***Chapter***

**Feminist Beliefs, Empowerment, and Positive Body Image: Exploring Associations and Between-Group Differences as a Function of Feminist Self-Labelling**

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**Abstract**

We examined associations between feminist beliefs, empowerment, and positive body image. An online sample of 302 British women completed measures of positive body image (body appreciation, body pride, functionality appreciation), feminist beliefs (synthesis, active commitment), and empowerment (power/powerlessness, self-esteem/self-efficacy). They also indicated whether they self-labelled as feminists. Feminist beliefs were weakly associated with facets of positive body image (*r*s = .15-.31). Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that, once empowerment had been accounted for, feminist beliefs significantly predicted body pride and functionality appreciation, respectively, but the unique contribution to the criterion was small (Δ*R*2 = .02). Between-groups comparisons indicated that women who self-labelled as feminists and who agreed with feminism only had significantly higher functionality appreciation than women who did not self-label as feminists (ηp2 = .04). Conversely, our findings suggest that self-esteem/self-efficacy was more strongly related to all three facets of positive body image and could be targeted through empowerment education.

**Keywords**: Feminism; Positive body image; Feminist self-labelling; Feminist beliefs

**Introduction**

*Body image* is a multifaceted construct that includes one’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviours that are related to the body (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Cash & Smolak, 2011). Large-sample surveys indicate that a majority of women in socioeconomically developed settings experience negative body image (e.g., Frederick, Sandhu, Morse, & Swami, 2016; Swami, Frederick et al., 2010; Swami, Tran, Stieger, Voracek, & The YouBeauty.Com Team, 2015), which is an urgent public health concern because of the consequences for psychosocial functioning. For example, negative body image has been reliably associated with poorer social functioning (Cash, Thériault, & Annis, 2004; Davison & McCabe, 2006), discomfort with sexual activities (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012), and poorer psychological well-being (e.g., Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2010). In addition, negative body image is one of the most important prognostic factors in the onset and maintenance of disordered eating (e.g., Stice & Shaw, 2002).

Some scholars have suggested that holding feminist beliefs or feminist identity may act as a protective factor against negative body image (Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999). More specifically, it has been proposed that feminist beliefs offer a “filtering lens” to interpret sociocultural messages about women’s bodies (Rubin, Nemeroff, & Russo, 2004, p. 30); that is, by promoting critical evaluation of sociocultural standards of appearance and encouraging women to challenge or reject normative beauty practices, feminist beliefs act as a buffer against negative body image (Myers & Crowther, 2007). Moreover, feminist beliefs may promote greater awareness of the ways in which women are objectified in patriarchal societies (Hurt et al., 2007) and provide peer support that counteracts the tendency to cope with negative feelings alone (Coles & Swami, 2013). This, in turn, may afford feminist women greater space in which to critically appraise, rather than internalise, appearance ideals and to develop self-schemas that minimise the importance of appearance (Smolak & Murnen, 2007). To date, however, research on the relationships between feminist beliefs and body image has returned mixed results.

On the one hand, some studies have suggested that feminist beliefs are associated with lower body dissatisfaction (e.g., Borowsky, Eisenberg, Bucchianeri, Piran, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2016; Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999) and body checking (Myers, Ridolfi, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2012). In a similar vein, an intervention study reported that exposure to feminist theories was associated with positive changes in women’s body image (Peterson et al., 2006). On the other hand, several studies have reported no significant associations between feminist beliefs and body image (Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997; Fingeret & Gleaves, 2004) and endorsement of a thin ideal (Swami & Tovée, 2006; Swami, Salem, Furnham, & Tovée, 2008). Also of note, Tiggemann and Stevens (1999) found that middle-aged women with stronger feminist beliefs were less concerned with their weight, but the same relationship was not significant in younger women. In a meta-analysis of 26 studies, Murnen and Smolak (2009) concluded that there was a significant, positive association between feminist beliefs and body attitudes, but that effect sizes were small (*r* = .12) and variable across studies.

A number of explanations may underscore these equivocal findings. First, there has been variation in how body image scholars have operationalised feminist beliefs. Some studies have relied on women self-labelling their private feminist identities. For example, using data from a large community-based sample, Borowsky and colleagues (2016) reported that feminist-identified women reported significantly lower body dissatisfaction than non-feminist women and women who did not identify as feminists but held feminist beliefs. However, some scholars have posited that feminist self-identification is a separate, though related, process from feminist beliefs (e.g., Liss & Erchull, 2010; McCabe, 2005; Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010). More specifically, feminist self-identification may represent one very specific way in which women relate to gendered inequality and sexism (hooks, 2000; Kelly, 2015). Instead, based on Downing and Roush’s (1985) feminist identity development model, which presents a sequence of five stages (from Passive Acceptance, Revelation, Embeddedness-Emanation, Synthesis, through to Active Commitment; see Hyde, 2002; Moradi & Subich, 2000), scholars have examined associations between feminist dimensions or styles and body image.

