), and women who were higher in body appreciation were less likely to report increased investment in their appearance after having viewed images of objectified bodies, even if they had accepted and internalized the unrealistic beauty ideal (Halliwell, 2013).

## The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine possible links among body appreciation and attitudes toward menstruation in a sample of adult American women. We hypothesized that body appreciation would predict positive attitudes toward menstruation and lower interest in suppressing menses.

## Method

### Participants

The sample was composed of 72 women who were recruited from Craigslist.com postings in 15 cities across the US (Albuquerque, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Honolulu, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 years ( $M = 28.08$  years,  $SD = 8.08$ ). Thirty-one participants were undergraduate students, and the rest had earned a bachelor's degree. They reported their ethnic identity as follows: 54 European Americans, six African Americans, eight Asian Americans, and four Hispanic Americans. Thirty-eight women were single, 29 were married or co-habiting, and five were divorced. Sixty-five women designated themselves as heterosexual, four as bisexual, and three as lesbian.

### Measures

Positive body image was measured with the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS; Avalos et al., 2005), a 5-point scale that ranges from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Its 13 items assess a respectful and appreciative attitude toward the body, as well as a desire to attend to the body's needs and health (e.g., "I respect my body," "I engage in healthy behaviors to take care of my body," and "I feel good about my body"). Evidence of its reliability and validity has been demonstrated with women (Avalos et al., 2005). Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .90.

Attitudes toward menstruation were assessed with the Beliefs about and Attitudes toward Menstruation Questionnaire (BATM; Marván et al., 2006), a 5-point scale that ranges from 1 (*disagree*

*strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). The 40 items comprise four subscales: Annoyance, Proscriptions and Prescriptions, Secrecy, and Pleasant. Annoyance refers to the menses as a bothersome event, and includes items that suggest a desire to reject menstruation (e.g., "Men have a great advantage not having the annoyance of the period"). Proscriptions and Prescriptions includes activities that women should not do and others that they should do while menstruating (e.g., "Women must take showers with hot water while we are having our periods") and beliefs that menstruation keeps women from their daily activities (e.g., "The period affects the performance of women at work"). Secrecy evaluates the importance of keeping menstruation a secret and feelings of embarrassment about menstruation (e.g., "It is uncomfortable for us women to talk about our periods"). Pleasant includes possible feelings of well-being and pride (e.g., "Women are proud when we start having our period"). The BATM has evidenced reliability and validity with adult women (Marván et al., 2006). Cronbach's alphas in the present study were: Annoyance .86, Proscriptions and Prescriptions .84, Secrecy .85, and Pleasant .74.

A desire to eliminate menstruation may be reflective of negative attitudes toward menstruation. Therefore, we asked participants how often they would like to menstruate if they could choose. Response options were every month, once every 2–3 months, once every 4–12 months, or never.

## Procedure

The research protocol for this study was approved by the institutional review board of Connecticut College. Participants responded to an advertisement that invited them to assist psychologists in a study of women's thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about a range of topics related to the female body. The advertisement for the study included a link to a survey posted on SurveyMonkey. Participants clicked a button to provide consent and to verify that they were at least 18 years of age. The measures were presented in the order in which they are described above: BAS, BATM, suppression questions, and then participants completed standard demographic questions. After they had completed the measures, the participants were thanked and debriefed. Those who were willing to provide their e-mail addresses were entered into a drawing to win one of three \$25 Amazon.com gift cards.

## Results

Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated between BAS and BATM scores (see Table 1). All participants answered all items on the BAS and BATM. Women's body appreciation scores correlated positively with their endorsement of pleasant items, and negatively with their endorsement of proscriptive and prescriptive items, secrecy items, and annoyance items. Therefore, women with the most positive attitudes toward the body also have more positive (and less negative) attitudes toward menstruation.

Four linear regression analyses were conducted to test whether body appreciation predicts attitudes toward menstruation. In the first, the criterion was the pleasant items; in the second, the criterion was the proscriptive and prescriptive items; in the third, the criterion was the secrecy items; and in the fourth, the criterion was the annoyance items. In all regressions, the predictor was body appreciation. The regressions indicate that higher body appreciation scores predicted higher pleasant scores,  $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ,  $F(1, 70) = 5.71$ ,  $B = .28$ ,  $p < .02$ , and that lower body appreciation predicted higher proscriptive and prescriptive scores,  $\Delta R^2 = .07$ ,  $F(1, 70) = 6.51$ ,  $B = -.24$ ,  $p < .01$ , secrecy scores,  $\Delta R^2 = .07$ ,  $F(1, 70) = 6.22$ ,  $B = -.25$ ,  $p < .02$ , and annoyance scores,  $\Delta R^2 = .07$ ,  $F(1, 70) = 4.87$ ,  $B = -.26$ ,  $p < .03$ .

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