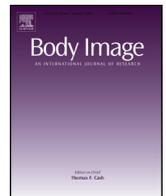




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# Considerations of positive body image across various social identities and special populations

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### ABSTRACT

Although the study of body image has been dominated by a focus on negative aspects, recent research interest has turned towards positive body image. The purpose of the present paper is to provide an integrative review of empirical research on the positive body image of individuals across a range of social identities beyond the typical college student. In particular, the review focuses on research exploring age, culture, gender, and special populations. Overall, the review finds that positive body image seems to confer benefit and operate similarly across a range of populations, although it may be expressed uniquely in different contexts. These results contribute to a more complete account of positive body image, but also raise a number of important additional questions and challenges for future research.

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### Introduction

Although body image has long been acknowledged as a complex and multifaceted construct encompassing many aspects of how people experience their bodies (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002), thus far both theorizing and research have been largely pathology driven (Smolak & Cash, 2011), with a particular focus on body dissatisfaction. However, contemporary research attention has finally turned toward positive, as opposed to negative, body image. Broadly defined, positive body image refers to love and acceptance of one's body (including aspects inconsistent with societally-prescribed ideals) and appreciation of its uniqueness and the functions it performs (see Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b, this issue). In addition, Tylka (2011, 2012) has presented a more detailed conceptualization of the core features of positive body image, as well as factors that promote (e.g., unconditional acceptance from important others), maintain (e.g., filtering negative body-related information), and emerge (e.g., inner positivity) from it.

Until recently, however, work in this field was hampered by the lack of any psychometrically valid measurement tool to assess positive body image. In response, Avalos, Tylka, and Wood-Barcalow (2005) developed the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) to measure favourable opinions, acceptance of, and respect toward the body.

Although the BAS does not incorporate all elements of positive body image, it does focus on some core features, and has demonstrated reliability and validity (see Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015, this issue). Importantly, it has enabled the considerable expansion of research into positive body image. In particular, a small but growing number of studies have shown body appreciation to be uniquely associated with a range of positive outcomes, e.g., optimism and self-esteem, over and above negative body image (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2014b; Avalos et al., 2005). Thus, the present paper focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on studies that have used the BAS as their measure of positive body image.

Although the study of positive body image, like the study of negative body image (Tiggemann, 2004), originated in samples of college women and adolescent girls, it has diversified much more quickly. Thus, despite its recency and smaller absolute quantity, the research on positive body image has been conducted with a wide range of individuals of varying characteristics. This pattern might reflect the breadth and salience of the construct itself, and/or researchers' increased awareness of the inherent limitations (e.g., gender, age, and educational level) of investigating only the experience of college women. The present integrative review aims to bring together in one place existing research that has addressed positive body image in samples other than college women. In particular, it focuses on research exploring age, culture, gender, and special populations. For each social identity, the literature review will be followed by a more speculative consideration of which of the core and enabling features identified by Tylka (2011, 2012) might be most salient, as well as how the expression of positive body

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image might be impacted by that identity; in other words, what positive body image might “look like” for different groups. Hopefully, this can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of both the experience of different individuals, and of the construct itself. Finally, limitations, challenges, and future research directions will be identified.

### Positive Body Image and Age

Although, as indicated above, the earliest studies of positive body image using the BAS were of college student samples, the correlates of positive body image have now been measured in much more diverse samples of community women. Such samples contain much more variability in demographic variables such as socioeconomic status, educational level, and importantly, age. Collectively, the studies have now investigated positive body image in adult women ranging in age from 18 to 90 years. In the main, these studies have shown similar relationships to positive outcomes as have been shown in college samples (e.g., [Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012](#); [Swami, Tran, Stieger, & Voracek, 2014](#)). One step further, [Augustus-Horvath and Tylka \(2011\)](#) explicitly compared the acceptance model of intuitive eating in three different age cohorts of women: emerging adulthood (18–25 years), early adulthood (26–39 years), and middle adulthood (40–65 years). The acceptance model postulates that women who experience high levels of perceived support and body acceptance by others will be able to resist adopting an observer’s perspective of their bodies (i.e., they will experience lower levels of self-objectification), all of which will predict greater appreciation of their own bodies (positive body image). Positive body image will, in turn, be associated with healthier and more internally responsive eating patterns (intuitive eating). Their study found that the acceptance model explained the data well for all three age cohorts, confirming that these postulated predictors and consequences of positive body image are not just limited to young college women.

