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Associations between Body Image, Social Physique Anxiety, and Dating Anxiety in
Heterosexual Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Studies have suggested that body image is associated with dating anxiety, but are limited by small sample sizes, singular operationalisations of body image, and a lack of consideration of the concurrent effects of social physique anxiety. To overcome these gaps in the literature, we asked an online sample of 501 heterosexual emerging adults from the United Kingdom (age $M = 21.16$, 50.3% women) to complete measures of multidimensional body image, social physique anxiety, and dating anxiety. Correlational analyses indicated that more negative body image and social physique anxiety were both significantly associated with greater dating anxiety. However, in hierarchical regressions, the variance accounted for by body image variables was largely non-significant and weak after accounting for the effects of social physique anxiety. In exploratory analyses, we found that social physique anxiety mediated the relationship between the body image facet of appearance orientation and dating anxiety. These results highlight the importance of developing targeted interventions to reduce social physique anxiety and unhealthy appearance orientation in heterosocial dating contexts.

Keywords: Dating anxiety; Body image; Social physique anxiety; Appearance orientation; Gender differences

1. Introduction

Body image is a multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment encompassing affective, cognitive, perceptual, and behavioural aspects related to one's body and appearance (Cash & Smolak, 2011). An extensive body of research has established that negative body image is associated with multiple detrimental outcomes, including poorer psychological well-being, unhealthy weight management practices, risk of substance abuse, and disordered eating behaviours (see reviews in Cash, 2012). Given these significant consequences of negative body image, along with its high prevalence globally (Swami et al., 2010), negative body image is increasingly viewed as an important public health concern (Atkinson et al., 2020). This has led to greater recognition that negative body image requires sustained attention and intervention, particularly among emerging adults (aged 18-29 years) who are especially vulnerable to body image concerns during an important period of identity and bodily development (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2018).

To date, the extant research documenting outcomes of negative body image has focused heavily on psychological and physical health functioning, with much less work on other important life domains (Atkinson & Diedrichs, 2021). One such life domain that may be especially pertinent for emerging adults is interpersonal functioning (Cash & Fleming, 2002), particularly as emerging adulthood is often characterised by the development, re-evaluation, and maintenance of romantic, sexual, and peer relationships (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2011). For instance, in a seminal study, Cash, Thériault and colleagues (2004) described how negative interpersonal feedback about one's appearance may lead to greater concerns about appearance, contributing to more negative body image and poorer psychological well-being. In turn, negative body image contributes to increased sensitivity to rejection, where individuals anticipate negative evaluations from others, resulting in

diminished confidence and greater social anxiety in interpersonal contexts, which then increases the likelihood of interpersonal rejection (Blöte & Westenberg, 2007).

Consistent with this theorising, Cash, Thériault and colleagues (2004) reported that indices of negative body image were significantly associated with social-evaluative anxiety in college students from the United States. Additionally, negative body image was significantly associated with romantic intimacy anxiety, though only in women. Since then, a small body of work has documented significant associations between negative body image and indices of interpersonal functioning, including social anxiety (i.e., fear of social situations due to perceived negative interpersonal evaluations; e.g., Cash, Phillips et al., 2004), opposite-sex peer relationships (e.g., Davison & McCabe, 2006), confidence about peer acceptance (Gerner & Wilson, 2005), and the quality of interpersonal interactions and relationships (e.g., Costarelli et al., 2008; Mills et al., 2014). In comparison with middle-aged and older adults, for whom relationships between negative body image and interpersonal outcomes tend to be weaker or non-significant (Davison & McCabe, 2005), these relationships are relatively robust in emerging adults.

One specific element of interpersonal functioning that has received scant attention within the body image literature is *dating anxiety*, which refers to the “distress associated with interactions with potential romantic partners prior to the development of a full-fledged relationship” (Hope & Heimberg, 1990, p. 220). Building on the work of Cash, Thériault and colleagues (2004), it is possible that romantic rejection or negative feedback about one’s appearance in dating contexts leads to more negative body image, which in turn contributes to greater dating anxiety (see also Harrington & Overall, 2021). Indeed, this seems likely given the importance of physical attractiveness in evaluations of potential romantic partners, as well as in predicting romantic interest and relationship initiation (for a review, see Swami, 2021). Given this importance, it is possible that individuals who experience romantic

rejection internalise a belief – whether accurate or not – that they were rejected because of their physical appearance, which thus contributes to negative body image. Furthermore, once significant levels of dating anxiety and distress occur, they can lead to various mental health and behavioural concerns – such as lower self-esteem, poorer sexual development, feelings of loneliness, a lack of confidence or assertiveness, and inhibition in seeking romantic relationships (Adamczyk et al., 2021; Sumter & Vandenberg, 2019; Weisskirch, 2017; Welsh et al., 2005) – that further contribute to negative body image.

