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Considering Positive Body Image Through the Lens of Culture and Minority Social Identities

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When writing about positive body image, scholars typically highlight a distinction between a historical focus of body image research on pathological aspects and a more contemporary focus on positive aspects (e.g., Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). This distinction helps to draw attention to the similarities and differences in the developmental trajectories of research on negative and positive body image. Like the study of negative body image (Cash, 2004), initial work on positive body image was limited to samples of young (typically college) women in the United States (U.S.). Unlike its counterpart, however, research on positive aspects has branched out very rapidly to include a wide range of different social groups and individuals (Tiggemann, 2015).

Much of this work draws, albeit implicitly, on the notion of “identity” being something that is routinely co-constructed and sustained by the activities of an individual within local social worlds (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1991). In her seminal work, for example, Becker (2004, p. 535) suggested that identities in post-modern societies are increasingly “constructed as a process of competitively positioning oneself through the savvy manipulation of cultural symbols”, such as through the consumption of material goods, adorning the body to demonstrate cultural capital, or attempts to reconfigure the body. In her view, the illusion that the self can be “reshaped and remade” invariably leads to body- and self-disparagement, as individuals struggle to reconcile their actual selves with culturally-prescribed ideals of appearance.

There is no denying the importance of this viewpoint in explaining the prevalence of negative body image, but one can also draw on this perspective to better understand how individuals resist unrealistic appearance ideals and creatively use cultural capital to construct social identities that promote positive body image. That is, by focusing on local social worlds and the social identities constructed therein, scholars can (and have) gained a better understanding of the nature and extent of positive body image. Of course, not all research on positive body image has fully adopted this identities perspective; instead, much of the extant research has only scratched at the surface of this approach, hinting at – rather than fully interrogating – the ways in which social identities shape positive body image. Nevertheless, what is clear from the available research is that social identities *do* matter when thinking about positive body image.

In this chapter, I aim to review research that has adopted this identities perspective, even if implicitly, to examine positive body image in different cultural and social groups (with the exception of gender, which has been reviewed in Chapter 2). I begin by focusing on attempts to understand positive body image at a macro level (i.e., in different national and linguistic groups) before delving into more micro levels of identity (e.g., ethnic and socioeconomic differences *within* specific cultural groups). In both cases, my review of the literature is followed by a consideration of research that still needs to be conducted to better understand the nature of positive body image in different groups.

**Positive Body Image in Different Cultural Groups**

Research examining the effects of cultural identities on positive body image has followed a very similar pattern: in the vast majority of cases, scholars have begun by examining the factorial validity of existing measures of positive body image in different national or linguistic groups. Here, factorial validity refers to the extent to which the underlying putative structure of a scale is recoverable in a set of scores produced by different cultural, national, or linguistic groups. Establishing factorial validity is important for two reasons: (1) it helps to determine the degree to which measures of positive body image are cross-culturally equivalent (that is, to the extent that scores on a scale produce the same dimensionality in different groups, scholars can assume that the scale is likely tapping the same underlying construct in those different groups), and; (2) cross-cultural equivalence of dimensionality on a scale allows scholars to compare latent scores on that scale across different groups.

To date, almost all of this research has focused on two scales in particular: the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS; Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005) and its revision, the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). This focus on body appreciation is perhaps unsurprising given that the BAS was one of the earliest scales developed to specifically measure a facet of positive body image. In this section, I begin by reviewing the literature that has examined the factor structures of the BAS and the BAS-2 in different cultural and linguistic groups. Later in this section, I suggest that the almost exclusive focus on body appreciation also has drawbacks, notably the lack of attention paid to other facets of positive body image and an incomplete understanding of the “meaning” of positive body image in different cultural groups.

**The Body Appreciation Scale**

Based on a review of the available literature focused on promoting body acceptance and protecting the self from sociocultural influences, Avalos et al. (2005, p. 287) proposed a definition of body appreciation as the extent to which women “hold favorable opinions of their bodies […], accept their bodies in spite of their weight, body shape, and imperfections […], respect their bodies by attending to their body’s needs and engaging in healthy behaviors, and […] protect their body image by rejecting unrealistic images of the thin-ideal portrayed in the media”. Based on this definition, Avalos et al. (2005) developed a 16-item measure of body appreciation and, through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses with primarily White college women in the U.S., retained 13 items that loaded onto the same latent dimension. In a later study, Tylka (2013) reported that the one-dimensional structure of BAS scores was invariant across college women and men in the U.S.

Beginning in 2008, scholars began to report on the factor structure of BAS scores in other cultural groups. Several of these studies found support for the factor structure reported in the parent study: studies with samples of Austrian community women and men (Swami, Stieger, Haubner, & Voracek, 2008), Spanish boys and girls (Lobera & Rios, 2011), and Turkish college women (Swami, Özgen, Gökçen, & Petrides, 2015) all upheld the one-dimensional factor structure of BAS scores using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). In contrast, other studies found that BAS scores have a two-dimensional factor in some cultural groups, consisting of facets that tap a general body appreciation construct and a separate construct that may be closer aligned to body image investment. Thus, studies conducted with adults in Brazil, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Poland, South Korea, Poland, and Zimbabwe all found support for the two-factor structure of BAS scores (see Table 1). As further indicated in Table 1, several studies have also assumed the uni-dimensionality of BAS scores in the absence of factor analytic investigations.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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In addition, studies within the same linguistic group have sometimes reported difficulty confirming earlier-reported factor structures. For example, in a sample of older Brazilian adults, it was reported using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) that a two-dimensional model had better fit than all other tested models (Ferreira, Neves, & Tavares, 2014), which contrasts with Swami et al.’s (2011) findings supporting a one-dimensional model. Ferreira et al. (2014) went on to draw a distinction between what they termed “body valorization” (the construct most closely related to body appreciation) and “body care” (more akin to body image investment). Similarly, in a sample of Turkish college women and men, one study found, using CFA, that the previously-reported one-dimensional structure had poor fit; instead, a two-factor model consisting of general body appreciation and body image investment had better fit (Bakalim & Tasdelen-Karçkay, 2016).