In contrast to the aforementioned study that found that body appreciation decreased slightly with age group ([Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011](#)), we predicted that body appreciation will increase, not decrease, as women grow older ([Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013](#)). We based this prediction on the reasoning that with increasing age, women tend to shift their focus to and become more appreciative of their health and functionality, are less likely to consider their physical appearance as central to their self-worth ([Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001](#)), and use cognitive strategies such as reappraisal to accept body imperfections ([Webster & Tiggemann, 2003](#)). The results bore out our prediction. In our sample of Australian women aged 18–75 years, there was a positive relationship between age and body appreciation; that is, older women had higher levels of body appreciation than their younger counterparts ([Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013](#)). This positive relation between age and body appreciation has since been replicated in a large sample of both U.S. residents and non-U.S. residents ([Swami, Tran, et al., 2014](#)). Interestingly, in our sample, although body appreciation increased across age, body dissatisfaction remained the same (as is usually found – see [Tiggemann, 2004](#), for a review). This difference in trajectory with age confirms body appreciation as something unique beyond the mere absence of body dissatisfaction. In addition, we found that the negative relationship between body appreciation and body dissatisfaction was weaker for older women. This finding suggests that with age it may become increasingly possible for women to simultaneously experience some level of body dissatisfaction but also to appreciate and respect their body in other ways.

Taken together, the above evidence suggests that older women can love and accept their bodies more readily than younger women. At first glance this finding may seem somewhat surprising, given

the undesirable (according to Western cultural standards) changes in appearance (e.g., increased weight, wrinkles, sagging skin) that inevitably accompany natural ageing. For older women, then, the most salient components of positive body image likely are appreciation of the functionality of their body over its appearance, and acceptance of their ageing body’s natural responses. In addition, experiences such as establishing a career, giving birth to a child, and engaging in satisfying relationships, likely contribute to the ability to define oneself by inner authentic qualities. Thus it might be expected that positive body image would be expressed among older women as gratitude for their health and body functionality, a lack of fear of ageing (at least of its appearance-related aspects), and by inner positivity reflected in outer presentation, what [Tylka \(2011\)](#) refers to as “a special glow.” Future research could investigate whether these attributes translate into more self-care behaviours such as engaging in gentle (e.g., mindful, enjoyable) exercise or attending for medical checks, and a lack of endorsement of cosmetic procedures or surgery in response to ageing-related physical changes. Future research could also usefully investigate the influence of specific biological (e.g., pregnancy, menopause) and social milestones (e.g., marriage) on positive body image in adult women.

At the other end of the age spectrum, a few studies have investigated positive body image among adolescents. Major themes emerged from two qualitative studies of 14-year-old Swedish adolescents with positive body image: an acceptance of one’s imperfections, a functional view of the body, lack of appearance conversations in the family, strong criticism of appearance ideals, and a wider perception of beauty ([Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010](#); [Holmqvist & Frisé, 2012](#)). In particular, [Holmqvist and Frisé \(2012\)](#) identified a tendency and ability to process negative appearance-related information in a body protective manner as an important characteristic of positive body image in this age group. In the single quantitative study (using the BAS), [Andrew, Tiggemann, and Clark \(2014a\)](#) showed that the acceptance model of intuitive eating yielded a good fit to the data in a sample of Australian adolescent girls. That is, positive body image was associated with both acceptance of the body by family and friends (an enabling feature) and intuitive eating (an outcome). The study also identified social comparison as a strong (negative) predictor of positive body image. This finding makes sense as girls whose bodies are accepted and appreciated by others and by themselves should have little need to make peer or media comparisons on the basis of appearance, otherwise very common among adolescents ([Jones, 2001](#)). Such social comparisons have been shown to be reliably associated with negative body image consequences (for a meta-analytical review, see [Myers & Crowther, 2009](#)).

In adolescent and young adult women, positive body image would likely be expressed most obviously in healthy eating patterns, whereby women eat freely and intuitively, following internal hunger and satiety cues, rather than in response to external situational or emotional cues. Food is something to be enjoyed, not feared as a source of weight gain. Such an intuitive eating style is in marked contrast to “normal eating” for many girls and women, which is characterized by dieting and a focus on weight control ([Polivy & Herman, 1987](#)). In addition, adolescent girls with positive body image are more likely to engage in pleasurable physical activities, including sports, which many girls otherwise cease participating in around ages 11–14, often for appearance-based reasons ([Slater & Tiggemann, 2010, 2011](#)). It has also been suggested that they might be less likely to engage in smoking, alcohol, or other drug use ([Andrew et al., 2014b](#)).

For adolescent girls, the most important process involved in promoting and maintaining positive body image likely lies in what [Tylka \(2011, 2012\)](#) and [Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath \(2010\)](#) refer to as “protective filtering,” whereby information about the body is interpreted in a self-protective

manner, filtering out negative information potentially harmful to body image. Thus, the ubiquitous and unrealistic thin-idealized images presented in the media, exposure to which has reliably been associated with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (for a review, see [Levine & Murnen, 2009](#)), need to be avoided, resisted, or challenged. This process is equally the case for appearance-related messages from family, friends, or other peers (e.g., fat talk). Relatedly, positive body image will be reflected in their friendship groups, as individuals with positive body image tend to choose to surround themselves with others who also have positive body image ([Tylka, 2012](#)). More generally, similarities in body image concerns and dieting have been reported within friendship cliques ([Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999](#)).