To date, however, only two studies have specifically examined associations between body image and dating anxiety. In a study involving mainly Australian, unpartnered women with breast cancer ($N = 92$), body image dissatisfaction ($r = .55$) and self-evaluative salience (i.e., the extent to which individuals define their self-worth in terms of their appearance; $r = .58$) were reported to be significantly associated with dating anxiety (Shaw et al., 2018). In another study of emerging adults in the United States ($N = 231$), body appreciation (i.e., a facet of positive body image) was found to be significantly associated with dating anxiety ($r = -.40$; Gupta et al., 2021). Although important, these studies are limited in terms of their small sample sizes, their measurement of body image as a singular construct (and, in the case of Gupta et al., lack of clarity in their conceptualisation of body image), and a lack of consideration of gendered effects.

In terms of the latter, Gupta et al. (2021) reported that body appreciation significantly predicted dating anxiety after controlling for the effects of gender, but did not report on gender differences in measured variables. This is important because the link between negative body image and dating anxiety may be differentially affected by gender. According to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), patriarchal societies sexually objectify women through media images, social interactions, and sociocultural messages about femininity. In dating scenarios in particular, women are likely to experience visual scrutiny,

sexualised evaluations, and appearance-related feedback from others, which lead to appearance-related self-consciousness and self-objectification that promotes negative body image (Calogero et al., 2009; Garcia et al., 2016; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Furthermore, in many societies, women are socialised to place considerably greater value than men on their physical appearance as a determinant of both self-worth and romantic desirability (Swami, 2021). Indeed, experimental work has shown that merely being primed with relationship-related words leads to greater self-objectification in unpartnered women (Sanchez & Broccoli, 2008). As such, it remains important to examine the extent to which relationships between negative body image and dating anxiety vary in women and men separately.

A further unresolved issue is the extent to which negative body image is associated with dating anxiety independently of social physique anxiety. The latter refers to an individual's perceived concern with the presentation of their physique in situations that they perceive others to be evaluating them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The construct is likely distinct from dating anxiety (Chorney & Morris, 2008; Glickman & La Greca, 2004) and is generally only weakly-to-moderately correlated with indices of negative body image (e.g., McCreary & Saucier, 2009). Nevertheless, insofar as social physique anxiety is an affective manifestation of self-presentation concerns around one's body (i.e., an affective expression of body image; Martin Ginis et al., 2011) and given its focus on interpersonal evaluation and self-presentational concerns (Hart et al., 1989), it is possible that social physique anxiety plays an important role in shaping dating anxiety. Indeed, greater social physique anxiety has been shown to be associated with lower dating involvement in Turkish adolescents (Demir, 2021), although we are not aware of studies examining associations with dating anxiety specifically.

Given that body image-related emotions, such as social physique anxiety, and body image cognitive processes are theorised as being distinct (Cash, 2002), it is also worth

examining the extent to which body image is directly associated with dating anxiety once the effects of social physique anxiety have been accounted for. Indeed, emergent research has suggested that social physique anxiety may play a more important role than body image in shaping outcomes such as depressive symptoms (Alcaraz-Ibáñez & Sicilia, 2020), although dating anxiety has not been a focus of this work. As such, it is important to consider the extent to which negative body image may be associated with dating anxiety independently of, or concurrently with, social physique anxiety. Another possibility worthy of investigation is the extent to which social physique anxiety mediates relationships between body image cognitions (e.g., greater investment in one's appearance) and dating anxiety.

1.1. The Present Study

Given the issues above, we conducted an assessment of associations between multidimensional body image and dating anxiety in a sample of heterosexual, emerging adults in the United Kingdom. In terms of sampling, we focused on emerging adulthood because of the important role romantic relationships play in identity development and well-being during this life-stage (for a review, see Gómez-López et al., 2019). Dating experiences are also known to increase during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) and, indeed, some scholars have suggested that dating and romantic involvement are developmental tasks that become particularly salient during this period of life (Furman & Collibee, 2014). On the other hand, our decision to focus on heterosexual participants was driven by practical demands: existing measures of dating anxiety were designed to measure heterosocial anxieties, and we are not aware of relevant measures that have been validated for use in non-heterosexual populations.

