



Considering an affect regulation framework for examining the association between body dissatisfaction and positive body image in Black older adolescent females: Does body mass index matter?

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ABSTRACT

The present study provided an initial evaluation of an affect regulation model describing the association between body dissatisfaction and two contemporary measures of positive body image among 247 Black college-bound older adolescent females. We further tested whether possessing a higher body mass index (BMI) would strengthen these associations. Self-reported height and weight were used to calculate BMI. Respondents also completed a culturally-sensitive figure rating scale along with assessments of body appreciation and body image flexibility. Results indicated a robust positive association between the two measures of positive body image; BMI was the strongest predictor of both body appreciation and body image flexibility with body size discrepancy (current minus ideal) contributing incremental variance to both models tested. Implications for improving our understanding of the association between positive and negative body image and bolstering positive body image to promote health-protective behaviors among Black young women at this developmental juncture are discussed.

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Introduction

Within the last decade, the burgeoning scholarship devoted to the study of body appreciation has generated tremendous advancements in the contemporary science of positive body image (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Tylka, 2011). The present investigation sought to further contribute to this flourishing line of research by attempting to both expand and deepen the scope of modern conceptualizations of positive body image to include more emergent, experientially-based constructs such as body image flexibility (Sandoz, Wilson, Merwin, & Kellum, 2013). Whereas body appreciation reflects a proactive stance of accepting the body even amidst its flaws (Avalos et al., 2005), body image flexibility describes the process of openly engaging (versus avoiding) negative thoughts and emotions about the body in order to live life more fully (Sandoz et al., 2013).

Additionally, leading experts have cautioned against making the premature inference that low negative body image (e.g., body dissatisfaction) is the equivalent of high positive body image (e.g.,

Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013; Tylka, 2011). Nevertheless, despite the mounting evidence supporting the inverse association between discrepancy score indices of body dissatisfaction and positive body image (e.g., Halliwell, 2013; Swami, Begum, & Petrides, 2010; Swami, Mada, & Tovee, 2012; Swami, Salem, Furnham, & Tovee, 2008; Swami & Tovee, 2009), a theoretically-driven understanding of how these two dimensions of body image may operate in relation to one another remains underdeveloped. Accordingly, drawing from Cash's (2011) comprehensive cognitive-behavioral process model, we considered the utility of an integrative affect regulation framework [infused with social comparison (Festinger, 1954) and self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) theoretical perspectives] for explaining how positive body image may be understood as adaptive coping responses that serve to transform or ameliorate the aversive impact of body dissatisfaction.

Recent data have further confirmed the importance of identifying pertinent moderators that may influence the relationship between body dissatisfaction and positive body image. For example, Tiggemann and McCourt (2013) found that this association was attenuated at older versus younger ages in their female community sample. Other findings revealed a significant negative correlation between weight dissatisfaction and body appreciation among a group of female non-dancers while this relationship failed to reach significance in their comparison sample of women who perform as

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street dancers (Swami & Tovee, 2009). Collectively, these results tentatively suggest that younger women (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013) and those who are less accustomed to moving their bodies in a highly athletic and empowering form of self-expression (Swami & Tovee, 2009) may be less prone to appreciating their bodies when confronted with experiences of body dissatisfaction than their age mature (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013) and street dancing (Swami & Tovee, 2009) counterparts.

As a complement to this inceptive line of inquiry and in light of the potential public health significance, we were interested in determining whether body mass index (BMI) would strengthen the inverse associations between body dissatisfaction and both body appreciation and body image flexibility. We chose to evaluate the tenability of these models using a culturally-sensitive figure rating scale instrument (Kelly, Bulik, & Mazzeo, 2011; Pulvers et al., 2004) in a pre-college sample of Black older adolescent females. This age has been framed as critical period of transition in Black female body image (Webb, Warren-Findlow, Chou, & Adams, 2013) among young ethnic minority women for whom rates of overweight and obesity are particularly high (e.g., Ogden, 2009). Research conducted in ethnically-diverse first-year college female samples has shown that higher body weights are associated with greater body dissatisfaction (Delinsky & Wilson, 2008) which could pose increased risk for engaging in less adaptive eating behavior and gaining more weight in acclimating to early college life relative to non-overweight peers (e.g., Webb & Hardin, 2012) if such body image threats are not managed constructively (Cash, 2011).

The Next Generation of Positive Body Image: Body Appreciation and Body Image Flexibility

The landscape of how more positive experiences of body image are defined and operationalized has evolved dramatically in recent years. Conventional understandings of adaptively relating to one's body were limited to making rather one-dimensional cognitive-affective evaluations reflective of body esteem (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) and body satisfaction (Pingitore, Spring, & Garfield, 1997). However, these widely-accepted concepts failed to adequately capture a more dialectical and nuanced experience of positive body image that is more closely aligned with affect regulation theory (e.g., Anestis, Selby, Fink, & Joiner, 2007; Cash, 2011) and Positive Psychology principles (Neff & Tirsch, 2013; Tylka, 2011), which both contemporary formulations such as body appreciation (Avalos et al., 2005) and body image flexibility (Sandoz et al., 2013) provide.