In some ways, protective filtering (and positive body image) seem like a conscious choice. In [Wood-Barcalow et al.'s \(2010\)](#) mixed-methods study, 80% of their college respondents reported that they had experienced negative body image during adolescence which they had subsequently overcome. They reported that this was achieved through a cognitive shift in their thinking, including embracing an inclusive definition of beauty, in addition to analysing, resisting, and challenging the internalization of media images. Thus, there may be a complex intertwining of positive and negative body image. It seems plausible that a negative body image typically emerges before a positive one in contemporary Western societies, as there is increasing evidence that a desire for thinness develops for girls around 6 years of age ([Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005, 2006](#)) and, as above, positive body image may have to be actively constructed. Thus, an explicit comparison of the developmental trajectory (or trajectories) of positive body image and negative body image across the period from childhood to young adulthood would be extremely informative. This would, of course, entail significant challenges in developing measures suitable for preadolescent and younger girls. Some guidelines for potentially altering the BAS for younger children are presented in [Cook-Cottone, Tribole, and Tylka \(2013\)](#).

### Positive Body Image and Culture/Ethnicity

Swami and his colleagues have now included the BAS as a measure of positive body image in a number of studies across a number of different non-English speaking cultures, including German, Hispanic, and South Asian women ([Swami et al., 2011](#); [Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008](#); [Swami, Kannan, & Furnham, 2012](#); [Swami, Stieger, et al., 2012](#); [Swami, Stieger, Haubner, & Voracek, 2008](#)). In the main, these findings show the expected relationships between body appreciation and other positive and negative variables, indicating that the construct has some utility across a range of cultural contexts.

However, while the BAS has a demonstrated unidimensional structure in U.S., U.K., Australian, and German samples, it appears to have a bidimensional factor structure for Malaysian ([Swami & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2008](#)), Indonesian ([Swami & Jaafar, 2012](#)), and Brazilian women ([Swami et al., 2011](#)). In these samples, body appreciation seems to be a distinct factor from investment in body image. Thus, there may exist cross-cultural differences in the factors constituting positive body image. For example, [Swami and Chamorro-Premuzic \(2008\)](#) suggested that in the industrialized setting of Kuala Lumpur, women may feel conflict between Western notions of individual control over the body and more traditional Eastern self-abasement. Thus, while bodily acceptance and respect seem to be common components of positive body image across samples, items related to autonomy or adaptive investment in the body may not be associated with positive body image among non-Western samples. These results suggest some caution in using the BAS to calculate an overall score across different cultures.

Because of linguistic issues and different sampling frames, it is not possible to sensibly compare mean scores on body appreciation across different samples. However, a few studies have explicitly reported on ethnic differences within the same study. Two of the earliest studies (not using the BAS) reported a disproportionate number of African American women over Caucasian women in their U.S. samples of college women with positive body image ([Williams, Cash, & Santos, 2004](#); [Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010](#)). The latter authors suggested that this may be due to Black women reporting a greater acceptance and appreciation for larger body proportions than White college women. More generally, African Americans girls have been found to be more flexible than Caucasian girls when defining beauty, reflected in a greater emphasis on being well-groomed, adopting a personal style, and exuding inner confidence, rather than trying to achieve a particular body standard ([Parker et al., 1995](#)).

[Swami, Ains, Chouhan, Leon, and Towell \(2009\)](#) set out explicitly to compare ethnic differences in positive body image in a U.K. sample. They reasoned that ethnic minority women may not internalize mainstream Euro-American norms of beauty, particularly that of the thin body as ideal. Instead, they may retain different culture-specific ideals of physical attractiveness that are broader and/or emphasize interpersonal aspects such as grooming and style. In this way, they may “decouple” the Western association between physical beauty and body size and weight ([Swami et al., 2009](#)). In their London sample, they found that the Hispanic women had the highest body appreciation, followed by the African Caribbean, Caucasian, and South Asian women. Of course these results are limited to the particular setting, in that Latina women in North America or elsewhere may have poorer body image. In this study, Hispanic and African Caribbean women also had the lowest scores on internalization of media ideals, indicating that they do not internalize mainstream or Euro-American norms of beauty. In contrast, the Indian and Pakistani women scored similarly to the Caucasian women on internalization of media ideals. Unfortunately, body dissatisfaction (or some other index of negative body image) was not included in the study, and as a result, it remains unknown whether ethnic differences in positive and negative body image parallel each other or display different patterns.

One potentially important demographic difference across cultures is religion (and associated religiosity). An interesting study by [Swami, Miah, Noorani, and Taylor \(2014\)](#) investigated whether wearing of the hijab (Islamic head cover) was protective within a large sample of British Muslim women (mostly of South Asian descent). Not surprisingly, the wearing of the hijab was related to intrinsic religiosity, which was itself positively related to body appreciation. Further, controlling for religiosity, women who wore the hijab had more positive body image and lower internalization of media messages about beauty standards. More broadly, spirituality/religion has been identified as a characteristic that promotes positive body image through love and unconditional acceptance from a higher power, and the belief that the higher power designs each person to be special ([Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010](#)). Of course, the experiences of Muslim women living in London may be very different from those of Muslim women elsewhere.