From a theoretical point-of-view, the equivocal nature of factor structure of BAS scores is important because it is possible that there are cross-cultural differences in the lower-order facets that contribute to positive body image generally and body appreciation specifically (Swami & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2008). That is, social identities developed in different cultural contexts may lead to different self-body relationships, divergent bodily ideals, and varying attitudes toward the body and the importance of appearance, which in turn result in different localized conceptions of body appreciation. In addition, from a practical point-of-view, the equivocal factorial validity of the BAS prevents effective comparisons of latent scores on the measure across cultural groups (i.e., cross-cultural comparisons may not be statistically appropriate if the latent dimensionality of BAS scores differs across groups).

Nevertheless, a handful of studies have conducted such cross-cultural comparisons, suggesting that group differences in body appreciation may be small. For example, one study that compared BAS scores between women in the U.S. (*n* = 8,925) and women in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia (*n* = 3,508) reported no significant between-group differences in BAS scores (Swami, Tran, Stieger, Voracek, & the YouBeauty.com Team, 2015). Similarly, a comparison of BAS scores between undergraduates in the U.S. and South Korea found that U.S. participants had significantly higher body appreciation, although the effect size was small (Jung & Hwang, 2016). The statistical basis of this comparison, however, is unclear given that a previous study with South Korean adults indicated that a two-factor model of the BAS should be extracted (Swami, Hwang, & Jung, 2012), which prevents a direct comparison with U.S. samples, where a one-factor model is preferred. More broadly, the conclusion that cross-cultural differences in body appreciation are small or negligible should be considered preliminary at best, given the difficulties of making such comparisons due to the possible lack of cultural equivalence of BAS scores.

One general conclusion that might be drawn on the basis of the existing BAS data is that the construct of body appreciation may not be cross-culturally equivalent. That is, while all 13 scale items tap into the construct of body appreciation in some groups, as was the case with U.S. college women and men (Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka, 2013), only some of these items directly tap into the same construct in other cultural groups. In the latter, it would seem that some items of the BAS tap into a different construct, more closely aligned with body image investment or body care. One possible interpretation of these data is that the BAS does not adequately measure the construct of body appreciation in different cultural groups. A more problematic interpretation is that the meaning and experience of body appreciation varies across cultural groups, a point I return to below.

**The Body Appreciation Scale-2**

Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b) argued that, in the decade since the BAS was first published, scholarly understanding of the concept of body appreciation has evolved. To account for these developments, they developed a revised version of the BAS, called the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2). More specifically, they deleted one sex-specific item and several items that had poor factor loadings (including all items that typically loaded on to the body image investment component in some cultural groups). This revised measure consists of 10 items, five of which were retained from the parent scale and five of which were newly-devised. Across three studies with college and community adults from the U.S., Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b) confirmed the BAS-2’s one-dimensional factor structure, which was invariant across participant sex.

As with the BAS, scholars have been quick to examine the factorial validity of the BAS-2 in different cultural groups. Thus, using EFA, the one-dimensional factor structure of the BAS-2 has been upheld in college samples from Hong Kong (Swami & Ng, 2015), and the Netherlands (Alleva, Martijn, Veldhuis, & Tylka, 2016), Iran (Atari, 2016), as well as a community sample in Serbia (Jovic, Sfroza, Jovanovic, & Jovic, 2016). In addition, using CFA, the one-dimensional factor structure of the BAS-2 has been confirmed in a mixed college staff-and-student sample from mainland China (Swami, Ng, & Barron, 2016), college samples from France (Kertechian & Swami, 2017) and Romania (Swami, Barron, Tudorel, Goian, & Vintila, 2017), and community samples from Spain (Swami, García, & Barron, 2017), Portugal (Marta-Simões, Mendes, Trindade, Oliveira, & Ferreira, 2016), and Poland (Razmus & Razmus, 2017). With the exception of the Romanian study, these CFA studies have reported that BAS-2 scores are invariant across participant sex, suggesting that the latent construct is stable across sex in most studied populations.

The cross-cultural equivalence of the factor structure of the BAS-2 is important because it could facilitate effective between-group comparisons of latent body appreciation scores. To date, however, only two studies have conducted such comparisons. Swami and Ng (2015) compared BAS-2 scores between their sample of adults from Hong Kong with the mean body appreciation scores reported by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b). They reported that women and men in Hong Kong had significantly higher body appreciation than their U.S. counterparts, although the effect size of the difference was small (*d*s = 0.17-0.33). Similarly, Swami, Ng, and Barron (2016) compared BAS-2 scores between their sample of adults from mainland China (who completed a Modern Standard Mandarin version of the scale) with a sample of adults in Hong Kong (who completed a Cantonese version of the BAS-2; Swami & Ng, 2015). They found that participants from mainland China had significantly higher body appreciation scores than their counterparts from Hong Kong, although the effect size of the difference was negligible (ηp2 = .01).

Cross-cultural comparisons of body appreciation remain in their infancy, but should be facilitated by the one-dimensional factor structure of the BAS-2 that has been reported in diverse cultural groups. More broadly, one liberal interpretation of the above factor analytic findings is that the construct of body appreciation, as measured using the BAS-2, is similar across cultural groups. However, caution should be applied when drawing this conclusion. For one thing, given that the development of BAS-2 excluded those items that proved cross-culturally problematic, it is possible that BAS-2 scores are masking cultural heterogeneity. To put it differently, the finding that scores on a given measure is one-dimensional in a specific cultural context cannot be used as evidence that underlying construct itself is one-dimensional in that group. More specifically, it is still possible that the BAS-2 is failing to tap into the multi-dimensional nature of body appreciation in some cultural contexts. I return to discussing the “meaning” of positive body image after first reviewing attempts to examine the factorial validity of other measures of positive body image.