These studies have typically shown that stronger endorsement of the advanced feminist dimensions of Synthesis (in which one defines oneself less in terms of gendered norms and more by unique characteristics and strengths) and Active Commitment (in which women actively combat oppression and take action regarding women’s issues) is associated with lower body dissatisfaction (Peterson, Grippo, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2008). Still, there remains some debate as to the relationship between feminist self-labelling and feminist beliefs: while Downing and Roush (1985) believed that self-labelling would be associated with the Synthesis stage, other scholars have reported weak correlations between the two constructs (Erchull et al., 2009; Liss & Erchull, 2010). In terms of body image specifically, Coles and Swami (2013) have suggested that focusing on feminist beliefs may be more fruitful than self-labelling, given possible construct issues with the latter. For example, some women may decline to self-label as a feminist because they are insufficiently knowledgeable about the term (e.g., Houvouras & Carter, 2008) or because of the stigma associated with the label (Breen & Karpinski, 2008; Redford, Howell, Meijs, & Ratliff, 2018; Twenge & Zucker, 1999).

A second explanation of the equivocal findings is the fact that previous studies have operationalised “body image” in a wide variety of ways, albeit focused on aspects of negative body image (for a review, see Murnen & Smolak, 2007). This is important because advances in the field of body image have shifted attention onto aspects of positive body image (for reviews, see Tylka, 2011, 2012). As reviewed and defined by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015a), *positive body image* refers to love, respect, and acceptance of one’s body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a), with core features including an appreciation of the uniqueness of one’s body, a compassionate acceptance of the body including those aspects that are inconsistent with societally-prescribed ideals, an emphasis on the body’s functionality rather than aesthetics, and a body-protective outlook in which positive information is internalised and negative information is rejected or reframed (Tylka, 2011, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Importantly accumulating evidence suggests that positive and negative body image are independent constructs (for a review, see Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a); that is, positive body image does not fall on the same continuum as, nor is it the polar opposite of, negative body image (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). This is important for two reasons: first, some scholars have examined associations between feminism and positive body image but have used measures that were originally designed to tap the construct of negative body image (e.g., Borowsky et al., 2016; Kinsaul, Curtin, Bazzini, & Martz, 2014). Second, examining the relationships between feminist beliefs and indices of positive body image, as the construct is currently defined, remains an important avenue for future research (Swami, 2018; Tiggemann, 2015).

A final explanation is that, rather than directly predicting body image outcomes, feminist beliefs moderate associations between body image and some other variable. For example, R. D. Peterson and colleagues (2008) hypothesised that feminism may moderate the relationship between *empowerment* – defined as affective states in which individuals gain control over their lives and environments (Speer & N. A. Peterson, 2000; Zimmerman, 1995, 2000) – and negative body image. However, when they tested this hypothesis, they found that Active Commitment scores did not account for any unique variance in the prediction of body dissatisfaction once the effects of two facets of empowerment – self-efficacy and self-ascribed power – had been accounted for. This led R. D. Peterson and colleagues (2008) to conclude that it is empowerment – a construct that may have been tapped in some studies that have included measures of feminist beliefs – rather than feminist beliefs *per se* that is most strongly predictive of negative body image (R. D. Peterson et al., 2008).

In the present study, we sought to examine the relationships between feminist beliefs and positive body image, thus overturning the extant focus on indices of negative body image. In doing so, we clarified the limiting issues described above in a number of ways. First, we operationalised feminist beliefs in two distinct ways: (i) through endorsement of feminist styles, namely the Synthesis and Active Commitment dimensions that have been found to be most influential in terms of protecting women from negative body image (Peterson et al., 2008), and (ii) through self-labelled feminist identity. Second, we operationalised positive body image along three dimensions that reflect contemporary definitions of the construct (for a review, see Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015). Our primary construct of interest was body appreciation (Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b), which represents dominant way in which the construct positive body image is currently operationalised. To this, we added measures of body pride (positive emotions toward the body that result from engaging in valued behaviours or presenting with positive characteristics; Castonguay, Gilchrist, Mack, & Sabiston, 2013) and functionality appreciation (appreciating what the body can do, rather than focusing on what it looks like; Alleva, Tylka & Kroon van Diest, 2017). Doing so allows us to examine associations between feminist beliefs and positive body image through broad coverage of the latter construct.

