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“On a Journey to Appreciate What My Body Does for Me”: Qualitative Results from a Positive Body Image Pilot Intervention Study

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests body appreciation is related to mental, physical, and sexual health behaviors and outcomes that are relevant to social workers and public health clinicians. As such, it is imperative to develop and test interventions that aim to improve body appreciation. The current study is part of a larger pilot intervention study that utilized 3D scanning technology. During the intervention, 18–25-year-old women digitally “painted” their avatar on a computer based on a series of prompts from the researcher. The purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore how a small subsample of the participants ($n = 18$) experienced this innovative intervention and how they view themselves differently post-intervention. Using thematic analysis, we uncovered three themes: 1) ways of defining body image, 2) importance of body function over aesthetics, and 3) body acceptance and appreciation. This study provides support for the use of one-time individual-level interventions focused on body appreciation and functionality over appearance. Implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Intervention; women; health; body appreciation

Introduction

Positive body image is defined as a multidimensional, complex construct that includes, but is not limited to body appreciation, body acceptance, and body satisfaction and is influenced by many factors such as culture and social identities, among others (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). In 1995, Franzoi conceptualized attitudes toward body parts as body-as-object and body functions as body-as-process. Body appreciation bridges these ideas.

Body appreciation, one aspect of positive body image that includes appreciation for one’s appearance, functionality, and body health (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a), has been shown in research to be a protective factor against thin-idealized media images (e.g., Halliwell, 2013). Additionally, researchers have found associations between body appreciation and preventive sexual health (Ramseyer Winter, 2017; Ramseyer Winter & Satinsky, 2014) and physical and mental health indicators (e.g., Gillen, 2015). Given the association between body appreciation and health, developing and testing interventions that aim to improve body appreciation is crucial. This is particularly true for women as women experience disparities in negative body image when compared to men (Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2014).

Literature review

Researchers have tested a number of approaches to improving body image. Cognitive behavioral group interventions have proven effective in improving body image (e.g., Devaraj & Lewis, 2010;

McLean, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2011). Cognitive dissonance is another promising approach. For example, “The Body Project” has strong evidence to support its efficacy and effectiveness among various populations, including college women with elevated body image concerns (Stice, Mazotti, Weibel, & Agras, 2000), ethnically diverse girls and women (Rodriguez, Marchand, Ng, & Stice, 2008), young girls (Halliwell & Diedrichs, 2014), and adolescents (Stice, Shaw, Burton, & Wade, 2006), among others. Exercise has also been explored as a way to improve body image, and a meta-analysis confirmed the association between exercise and improved body image (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006).

Media literacy interventions to improve body image have also been implemented to address the link between exposure to images in the media and body image concerns in some women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). These interventions teach participants to think critically about images in the media and their accompanying messages to individuals viewing them. Results of short-term media literacy interventions have displayed an increase in media skepticism but no significant difference in body image scores between treatment and control groups (Irving & Berel, 2001). Additional techniques that have been utilized by body image interventions and have been associated with improved body image include psychoeducation about body image, changing negative language used about the body, guided imagery tasks, exposure exercises, and stress management training for relapse prevention (Alleva, Sheeran, Webb, Martijn, & Miles, 2015b).

More recently, researchers have tested interventions focusing on body functionality as a way to improve body image. Using structured writing assignments, researchers have found significant improvements in body appreciation, functionality satisfaction, and self-objectification among undergraduate men, undergraduate women, and middle-aged women (Alleva et al., 2016; Alleva, Martijn, Jansen, & Nederkoorn, 2014; Alleva, Martijn, Van Breukelen, Jansen, & Karos, 2015a). This research is moving the field in an important direction by focusing on body-as-process, but does not capture body-as-object, as conceptualized by Franzoi (1995). The current study tested an intervention that aimed to marry these ideas by focusing on body appreciation.

The current study

The current study explores the qualitative component of a larger mixed methods study that piloted an intervention focused on improving body appreciation through the use of 3D body scanning among 18–25-year-old women. The purpose of the study is to explore how the participants describe the intervention and what they learned about themselves from the experience in order to provide a nuanced understanding of their experience with the 3D Body Appreciation Mapping (3D-BAM) intervention.

Method

Participants

To qualitatively explore experiences with the intervention, we recruited participants from the larger intervention study following the intervention ($n = 20$). The interview for one of the participants with a low body appreciation score was discontinued due to the participant disclosing an eating disorder. After discontinuing the interview, the researcher provided the participant with resources and referrals. One other qualitative interview was excluded from the current study and the larger study because she did not meet the age criteria of the study. The final sample size was 18. The overall body appreciation score mean was 3.69 ($SD = 1.09$), which is similar to other samples of college women (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). The mean BMI for the sample was 24.77 ($SD = 4.08$, range = 20.17–36.02). The majority of the sample identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 15$, 83.3%) and the rest of the sample identified as Black/African American ($n = 3$, 16.7%). See [Table 1](#) for participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant demographics (n = 18).

