Brief research report

Body appreciation in adult women: Relationships with age and body satisfaction

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 19 April 2013
Received in revised form 15 July 2013
Accepted 15 July 2013

Keywords:
Positive body image
Body appreciation
Adult women
Middle-aged women
Body dissatisfaction

A B S T R A C T

The major aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of age on positive body image (operationalized as body appreciation) across the female lifespan. A secondary aim was to examine the effect of age on the relationship between positive body image and body satisfaction. Participants were 158 women aged between 18 and 75 years who completed questionnaire measures of body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction. A significant positive linear relationship was found between age and body appreciation; that is, older women had higher levels of body appreciation than their younger counterparts. Although body appreciation was positively correlated with body dissatisfaction–satisfaction across all age groups, the association was weaker for older women. The results contribute to a richer picture of women’s body image across the lifespan, as well as confirming positive body image as something beyond the mere absence of body dissatisfaction.

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Introduction

Body image has been conceptualized as a complex and multi-faceted construct encompassing many aspects of how people experience their own embodiment, especially their physical appearance (Cash, 2012). Despite this broad remit, both theorizing and research in body image have been largely pathology driven (Smolak & Cash, 2011), with a particular focus on body dissatisfaction. Recently, however, it has been argued that such a negative focus has limited our holistic understanding of body image, as well as treatment and prevention options (Tylka, 2011). Correspondingly, there have been accompanying calls for the field to re-focus on studying positive body image (Menzel & Levine, 2011; Tylka, 2011).

Broadly defined, positive body image refers to the love, respect, acceptance, and appreciation held for one’s body (Tylka, 2011). Having positive body image allows individuals to accept all aspects of their body, even those which do not conform to media-portrayed societal ideals, and to appreciate the functions their body performs for them. Importantly, positive body image is conceptualized as something more than just the equivalent of low negative body image, or the mere absence of body dissatisfaction. Indeed, a number of qualitative studies have identified characteristics of positive body image that go considerably beyond body satisfaction such as optimism, a broad notion of beauty, and a functional view of the body (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Williams, Cash, & Santos, 2004; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010).

Until recently, however, research examining positive body image has been hampered by the absence of any reliable and valid measurement tool. In response, Avalos, Tylka, and Wood-Barcalow (2005) developed the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) and showed it to have good psychometric properties. The scale has now been used in a number of empirical studies to investigate positive body image. In particular, a small but growing body of research has shown the BAS to be associated with a range of positive outcomes, including intuitive eating (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Iannantuono & Tylka, 2012), self-esteem (Avalos et al., 2005; Swami, Airs, Chouhan, Leon, & Towell, 2009), and better sexual functioning (Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012).

One important limitation of this small body of research is that samples have largely been comprised of female undergraduate students. Thus they have been restricted in terms of education, socio-economic status, and age. Little is known about body appreciation among middle-aged women or how this construct might differ across age. In one community sample of ethnically diverse young adult British women (M age = 26.1 years), Swami, Hadji-Michael, and Furnham (2008) found a small negative correlation between BAS and age (r = −.22). Similarly, Augustus-Horvath and Tylka (2011) reported a small negative correlation with age (r = −.08) in a sample of US women (M age = 33.1 years). However, these samples were recruited from a diverse array of sources and were weighted towards younger participants.

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1740-1445/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2013.07.003

http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/17401445
Thus, the first aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between age and body appreciation across a wide age range in a sample recruited from a single catchment source. Here, we predicted a positive relationship between age and body appreciation. That is, as women grow older, we predicted that their body appreciation would increase, not decrease. This prediction was based on the reasoning that with increasing age women shift their focus to and become more appreciative of their health and functionality rather than their physical appearance (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). They also use cognitive strategies such as reappraisal to accept their body's imperfections (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003) and are less likely to consider their physical appearance as central to their overall self-worth (Tiggemann & Lacey, 2009; Tiggemann & Stevens, 1999). These attitudinal and accompanying behavioral changes are all hallmarks of body appreciation, and hence lead logically to the prediction of increasing body appreciation with age.

The secondary aim of the present study was to examine the effect of age on the relationship between positive body image (body appreciation) and the most commonly assessed body image construct, body dissatisfaction–satisfaction (Cash, 2012). Although body dissatisfaction and body appreciation have been shown to be negatively related in samples of college (Avalos et al., 2005) and community women (Swami, Stieger, Harris, Nader, Pietschnig, Voracek & Tovée, 2012), as indicated earlier, body appreciation and body dissatisfaction are not simply polar opposites. Put differently, body appreciation is something over and above simply body satisfaction. In support, Swami and Tovée (2009) found that body appreciation was significantly higher among street dancers than non-dancers, despite there being no difference in body dissatisfaction.