In the present study, we also included two empowerment-related constructs, namely self-ascribed power and self-efficacy, which have been found to be significantly associated with negative body image in previous work (Peterson et al., 2008). This allowed us to conduct multiple hierarchical regressions to examine the extent to which feminist beliefs uniquely predicted indices of positive body image once the predictive variance of empowerment facets had been accounted for. Thus, our first hypothesis was that feminist beliefs would be significantly associated with indices of positive body image once the effects of empowerment had been accounted for. In addition, we also hypothesised that feminist-identified women would report significantly higher positive body image across all three body image facets compared with non-feminist women and women who did not identify as feminists but held feminist beliefs.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants of this study were 302 British women, ranging in age from 18 to 71 years (*M* = 36.35, *SD* = 11.11) and in self-reported body mass index (BMI) from 12.02 to 45.65 kg/m2 (*M* = 25.88, *SD* = 5.28). The majority of participants self-reported as being of British White ethnicity (91.1%), with smaller groups of Asian (4.0%), African Caribbean (2.6%), and other ethnic groups (2.3%). The majority of participants also self-reported as heterosexual (93.4%; gay/lesbian = 1.7%; bisexual = 3.7%; pansexual/queer = 1.0%; asexual = 0.3%). In terms of marital status, 16.9% were single, 8.9% were partnered but not cohabiting, 28.9% were partnered and cohabiting, 39.7% were married, and the remainder were of other status. In terms of educational qualifications, 39.4% had completed minimum secondary schooling, 36.8% had an undergraduate degree, 15.6% had a postgraduate degree, 2.0% were in full-time higher education, and the remainder had some other qualification.

**Measures**

**Body appreciation**. Participants completed the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). This is a 10-item scale that assesses acceptance of one’s body, respect and care for one’s body, and protection of one’s body from unrealistic beauty standards (sample item: “I respect my body”). All items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*), and an overall score was computed as the mean of all items (higher scores reflect greater body appreciation). BAS-2 scores have been shown to have a one-dimensional factor structure, as well as being judged adequate in terms of internal consistency estimates, test-retest reliability after three weeks, and indices of convergent and discriminant validity, in college and community samples of English-speaking adults (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). In the present study, ordinal coefficient alpha for this scale was .95.

**Body pride**. Participants also completed the Authentic Pride subscale of the Body and Appearance Self-Conscious Emotions Scale (BASES; Castonguay et al., 2014). This 6-item subscale measures body pride as a sense of personal appearance-related achievement (sample item: “I am proud of my appearance efforts”). Items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*), and scores were averaged (higher scores reflect greater authentic body pride). Data drawn from North American adults supports the factor structure of the BASES, and estimates supported the internal consistency, test-retest reliability after two weeks, and validity of the BASES subscales (Castonguay et al., 2014). Here, ordinal coefficient alpha for this subscale was .94.

**Functionality appreciation**. Participants completed the 7-item Functionality Appreciation Scale (FAS; Alleva et al., 2017), which measures one’s appreciation of what the body does and can do (sample item: “I respect my body for the functions that it performs”). All items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). An overall score was computed as the mean of all items, such that higher scores reflect greater functionality appreciation. Scores on the FAS have been reported to have a one-dimensional factor structure, adequate internal consistency and test-retest across a 3-week period, and acceptable criterion-related and construct validity (Alleva et al., 2017). In the present study, ordinal coefficient alpha for this scale was .93.

**Empowerment**. Participants completed the Power/Powerlessness and Self-esteem/Self-efficacy subscales of the Empowerment Scale (ES; Rogers, Chamberlin, Ellison, & Crean, 1997). The ES is a 28-item measure of empowerment that reduces to five dimensions. The 8-item Power/Powerlessness subscale assesses feelings of control over societal and individual decisions (sample item: “I feel powerless most of the time”), whereas the 9-item Self-esteem/Self-efficacy subscale measures feelings of self-worth and locus of control (sample item: “I generally accomplish what I set out to do”). All items were rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly agree*). Subscale scores were computed as the mean of all items, so that higher scores reflect greater empowerment (scores on the Power/Powerlessness subscale were reverse-coded prior to analyses). Scores on the ES have been shown to have acceptable factorial and convergent validity, and adequate internal consistency (Rogers, Ralph, & Salzer, 2010). In the present study, ordinal coefficient alpha was .79 for Power/Powerlessness and .92 for Self-esteem/Self-efficacy.