**Other Measures of Positive Body Image**

In their review, Webb, Wood-Barcalow, and Tylka (2015) identified a range of other quantitative measures developed by Western researchers that tap into constructs related to positive body image. To date, however, none of these measures has received the same sort of treatment in cultural research as the BAS and the BAS-2. In this section, I briefly review the limited attention that has been paid to establishing the factorial validity of several other measures in different cultural groups, so as to highlight cultural experiences of different elements of positive body image.

**Body Image Coping Strategies Inventory**. The Body Image Coping Strategies Inventory (BICSI; Cash, Santos, & Williams, 2005) is a 29-item measure of coping response styles to manage body image-related threats or challenges. Webb et al. (2015) have suggested that, of the three factors identified in the parent study with U.S. college students, one – the 9-item Positive Rational Acceptance subscale – can be used as a measure of positive body image, as it taps into positive rational acceptance and engagement in self-care and rational self-talk in the face of a distressing event. Doğan, Sapmaz, and Totan (2011) examined the factor structure of a Turkish translation of the BICSI in a sample of college students. Using CFA, these authors confirmed the three-factor structure from the parent study and reported that Positive Rational Acceptance scores had adequate internal consistency. Likewise, Dhurup and Nolan (2014) reported that, using EFA, the three-factor structure of the BICSI was upheld in a college sample from South Africa, although they did not indicate whether the measure had been translated. The BICSI also appears to have been translated into Japanese (Yeung & Fukutomi, 2008) and Persian (Farid & Akbari-Kamrani, 2016), although its factor structure has not been investigated in these studies.

**Body Image-Acceptance and Action Questionnaire**. The Body Image-Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (BI-AAQ; Sandoz, Wilson, Merwin, & Kellum, 2013) is a 12-item measure that taps into a compassionate response to embrace rather than avoid, escape, or alter the content or form of aversive body-related thoughts and feelings. In its current form, the BI-AAQ measures the degree of negative body-related thoughts, behaviors, and affect. However, Webb et al. (2015) have suggested that a version in which all items are reverse-coded could provide a preliminary measure of body image flexibility. In the parent study with U.S. college students, Sandoz et al. (2013) developed a 46-item scale, which was reduced through EFA to a 12-item scale with a one-dimensional factor structure.

In a study with a community sample, Ferreira, Pinto-Gouviea, and Duarte (2011) translated the original 46-item version of the scale into Portuguese. Using EFA, these authors reported that 29 items loaded on to a primary factor and 17 items loaded on to a secondary factor. They elected to eliminate the second factor because of problems associated with “wording issues” and retained, through a second EFA, 12 items with a one-dimensional structure and adequate internal consistency. In addition, two studies have examined the factor structure of the English version of the BI-AAQ using CFA. In the first study, Kurz, Flynn, and Bordieri (2016) confirmed that the English version of the scale had a one-dimensional factor structure in Hispanic college students in the U.S. More recently, however, it was reported that the BI-AAQ had poor fit in a clinical sample of women and girls in the U.S.; a modified, 11-item version of the scale also had poor fit (Lee, Smith, Twohig, Lensegrav-Benson, & Roberts, 2017). Finally, the BI-AAQ has also been used with a sample of Malaysian college students (Manaf, Saravanan, & Zuhrah, 2016), though the authors did not report whether the scale had been translated into Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), nor did they examine the scale’s factor structure.

**Internal Body Orientation**. The 8-item Body Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) measures the degree to which women view their bodies as an outside observer would (i.e., an “external body orientation”). Webb et al. (2015) have suggested that this subscale could instead be used as a measure of positive body image if it is scored to measure “internal body orientation” (i.e., a focus on the how the body feels rather than how it looks). In the parent study with primarily White U.S college women, McKinley and Hyde (1996) reported that OCBS scores demonstrated good factorial validity and that subscales scores were internally consistent. When scored to measure internal body orientation, the Body Surveillance subscale has been found to have good convergent and discriminant validity in U.S. adults (Augutus-Horvath, 2011; Avalos & Tylka, 2006; Homan & Tylka, 2014).

Knauss, Paxton, and Alsaker (2008) prepared a German translation of the scale, but added three novel items to the Body Surveillance subscale and changed the scale’s response format. In an EFA with college students (sex unspecified), Knauss et al. (2008) extracted a single Body Surveillance factor with 11 items. Chinese (Fang, Chang, & Shu, 2014), Dutch (Alleva, Martijn, van Breukelen, Jansen, & Karos, 2015), Korean (Forbes & Jung, 2008), and Spanish (Breitkopf, Littleton, & Berenson, 2007; Forbes et al., 2012) translations of the OCBS have also been prepared, but in all cases the authors have neglected to examine the scale’s factor structure. Until the factor structure of the OCBS is carefully examined in different national and linguistic groups, caution should be applied when interpreting previous findings in different linguistic groups.

**Other Scales**. Other scales that have been developed to measure facets of positive body image include the Embodied Image Scale (Abbott & Barber, 2010), the Body Responsiveness Scale (Daubenmier, 2005), the Authentic Pride subscale of the Body and Appearance Self-Conscious Emotions Scale (Castonguay, Sabiston, Crocker, & Mack, 2014), the Body Acceptance by Others Scale (Avalos & Tylka, 2006), and the Broad Conceptualization of Beauty Scale (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016), but translations of these scales for use outside English-speaking populations have not been prepared to date.