In summary, it appears that African and Hispanic cultural identification may promote positive body image. The most salient aspect is likely the endorsement of a broader conceptualization of beauty, in which beauty is not held to a narrow Western ideal. Accordingly, cultures in other geographical locations as yet unstudied who share a broad and flexible notion of beauty will likely also demonstrate higher levels of positive body image, a prediction that needs to be put to future test. For ethnic subcultures within a Western country, this almost by definition means filtering out and not buying into the ubiquitous media depictions of appearance ideals. This filtering can be reciprocally reinforced by identification with the culture

(and possibly religion) and connection with its fellow members. How positive body image is expressed will likely be dependent on the culture, but may involve taking pride in carrying oneself well through clothing choice, grooming, and style. Positive body image may also result in women of whatever age engaging joyfully (and unselfconsciously) in pleasurable activities like dancing, which in Western countries tend to be limited to the young.

### Positive Body Image and Gender

As yet, there have been few studies of positive body image in men. The few samples that have included male participants have likewise shown that positive body image is related to men's psychological well-being, e.g., self-esteem and life satisfaction, in parallel to what has been found for women (Kroon Van Diest & Tylka, 2010; Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008; Swami, Stieger, et al., 2008; Tylka, 2013; Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2013).

One critical assumption underlying meaningful comparison between men and women's scores on the BAS is that the scale assesses the same latent construct across gender. To test this assumption, Tylka (2013) examined the scale's measurement equivalence/invariance. For men, this required minor modification to one item of the scale (Item 12): "unrealistically thin images of women" was replaced by "unrealistically muscular images of men." The results demonstrated measurement equivalence, indicating that the BAS has the same underlying structure for men and women (at least in the U.S.). The updated BAS (the BAS-2), which does not contain any gender specific items, also revealed the same underlying structure for U.S. women and men (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a).

Studies which have explicitly compared men and women using the BAS have generally shown that body appreciation is higher for men than for women. This finding has been demonstrated for English-speaking (Kroon Van Diest & Tylka, 2010; Tylka, 2013; Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2013), German-speaking (Swami, Stieger, et al., 2008), and Spanish samples (Lobera & Ríos, 2011). The same gender difference has also been observed with a shortened version of the BAS in Brazilian (Swami et al., 2011) and Indonesian samples (Swami & Jaafar, 2012). From an examination of individual items (men scored significantly higher on 11 of the 13 items), Tylka (2013) further concluded that men scored higher on items assessing favourable body attitudes, but at similar levels for behavioural items concerned with taking care of the body. The observed gender difference in Western cultures likely arises from more flexible appearance and body ideals for men, and because men's bodies are valued relatively more for their competence. Across cultures, Swami, Stieger, et al. (2008) further suggest that men may have greater access to societal and individual resources that promote positive body image.

In the one study to not find a significant gender difference in body appreciation (Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008), the community sample of British adults was ethnically diverse, with less than 50% of European Caucasian descent (White). In this sample, higher BAS scores were correlated with highest level of education, for both men and women. The authors suggested that higher education may afford individuals greater financial opportunity, as well as personal means to improve their psychological and physical health, including attaining more positive body image. The lack of a significant gender difference in this sample perhaps underscores the limitations of examining one social identity variable (in this case gender) in isolation. It is likely that gender, race, class, ethnicity, and other potential axes of social identity will interact on multiple levels and in complex ways to determine the experience of body image, in accord with the general principal of intersectionality (e.g., Levine-Rasky, 2011).

I propose that positive body image will be expressed in men via healthy and relaxed eating patterns, and by engaging in moderate amounts of exercise. In particular, men with positive body image will not feel compelled to pursue higher and higher levels of muscularity at the gym or elsewhere. Instead, they would likely engage in pleasurable physical activity for enjoyment or for health reasons which, in contrast to appearance reasons, have been associated with higher self-esteem and better body image for both genders (e.g., McDonald & Thompson, 1992). Future research could further usefully test whether positive body image in men is protective against engaging in stereotypically masculine and unhealthy behaviours like smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. Finally, as negative comments from male partners are a source of stress and contribute to negative body image in heterosexual women (e.g., McLaren, Kuh, Hardy, & Gauvin, 2004), it is also my hope (as yet untested) that positive body image in men will be reflected in a less prescriptive view of how women should look and a greater appreciation of women's bodies in general.

### Positive Body Image, Sexuality, and Gender Roles

As yet, there has not been any research explicitly aimed at investigating the relationships among sexual orientations and positive body image. This would provide a very interesting future research question. However, in terms of negative body image, a great deal of research has now reliably shown that gay men exhibit more body dissatisfaction and eating disorder pathology than their heterosexual counterparts (for a meta-analysis, see Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004). This difference has generally been attributed to gay men living in a more "appearance potent" culture, one that contains a high level of sexual objectification and places a virtual premium on youth and attractiveness (Jankowski, Fawcner, Slater, & Tiggemann, 2014; Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007). Given the extreme focus on physical appearance, one could predict that gay men will have lower positive body image than heterosexual men.