In order to measure body image, we used the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire–Appearance Scales (MBSRQ–AS; Cash, 2000), a self-report inventory of attitudinal aspects of body image. Doing so allowed us to comprehensively capture the

multidimensionality of the construct of negative body image, tapping evaluative and cognitive-behavioural orientations toward appearance (Cash, 2000, 2015). Further, we also examined the extent to which social physique anxiety is associated with dating anxiety, and the extent to which associations between multidimensional body image and dating anxiety remain significant after accounting for the effects of social physique anxiety. Building on previous work (Gupta et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2018), we hypothesised that more negative body image (and specifically appearance satisfaction) and greater social physique anxiety would be significantly associated with greater dating anxiety. In exploratory analyses, we also assessed the extent to which social physique anxiety mediates the relationship between appearance orientation (i.e., greater investment in one's appearance) and dating anxiety.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 252 women and 249 men from the United Kingdom who ranged in age from 18 to 29 years ($M = 21.16$, $SD = 2.15$) and in self-reported body mass index (BMI) from 14.23 to 45.76 kg/m² ($M = 24.05$, $SD = 4.74$). The majority of participants (71.9%) were White, 13.2% were Asian, 5.4% were Black, 8.0% were mixed race, and 1.6% were of another ancestry. In terms of educational attainment, 6.0% had completed their General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs), 48.3% had an Advanced-Level (A-Level) qualification, 32.9% had an undergraduate degree, 8.0% had a postgraduate degree, 4.4% were in full-time education, and 0.4% had another qualification.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Body image. To measure multidimensional body image, we used the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire–Appearance Scales (MBSRQ–AS; Cash, 2000). This is a 34-item measure with items rated on 5-point scales, with anchors varying depending on the subscale. Based on data from English-speaking participants (Brown

et al., 1990), Cash (2000) recommended computing scores for five subscales, namely Appearance Evaluation (AE; higher scores reflect greater satisfaction with one's physical attractiveness; 7 items; sample item: "Most people would consider me good-looking"), Appearance Orientation (AO; higher scores reflect greater degree of investment in one's physical appearance; 12 items; sample item: "Before going out in public, I always notice how I look"), Overweight Preoccupation (OP; higher scores reflect greater fat anxiety, weight vigilance, dieting, and eating restraint; sample item: "I constantly worry about being or becoming fat"), Self-Classified Weight (SCW; higher scores reflect a perception that one is very overweight; 2 items about self and other perceptions of weight status), and the Body Areas Satisfaction Scale (BASS; higher scores reflect greater satisfaction with discrete aspects of one's appearance; 9 items; sample item: "Weight"). Cash (2000) summarised the extensive evidence in favour of the reliability and validity of scores on the MBSRQ-AS in English-speaking populations. In the present study, McDonald's ω for scores on the AO, AE, OP, and BASS subscales were all $\geq .83$. The inter-correlation between the two SCW items was very high ($r = .82$); because ω cannot be estimated for 2-item scales, we used Cronbach's α to assess reliability of SCW scores, with estimates found to be adequate at .90 (95% CI = .88, .92).

2.2.2. Social physique anxiety. Participants were asked to complete the Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPAS; Hart et al., 1989). This is a 12-item measure of anxiety associated with perceived evaluation of one's body or physical appearance (sample item: "When it comes to displaying my physique/figure to others, I am a shy person"). Items were rated on a 5-point type ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*like me a lot*) and an overall score was computed as the mean of all items, with higher scores indicating greater social physique anxiety. Scores on the SPAS have been shown to have adequate construct validity, internal consistency, and test-retest reliability (Hart et al., 1989), including in emerging adults

(Motl & Conroy, 2001). In the present study, McDonald's ω for SPAS scores was .91 (95% CI = .90, .92).

2.2.3. Dating anxiety. To measure dating anxiety, we used two subscales from the Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (DAS–A; Glickman & La Greca, 2004). The Fear of Negative Evaluation subscale (FEN; 10 items; sample item: “I am afraid that the person I am dating will find fault with me”) measures the degree to which an individual is concerned or worried that a date or member of the opposite sex will judge them in a negative manner, whereas the Social Distress subscale (SD; 7 items; sample item: “I feel nervous in dating situation”) measures inhibition and distress when interaction with a single member of the opposite sex. Although nominally developed for use with adolescents, the DAS–A is widely used with emerging adults, and researchers have documented good indices of validity and reliability in this age group (e.g., Adamczyk et al., 2021; Rizvi et al., 2021). In the present study, McDonald's ω for FEN scores was .94 (95% CI = .93, .95) and .91 (95% CI = .90, .92) for SD scores.

2.2.4. Demographics. As part of the survey package, participants were asked to provide their demographic details consisting of their gender identity, age, highest educational qualification, race/ethnicity, height, and weight. Height and weight were used to compute BMI as kg/m^2 . Missing height and/or weight data ($n = 21$) or improbable BMI values (< 12 and $> 50 \text{ kg/m}^2$; $n = 12$) were treated as missing values and replaced using the mean replacement technique (i.e., replacement using the mean of valid surrounding values).