**Summary of Quantitative Measures of Positive Body Image**

A range of measures have been developed to measure positive body image (Webb et al., 2015), but the psychometric properties of only a small minority of these scales has received systematic attention outside English-speaking samples. Although the factor structure of the BAS appears problematic across cultures, the BAS-2 holds promise as a suitable measure of a facet of positive body image that retains its one-dimensional factor structure in different cultural groups. Likewise, the available evidence suggests that the BICSI may retain its parent factor structure in non-English samples, but much more work needs to be done to examine the factor structure of the measure in different cultural contexts. Conversely, of the range of other measures of positive body image reviewed by Webb et al. (2015), few have been translated for use in non-English samples and those that have require further investigation of their factor structures before being held up as adequate measures of positive body image in different cultural groups.

This also points to a broader concern with the manner in which cross-cultural research on positive body image has developed. In the case of body appreciation, for example, research has begun with measurement tools designed by scholars in a particular cultural context (the U.S.) based on an understanding of the nature of body appreciation within that particular cultural context. Next, researchers have sought to examine the factor structure of those measures in a diverse range of cultural groups and, in the case of BAS-2, concluded that the construct is equivalent across groups. This is problematic because scholars may be neglecting culture-specific facets of body appreciation specifically or positive body image generally. That is, because the measures of body appreciation were developed in a particular cultural milieu, they may not fully capture the meaning and lived experience of the construct of body appreciation in other cultural groups. To truly understand the nature and meaning of body appreciation in different cultural groups, different methods are required.

**Qualitative Research**

One useful way of extending our knowledge of the nature of positive body image in different cultural groups is through qualitative research. To date, however, such research has been extremely limited and has not kept pace with the quantitative research reviewed above. In a sample of U.S. college women of mixed ethnicities and White body image experts, Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2010) identified a range of characteristics of positive body image through one-on-one interviews. Themes generated through grounded theory included an appreciation of the unique beauty and functionality of one’s body, a filtering of information in a protective manner, a broad definition and conceptualization of beauty, and a focus on the body’s positive qualities rather than its imperfections. These themes have proved important in contemporary definitions of positive body image, but it should be noted that they are based on interviews with a culturally homogenous group of individuals.

Similar themes emerged in qualitative research with adolescent girls and boys in Sweden who had been identified as having high levels of positive body in earlier longitudinal research (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010). Specifically, in this sample, adolescents’ appearance satisfaction was characterized by a functional view of the body and an acceptance of bodily imperfections. In addition, participants had also learned to minimize the importance of negative appearance comments from peers and family and to filter appearance information in a body-protective manner. A second study with Swedish adolescents with positive body image revealed that they took a critical approach to societal appearance ideals, viewing them as unnatural and unrealistic (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012). Instead, these adolescents adopted broader and more flexible definitions of beauty and stressed the importance of looking like “oneself”.

Although these studies would seem to suggest that the concept of positive body image is similar across cultural groups, other qualitative research points to characteristics that may be unique to particular cultural groups. For example, one research group conducted one-on-one interviews with Aboriginal young women in Canada about how they conceptualize body pride (McHugh, Coppola, & Sabiston, 2014). This study, too, highlighted the importance of accepting the body despite its imperfections as a central aspect of positive body image. However, other aspects of positive body image that were identified developed from the particular cultural identities of this group of women. For example, all participants in the study explained how body pride was something that emerged from the “inside”, but could be expressed through various cultural symbols, like dance regalia, make-up, and tattoos.

More than simply “showing” body pride in ways that reflect their Aboriginal identity, participants in the study also described how culture shaped their body pride (McHugh et al., 2014; see also Coppola, Dimler, Letendre, & McHugh, 2017). For example, some participants described how their cultural activities like dance and traditional ceremonies helped to foster a sense of pride in their bodies. For McHugh et al. (2014), these descriptions highlight the complex relationships between body pride and cultural identity. Aboriginal identity was seen as underlying participants’ experiences of body pride, but also facilitated participation in cultural activities and navigating negative perceptions from others. More broadly, the participants described that, in order to experience body pride, young Aboriginal women had to first be proud of their cultural identities.

Thus, the available qualitative research on positive body image suggests that there may be some core features of positive body image that are stable across cultural groups, such as acceptance of the body despite its imperfections and a focus on the body’s functionality. However, it also seems likely that local social identities give rise to elements of positive body image that are unique to particular groups. This highlights the importance of trying to understand the different ways in which immersion in local social and cultural identities can sometimes promote more positive body image. At present, however, the available qualitative research is limited to cultural groups in North America and Europe, and an important future step for researchers will be to extend this work to cultural groups in other parts of the world. Webb et al. (2015, pp. 138-139) have provided a guide that scholars are encouraged to adopt in conducting such research.

**Positive Body Image Within Cultures**

Thus far, this review has examined aspects of positive body image as they manifest in different macro-level cultural groups. Conversely, the social identities approach can also be applied to micro-level cultural identities *within* cultures. This perspective is based on the notion that localized cultural identities that are constructed within broader cultural milieus can sometimes result in changes to body image that are either protective or detrimental. The available research that has focused on such within-culture groups is broad-ranging and, in this section, I focus on differences in positive body image as a function of race/ethnic identity, socioeconomic status and migration, sexual orientation and gender identity, and religious identity.

**Race/Ethnic Identity**

Historically, studies of women in North America have indicated that there are marked racial/ethnic differences in rates of negative body image. For example, compared to White women, it has been suggested that ethnic minority – and particularly Black – women may be less likely to internalize mainstream standards of appearance and beauty, particularly the thin ideal (for a review, see Grogan, 2016). Instead, ethnic minority women may be more likely to adopt culture-specific beauty ideals or place less importance on appearance than White women (Rubin, Fitts, & Becker, 2003). Consistent with these suggestions, studies have shown that Black women have lower levels of body dissatisfaction than White women (Franko & Roehrig, 2011), are more accepting of larger body sizes (Aruguete, Nickleberry, Yates, 2004), and have more flexible conceptions of beauty and attractiveness (Latner, Stunkard, & Wilson, 2005). However, more recent studies have also highlighted shifts in Black women’s body image, with meta-analyses concluding that Black-White differences in body dissatisfaction are narrowing (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Roberts, Cash, & Johnson, 2006).

