



Review article

A systematic review of the roles of body image flexibility as correlate, moderator, mediator, and in intervention science (2011–2018)



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ABSTRACT

The emergence of body image flexibility into the positive body image nomenclature has innovatively expanded the conceptualization of how individuals may adaptively respond to body image threats. Given the notable growth of interest in researching this construct over nearly the past decade, the present analysis provides a systematic and critical review of evidence examining the roles of body image flexibility as correlate, mediator, moderator, and in intervention research. Results indicated that body image flexibility tended to demonstrate a pattern of relationships with correlates in directions predicted by its conceptualization and showed promise in functioning as both effect modifier and as an explanatory variable in the associations evaluated. Multiple studies demonstrated susceptibility to change following intervention. Although the current state of the literature is bound by notable limitations, the results of this review point to pertinent future steps in advancing the theory and application of body image flexibility scholarship.

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1. Introduction

The introduction of body image flexibility (Sandoz, Wilson, Merwin, & Kellum, 2013) into the lexicon of positive body image constructs has ushered in a modern era in the conceptual landscape constituting how individuals may adaptively respond to body image challenges or threats (Webb, Butler-Ajibade, & Robinson, 2014; Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015). Initially, scholars drawing upon established cognitive-behavioral process models of body image (Cash et al., 2002; Rosen, Srebnik, Saltzberg, & Wendt, 1991) and transactional emotion regulation frameworks (e.g., Gross, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) emphasized clarifying the correlates and impact of *maladaptive avoidance-based strategies* for coping with body image stressors (Rosen et al., 1991). More recently, Cash et al. aligned with the contemporary zeitgeist to study aspects of positive body image alongside its less adaptive counterparts by conceptualizing three distinct styles of coping with body image threats or stressors (Cash, Santos, & Williams, 2005). These dimensions included avoidance, appearance fixing, and positive rational acceptance (Cash et al., 2005).

Positive rational acceptance in particular is characterized as an adaptive response when exposed to body image challenges (e.g., being weight-teased, making upward body comparisons with a peer or celebrity, etc.) and involves engaging in forms of positive self-talk (e.g., reminding oneself of their good qualities and of the time-limited nature of experiencing negative feelings in the aftermath of the threat, minimizing the importance of the stressor, encouraging more realistic appraisals, etc.; Cash et al., 2005). Indeed, evidence has shown this body image-specific affect regulation style to be positively related to more general adaptive emotion regulation strategies, body image quality of life, subjective well-being, social support appraisals, and self-esteem, and to be inversely linked to less adaptive emotion regulation strategies, forms of disordered eating, self-objectification, negative body image, and body mass index (BMI; albeit weakly) particularly among women and adolescent girls (Cash et al., 2005; Choma, Shove, Busseri, Sadava, & Hosker-Field, 2009; Hughes & Gullone, 2011). Positive rational acceptance coping was also shown to buffer the effects of body image concerns on reported depressive symptoms in a large community sample of adolescents (Hughes & Gullone, 2011) and to be less utilized among women with eating disorders relative to controls (Hrabosky et al., 2009).

Body image flexibility uniquely advances this earlier conceptualization while continuing to underscore the importance of developing a taxonomy of and evidence base supporting *adaptive* body image coping styles grounded in an overarching affect regulation framework (Sandoz et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2014, 2015). Indeed, body image flexibility is born out of the intersection of Buddhist philosophical construals of the self and the principles of Western contextual behaviorism for promoting human flourishing (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006; Sandoz et al., 2013). What makes body image flexibility distinct from more established and perhaps more straightforward conceptualizations of positive body image (e.g., body appreciation; Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005) including coping with body image threats (e.g., positive rational acceptance coping; Cash et al., 2005) is how

it involves transforming the way in which individuals *relate to* aversive internal experiences of the body rather than necessarily endorsing positive feelings or thoughts about the body or attempting to reappraise one's reaction in order to feel better and behave adaptively (Sandoz et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2014, 2015).

More specifically, *body image flexibility* is described as an individual's ability to willingly embrace the present-moment experience (e.g., thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, etc.) of their body in a non-judgmental fashion. Further, it also encompasses the capacity to choose the pursuit of living in a manner consistent with personal values even in the face of experiencing these aforementioned unwanted private events regarding the body and/or weight stimulated by body image threats (Sandoz et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2014). Body image flexibility is a domain-specific outgrowth of the broader construct of psychological flexibility, which Hayes et al. (2006) define as "the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends" (p. 7). Psychological flexibility is purported to be the central change mechanism in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). ACT is a third-wave behavioral therapy approach, which conceptualizes psychological distress as the result of low levels of psychological flexibility. To increase psychological flexibility, ACT utilizes interventions such as mindfulness and traditional behavioral techniques to expand the individual's behavioral repertoire and to alter how they interact with their distressing thoughts and feelings (Hayes et al., 2006).

The willing acceptance of potentially distressing thoughts and feelings seen in both psychological and body image flexibility stands in contrast to experiential avoidance, which is defined as avoiding or attempting to change distressing internal events, even if this comes at the cost of valued behaviors (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Individuals may avoid or attempt to cope with distressing private events due to immediate, positive results of these strategies (e.g., temporary relief; Cash et al., 2005; Hayes et al., 2004; Rosen et al., 1991). This relief can serve as initial reinforcement for the avoidance behavior. Unfortunately, over time, attempts at suppression can lead to an increased intensity of the distressing feelings and, subsequently, increased frequency of attempts to relieve this distress (Cash et al., 2005; Gross, 2002). An increase in flexibility includes engaging distressing private events to interrupt the perpetuation of this process and, subsequently, decrease distress and help the individual to lead a fuller life (Hayes et al., 2006; Sandoz et al., 2013).

1.1. Specific aims of the current review

Over nearly a decade, body image flexibility scholarship has shown considerable growth. Given this critical juncture, first we deemed it worthwhile to provide a comprehensive and critical evaluation of the literature demonstrating the relationships between body image flexibility and select participant sample characteristics (i.e., body size, gender, eating disorder status) along with other aspects of body image, eating, self-regulation, psychological distress, and well-being. Addressing this aim allows us to understand whether the patterns of relationships with these correlates are in

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