2.3. Procedures

Once ethics approval was obtained from the first author's institution, all data were collected via the Prolific website (a crowdworking platform that allows scientists to recruit participants; Palan & Schitter, 2018) on July 20-21, 2021. The project was advertised as a study on “attitudes toward the body and psychological well-being” with an estimated

completion time (10 min). Potential participants were eligible to complete the survey if they were residents and nationals of the United Kingdom (to ensure a culturally homogeneous sample), between the ages of 18 and 29 years (i.e., emerging adulthood; Hochberg & Konner, 2020), single and unpartnered (i.e., not married, cohabiting, or in a romantic/dating relationship), self-identified as heterosexual (because the DAS–A was designed to measure heterosocial anxieties), and able to complete a survey in English. Prolific ID codes and IP addresses were checked to ensure that no participant completed the survey more than once. After providing digital informed consent, participants were asked to complete the scales described above, which were presented in a counter-balanced order in Qualtrics™. The survey was anonymous and participants were paid £0.90 upon completion. All participants received debriefing information at the end of the survey.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Less than 0.2% of the data were missing; these data were missing completely at random (MCAR), $\chi^2(248) = 200.91, p = .987$, as determined by Little's (1988) MCAR test and were replaced using mean replacements. We first examined gender differences on all variables using Bonferonni-corrected ($\alpha = p = .05/8 = .006$) independent-samples *t*-tests. The results showed that, compared to men, women had significantly greater dating anxiety on both DAS–A subscales, greater appearance orientation, overweight preoccupation, self-perceived weight, and social physique anxiety, with moderate effect sizes (Cohen's *d*; see Table 1). There were no significant gender differences in appearance evaluation and body areas satisfaction.

Next, we examined inter-scale bivariate correlations between all variables, separately for women and men. As can be seen in Table 1, in both women and men, higher fear of negative evaluations in dating contexts was significantly associated with lower appearance

evaluation and body areas satisfaction, and with greater appearance orientation, overweight preoccupation, self-perceived weight, and social physique anxiety. Additionally, in women, social distress in dating contexts was significantly associated with lower appearance evaluation and body areas satisfaction, and with greater appearance orientation, overweight preoccupation, self-perceived weight, and social physique anxiety. In men, however, greater social distress was only significantly associated with lower appearance evaluation and body areas satisfaction, and higher appearance orientation and social physique anxiety. Fisher's z comparisons indicated that the strength of these associations only differed between women and men for the correlations between social distress and overweight preoccupation ($z = 2.46$, $p = .007$) and social physique anxiety ($z = 1.92$, $p = .027$), respectively. All other comparisons indicated no significant gendered differences in the strength of the correlations.

3.2. Hierarchical Regressions

To test the study hypotheses, we conducted a series of hierarchical regressions in which the dating anxiety subscale scores (i.e., fear of negative evaluations and social distress) were entered as criterion variables. In a first step of the regression, we entered social physique anxiety as a predictor; all MBSRQ-AS subscale scores were entered in a second step. Although our correlational analyses indicated few significant differences between women and men, we nevertheless conducted these regressions separately for women and men (see Tables 2 and 3). Multicollinearity was not a limiting factor in any of the regressions, with all variance inflation factors ≤ 5.65 (values < 10 are indicative of acceptable collinearity; Hair et al., 1995).

In women, the first step of the regression with fear of negative evaluation was significant, $F(1, 250) = 150.46$, $p < .001$, Adj. $R^2 = .37$. The second step of the regression was also significant, $F(6, 245) = 29.38$, $p < .001$, Adj. $R^2 = .41$, with the addition of the MBSRQ-AS variables accounting for a significant increase in variance explained, $F(5, 245) = 3.60$, p

= .004, $\Delta R^2 = .04$. Of the variables entered in the second step, only social physique anxiety and appearance orientation were significant predictors. When social distress was entered as the criterion variable, the first step of the regression was significant, $F(1, 250) = 112.29, p < .001$, $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .31$, as was the second step, $F(6, 245) = 19.78, p < .001$, $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .33$.

However, the MBSRQ–AS variables did not account for a significant change in variance explained, $F(5, 245) = 1.19, p = .312, \Delta R^2 = .02$, and the only significant predictor in the second step was social physique anxiety.

In men, when fear of negative evaluations was entered as the criterion variable, both the first, $F(1, 247) = 169.36, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .40$, and second steps were significant, $F(6, 242) = 30.70, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .43$. The MBSRQ–AS variables accounted for a significant change in variance explained, $F(5, 242) = 2.79, p = .048, \Delta R^2 = .03$, and both social physique anxiety and appearance orientation were significant predictors in the second step. In terms of social distress, the first step of the regression was significant, $F(1, 247) = 56.63, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .18$. The second step was also significant, $F(6, 242) = 10.66, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .19$, but the MBSRQ–AS variables did not account for a significant change in variance explained, $F(5, 242) = 1.37, p = .235, \Delta R^2 = .01$. In the second step, only social physique anxiety was a significant predictor of social distress.