On the other hand, the situation for women is more complicated and findings are less clear. One might expect lesbian women, who are not attempting to be attractive to men, to be somewhat immune to pressure from heterosexist cultural norms and less vulnerable to internalizing societally-defined beauty standards (Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999), and therefore have lower levels of body dissatisfaction and investment. However, the findings are mixed, with some studies finding the predicted sexuality difference and others not. In fact, Morrison et al.'s (2004) meta-analysis showed no reliable difference on a variety of measures of negative body image between lesbian and heterosexual women. The authors suggest that identification as a lesbian may simply be insufficient to counteract years of objectification and messages about physical appearance that are transmitted to all women from childhood onward. In other words, women (of all sexualities) are socialized into a mainstream culture that emphasizes appearance from an early age. My own prediction is that lesbian women's greater experience of female bodies will contribute to an acceptance of a wide variety of bodies as beautiful (or at least as normal), which will result in more positive body image than heterosexual women, even though they may not differ on body dissatisfaction. This outcome might be expressed as collective appreciation for their own and other women's bodies, as well as a greater sense of connection with other women than their heterosexual counterparts.

Relatedly, there exists a parallel set of inconsistent results for feminism and negative body image. One would expect a feminist identity to equip women with a heightened ability to critique traditional feminine roles and cultural pressures related to appearance and thinness. However, a number of studies do not find the

predicted relationship between feminism and better body image (e.g., Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997; Tiggemann & Stevens, 1999). A meta-analysis by Murnen and Smolak (2009) concluded that there was an overall significant negative association between feminist identity and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. However, there was considerable heterogeneity in the results. In particular, the effect size was very small for young women in their 20s, compared to older participants. As suggested by some authors, the importance of women's appearance may be so ingrained and socially reinforced in young women that they become core beliefs, relatively little affected by the acquisition of a feminist ideology (Cash et al., 1997; Tiggemann & Stevens, 1999). Alternatively, or in addition, it is possible that possession of a feminist identity may take some time (and work) to develop to a point where women can resist the strong pressures of cultural ideals. Again, I would tentatively predict that women (of whatever age) who identify as feminist would demonstrate a greater degree of body-size acceptance and felt connection with other women, and consequently have more positive body image, even if they do not differ on body dissatisfaction or other indices of negative body image.

Should the above predictions be confirmed by empirical test, they would have important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they would provide further convincing evidence that positive body image (body appreciation) is something more than simply the opposite of negative body image (or the lack of body dissatisfaction). In practice, they would suggest that we can actively aim to promote positive body image, even in the presence of some level of body dissatisfaction (negative body image).

Somewhat in support, one study has begun the investigation of gender ideology and positive body image. Swami and Abbasnejad (2010) found that a more traditional femininity ideology (stronger endorsement of traditional beliefs about how women should act) was associated with lower body appreciation in a sample of British women. This finding was particularly the case for subscales assessing traditional beliefs about physical appearance and image including a chaste ideal and passive sexual role. Thus it may be that promoting more egalitarian and non-traditional gender ideology (including feminism) will result in higher levels of positive body image in women.

### Positive Body Image in Special Populations: Athletes, Dancers, and Fashion Models

A few studies have addressed positive body image in particular populations. Such studies may provide additional insights into the genesis or supporting conditions for positive body image that may be more broadly useful.

College women athletes can be viewed as individuals with intersecting identities of woman and athlete (Hahn Oh, Wiseman, Hendrickson, Phillips, & Hayden, 2012). They may struggle with contradictory pressures to be both feminine and athletic, for example, reporting concerns about the size of their muscles (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004). On the other hand, they may feel pride in their bodies because of their strength, physical competence and athletic skill. In particular, they are liable to have a more immediate and obvious sense of and appreciation for their body's functionality. Hahn Oh et al. (2012) tested the acceptance model of intuitive eating in a sample of college athletes and found it to provide a good fit. That is, body acceptance by coaches, trainers, and teammates, body functionality and high levels of intuitive eating were all associated with positive body image (body appreciation).

Although not explicitly tested in Hahn Oh et al.'s (2012) study, the mean body appreciation score ( $M = 3.87$ ) was somewhat higher than those in Avalos et al.'s (2005) initial college validation samples ( $M_s = 3.48, 3.48$ ). This finding is consistent with a recent theoretical

model of the development of positive body image put forward by Menzel and Levine (2011). This model proposes that participation in "embodying" activities is key, because embodiment is central to positive body image. Embodiment refers to a sense of ownership of the body and experiencing it as trustworthy and deserving of respect, as well as a key means of expressing competence, interpersonal relatedness, self-expression, and power (Menzel & Levine, 2011; Piran, 2015, this issue). Menzel and Levine (2011) provide competitive athletics as a theoretical example of a source of embodying experiences and identify frequent states of mind-body integration, increased body awareness and responsiveness, an increased sense of physical empowerment, and an overall sense of physical competence as embodying features.