Although these studies are informative, relatively little research has examined ethnic/racial differences in positive body image specifically. However, one early study with U.S. college women indicated that Black rather than White participants were more likely to have positive body image (Williams, Cash, & Santos, 2004). Qualitative research with White and Black college students in the U.S. would seem to support this general conclusion. One study found that African American adolescents were more flexible than their White counterparts in their conceptions of beauty, and spoke about “making what you’ve got work for you” (Parker et al., 1995). Another, more recent qualitative study found that Black women were more likely than their White counterparts to express high levels of body acceptance and a resistance of singular body size as ideal (Webb, Warren-Findlow, Chou, & Adams, 2013). The authors concluded that embracing positive body image may be one way through which members of a historically marginalized group could maintain psychological well-being and cultural pride.

Other qualitative research suggests a more complex picture of the impact of ethno-cultural identities on positive body image. Through interviews with Black women attending predominately White colleges in the U.S., one group of researchers described how some participants had a self-concept with a contingency of self-worth associated with Black cultural identity (Hesse-Biber, Livingstone, Ramirez, Barko, & Johnson, 2010). In turn, this heightened acceptance of Black cultural identity helped to foster a degree of body confidence and increased body satisfaction. However, it was not only identification with one’s cultural identity that conferred a protective effect on body image. In the same study, Hesse-Biber and colleagues (2010) also described how participants with a cultural identity of diversity (due to the identification as mixed-raced or circumstances of growing up in racially diverse environments) also developed more positive body image, possibly because they did not “hyper-identify” with either Black or White culture. That is, these “bridge builders” were less likely to be highly influenced by the prescriptive beauty ideals of any specific cultural group.

Other studies with college students in the U.S. hint at more equivocal findings. For example, in a sample of U.S. college students, Gillen and Lefkowitz (2012) reported that Black participants were more satisfied with areas of their body than White and Latino/a participants. Another study found that the one-dimensional factor structure of the BAS had adequate fit in a sample of Black college women (Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2013). and that this sample had higher mean body appreciation scores than the predominantly White college sample from Avalos et al. (2005) (although a direct comparison of scores was not conducted). However, a later study with a sample of U.S. college students found that participant race (Black versus other ethnic groups) was not significantly associated with body appreciation scores, as measured using the BAS (Gillen, 2015). Nevertheless, one difficulty in interpreting this finding is that ‘other’ ethnic groups included a range of distinct identities (e.g., White, Asian American, etc.) and the relatively small sample size of Black participants may mean that the association was under-powered. In short, available studies examining ethnic/racial differences in positive body image in the U.S. suggest that ethnic minority women may have more positive body image than their White counterparts, although more in-depth research is needed.

A handful of studies have examined ethnic differences in positive body image outside the U.S. For example, one study examined ethnic differences in body appreciation (measured using the BAS) in White, South Asian, African Caribbean, and Hispanic female undergraduates in the United Kingdom (Swami, Airs, Chouhan, Padilla Leon, & Towell, 2009). Controlling for participant age, these authors found that Hispanic participants had the highest body appreciation scores, followed by African Caribbean and White women. South Asian women had the lowest body appreciation scores. Swami et al. (2009) also found that Hispanic and African Caribbean women had the lowest scores on internalization of media ideals, and they concluded that women from these ethnic minority groups may be more likely to adopt ethnocentric ideals of appearance that allow for greater body diversity or minimize the importance of appearance altogether. They also suggested that the higher self-esteem reported by these groups may be related to increased body appreciation. Conversely, the finding that South Asian women reported the lowest body appreciation scores was attributed to their higher levels of parental conflict and parental over-protection (particularly in terms of socializing and one’s choice of friends; see Furnham & Husain, 1999), which may diminish body-protective work.

Two other studies are noteworthy for examining ethnic differences in positive body image in a non-U.S. context. In a community sample from Malaysia, Swami and Chamorro-Premuzic (2008) examined differences on the truncated Malay BAS between ethnic Malay and Chinese women and reported no significant between-group differences. Likewise, in neighboring Indonesia, Swami and Jaafar (2012) examined ethnic differences between Javanese, Sundanese, and Chinese women and men on a truncated, 10-item version of the BAS. These authors, too, reported no significant differences between the three ethnic groups and no significant ethnicity by gender interaction. Swami and Chamorro-Premuzic (2008) have suggested that, in countries like Malaysia, ethnic differences may be less salient than other social identities in terms of body appreciation. One such aspect that may of relevance when considering positive body image in developing countries is socio-economic status.

**Socio-Economic Status and Trans-Cultural Migration**

Studies of negative body image now indicate that the biggest differences globally are no longer found between countries, but rather between sites *within* countries that differ in terms of socio-economic development (e.g., Swami et al., 2010). Swami (2015) has attributed this to a range of differences between sites that differ in socio-economic status, including variation in body size ideals (with heavier bodies being more accepted in contexts of low socio-economic status), gender roles and opportunities for women, and exposure to Western media. Based on this general perspective, Swami, Kannan, and Furnham (2011) hypothesized that variation in socio-economic status should also lead to differences in positive body image. More specifically, they argued that cultural identities developed in rural, low socio-economic status contexts may promote more positive body image; conversely, residing in urban, high socio-economic sites may have a detrimental effect on positive body image.

To test this hypothesis, Swami et al. (2011) administered the truncated version of the Malay BAS to participants in Sabah, Malaysia, a location with marked intra-state differences in socio-economic status. More specifically, they recruited female participants from rural and urban sites in Sabah, and their sample also varied in ethnicity with the inclusion of Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, and Murut participants. Their analyses indicated that there were no significant ethnic differences and no significant interaction between ethnicity and socio-economic status. However, they did find that rural participants had significantly higher body appreciation compared with urban participants once the effects of body mass index had been controlled for. Further analyses indicated that the socio-economic development of the participants’ living context was a stronger predictor of body appreciation in this sample than exposure to Western media.