3.3. Mediation Analyses

Based on the finding that both social physique anxiety and appearance orientation were generally significant predictors of dating anxiety, we considered – in exploratory analyses – the possibility that social physique anxiety mediates the relationship between appearance orientation and dating anxiety. To test the robustness of indirect effects in a mediation model, the bootstrap method (Hayes, 2017) was used with 5,000 bootstrap samples drawn from the dataset to calculate indirect and direct effects, as well as bias-corrected 95% CIs (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Effects were considered to be significant if the respective CI

did not overlap zero (Mallinckrodt et al., 2006). For these analyses, we used the total sample, given the lack of gendered effects uncovered in earlier analyses.

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, the effects of appearance orientation on fear of negative evaluation and social distress, respectively, were mediated by social physique anxiety. For fear of negative evaluation, all standardised direct effects were significant (see Figure 1), the standardised indirect effect was .32 (95% CI = .24, .40), and the standardised total effect was .55 ($R^2 = .12$). For social distress, the direct effects of appearance orientation on social physique anxiety, and of social physique anxiety on social distress were significant. The direct effect of appearance orientation on social distress was not significant (see Figure 2). The standardised indirect effect was .26 (95% CI = .19, .35) and the standardised total effect was .36 ($R^2 = .05$).

4. Discussion

Here, we examined associations between dating anxiety, social physique anxiety, and body image in a sample of heterosexual emerging adults. Our correlational analyses indicated that both social physique anxiety and indices of body image were significantly correlated with greater fear of negative evaluations and social distress in dating contexts. However, in regression analyses, after accounting for the effects of social physique anxiety, only appearance orientation explained a small increase in variance explained in terms of fear of negative evaluations, and none of the body image variables significantly accounted for added variance in social distress. In exploratory analyses, we also found that social physique anxiety mediated the relationship between appearance orientation and dating anxiety, although effects were larger for fear of negative evaluation compared to social distress. Overall, these results add a degree of nuance to previous reports suggesting that body image is significantly associated with dating anxiety (Gupta et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2018).

The main finding of the present study was a robust link between greater social physique anxiety and dating anxiety. In broad outline, this finding is consistent with previous work showing that social physique anxiety is important in terms of understanding interpersonal outcomes (for a review, see Sabiston et al., 2014) that may also extend to dating experiences (Demir, 2021). For individuals high in social physique anxiety, heterosocial dating contexts may be especially threatening because such situations are marked by heightened scrutiny of one's appearance and body (Swami, 2021). Indeed, our results suggest that individuals who are high in social physique anxiety are likely to be fearful of negative evaluations from others in dating contexts, but are also more likely to experience greater social distress when interacting with members of the opposite sex. Individuals high in social physique anxiety may, therefore, avoid heterosocial situations and activities in which their bodies and appearance may be scrutinised (e.g., first dates). Where behavioural avoidance is not possible (e.g., necessary social engagements), these individuals may engage in short-term appearance management strategies (e.g., body-checking, hiding one's body in baggy clothing, or covering one's body with one's arms and hands), which may help to improve body-related cognitions and regulate feelings of anxiety (Kowalski et al., 2006; Sabiston et al., 2007)

In terms of multidimensional body image, our results indicated that only appearance orientation explained significant additional variance over-and-above social physique anxiety in terms of fear of negative evaluation. It is possible that individuals who are high in appearance orientation (i.e., who invest more strongly in their physical appearance) hold more dysfunctional beliefs about the importance of appearance for life outcomes (see Cash, Melnyk et al., 2004), and consequently experience greater anxiety in dating contexts where the salience of appearance is heightened. Another possibility is suggested by our exploratory analyses: it may be that greater appearance orientation is associated with greater social physique anxiety, which in turn is associated with greater dating anxiety. That is, individuals

who more strongly invest in their appearance and perhaps those who hold dysfunctional appearance-related beliefs may be more likely to experience anxiety about their appearance in social contexts, which in turn leads to greater heterosocial dating anxiety.

Such an account is consistent with Cash's (2002) cognitive-behavioural model, which suggests that body image-related emotions (e.g., social physique anxiety) and body image cognitive processes (e.g., appearance orientation) may be differentially associated with outcomes (e.g., interpersonal experiences). Certainly, emerging evidence suggests that social physique anxiety may play an important mediating role between body image cognitions and outcomes such as disordered eating (Alcaraz-Ibáñez et al., 2020), although our work is the first to suggest that such a model may also apply to dating anxiety. In this sense, it is possible that unhealthy appearance-related cognitions (e.g., the belief that one always has to look good) provide the basis for the development of greater fear about negative evaluations of one's physique (for a review, see Jarry et al., 2019). Such social physique anxieties are likely to be heightened in dating and heterosocial scenarios, where one may perceive heightened scrutiny of their appearance (Swami, 2021). Although not specifically examined in our study, it is also possible that romantic rejection contributes to greater appearance orientation and thus social physique anxiety (see Cash, Thériault et al., 2004), especially if individuals also doubt their ability to create and maintain desired appearance-based impressions in dating contexts (Cash & Syzmanski, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1995).