Some forms of dance might also supply such embodying opportunities. While ballet dancers have been identified as the prototypical group particularly at risk for negative body image and eating disorders (Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble, 2000), other forms of dance may confer embodiment and positive body image. Three studies have now explicitly investigated positive body image (body appreciation) in dancers. In the first, Swami and Tovée (2009) reported that street dancers had significantly higher body appreciation than non-dancers. In contrast, there was no significant difference between groups on actual-ideal weight discrepancy (body dissatisfaction). The results suggest that, although street dancers may be as weight dissatisfied as non-dancers, they simultaneously are more accepting and respectful of their bodies. The authors suggest that dancing perhaps provides a unique opportunity to view the body as functional in a kinesthetic manner. In the second study, Langdon and Petracca (2010) similarly found that their sample of modern dancers had higher body appreciation (as well as lower self-objectification) than non-dancer counterparts. Both street and modern dance have been classified as athletically focussed forms of dance (Langdon & Petracca, 2010).

The final study addressed a rather more exotic style of dance, namely belly dance. Based on Menzel and Levine's (2011) model, we (Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014) argued that belly dance shared many of the positive features identified in athletics. In particular, we proposed that belly dance is an embodying activity. It is highly skilled and requires focused attention on breathing and muscles of the mid-torso, as well as strength and flexibility, as dancers train their bodies to move in novel ways. Indeed, it has been argued that belly dance brings together mind, body, and spirit (Kraus, 2009). In addition, belly dance does not subscribe to the one narrow (thin and youthful) ideal, but is accepting of different physiques and the whole range of ages (Bock & Borland, 2011). If anything, a fatter and curvier body type is valued as more suited to belly dance's shimmies, rolls, and undulating movements (Bock & Borland, 2011). In support, even though belly dance is widely viewed as a potentially sexualized and visually alluring activity, we found that belly dancers scored higher on body appreciation and lower on self-objectification than non-dancer controls (Tiggemann et al., 2014).

There are a number of features shared by the above three forms of dance, and to some extent by athletics, that contribute to positive body image. These forms of dance demonstrate a more obvious physicality and value a greater diversity of body size and shape than more traditional forms of dance like ballet. Belly dance, in particular, provides an opportunity for women who differ from the societally-prescribed thin and youthful ideal to reconnect to their body in a joyful manner. Importantly, all have a major focus on the functionality of the body and require concentration and a mental and physical presence "in" the body, giving rise to a sense of interconnectedness with the body. Athletes are likely to be proud of their physical strength, competence, and accomplishments. Belly dance also seems to carry a spiritual element. In addition, all are typically practised in a female social environment, giving rise to

a sense of support, social connectedness, and community among women. As pointed out by Tylka (2012), individuals with positive body image engage in behaviours that further promote positive body image in a reciprocal process. In particular, they choose to surround themselves with others who also have positive body image. More generally, participation in athletics or the above forms of dance seems to provide many of the core and predisposing features of positive body image identified by Tylka (2011, 2012). This finding is also likely to be case for other (as yet untested) forms of embodying activities such as yoga, mountain climbing, or circus skills. At its most basic, moving bodies in an enjoyable and unselfconscious way probably represents the ultimate expression of positive body image.

While the above forms of dance are associated with appreciation of a broader range of body physiques, one group for whom this is emphatically not so, is fashion models. Swami and Szmigielska (2013) compared a group of professional fashion models with a matched control group of non-models in London. They found fashion models had a higher drive for thinness and dysfunctional investment in appearance, but the same level of body appreciation as control participants. Moreover, greater duration as a fashion model was associated with more positive body appreciation, but also greater drive for thinness. These findings provide a telling illustration that positive and negative body image can co-exist in some settings/experiences.

### Positive Body Image in Coping with Physical Change

As yet there has been no investigation of positive body image among people who have some form of visible, physical difference or disfigurement. Such individuals face significant psychosocial challenges in negotiating and finding their place in a social environment preoccupied with physical attractiveness. Is it even possible to have a positive body image under these circumstances? Related research suggests that the answer, at least for some individuals, can be “yes.” In their qualitative study of college women with positive body image, Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) found that some women had illnesses that impacted on their appearance (e.g., lupus, cancer). These women described how managing their illness had resulted in a shift from an appearance-related focus to that of gratitude toward the optimal functioning of the body.

In terms of negative body image and overall adjustment, people with visible differences vary considerably. This population as a whole has an increased risk for a range of poorer psychosocial outcomes. For example, it has been estimated that 30–50% of individuals with visible differences may experience significant psychological difficulty at some time (Rumsey & Harcourt, 2011). However, these figures also reflect that the majority of individuals with visible differences in fact cope well and adaptively, and some even have the capacity to transform the challenge of living with a visible difference into a positive experience (Feragen, 2012). Relatedly, it appears that the effect of visible difference (positive and negative) is predicted more strongly by psychological factors than by physical characteristics. Across a number of conditions (e.g., craniofacial abnormalities, amputations, burns), one of the most reliable research findings is that objective severity of a disfigurement does not predict the extent of distress or negative body image (for an overview, see Rumsey, 2012).