Characteristic	N	%
Race		
White/Caucasian	15	83.3
Black/African American	3	16.7
Characteristic	M	SD
Age	20.89	1.81
Body appreciation score	3.69	1.09
BMI	24.77	4.08

Intervention and procedures

The 3D-BAM intervention was piloted with five data collection points. After obtaining IRB approval, participants were recruited through email and fliers. If interested, they emailed to indicate their interest and, in return, received a link to the baseline survey. At the beginning of this survey, participants answered several questions to determine if they qualified for the study. They were required to: 1) identify as a woman, 2) be between 18–25 years old, 3) have lived in the U.S. for at least 10 years, 4) not currently be pregnant, and 5) not have had an eating disorder diagnosis. If they qualified for the study, they were taken to the full survey (Time 1; $N = 158$). After completing the survey, participants were scheduled to come to the scanning lab to be scanned. The 3D scanner uses digital camera technology and took no more than five seconds to complete. After their scan, participants completed a brief 3–5-minute survey (Time 2; $n = 105$).

After their scan was processed into an avatar using 3D modeling software, participants were scheduled to return to the scanning lab for the intervention. The intervention took approximately 20–30 minutes. During this time, they were given prompts by the researcher to digitally “paint” their avatars on a computer. For example, prompts included “Paint the parts of your body you appreciate for their utility, the things they did for you” and “Paint the parts of your body you appreciate for their role in your friendships.” All seven of the prompts focused on reasons to appreciate one’s body. After the intervention, participants completed a brief 3–5-minute survey (Time 3; $n = 99$). Three months after the intervention, participants were emailed a link to a survey that was very similar to the baseline survey. This was Time 4 ($n = 89$). Finally, we conducted qualitative interviews with a subsample of the study participants (Time 5; $n = 18$). For the qualitative portion of the study, we included participants with the lowest body appreciation scores and highest body appreciation scores at baseline.

Participants took part in one-hour semi-structured interviews in person or over the phone and received \$10 compensation for their time. Questions addressed intervention experience. Example questions include: “Imagine I dropped in from another planet, describe the intervention for me.” “What did you expect the intervention to be like?” “How did it differ from your expectations?” “What did you learn about yourself via the intervention?” Interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions comprised the data for this analysis. See Table 2 for a full list of interview questions.

Analysis

We were interested in how the intervention supported improved body appreciation (Ramsey Winter, et al., 2019) and thus chose to conduct thematic analysis as a way to outline key themes and patterns about women’s intervention experiences (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). Analysis steps included initial and more specific coding, analytical memos, and organizational matrices and reports. After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the second author and a research assistant (i.e., the coders) reviewed all of the responses to conduct initial coding of the data. The goal of the first round of coding was to identify and list all possible key categories and

Table 2. Qualitative interview questions and prompts.

1	If I just dropped in from another planet, how would you describe the intervention to me?
2	What did you expect the [intervention] to be like?
3	How did your experience differ, or not, from your expectations?
4	Describe what it was like to [paint your avatar]?
5	What did you learn about yourself, or the way that you see yourself and feel about yourself, through doing this?
6	How did/do you think about yourself before, and after, the [intervention], what is different?
7	How has your perception of your body changed?
8	When you are intimate with another person, how do you think about your body?
9	Please give me an example of the thoughts you have when you are intimate with someone?
10	How do you compare your appearance with people you have relationships with (e.g., friends, family, romantic partner)?
11	How do you compare your appearance with people you are not in a relationship with?
12	How does your body image impact your physical health?
13	How does your body image impact your mental health?
14	How does your body image impact your sexual health?

patterns arising in the data (e.g., body image, body appreciation, body comparisons, body and behavior, media influences, body image and age, etc.). Coders analyzed the data separately and then met to discuss and compare their results. After initial coding of the data, the coders also agreed that the themes across both high and low body appreciation groups were more similar than different and that all of the interviews should be analyzed together versus in comparison to each other.

Next, the coders reviewed the results of initial coding in more detail and decided to consolidate and redefine the most salient categories into key themes. They created a codebook that identified and defined these themes (i.e., the ones detailed in the results section), and then using the codebook, matched interview text excerpts to codes. Both coders started the analysis by coding 25% of the data independently and then meeting to calculate coder agreement. After the first 25% of coding was complete, agreement was only 60%. The coders clarified the code definitions and coded another 25% section of data. After the second round of coding, coder agreement was 90%, so the coders completed the analysis on all of the data, meeting weekly to discuss coding, preliminary findings, and analysis memos.