Related to socio-economic status, two studies have examined the impact of trans-cultural migration on positive body image. First, Swami, Mada, and Tovée (2012) compared scores on a truncated version of the BAS between Zimbabwean women in Harare, Zimbabwe, and Zimbabwean migrants in London, United Kingdom. They found that the migrant group had significantly lower body appreciation than their counterparts in Zimbabwe. In the migrant group, length of residence in the United Kingdom was not significantly associated with body appreciation, although there was a significant and negative correlation between body appreciation and exposure to Western media. Swami et al. (2012) concluded that the process of trans-cultural migration may bring antecedent changes (e.g., exposure to Western media that heighten a requirement to work on the body’s appearance) that have a detrimental effect on positive body image. It is also possible that migration has an indirect effect on positive body image: for example, the stress of migration may mean that migrants have less time or inclination to engage in body-protective behaviors and attitudes (Swami, 2016).

In the second study, Taylor et al. (2013) compared body appreciation scores (measured using a truncated version of the BAS) between Polish women in Warsaw, Poland, and London, United Kingdom. Unlike Swami et al. (2012), however, the authors of this study reported that the migrant Polish women had significantly higher body appreciation than their counterparts in Poland, even after controlling for subjective social status. In explanation, Taylor et al. (2012) suggested that Polish women in Poland may experience heightened cultural pressure to attain thinness as cultural capital in a context where the introduction of a market economy has brought widespread and rapid sociocultural changes (e.g., changes in the role of women). That is, as women negotiate new social identities in a rapidly evolving national context, one cost might be a dampening effect on positive body image.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the effects of socio-economic status and trans-cultural migration may not be straightforward or linear. Although we might expect elevated positive body image in contexts of low socio-economic status, actual outcomes may require a closer appreciation of localized national, cultural, and subcultural identities. In a similar vein, the available studies on trans-cultural migration only point to between-group differences, but they have not been able to determine whether migration specifically dampens or elevates positive body image. To be able to do so, scholars will need to conduct prospective and longitudinal studies that specifically examine the effects of moving between cultures that differ not only in socio-economic status but also in other related variables, such as exposure to Western media that promotes unrealistic appearance ideals.

**Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Ideology**

To date, only a handful of studies have examined associations between sexual orientation and positive body image (e.g., Winter, Satinsky, & Jozkowski, 2015). In one study, heterosexual and sexual minority women in the U.S. were asked to complete the BAS (Winter et al., 2015). Between-group analyses indicated that heterosexual women had significantly lower body appreciation than sexual minority women. On the other hand, there were no significant differences between bisexual and sexual minority women in terms of body appreciation. It has been suggested that sexual minority women experience less pressure to attain heterosexist norms of appearance, which in turn has a protective effect in terms of body image (Tiggemann, 2015). The greater acceptance of diverse body types among lesbians may also promote healthier body images (VanKim, Porta, Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Laska, 2016), although the normalization of homosexuality places pressure on lesbians to conform to heteronormative standards of appearance (Smith, Telford, & Tree, 2017).

In contrast, sexual minority status in men may have a detrimental effect on positive body image. For example, one qualitative study of sexual minority college men in the U.S. documented the pressure that gay men in particular experience to attain subcultural ideals of appearance, which may blunt any positive body work (VanKim et al., 2016). Moreover, gay men may experience heightened pressure to be both muscular and thin. Unlike lesbians, for whom the broader sexual minority community may facilitate healthier body image, gay men reported that the male sexual minority community offered few resources with which to develop positive body image. Among sexual minority men, the experience of heterosexism has also been found to be negatively associated with body appreciation (Simpson, Sutter, & Perrin, 2016). Further work is necessary to generalize these findings, particularly as the available quantitative evidence base to date is limited to small samples of U.S. participants.

Beyond sexual orientation, two qualitative studies have focused specifically on gender identity and positive body image. The first study, with low-income and ethnically-diverse young transgender women in the U.S., found that they employed a range of strategies to promote positive body image (Gordon, Austin, Krieger, Hughto, & Reisner, 2016). For example, some women employed critical perspectives of the media to distance themselves from unrealistic femininity ideals, while others relied on gender affirming support from intimate partners, friends, and community members. In addition, some participants who were taking hormones reported increased body satisfaction, which was attributed to gender affirming effects (i.e., developing a more feminine physique). The latter finding is consistent with the results of another qualitative study with transgender youth in the U.S., which found that those further along in consolidating gender identity described gaining a sense of body satisfaction reflecting resilience (McGuire, Doty, Catalpa, & Ola, 2016).

On the other hand, studies examining associations between body appreciation and gender role ideology remain piecemeal. One early study suggested that, in a sample of British women and men, higher body appreciation was significantly associated with greater internalized male-stereotypic (instrumental) traits, but not female-stereotypic (expressivity) traits, although the associations were weak (Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008). A second study with British women reported that stronger endorsement of traditional femininity ideology – particularly the belief that women should maintain a physical appearance that is consistent with societal ideals – was significantly associated with lower body appreciation (Swami & Abbasnejad, 2010). These studies would seem to suggest that adopting non-traditional gender role ideologies may have a positive impact on positive body image, but again much more in-depth research is needed to better understand these relationships.

