

## Body confidence: Girls want support, guys want to show off

Kimberley L. Gammage  
Brock University  
Larkin Lamarche  
McMaster University



## Body image

- Unique mental representation of your body
  - Multidimensional
  - Perceptions, thoughts, feelings, behaviours
- Focus on weight & shape OR muscularity
  - Functioning and fitness
  - Health and illness



Bane & McCauley, 1998; Cash, 1990; Thompson et al., 1997

## But is it really a problem?

**2/5 women, 1/5 men willing to give up 5 years of their lives to achieve their weight goals**

*Average age of girls' first diet: 8 (weight concerns start at age 5)*

**Girls' self-esteem peaks at age 9**

**9/10 times children offered selection of dolls, pick thinnest doll available**

**Only 12% of women aged 50+ are satisfied with their body size**

**Women overestimate the size of their hips by 16% and waist by 25%**

**46% of 9-11 yr olds diet sometimes or very often**

**Most common reason adolescent boys use steroids is to improve their appearance**

## Is negative body image that big a deal?

- Associated with poor psychological health throughout the lifespan
  - Depression, anxiety
  - Lower self-esteem, quality of life
- Associated with physiological changes
  - Increased cortisol
- Can influence behaviours
  - Avoidance behaviours (esp. social)
  - Eating disorders, symptoms, dietary restraint
  - Excessive physical activity/inactivity
  - Suicide ideation/attempts



## What's the matter with this approach?

- Dominated by negative aspects of body image
  - Dissatisfaction, distortion, anxiety, depression, dietary restraint, avoidance behaviours
- Body image treated as pathology
  - E.g., eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder
- Assumption of normative discontent
  - Not 'normal' if you don't have negative body image
- Absence of negative body image ➔ positive body image



Cash & Smolak, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015

## What's the alternative? Positive body image



**Overall love and respect for your body, appreciating the uniqueness of your body & what it can do, and accepting your body regardless of what it looks like**

- Not just the absence of negative body image
- Protective
  - Reject threats to body image (e.g., media, teasing)
- Associated with:
  - Psychological well-being, self-compassion
  - Health behaviours (e.g., intuitive eating, physical activity)

## Types of Situations



- Marquez and McAuley (2001) asked participants to identify situations high and low in threat related to evaluation of the body
  - 71% men/86% women: wearing swimsuits highest threat
  - 59% men/72% women: familiar people lowest threat
  - 54% men/14% women: working out/playing sports low threat
    - 21% men/17% women high threat
  - Many situations appeared on both high and low threat lists
    - Why?

## Rationale

- Body image research dominated by focus on negative
- Much positive body image research is quantitative
  - Researcher driven outcomes
  - Relatively narrow definition of positive body image (satisfaction, appreciation)
- Situations of low threat (not necessarily comfortable) and high threat overlap – why?



## Purpose

- Identify comfortable body-related situations in university women and men
  - Context of those situations
  - Responses in those situations



## Participants

### University Women

- N = 23, 18-26 years
- No history eating disorder
- BMI 17.17-32.89 kg/m<sup>2</sup>
- Social physique anxiety range
- BMI & anxiety uncorrelated

### University Men

- N = 20, 18-26 years
- No history eating disorder
- BMI 19.66-33.45 kg/m<sup>2</sup>
- Drive for muscularity range
- BMI & drive for muscularity uncorrelated

## Procedures



- One-on-one interviews
- Interview guide:
  1. What specific situations can you identify in which college (wo)men may feel confident or comfortable with their bodies?
    - What specific situations can you identify in which you feel confident or comfortable with your body?
  2. Think about the last time you felt comfortable about your body. Describe the context (or the details) of that situation.
    - Think about the time you felt most comfortable about your body and describe the context.
  3. What were you thinking and feeling in those comfortable situations?

## Comfortable Situations



Women

- Difficult to identify
- Longer response time
- Required more prompts
- Spoke about 'university women' rather than themselves
- Vague responses



Men

- Relatively easy time responding
- Similar responses between self and others
- Several participants reported 'all the time' or 'men don't care'

### Specific Situations



Women

- Everyday life locations (n = 13)
- Particularly being at home
- Working out or playing sports (n = 11)



Men

- Gym (n = 20)
- Playing sports (n = 16)
- Going to the bar (n = 5)
- Being at the beach or pool (n = 5)
- Having sex (n = 3)
- Being with friends or girlfriends (n = 3)

### Context of Comfortable Situation: Women

**Social environment**

- Presence of friends/family
- "Having someone there who like, that won't judge you no matter what your body is because they love you for who you are"

**Clothing**

- Non-form fitting (moderate & high SPA groups)
- "No need to dress to impress"
- Formal clothing (low SPA group)
- "When you dress up you feel nice, you put on all your fancy clothes and you know you feel comfortable"

### Context of Comfortable Situations: Men

**Opportunity for social comparison**

- Skills, function & appearance
- Always downward comparisons
- Participants perceived to be stronger, fitter, more in shape, or more skilled than others
- "You see you have more muscle, more in shape, and look better than others."


**Physique-salient clothing**

- Gym and beach situations
- Being shirtless, wearing tight-fitted muscle/sleeveless shirts
- Shared pursuit of body achievement toward the ideal/self-improvement
- "Guys aren't concerned about what other people are thinking at the gym because everyone else is working toward the same goal."

### Responses to Comfortable Situations: Women


**Positive, calm, confident**

- "really happy...definitely [the compliment] was a confidence-booster"

General 


**Fit, strong, attractive**

- Not thinking about body
- "I wasn't constantly consumed by the thought of what I looked like."

Body-related 

**Unaware of others' evaluations**


- "I wasn't worried about what others were saying about me or like if people were saying anything about me."

Self-presentational 

### Responses to Comfortable Situations: Men


**Feeling good, confidence, feeling healthy**

- Feeling of confidence beyond the gym/sporting setting
- "You feel confidence about other things."

General 


**Comparing self to others**

- "Well, I'm fitter than them, I'm taller."

Comparison 


**Satisfaction for achieving goals**

- Motivated to improve (function, appearance)
- "I wasn't thinking about what I was looking like, I was thinking about what I was doing"

Achievement 

**Physiological sensations**

- "a body buzz"
- "the pump"
- "feeling the endorphins"
- "a runner's high"

Physiological 

### Discussion

- More difficult for women to identify comfortable body image experiences compared to men
  - Experience fewer comfortable situations?
  - More socially acceptable (normative discontent)?
  - Men generally more confident?
- Few differences based on weight/shape or body image
- Context of situation important
- Key gender difference: role of others
  - For women = social support
  - For men = social comparison



## Implications

- De-emphasize focus on appearance
  - Be in the moment (mindfulness?)
- Emphasis on function (what the body can do)
  - Achievement and improvement
- Importance of others
  - For women: support
  - For men: pursuit of goals

## Take home message...