Of course, it should be noted that appearance orientation only accounted for a small proportion of additional variance in fear of negative evaluations, and also did not significantly predict social distress once the variance accounted for by social physique anxiety had been taken into consideration. Similarly, our mediating models accounted for only a small proportion of the variance (between 5 and 12%). Indeed, overall, although body image variables were significant correlates of dating anxiety, these relationships did not

generally reach significance once the variance accounted for by social physique anxiety had been explained. Taken as a whole, these results suggest that, body image cognitions may play a role in shaping dating anxiety, although its effects are likely indirect via social physique anxiety. On the other hand, body image evaluations may play a diminished role in shaping dating anxiety and are unlikely to exert much of an effect beyond body image-related emotions, such as social physique anxiety. Theoretically, our results cast a light on a relatively underexplored area of research and calls for improved understandings of the ways in which body image-related emotions may mediate the effects of body image cognitions on interpersonal outcomes.

In addition, and in contrast to our theorising, the relationships (both in terms of direction and strength) between dating anxiety, body image, and social physique anxiety were largely equivalent between women and men. This is a difficult finding to explain fully in the absence of additional investigation, but it is possible that, in the context of dating at least, body image-related emotions are just as salient for men as they are for women. This explanation is consistent with the suggestion that, in contemporary heterosocial dating contexts, the importance of physical appearance in terms of relationship initiation following face-to-face meetings is largely similar for both women and men (for a review, see Swami, 2021). That is, in dating contexts, both women and men may have internalised the notion that one's physical appearance is of paramount importance in partner perceptions. Another possibility is that gendered effects may be less important than intra-individual variables that are common across gender, such as negative interactions with romantic partners (La Greca & Mackey, 2007).

4.1. Limitations

A number of limitations of the present study should be considered. First, the present work was conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although social distancing

mandates had largely been minimised across the United Kingdom at the time of the study (all COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted in England, whereas minimal restrictions remained in place in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales), previous research has suggested that COVID-19-related stress and anxiety negatively impacted on body image outcomes in adults in the United Kingdom (e.g., Swami, Horne et al., 2021; Swami, Todd et al., 2021), and may have attenuated appearance orientation (Gullo & Walker, 2021). As such, it may be difficult to know to what extent the present results are time- and context-limited. In a similar vein, we cannot be certain that our findings are broadly generalisable given our recruitment methods. While it would certainly be useful to replicate our findings in more representative samples of emerging adults in the United Kingdom, it may also be important to examine the present issues in social identity groups that we did not examine here (e.g., queer adults, adolescents, and older adults).

Additionally, the present study was focused on cognitive elements of multidimensional body image, as measured using the MBSRQ-AS. In future research, it may be valuable to examine associations between dating anxiety and other facets of body image, such as perceptual (e.g., actual-ideal weight discrepancy) and behavioural (e.g., body checking) components. Similarly, future research could also include additional variables that were omitted here, such as appearance rejection sensitivity (Park, 2007). Doing so may allow scholars to identify fuller mechanistic pathways linking social physique anxiety, body image, and dating anxiety, and to develop data-driven theoretical models linking these constructs. Another way in which the present work could be extended is through the use of alternative research designs, such as experience sampling methods (e.g., Mills et al., 2014). This would be especially useful given that social physique anxiety can be conceptualised as both a trait and state construct (Martin Ginis et al., 2011) and may allow researchers to more precisely identify everyday situations in which social physique anxiety detrimentally shapes

interpersonal outcomes. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of our data means that any suggestion of causation should be treated with extreme caution and should be corroborated in future work using longitudinal or experimental designs.

4.2. Conclusion

To conclude, our results suggest that associations between multidimensional body image and dating anxiety were largely attenuated once the effects of social physique anxiety had been accounted for. We also proposed and found evidence of a mediating role for social physique anxiety in the relationship between appearance orientation and dating anxiety. These issues are far from trivial: dating anxiety has been associated with a range of mental health and behavioural concerns, including higher rates of depression, lower self-esteem, unhealthy sexual development, and loneliness (Adamczyk et al., 2021; Dow et al., 1985; Weisskirch, 2017; Welsh et al., 2005). To the extent that body image attitudes and social physique anxiety are related to dating anxiety, it may be useful to consider whether interventions designed to manage and reduce appearance-based anxieties are effective at reducing dating anxiety. For instance, it may be possible to adapt or extend existing intervention methods developed for managing social anxiety (see Heimberg, 2002), although more data on body image-related issues in relation to dating anxiety is also needed.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, the Results of Independent Samples t-Tests Examining Gender Differences, and Bivariate Correlations between All Variables for Women (Top Diagonal) and Men (Bottom Diagonal).