**Religious Identity**

Another set of factors that may offer a protective effect in terms of body image is religiosity or religious identity. Reviews of the literature have concluded that religious beliefs are associated with lower levels of negative body image and disordered eating (Akrawi, Bartrop, Potter, & Touyz, 2015; Boyatzis & Quinlan, 2008). Moreover, it has been suggested that religious principles may help individuals develop a sense of self-worth that challenges prescriptive standards of appearance and may also help promote positive body image (Kim, 2006). For example, studies of U.S. college women have found that a perceived warm relationship with God was significantly associated with more positive body appreciation (Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013; Homan & Lemmon, 2016). It seems that to the extent that religiosity promotes unconditional acceptance from a higher power despite one’s imperfections, it may be a trait that promotes more positive body image (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

Similarly, in Israel, one study found that ultra-Orthodox Jewish women had significant higher body appreciation compared with modern-Orthodox and secular Jewish women (Handelzalts, Geller, Levy, Vered, & Fisher, 2017). Ultra-Orthodox women were also found to have significantly more positive attitudes regarding body care. The authors suggested, in Israeli Jewish women, positive body image may vary along a continuum, with greater religiosity being associated with more positive body image. In addition, one study of Protestant Christians found that greater belief in radical dualism (which sees the body as corrupt and separate from oneself) was negatively associated with body appreciation, whereas stronger belief in sanctification (which sees the body as holy, worthy of respect, and integral to the self) was associated with higher body appreciation (Jacobson, Hall, Anderson, & Willingham, 2016).

One subset of this literature has focused on the way in which religiosity impacts body image through sanctification of the body, primarily through modesty in terms of clothing. For example, one study compared scores of body appreciation between British Muslim women who did and did not wear the hijab, or Islamic head- and face-cover (Swami, Miah, Noorani, & Taylor, 2014). This study found that those who wore the hijab had significantly higher body appreciation, possibly because the hijab protects Muslim women from appearance-based public scrutiny (Mussap, 2009) and sexual objectification (Odoms-Young, 2008). Use of the hijab may also afford some Muslim women the space to challenge prescriptive standards of appearance, which can be experienced as empowering (Al Wazni, 2015). More broadly, the hijab may allow some Muslim women to visibly identify with the wider Muslim community, especially when faced with stressful societal conditions (e.g., the experience of Islamophobia), which may in turn facilitate social support that helps to buffer against threats to body image (Gulamhussein & Eaton, 2015). However, these findings urgently need to be replicated in other national contexts (e.g., see Kertechian & Swami, 2016).

**Other Social Identity Groups**

Most of the studies reviewed above have suggested that there may be some social identities that are associated with more positive body image. However, identification with some social identity groups may have the opposite effect in dampening positive body image. For example, identification with goth youth subculture typically involves transgressive forms of stylistic appearance displays and negotiations of established understandings of appearance (particularly slimness, tight clothing, and make-up). Such expectations, along with appearance competitiveness between members of the goth community, may stimulate dysfunctional cognitions about the importance of appearance and blunt body-protective work. Consistent with this perspective, Swami (2017) reported that young women who identified with goth subculture in the United Kingdom had significantly lower body appreciation than a matched control sample.

Another group where it might be expected that positive body image will be attenuated is fashion models. Indeed, scholars have frequently commented that – by promoting an extremely slender ideal and through its excessive focus on appearance and body weight, extreme competition, and the use of underweight models – the fashion industry creates a “toxic” environment that increases the incidence of negative body image (Treasure, Wack, & Roberts, 2007). There may be some truth to this claim: in a study of professional fashion models and a matched control sample of non-models in London, United Kingdom, Swami and Szmigielska (2013) found that the fashion model group had significantly higher levels of drive for thinness and dysfunctional investment in appearance. However, there was no significant between-group difference in body appreciation, and greater duration as a fashion model was in fact associated with more positive body appreciation. One explanation for these discrepant sets of findings is that, because fashion models more closely mirror societal standards of appearance, they may come to be more appreciative of their bodies.

**Summary**

Although the study of positive body image in social identity groups within cultures is beginning to grow, this research currently remains in its infancy. Much of the theorizing in this literature, for example, has been borrowed from models of negative body image, with an attendant assumption that negative and positive body image are polar opposites. As Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015a) have made clear, however, such an assumption is unlikely to be true, even if does help guide research design and hypothesizing. Just as problematic is the fact that very little research has examined issues related to positive body within specific cultural groups, and what little research that does exist is heavily focused on college samples. Clearly, there is much work to be done to better understand the ways in which social identities within cultures influence and shape positive body image.

**The Future of Positive Body Image Through the Lens of Culture and Social Identity**

Research on positive body image has developed very quickly to include a wide range of different social groups and individuals (Tiggemann, 2015). However, this field as yet remains in its infancy and faces a number of challenges going forward. In terms of macro-level identities, the BAS-2 has emerged as an important tool that may facilitates cross-cultural research on positive body image. An important next step will be to assess cultural differences in body appreciation and more fully examine cross-cultural differences (or lack thereof) in body appreciation. In doing so, however, scholars should bear in mind that the BAS-2 taps only a single fact of positive body image and that alternative measures are required to more fully assess the constructs that make up positive body image in different cultural contexts. Qualitative studies may provide an alternative means of fully understanding the nature and “meaning” of positive body image in different cultural groups. In terms of within-culture issues, there is a clear need for carefully-designed, large-sample studies that more carefully examine differences between subcultural groups, particularly ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. This is true of both research in established sites, such as North America, as well as less-studied populations in the rest of the world.

In all future research, adopting a clearer identities framework may be beneficial. Such an approach should seek to understand multiple ways in which identities are (re)negotiated within particular cultural or subcultural contexts and, in turn, the ways in which identities can promote or impede the development of positive body image. One specific way in which an explicit identities approach may be beneficial is in highlighting the underlying mechanisms through which positive body image is developed. Another way in which an identities approach may be useful is in highlighting intersections between different salient aspects of identity, such as the intersection between socio-economic class and ethnicity. As this review has suggested, different aspects of identity may be more salient in some contexts than others, and focusing on intersectionality may help to identify specific routes through which positive body image emerges.

