



Gratitude buffers the adverse effect of viewing the thin ideal on body dissatisfaction



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ABSTRACT

Gratitude has robust associations with multiple aspects of well-being. However, little research has explored whether the psychological benefits of gratitude extend to body image. We used a repeated measures experimental design to test whether a brief period of grateful reflection would buffer the adverse effect of exposure to thin-ideal media. Female undergraduates ($N = 67$) completed three sessions one week apart. The conditions were specifically designed to isolate (a) the effects of viewing thin models on body dissatisfaction and (b) the moderating effect of grateful contemplation. Results showed that body dissatisfaction scores were lower for women who engaged in a brief period of grateful contemplation before viewing photographs of thin models than for women who reflected upon life hassles before viewing the same photographs. The magnitude of this decrease depended on BMI. Gratitude offers an innovative direction for future research directed toward helping women to accept their bodies.

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Introduction

Two thousand years ago, the Roman statesman Cicero wrote that “gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others” (Pro Plancio). A growing body of contemporary research findings supports this ancient adage. Indeed, gratitude has been described as “the quintessential positive psychology trait” (Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland, 2010; p. 31) as it is linked with mental health and life satisfaction more than almost any other personality trait. Grateful people tend to show a wide variety of adaptive qualities that contribute to emotional stability and general well-being (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). They also experience more satisfying, meaningful relationships (Algoe, Gabel, & Meisel, 2010) and lower rates of many psychological disorders (Kendler, Liu, Gardner, McCullough, Larson, & Prescott, 2003). Given the robust associations between gratitude and well-being, it is likely that gratitude also plays a role in the way women feel about their bodies. However, this idea has not yet been explored. Hence, this study experimentally tested whether a brief gratitude intervention would buffer women against the adverse effects of exposure to thin ideal media images.

Gratitude has been conceptualized as both a disposition and an emotion. At the dispositional level, gratitude has been defined as a habitual orientation toward noticing and appreciating the positive in the world (Wood et al., 2010). People who are high in dispositional gratitude experience gratitude more easily and more frequently than those lower in dispositional gratitude. At the emotional level, gratitude has traditionally been defined by researchers as the feeling that is elicited when one is the beneficiary of a kind act of another (Emmons, 2004). However, some researchers have argued that this definition is too narrow, as it focuses only on the transfer of a benefit from one person to another and does not consider feelings of gratitude that can arise from other experiences, events, or even relationships that do not involve a transfer of benefits. Furthermore, most laypeople think of gratitude in broader terms than the feeling associated with receiving a gift or kind act. Thus, some researchers have made a distinction between *benefit-triggered gratitude*, which refers to the traditional definition involving a benefactor and beneficiary, and *generalized gratitude*, which refers more broadly to “the emotion or state resulting from an awareness and appreciation of that which is valuable and meaningful to oneself” (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009, p. 1194). According to this definition, gratitude can arise from reflection upon multiple aspects of one’s internal and external world including personal abilities or achievements, religious faith, relationships, experiences, objects, and nature. The present study conceptualized gratitude in this latter way.

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Substantial evidence shows that gratitude—both at the dispositional and emotional level—is associated with multiple aspects of well-being. People who experience high levels of gratitude tend to also experience high levels of subjective well-being, which is usually defined as high levels of positive affect, low levels of negative affect, and high life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009). It appears to protect against a variety of psychological disorders including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006; Kendler et al., 2003; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Gratitude is related to deeper, more satisfying, and more committed romantic relationships (Algoe et al., 2010). There are even physical health benefits associated with gratitude; grateful people experience improved sleep (Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, & Atkins, 2009), diminished stress over time (Wood et al., 2008), and participants randomly assigned to a gratitude diary condition reported fewer illness symptoms and more hours of exercise (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Given the benefits that accompany gratitude, researchers have attempted to increase gratitude through a variety of interventions. The most common procedure involves creating lists of things for which one is grateful. Participants usually keep the list on a daily basis for one to two weeks, although other timeframes have been used. In their classic study, Emmons and McCullough (2003) found that participants randomly assigned to keep weekly gratitude lists reported increases in gratitude, overall positive affect, and life satisfaction relative to participants assigned to keep lists of either hassles or neutral life events. Other studies have used grateful contemplation, in which participants are instructed to reflect upon, or write about, aspects of their lives for which they are thankful, usually for a period of five minutes. This technique has been shown to produce significant increases in positive affect, satisfaction, and self-esteem relative to a control condition (such as writing about memorable events or the layout of one's living room; Rash, Matsuba, & Prkachin, 2011; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). Finally, a third technique involves writing and delivering (in person) a letter to someone who had done something kind for the participant, but had never been thanked. This behavioral expression of gratitude has been shown to increase happiness and decrease depression relative to a control condition involving writing about early memories (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