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1)	DAS–A FEN		.75**	-.47**	.35**	.38**	.19*	-.46**	.61**
(2)	DAS–A SD	.76**		-.45**	.23**	.32*** ^a	.18*	-.44**	.56*** ^a
(3)	MBSRQ AE	-.45**	-.35**		-.02	-.50**	-.54**	.85**	-.81**
(4)	MBSRQ AO	.30**	.17*	-.03		.31**	.01	-.15*	.29**
(5)	MBSRQ OP	.25**	.11 ^a	-.32**	.30**		.45**	-.55**	.63**
(6)	MBSRQ SCW	.13*	.07	-.33**	-.01	.59**		-.47**	.48**
(7)	MBSRQ BASS	-.50**	-.37**	.84**	-.15*	-.33**	-.27**		-.77**
(8)	Social physique anxiety	.64**	.43*** ^a	-.75**	.31**	.49**	.30**	.74**	
Women	<i>M</i>	3.61	3.56	2.72	3.63	3.03	3.36	2.88	3.65
	<i>SD</i>	0.95	0.96	0.96	0.61	1.06	0.78	0.77	0.86
Men	<i>M</i>	3.28	3.18	2.91	3.36	2.42	3.10	2.98	3.18
	<i>SD</i>	1.06	1.04	0.87	0.65	0.99	0.83	0.72	0.92
	<i>t</i>	3.66 ^b	4.20 ^b	2.30	4.98 ^b	6.65 ^b	3.75 ^b	1.57	5.98 ^b
	Cohen's <i>d</i>	0.32	0.38	0.21	0.45	0.59	0.34	0.14	0.53

Note. ^aIndicates a significant gender difference in the strength of the association as determined by Fisher's *z*; ^bIndicates a significant gender difference at Bonferroni-corrected $p = .006$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. DAS–A = Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents, FEN = Fear of Negative Evaluation, SD = Social Distress, MBSRQ = Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire, AE = Appearance Evaluation, AO = Appearance Orientation, OP = Overweight Preoccupation, SCW = Self-Classified Weight, BASS = Body Areas Satisfaction Scale.

Table 2*Results of the Hierarchical Regression Predicting Dating Anxiety in Women.*

Step			Fear of Negative Evaluations					Social Distress				
			B	SE	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	B	SE	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1	SPA		.68	.06	.61	12.27	< .001	.62	.06	.56	5.87	< .001
2	SPA		.60	.11	.55	5.46	< .001	.60	.12	.54	4.99	< .001
	MBSRQ AE		-.10	.11	-.10	-0.86	.390	-.05	.12	-.05	-0.38	.708
	MBSRQ AO		.30	.09	.20	3.44	< .001	.12	.10	.08	1.28	.200
	MBSRQ OP		-.01	.06	-.02	-0.24	.812	-.04	.07	-.04	-0.59	.559
	MBSRQ SCW		-.14	.07	-.12	-1.90	.058	-.13	.08	-.11	-1.69	.093
	MBSRQ BASS		.01	.12	.01	0.12	.908	-.06	.13	-.05	-.43	.666

Note. SPA = Social physique anxiety, MBSRQ = Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire, AE = Appearance Evaluation, AO = Appearance Orientation, OP = Overweight Preoccupation, SCW = Self-Classified Weight, BASS = Body Areas Satisfaction Scale.

Table 3*Results of the Hierarchical Regression Predicting Dating Anxiety in Men.*

Step			Fear of Negative Evaluations					Social Distress				
			B	SE	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	B	SE	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1	SPA		.74	.06	.64	13.01	< .001	.49	.07	.43	7.53	< .001
2	SPA		.71	.10	.62	7.03	< .001	.43	.12	.38	3.69	< .001
	MBSRQ AE		.13	.12	.11	1.08	.280	-.03	.14	-.02	-0.18	.855
	MBSRQ AO		.19	.09	.12	2.12	.035	.13	.11	.08	1.19	.234
	MBSRQ OP		-.11	.07	-.10	-1.44	.152	-.15	.09	-.14	-1.69	.092
	MBSRQ SCW		.01	.08	.01	0.01	.997	-.01	.09	-.01	-0.01	.994
	MBSRQ BASS		-.23	.14	-.16	-1.67	.096	-.15	.16	-.10	-0.95	.346

Note. SPA = Social physique anxiety, MBSRQ = Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire, AE = Appearance Evaluation, AO = Appearance Orientation, OP = Overweight Preoccupation, SCW = Self-Classified Weight, BASS = Body Areas Satisfaction Scale.