More generally, a number of reviews (e.g., Grogan, 2008; Tiggemann, 2004; Tiggemann & Slivec, 2012) have concluded that, despite the physical changes associated with ageing, body (dis)satisfaction remains remarkably stable across the entire female lifespan. This is in marked contrast to our prediction for body appreciation (that it will increase with age), and thus provides another opportunity for distinguishing between the two constructs. We predict here that body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction will be positively correlated across the entire age range. However, we also expect that this relationship will be weaker for older women than younger women. We reason that older women may experience body appreciation even if they are not totally satisfied with their body, in a way unlikely to be the case for younger women.

In sum, the major aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between age and body appreciation across a wide age range. Specifically, it was predicted that body appreciation would increase as women age. The second aim was to investigate the effect of age on the relationship between body appreciation and body satisfaction. It was predicted that body appreciation will be positively correlated with body dissatisfaction–satisfaction, but that this relationship will be moderated by age, such that the relationship will be weaker in older than younger women.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 158 women between the ages of 18 and 75 years ($M = 39.93$, $SD = 13.27$) recruited from a major clothing store and adjoining hair salon located in a town in southern South Australia. The population of the town is overwhelmingly Caucasian/White. The particular store carries a full range of clothing sizes, including plus sizes. On average, participants reported shopping for clothes ‘once a month’. Mean body mass index (BMI) was 26.54 ($SD = 4.46$), and mean clothing size was 13.1 ($SD = 3.1$) [Australian size 14 = UK size 14 = US size 10].

**Measures**

**Background information:** Participants were asked their age, clothing size, height, weight, and how frequently they shopped for clothes. Participants also completed a measure of clothing choices (Tiggemann & Lacey, 2009) [not analyzed].

**Body appreciation:** Body appreciation was assessed by the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) developed by Avalos et al. (2005). This 13-item scale contains items addressing the appreciation, acceptance, respect, and attention given to one’s body (e.g., “I respect my body”, “Despite my flaws, I accept my body for what it is”). Responses are on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always) and averaged, with higher scores reflecting greater body appreciation. Avalos et al. (2005) reported unidimensionality of the scale, as well as good construct validity and internal reliability ($\alpha = 91.91$–94) in samples of US college women. In the present Australian sample, internal reliability was similarly high ($\alpha = 0.90$).

**Body satisfaction:** Body dissatisfaction–satisfaction was measured by the Body Areas Satisfaction Subscale of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990). Participants indicate their degree of dissatisfaction or satisfaction with nine body areas (e.g., mid torso, face, weight) using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied). Items are averaged to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction (and lower dissatisfaction). Cash (2000) reported good reliability and validity, and internal consistency ranging from 0.70 to 0.89. In the present sample, internal reliability fell within this range ($\alpha = 0.77$).

**Procedure**

Following approval by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee, and with the permission of the shop owners, women shoppers in the clothing store and adjoining hairdressers were invited to participate in a study entitled ‘You and your clothing choices’ via a poster and an information letter on the store counter. Interested participants completed the questionnaire either in the store or at home in their own time. Completed questionnaires were deposited anonymously into a secure box at the store or returned by post in a sealed reply-paid envelope.

**Results**

**Age Effects on Body Appreciation and Body Satisfaction**

Table 1 provides the correlations between age and body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction. In particular, it can be seen that there was a significant positive correlation between age and body appreciation. In support of our prediction, increasing age was associated with increasing levels of body appreciation. In contrast, there was no significant correlation between age and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction.

To address the possibility of non-linear age effects, the women were divided into three (approximately tertile) groups on the basis of age according to Webster and Tiggemann (2003) categorization: young adulthood (18–34 years; $n = 56$), middle adulthood (35–49 years; $n = 50$), older adulthood (51–75 years; $n = 52$). A one-way ANOVA confirmed a significant difference only on body appreciation between the three age groups, $F(2, 155) = 3.59, p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .044$. Subsequent post hoc (Tukey) testing showed that the
Table 1
Correlations between age and body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction, and age group means (standard deviations).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlation with age</th>
<th>Stage of Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Younger (n = 56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body appreciation</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body dissatisfaction–satisfaction</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Different subscripts denote significantly different subgroups. *p < .05.

oldest age group had significantly higher body appreciation than both groups of younger women.