In conclusion, this review has highlighted the ways in which research on positive body image has developed to include a wide range of different social identities, but has also highlighted the fact that much more research is needed in this vein. Future research will undoubtedly begin to provide a fuller picture of the nature and meaning of positive body image in different cultural and subcultural groups. This is important as such research will also help to identify mechanisms that could, in theory, be leveraged to promote healthier body image in multiple groups. The goal of such research remains the promotion of positive body image in all groups and social identities.

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Table 1. *Translations and Examinations of the Factorial Validity of the Body Appreciation Scale*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Reference | Language | Country | Sample type | *N* | Data reduction method | Dimesionality | Cronbach α | Mean (*SD*) |
| Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow (2005, Study 1) | English | United States | College | 181 women | EFA | Single dimension | .94 | 3.84 (0.79) |
| Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow (2005, Study 2) | English | United States | College | 327 women | CFA | Single dimension | Not reported | 3.45 (0.68) |
| Swami, Stieger, Haubner, & Voracek (2008) | German | Austria | Community | 156 women, 144 men | EFA | Single dimension | .85-.90 | Women = 3.74 (0.62); Men = 3.90 (0.59) |
| Swami & Chamorro-Premuzic (2008) | Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) | Malaysia | Community | 591 women | EFA and CFA | CFA of one-dimensional structure showed poor fit; EFA extracted two factors (8-item GBA and 3-item BII) and confirmed by CFA | GBA = .95; BII = .71-.74 | GBA = 3.68 (0.86); BII = 3.46 (0.98) |
| Dumitrescu, Zetu, Teslaru, Dogaru, & Dogaru (2008) | Romanian | Romania | College | 127 women, 51 men | N/A | Not examined (one-dimensional assumed) | 0.83 | Total sample = 3.42 (0.60) |
| Llobera & Ríos (2011) | Spanish | Spain | Adolescents | 148 girls, 164 boys | EFA | Single dimension | 0.91 | Sum girls = 49.18 (10.25); boys = 52.01 (9.39) |
| Swami, Campana, Ferreira, Barrett, Harris, & Tavares (2011) | Brazilian Portuguese | Brazil | College staff and students | 195 women, 115 men | EFA | Two dimensions (10-item GBA and 3-item BII) | GBA = .89; BII = .67 | GBA women = 3.90, 0.67; men = 4.11 (0.57); BII women = 3.37 (0.75); men = 3.35 (0.81) |
| Swami & Jaafar (2012) | Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian) | Indonesia | Community | 262 women, 278 men | EFA | Two dimensions (10-item GBA and 3-item BII) | GBA = .90-.93; BII = .72-.68 | GBA women = 3.32 (0.86); men = 3.67, 0.78); BII not reported |
| Swami, Mada, & Tovée (2012) | English | Zimbabwe | Community | 140 women | EFA | Two dimensions (10-item GBA and 1-item BII) | GBA = .90 | GBA = 4.08 (0.63) |
| Swami, Hwang, & Jung (2012) | Korean | South Korea | College | 200 women, 67 men | EFA | Two dimesions (10-item GBA and 3-item BII) | GBA = .93; BII = 0.55 | GBA women = 3.44 (0.78); men = 3.74 (0.82); BII not examined |
| Tylka (2013) | English | United States | College | 527 women, 403 men | CFA | Single dimension | .92-.94 | Women = 3.49 (0.79); men = 3.82 (0.70) |
| Lunde (2013) | Swedish | Sweden | Adolescents | 50 girls, 60 boys | N/A | Not examined (one dimension assumed) | .88 | Girls = 3.48 (0.69); boys = 3.98 (0.65) |
| Taylor, Szpakowska, & Swami (2013) | Polish | Poland and United Kingdom | Community | 306 women | EFA | Two dimensions (10-item GBA and 3-item BII) | GBA = .83; BII = .62 | Poland = 3.24 (0.85); United Kingdom = 3.60 (0.72) |
| Pisitsungkagarn, Taephant, & Attasaranya (2014) | Thai | Thailand | College | 302 women | N/A | Not examined (one dimension assumed) | 0.89 | 3.81 (0.59) |
| Ferreira, Neves, & Tavares (2014) | Brazilian Portuguese | Brazil | Community of older adults | 424 women, 182 men | CFA | One dimension with all 13 items had poor fit; two-factor structure with 4 items each had best fit | Body Valorisation = .78; Body care = .82 | Not reported |
| Ng, Barron, & Swami | Cantonese | China (Hong Kong) | College | 1,319 women, 1084 men | CFA | One dimension with all 13 items had poor fit; two-factor with GBA (7 items) and BII (2 items) had best fit | GBA = .90-.92, BII = .61-.64 | GBA women = 3.20 (0.67), men = 3.32 (0.91) |
| Atari, Akbari-Zardkhaneh, Mohammadi, & Soufiabadi (2015) | Persian | Iran | College | 206 women | EFA | Two dimensions (10-item GBA and 3-item BII) | GBA = 0.92, BII = Not reported | Not reported |
| Swami, Özgen, Gökçen, & Petrides (2015) | Turkish | Turkey | College | 501 women | EFA | One dimension | .88 | 3.23 (0.89) |
| van den Brink, Smeets, Hessen, & Woertman (2016) | Dutch | The Netherlands | College | 399 women | N/A | Not examined (one dimension assumed) | .88 | 3.62 (0.50) |
| Bakalim & Tasdelen-Karçkay (2016) | Turkish | Turkey | College | 431 women, 310 men | CFA | Two-factor with GBA (7 items) and BII (2 items) had best fit | GBA = .89-.90; BII = .62-.65 | Not reported |
| Jain & Tiwari (2016) | Hindi | India | College | 37 women, 30 men | N/A | One-dimension factor structure assumed | Not reported | Sum women = 50.03 (7.07) men = 50.00 (8.27) |