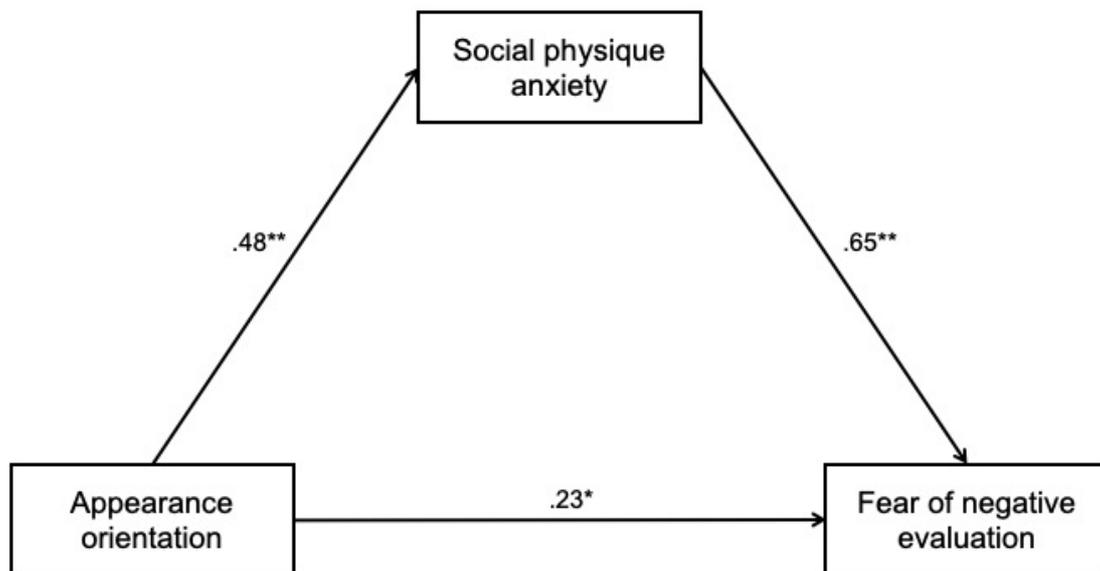


Figure 1

*Standardised Direct Effects of the Mediation Model with Fear of Negative Evaluation. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.*

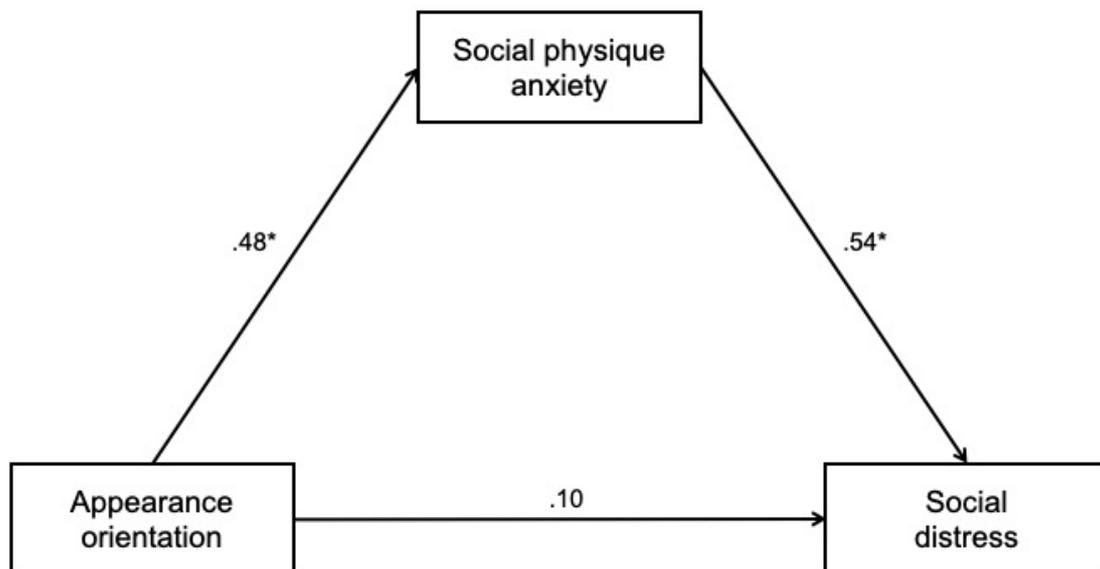


Figure 2

*Standardised Direct Effects of the Mediation Model with Social Distress. * $p < .001$.*