To our knowledge, only two studies have explored the relationship between gratitude and eating disorders or body image. Using data from the population-based Virginia Twin Registry, Kendler et al. (2003) created a religiously oriented “thankfulness” composite. Thankfulness was related to a significantly lower risk of bulimia nervosa. However, the 4-item thankfulness scale was not directly comparable to other, more widely used measures of gratitude as it was distinctly religious. The other study tested whether keeping a daily gratitude diary would reduce body dissatisfaction among volunteers interested in Internet-administered self-help techniques for body dissatisfaction (Geraghty et al., 2010). Volunteers were randomized to a waitlist control, a standard cognitive behavioral intervention, or a gratitude intervention. Both of the treatment groups produced significant reductions in body dissatisfaction relative to the waitlist and there were no significant differences between the two interventions.

Although research has shown that a gratitude intervention can decrease body dissatisfaction as effectively as a cognitive restructuring program, the role of gratitude as a buffer against media images of thinness has not yet been explored. It is widely believed that societal standards of female attractiveness that emphasize extreme thinness have contributed to the body dissatisfaction that is common among Western women. This assertion is supported by correlational studies that report a positive association between body dissatisfaction and consumption of media featuring the thin

ideal (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Experimental data have also shown that exposure to advertisements or photographs of thin models produces measurable increases in body dissatisfaction (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Dozens of studies have demonstrated this effect, and the media exposure paradigm is common in body image research. It is important to explore factors that might shield women from the effect of thin-ideal media exposure because media images are omnipresent and body dissatisfaction is a common cause of distress in women that can lead to more serious psychopathology such as eating disorders and depression (Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Stice, Ng, & Shaw, 2010).

It is likely that gratitude has a buffering influence against the effects of media exposure. First, there is considerable evidence that gratitude enhances multiple facets of psychological well-being and protects against psychological distress (Wood et al., 2010). These wide-ranging positive effects are likely to have a generalized positive impact on women's frame of mind, perhaps empowering them to resist the effects of viewing thin models. Second, there is evidence that a gratitude intervention can specifically reduce body dissatisfaction (Geraghty et al., 2010). If gratitude can decrease women's negative feelings about their bodies, it is likely that it can also weaken the deleterious effects of exposure to thin-ideal media. Thus, the purpose of this study was to test these ideas. Specifically, consistent with previous research (Groesz et al., 2002), we hypothesized that exposure to photographs of models exemplifying the thin ideal would produce increases in body dissatisfaction relative to viewing photographs of neutral objects. We further hypothesized that a short period of gratitude contemplation would mitigate the negative effects of viewing images of the thin ideal.

Method

Participants

A sample of 72 female students was recruited from undergraduate psychology courses¹ Women were offered extra course credit in exchange for participation. Average age was 19.96 years ($SD=0.90$), and average BMI was 22.42 ($SD=3.13$) which is within the normal range. Most of the sample was White (90%) with 5% African-American and 5% Asian. Most of the sample reported middle class status (58.8%), with 35.3% upper middle class, and 5.9% working class.

Procedure

We used a repeated measures design because it is more powerful than a between subjects approach. Our preliminary pilot work suggested that effect sizes would be small, so we intentionally chose the design that would be most likely to detect a true effect. We used three experimental conditions that were designed to isolate (a) the effects of viewing thin models on body dissatisfaction and (b) the moderating effect of grateful contemplation. Specifically, comparisons between Condition 1 and Condition 2 were intended to reveal the effect of thin-ideal exposure, and comparisons between Condition 2 and Condition 3 were intended to reveal the effect of grateful reflection.

¹ The original sample consisted of 42 women randomly assigned to three possible orders of administration. Based on reviewer recommendations to include all possible counterbalanced orders, we recruited an additional 30 participants and randomly assigned them to the remaining three orders. It is important to note that our results were substantively unchanged from the first sample to the second, and all findings reported in this paper were statistically significant for the original sample as well as the combined sample.

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