For instance, body appreciation transcends beyond holding favorable views of the physical self to also incorporate internalizing a flexible, holistic orientation to the body that is exemplified by: (a) accepting the body even with its perceived flaws and regardless of actual weight or size, (b) being attuned to and responding to the body's needs, (c) respecting the body by engaging in adaptive self-care/health-promoting behaviors, and (d) protecting the body by resisting unrealistic media images of beauty (Avalos et al., 2005).

Research has shown body appreciation to be inversely associated with harmful dimensions of body image and eating disorder symptoms (Avalos et al., 2005), restrictive/critical caregiver eating messages (Kroon Van Diest & Tylka, 2010), along with certain personality variables including neuroticism (Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008) and maladaptive perfectionism (Iannantuono & Tylka, 2012). Conversely, it demonstrated positive links with body acceptance by others and healthy approaches to food consumption (i.e., intuitive eating; Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Avalos & Tylka, 2006). Body appreciation has additionally contributed incremental variance beyond measures of disordered eating and negative body image in the prediction of psychological well-being (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction, optimism, proactive coping; Avalos et al., 2005) in college women. Body appreciation further served as

a moderator in the context of thin-ideal media internalization and appearance-related self-discrepancies in undergraduate females exposed to magazine advertisements depicting either thin female models or control images (Halliwell, 2013). More specifically, when viewing the models, young women scoring high on internalization and low on body appreciation endorsed greater importance and demonstrated a larger appearance discrepancy relative to young women in the control condition. Conversely, participants with elevated ratings on both measures of media internalization and body appreciation indicated a less prominent self-discrepancy that was comparable in magnitude to their counterparts who viewed the control images (Halliwell, 2013).

While much evidence supports body appreciation as a component of positive body image, the scholarship on body image flexibility is emerging. This more nascent form of positive body image is an outgrowth of the Buddhism-inspired third-wave behavior therapy movement (Hayes, Villatte, Levin, & Hildebrandt, 2011) and is described as a change process relevant to the treatment of disordered eating (Sandoz et al., 2013). Indeed, the development of the Body Image-Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (BI-AAQ) as a measure of the construct of body image flexibility (Sandoz et al., 2013) was largely guided by the philosophical underpinnings of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999).

Central to ACT is the idea that the content or valence of one's internal experience (e.g., negative thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, perceptions) is not most problematic. Instead it is the rigid and inflexible desire to want to avoid or control these painful experiences (as opposed to willingly accepting them from an open stance of mindful compassionate awareness) that drives mental distress and maladaptive behavioral responses (Hayes et al., 1999). Moreover, ACT emphasizes catalyzing engagement in meaningful or valued action as the antidote to becoming absorbed in unhelpful mental processes (e.g., self-critical worry and rumination, attempts at thought suppression; Hayes et al., 1999).

In the context of body image, when this flexible mindset is activated, unfavorable body-evaluative content is not perceived as true in an absolute sense and is understood as time-limited in nature (Sandoz et al., 2013). Therefore, it follows that having undesirable thoughts and feelings about aspects of the body do not necessarily negatively impact one's overall outlook or the motivation to pursue meaningful goals in other life domains (Sandoz et al., 2013). In line with this theoretical framework, behaviors intentionally taken to respect, take care of, and protect the body in the face of body image-related threats and distress would reflect instances of valued action, which are core to both the foundations of body appreciation and body image flexibility.

Research has uncovered strong positive relationships between body image flexibility and self-compassion (Ferreira, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2011; Schoenefeld & Webb, 2013) and intuitive eating (Schoenefeld & Webb, 2013). Inverse associations were observed between body image flexibility and psychological distress and poor body image (Ferreira et al., 2011; Sandoz et al., 2013) along with disordered eating (Sandoz et al., 2013). Body image flexibility was shown to partially account for the relationship between disordered eating cognitions and reports of eating pathology (Wendell, Masuda, & Le, 2012) and between body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Sandoz et al., 2013) in college student samples. Female participants reporting higher levels of body image flexibility endorsed lower EAT-26 scores at low (versus average and high) BMI levels (Hill, Masuda, & Latzman, 2013).

Both body appreciation (Tylka, 2013) and body image flexibility (Sandoz et al., 2013) tend to be higher in men. With respect to BMI, reports of body appreciation are typically lower at higher body weights (e.g., Iannantuono & Tylka, 2012; Kroon Van Diest & Tylka, 2010; Swami, Campana, & Coles, 2012) even among Black college

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