**Effect of Age on Relationship Between Body Appreciation and Body Satisfaction**

Table 2 provides the correlations between body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction. For the whole sample, as predicted, body appreciation was significantly positively correlated with body dissatisfaction–satisfaction.

To test whether age moderated the relationship, a hierarchical regression was conducted. Age and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction (centred) were entered in Step 1 of the regression to control for main effects, followed by the product term in Step 2. A significant interaction is indicated by a significant \( R^2 \) change in Step 2. Here it was found that the product term did add significant variance to the prediction of body appreciation, \( R^2 \) change = .031, \( F_{change}(1, 154) = 9.28, p < .01 \); that is, age did moderate the relationship between body dissatisfaction–satisfaction and body appreciation. The form of this moderation is indicated in Table 2. It can be seen that, as predicted, the correlation decreased in size across the increasing age groups. It should nevertheless be noted that the relationship remained moderately strong in all three age groups.

**Discussion**

The major results of the present study are clear. First, body appreciation was positively associated with age. Second, body appreciation was positively related to body dissatisfaction–satisfaction across the entire age range, but the strength of the relationship became weaker with increasing age. These results add to the small but growing literature on the strength of the relationship became weaker with increasing age. These results add to the small but growing literature on the relationship between body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction. The second aim of the study was to investigate the effect of age on the relationship between body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction. Just as has been demonstrated in college-aged samples (Swami et al., 2008), this likely explains the difference in result and suggests that the observed relationship may be largely carried by the older women. Future research will require much larger samples in order to specify the trajectory of body appreciation over the female lifespan with more precision, as well as to investigate the influence of specific biological (e.g., menopause) or social (e.g., marriage) milestones.

Although the positive linear relationship between age and body appreciation was significant with a small to moderate effect size, it should be noted that when age categories were compared, only the oldest group of women, those aged over 50 years, had greater body appreciation than both groups of younger women. Perhaps around age 50 (the typical time of menopause) marks a turning point in women’s lives, a point where women can (or perhaps reluctantly are forced to) come to terms with their body’s increasing departure from the societally-defined ideal (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001) and learn to appreciate their body as it is. As the present sample had a relatively greater proportion of women over 50 years than the previous samples (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Swami et al., 2008), this likely explains the difference in result and suggests that the observed relationship may be largely carried by the older women. Future research will require much larger samples in order to specify the trajectory of body appreciation over the female lifespan with more precision, as well as to investigate the influence of specific biological (e.g., menopause) or social (e.g., marriage) milestones.

The second aim of the study was to investigate the effect of age on the relationship between body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction. Just as has been demonstrated in college-aged samples (Avalos et al., 2005), body appreciation was positively correlated with body dissatisfaction–satisfaction in both middle- and older-adult women, and thus we can conclude that body satisfaction is a moderately strong predictor of body appreciation across a wide age range.

However, this moderately strong relationship should not be taken as confirmation that body appreciation is more-or-less the same as body satisfaction. Two different findings from the present study argue against this interpretation. First, the different trajectories with age (body appreciation increased, body dissatisfaction–satisfaction remained stable) provide a convincing demonstration that the two constructs are not interchangeable. Second, the strength of the relationship between body appreciation and body dissatisfaction–satisfaction weakened with age, suggesting that it becomes increasingly possible for women to simultaneously experience some level of body dissatisfaction but also to appreciate and respect their body in other ways. One potential practical implication is that body image interventions might usefully specifically target increasing positive body image (rather than attempting to decrease body dissatisfaction).

Like all studies, the present study carries a number of limitations. The sample came from one clothing shop and hairdresser in one town and so women may have had particular characteristics (e.g., investment in appearance), such that results may not generalize to more ethnically diverse groups in other geographic locations. However, recruiting participants from a single source carries the
methodological advantage that age is less likely to be confounded with other (unmeasured) variables than when recruiting participants from a variety of disparate sources. In addition, the study was cross-sectional in design and thus it is theoretically possible that observed age differences are due to cohort effects, rather than developmental changes accompanying ageing. The overall pattern of results obtained makes this seem unlikely, but longitudinal studies which trace positive body image over a considerable period of time are required to definitively rule out this possibility.

Despite its limitations, the present study has made a contribution to the study of body image. As the first demonstration of a positive relationship between age and body appreciation, it has extended existing knowledge in two domains: middle-aged and older women's body experience, and positive body image. In addition, the results have theoretical implications for the conceptualization of positive body image as something beyond simply the absence of body dissatisfaction. Overall, the results contribute to a more complex and rich understanding of adult women's body experience.

References