Then, the coders created a matrix that outlined and defined each of the final themes and a report that listed example quotes under each theme, to organize the data for the results section. The first author reviewed the matrix and report to ensure that the data appropriately reflected the content of the interviews.

Results

Three major interconnected themes were apparent across participants' responses: new ways of defining body image, the importance of body function over aesthetics, and body acceptance and appreciation. We expand upon the meaning of these patterns using participant quotes and paraphrased discussions below.

New ways of defining body image: the intervention "twisted my mindset"

Participants stressed that the intervention made them think about their body in new and unexpected ways. Some of the most surprising insights among participants were that they *could* define their body positively and the recognition that their body was more than a physical appearance. They realized it was comprised of very important parts. For example, Nancy (all names are pseudonyms) said she expected to be asked about the parts of her body she did not like or wanted to change in the intervention, but instead:

My reaction [to the intervention] was much more positive than I would have expected. I tend to think of myself in a positive light, but I can be critical if I'm feeling a certain way. But [in the intervention] I felt a lot more positive.

Nancy noted specifically that she remembered the question about “the part of your body that you use in your intimate, romantic relationships” because she wanted to mark her entire body. Similarly, she said, “The questions made me think about my body in a different way. I've never really thought about the parts of my body that I use in my friendships. It's never been like a thought that's crossed my mind.” Jackie also remarked that the intervention prompted her to “[consider] parts of my body that I hadn't thought about before. Like all the questions about what parts do you assign to friends, family. I just hadn't really thought about the way that I use my body before.” Francis said the question about how she used her body for her family “kind of twisted my mindset.”

Laura reiterated both points – that the questions helped her think about her body as functional in different ways (e.g., relationships) and that they pushed her to think beyond simply what she liked or did not like about her body to a more holistic vision of her body as having both a physical appearance and a function. Participants also recognized that the limiting ways that they thought about their body came from social norms. For example, Hailey noted,

Society kind of makes you look at your body as a sex item. And [the intervention] helped me look at it differently. Because one of the questions was, “What helps you find, like, sexual partners?” There were so many parts, and I think society kind of makes that [sexuality, appearance] the main question, and it really shouldn't be.

Jenny, and several other participants noted that their body may not look like everyone else or look like societal expectations, but that their body was okay or positive nonetheless.

Body strength and function: “utility over aesthetics”

Not only did participants recognize that their body could be positive and useful, participants went further to say that the intervention helped them realize the value of utility over aesthetics. Nancy said it was “really cool” to see “how much each part of my body is used for the different functions” and “What kind of effect does it produce in my life?” Sadie admitted that some part of the visual produced by the intervention included things that “no girl likes to see, or anyone likes to see,” but said that even still, the intervention “reinforced, like, the utility over aesthetics.” Similarly, Francis said she previously thought about her thighs as “fat” but started to recognize that “They're strong at the end of the day. Like I can climb a lot of stairs or something, you know, so I think that was what helped me shift into kind of a more functional [versus a] romanticized or demonized view of my body.”

A few participants, like Sadie, mentioned that they were quick to focus on negatives, such as “you need to lose those 20 pounds” but realized parts of her body that she was critical about helped her to “carry a child.” Nancy also noted that she still has

days where I'm, like, really struggling with that self-loathe concept. But I do kind of reframe the way I think about it, thinking about the questions and the way that I described the functionality of my body ... Such as, “Oh, I'm using my legs to walk to the car. I'm going to go home and [use my arms to] give my boyfriend a hug.”

Abigail noted that some of the questions gave her the opportunity to choose more than just traditional “body-options,” such as her heart and head. It made her happy to consider that “in relationships, especially mine is a good example, looks aside, like looks don't even matter. So it's cool that I can put my heart and my head in the same [level as my physical body.]”

Appreciation and acceptance: “on a journey to appreciate what my body does for me”

Other participants indicated that the intervention helped them to appreciate or love their body, especially in light of its functionality. For instance, Francis said, “My body has a lot of utility that I never really gave it credit for,” and Jenny admitted,

[I] definitely don’t appreciate my body as much as maybe I should. I definitely need my body for certain things, and I should be more appreciative of its qualities, rather than just its general appearance, because it’s so hard to just, like, cater to what society asks women to look like, and do with their body and stuff. Just trying to get away from that and find what’s really important in life.

Similarly, Becky remarked that she now looks at her thighs and appreciates how much she uses them. Jasmine said she is on a “journey to appreciate what my body does for me ... I will surprise myself with how far I can go, or how much I can lift, or something like that. So, I think from then, I’ve just started to appreciate more of what I can actually do.”