In the limited research to date, Rumsey (2012) identifies the family environment as crucial in the developing body image of a child with a visible difference. In particular, parental levels of acceptance or discomfort are liable to be transmitted to and assimilated by the child. So parents can help their child learn to talk about their condition in an everyday way and model positive social responses, for example, to the appearance-based teasing or other

stigmatization a child may experience. Thus, a family environment in which the condition is acknowledged but allowed to have only minimal impact, and in which neither body image nor self-esteem is contingent on the disfigurement, is most beneficial. For adults, research has shown the major predictor of psychological well-being to be the cognitive beliefs of the person. Specifically, positively adjusted individuals are characterized by optimism, a self-system not dominated by appearance-related information, a lack of concern about negative evaluations from others, and a sense of social acceptance (Rumsey, 2012). Positive adjusters have learned to be comfortable in their own skin and some believe that their disfigurement has given them unique and valued characteristics, including communication skills, inner strength, and genuine friendships that do not rely on external appearance factors (Feragen, 2012).

Many of the above characteristics are those identified by Tylka (2011, 2012) as core features of positive body image more generally. Thus, it is plausible that people with a visible difference or disfigurement can also embrace a positive body image. The key factor seems to be viewing the visible difference as only a small part of their lives. As with individuals without any visible difference, positive body image will be expressed as a comfort with and appreciation of the body, including its “flaws.” This process probably requires an enhanced ability to filter in a self-protective way the negative appearance-related information likely encountered on a daily basis. For example, women may refer to their mastectomy scars as “badges of honour” or “victory scars” that serve as visible reminders of their body’s strength in surviving cancer. Finally, and most importantly, for individuals with congenital visible difference or other appearance-based and stigmatized conditions, positive body image means being able to find a core in themselves that is worthy and worth celebrating above and beyond that of physical appearance.

Like individuals without a visible difference, a critical promoting factor seems to be unconditional acceptance from others. Perceiving body acceptance from important others (e.g., family, friends, partners), and feeling loved, special, and valued for authentic qualities not contingent on appearance, are crucial. Given that visible difference can be a highly stigmatized condition in Western societies, it is a testament to such individuals (and their parents and caregivers) that so many seem to be able to enjoy a positive body image. Future research will need to document these assertions using the BAS, BAS-2, or other validated measures (see Webb et al., 2015, this issue). If empirically confirmed, we may have much to learn from the core beliefs and strategies used by people with visible difference in order to maintain a positive body image in an appearance-based culture.

### Limitations, Challenges, and Future Directions

One of the obvious challenges to an overall conceptualization of positive body image is that different social identities might express positive body image differently. While core attitudinal components like appreciation of and positive feelings toward the body are likely to be exhibited across all groups, manifest behavioural expressions likely do not. For example, in Western cultures, as indicated above, positive body image may be expressed primarily through: healthy eating in adolescent and young women, a relaxed attitude regarding exercise in young men, choosing to not undergo cosmetic surgery in older women, and excellent social skills among people with visible difference. For individuals in non-Western cultures, specific expression will be dependent on cultural norms and values, but may manifest through behaviours like grooming, confidence, and style.

Of course, the above presents further challenges for the measurement of positive body image. In this, the BAS can surely be

judged to have made an excellent start. However, the items may not be as internally consistent, or there may be other items of greater salience, across different social identities. Formal measurement equivalence has been established for gender in young heterosexual U.S. samples (Tylka, 2013), but has yet to be tested for other age, ethnic, sexual orientation, and developmental status groups.

In particular, the finding of a two-dimensional structure for the BAS among Malaysian and Indonesian samples (as opposed to the unidimensional structure observed in English-speaking samples) suggests that the measure does not assess exactly the same latent construct across cultures. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a shorter (10 item) core component of body appreciation that applies across all the cultures investigated thus far, a component that requires formal psychometric evaluation. It is of note that the items that form the separate factor for Malaysian and Indonesian samples are those that contain specific reference to body weight and shape and the thin ideal. It may be that these items do not accurately reflect the ideals of a particular culture, and should be changed to do so, just as the male items were changed to reflect “muscular” rather than “thin” ideals. From the existing data, it is not possible to ascertain whether cultural/ethnic differences in positive body image as measured by the BAS arise because different groups have a different specific ideal (less thin), because weight and shape are not central aspects of the ideal, because they hold more flexible ideals and a broader conception of beauty, or because physical appearance is less important to them. These are challenging and interesting questions.

Further, the BAS was not designed to capture all elements of positive body image and it has been suggested that it should be expanded to include the other components (Tylka, 2012, see Webb et al., 2015, this issue, for measures of other dimensions of positive body image). In this, I think a broader conception of beauty and a focus on the functionality of the body are perhaps the most critical for the social identities reviewed here. Nevertheless, were such items included, I would still expect a single factor to emerge for college-aged U.S. samples (as these components have been identified in qualitative studies with young U.S. women). However, additional components might provide valuable information for comparisons across different social identities.