Emma and Olivia commented on gaining a greater self-acceptance. Emma said, “I do feel like I’ve had a little bit more acceptance in regards to how I feel about myself [post intervention]” and that she was “coming to a place of willingness,” which resulted in running a 5K. Olivia said she was overcoming her insecurities: “I’m definitely just more confident. Gradually, I’m learning to, like, just accept who I am and not try to conform into, like, media ideals or just society overall, just being comfortable in my own body.” Ava said the intervention was about “self-love”:

But at the end, it was really just about self-love. To realize that people are different, like, regardless of what you don’t like about yourself, or do like. People are just different. You don’t want to be like anyone else, or compare your image to anymore else, so I just feel like, you know, at the end of the day, like, “Just love yourself.”

Discussion

This qualitative study extends innovative and burgeoning research that tests individual-level strategies designed to shift women’s focus away from body appearance and instead toward functionality dimensions of the body (Alleva et al., 2014, 2015a). We developed the 3D-BAM intervention program focusing on body functionality and appreciation, rather than body appearance, as a method to improve women’s body image, reduce self-objectification, and improve health outcomes. Following the intervention, we were interested in how women viewed the usefulness of body functionality and appreciation in their own words. Specifically, we conducted in-depth interviews to investigate how women described participating in the intervention and what they learned about themselves from the experience.

Our results showed that women were able to reflect on new and unexpected ways in which they thought about their body, resulting in new definitions of their body focused on appreciating the functionality components of their body rather than physical appearance. For instance, women discussed that they never thought about the parts of their body they use in their romantic relationships, friendships, and family relationships. Results are consistent with previous research that has suggested that a functionality-based approach to the body, which comprises the unobservable dimension of the body (e.g., physical strength, health), the body’s skills (e.g., playing an instrument, drawing), and the ways in which the body interacts with others (e.g., holding hands, body language), influences the body image of women (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Wood-Barcalow, Tyka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). Creating a space for women to reflect on the positive and/or meaningful components of body functionality as they relate to interpersonal relationships may be a useful strategy to help redefine body image.

Findings also demonstrated that the intervention helped women recognize, and in some cases reinforce, the value of utility over aesthetics. Participants discussed a reframing process that led them to view body parts that they saw as fat to seeing them as strong and a vital part to life (e.g., childbirth, walking). Similar to results found by Alleva et al. (2015a) who tested an intervention using a structured writing assignment that focused on the functionality of women’s body, and others (Wasyliw & Butler, 2014), women in our study learned to place more value in *function over form*.

Lastly, results showed that the intervention helped women to appreciate and accept the qualities of their bodies. Participants noted how they began to appreciate what their bodies do for them. Participants also discussed learning to accept who they were and not try to conform to media ideals. Past research has demonstrated the prominent force of mass media in distributing idealized images of women (Grabe et al., 2008; Tiggemann, 2011). Work by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015a, 2015b), among others, has noted that body appreciation and acceptance are important features of a positive body image.

Taken together, our results suggest that reflecting on body functionality and appreciation has the potential to improve body image among a sample of young women. Therefore, this type of intervention may be a useful mechanism to improve women's body image as it has been found to encourage new ways of defining body image, bolster the importance of body function over aesthetics, and promote body acceptance and appreciation. Importantly, these findings could have significant implications for public health and social work, as researchers have made a compelling case for the relationship between body image and health behaviors and outcomes. For example, body image is significantly related to risky sexual behaviors that place one at risk for negative outcomes such as an unplanned pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections (e.g., Littleton, Radecki Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2005), both of which are significant public health issues (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2018) that social workers address with clients regularly. This research suggests that we may be able to improve body image by focusing on appreciation and functionality, which *could* lead to improvements in health behaviors and outcomes. Future research should investigate this further.

Our findings should also be viewed within the context of a few limitations. First, the majority of our participants identified as White. Future research should examine whether perceptions of the usefulness of a body functionality intervention may be shaped by race/ethnicity and culture. Second, our study did not include men. Future research should also explore how men view body functionality in their own words. Despite these limitations, our findings extend research on the effectiveness of body appreciation and functionality interventions. In listening to the voices of women, results show that interventions focused on body appreciation and functionality rather than appearance-only can aide women in new ways of defining body image, valuing body function over aesthetics, and encouraging their body acceptance and appreciation.

Conclusion

Interventions that aim to improve positive body image such as body appreciation are critical to improving women's health and well-being. The current study discussed three themes that emerged from qualitative interviews of 18–25-year-old women participants after completing the 3D-BAM intervention. The three themes, ways of defining body image, importance of body function over aesthetics, and body acceptance and appreciation suggest that one-time body appreciation interventions are valuable for shifting young women's focus away from appearance and toward function.

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