One important methodological limitation of the existing body of research is that studies are almost entirely correlational and cross-sectional in design (assessing contemporaneous relationships or comparing known self-selected groups). Thus, it is impossible to come to any definitive causal conclusions. For example, while the acceptance model posits that positive body image results from acceptance by others, the converse causal assumption is equally plausible. That is, having a positive body image may make individuals perceive others as more accepting or may actually generate more acceptance from others. Or there might be other mediating factors, such as familial levels of self-esteem. Similarly, while it is possible that engaging in athletics or some forms of dance might increase positive body image, it is equally possible that individuals with already high positive body image choose to engage in these types of activity. In both the above cases, it is most likely that the relationships will be reciprocal and accordingly, that both processes will co-occur. Although this may present a methodological challenge, it is consistent with the conceptualization of positive body image as a reciprocal process (Tylka, 2011, 2012; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Positive body image is both shaped by and shapes the environment. In particular, people with positive body image choose to surround themselves and connect with others with positive body image, and actively seek to encourage others to be more positive toward their bodies. More sophisticated longitudinal and experimental research designs are required to better demonstrate these complexities. For example, reciprocal-influence longitudinal designs (Burns et al., 2008) could examine whether initial levels of

body appreciation predict subsequent body appreciation through athletics or dance.

In my view, one of the most important future tasks is to trace the developmental trajectory (or trajectories) of positive body image over the life span. In particular, there is need for research addressing the initial development of positive body image in children, pre-adolescents and adolescents. This process entails the construction of age-appropriate measurement tools. Taken together, the available research seems to point to people actively learning and cognitively constructing a positive body image. Positive body image is associated with higher education, age, and increasing experience, and women report that they previously had negative body image in adolescence. It may be that, as argued, in contemporary Western cultures negative body image typically develops earlier and more readily and easily. Thus, positive body image may be something that individuals need to aspire to. In particular, cognitive reappraisal is a specific strategy identified by participants in the qualitative studies (e.g., Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), by older women (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003), and by individuals with visible difference (Rumsey, 2012). Whether this way of thinking evolves over time, or is triggered by some specific event (e.g., illness in themselves or family members, Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), is a future research question. In practice, this is a useful conceptualization, as it may be easier to implement interventions that target increasing positive body image rather than attempting to shift negative body image. On the other hand, as yet unexplored is the bigger question of how to raise a child with positive body image. The available evidence suggests an accepting family and peer environment that focuses on inner strengths, body functionality, and social support rather than appearance is key. In Western societies this would necessitate having in place good strategies for protective filtering from a young age. My expectation is that there will be multiple pathways to positive body image.

Other future research directions include the investigation of positive body image across a range of other social identities and special populations, together with their accompanying underlying mechanisms. In particular, empirical research has not yet addressed positive body image among individuals of different sexual orientations, nor individuals who experience major changes in their physical appearance. There is much to be learnt from how the latter group respond to the challenge of maintaining a positive body image in an appearance-focused culture. Their strategies may be more broadly useful in helping other individuals (without visible difference) transition from a negative body image to a positive one. Another interesting line of research is to expand the investigation of consequences of positive body image from the individual's own well-being to the effects on attitudes to others. For example, does positive body image in men result in a less prescriptive view of how women should look and a greater appreciation of women's bodies all around? Or is having positive body image associated with less stereotyping of fat or visible difference? If confirmed, such questions potentially expand the benefits of positive body image from the individual with positive body image to society as a whole.

### Final Comments

What has been achieved? In a nutshell, positive body image has been shown to be a useful and salient concept, applicable across a diverse array of social identities and special groups. In these groups, positive body image has been associated with a host of positive outcomes (e.g., health monitoring, optimism, self-compassion) that go way beyond the absence of negative body image. Further, it is likely that this list will expand quite rapidly. Of course there are challenges in both the conceptualization and measurement of positive

body image across different groups. Nevertheless, in this, the BAS can be judged to have performed very well.

What is to be done? The investigation of positive body image needs to be extended to new social identities, including sexual orientation and visible difference, as well as to the consideration of the intersection of individuals' multiple social identities. Methodologies need to be extended to experimental and longitudinal designs. In particular, the study of the development of positive body image is an important and urgent research task, both in children and in older individuals transitioning from a negative body image to positive body image. Multiple measures of positive body image (see Webb et al., 2015, this issue) could be useful in these investigations.

In conclusion, I hope that this review and associated commentary has been convincing in arguing that the investigation of positive body image across different social identities is valuable for three intertwined reasons. First, it tells us about the experience of groups outside U.S. college women and thus expands our knowledge of the role of body image in these individuals' lives. Second, it contributes to a more complex and nuanced theoretical understanding and conceptualization of the construct of positive body image. Third, it provides some practical strategies that might be more broadly applicable in nurturing positive body image, that is, in helping people to appreciate, respect, celebrate and honour their body.

Of course, I also hope that this review will stimulate further research. Although it contains considerable conjecture, there are a number of empirical questions raised that await answer. In this, we are collectively embarking on new territory that may have large ramifications. Because positive body image is intimately connected to individual and societal well-being, research in this area has the real potential to enrich lives. It is an exciting time to be part of this research endeavour.

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