**Feminist beliefs**. Participants were asked to complete the Synthesis and Active Commitment subscales from the Feminist Identity Composite (FIC; Fischer et al., 2000). The FIC is a 40-item scale that assesses endorsement of five stages of feminist identity, based on the model proposed by Downing and Roush (1985). The 6-item Synthesis subscale taps a healthy feminist identity that involves transcending traditional gender roles and evaluating men on an individual basis (sample item: “I have incorporated what is female and feminine into my own unique personality”). The 9-item Active Commitment subscale measures deep commitment to social change geared toward gender quality (sample item: “I want to work to improve women’s status”). All items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*) and subscale scores were computed as the mean of all relevant items (higher scores reflect stronger feminist beliefs on each dimension). Previous work has shown that scores on the FIC have factorial, convergent, and discriminant validity, as well as adequate internal consistency (Fischer et al., 2000; Moradi & Subich, 2002). In the present study, ordinal coefficient alpha was .80 for Synthesis and .90 for Active Commitment.

**Feminist self-labelling**. Participants were asked to choose a label that best described their feelings about feminism. Response options were: “I call myself a feminist,” “I agree with most of the objectives of the feminist movement, but do not call myself a feminist”, and “I do not consider myself a feminist”. The responses were based on the Feminist Self-Labelling Scale (Myakovsky & Wittig, 1997) and were adapted by Borowsky and colleagues (2016) to reduce the number of available options. Previous studies have suggested that feminist self-labelling measures have adequate construct and convergent validity (e.g., Conlin & Heesacker, 2018).

**Demographics**. Participants provided their demographic details, consisting of sexual orientation, relationship status, educational qualifications, age, ethnicity (based on primary response categories from the United Kingdom census), height, and weight. The latter two items were used to compute participants’ self-reported BMI as kg/m2. Although there is a tendency for online samples to under-report weight and over-report height, self-reported data are generally strongly correlated with measured data (*r*s ≥ .98; Bonn, Trolle Lagerros, & Bälter, 2013).

**Procedures**

The project was approved by the relevant departmental ethics committee. Data were collected via the Prolific Academic website, a crowdsourcing Internet marketplace that allows individuals to complete academic surveys for monetary compensation, on February 6, 2018. Crowdsourcing Internet marketplaces have been found to produce reliable data on body image (Gardner, Brown, & Boice, 2012) and other differential constructs (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) as compared with offline samples. The project was advertised as a study on “the impact of socio-political beliefs on body image” and included an estimated duration (15 min; average completion time for participants was 14.6 min). Participation was limited to British women of adult age and fluent in English, so as to achieve a relatively homogeneous sample in terms of cultural and national identity. In addition, participation was limited to those who had an Academic Prolific score of > 96 and Academic Prolific ID codes were examined to ensure that no participant took the survey more than once. After providing digital informed consent, participants were directed to the scales described above in counter-balanced order for each participant. Demographic items were completed last. The questionnaire was anonymous and, in exchange for completion, participants were paid £1.25, which is commensurate with Academic Prolific recommendations based on questionnaire completion times. All participants received debriefing information at the end of the survey.

**Results**

**Data Treatment**

No participant was missing substantial amounts of data and all missing data (< 0.8% of the total dataset) were missing completely at random (MCAR), as determined by Little’s (1988) MCAR analysis. We, therefore, inputted missing values using pooled estimates from multiple imputations (Rubin, 1987). Where BMI computations resulted in improbable values (< 12 or > 50 kg/m2; < 2.8% of the total dataset), we replaced these using pooled estimates from multiple imputations. All variables were screened for normality and indicated no violations in statistical assumptions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

**Inter-Scale Correlations and Multiple Hierarchical Regressions**

To test the first hypothesis, bivariate inter-correlations between all variables were computed (see Table 1). As can be seen, there were significant positive associations between feminist beliefs and all three measures of positive body image: Active Commitment and Synthesis scores were positively correlated with higher body appreciation, body pride, and functionality appreciation, although the strength of the relationships was weak-to-moderate. Scores on the empowerment facets of Power/Powerlessness and Self-Esteem/Self-efficacy were also positively associated with scores on all three measures of positive body image and, with the exception of the relationship between Power/Powerlessness and body pride, were generally moderate in strength. In exploring our data, we also included participant age and BMI in the correlational analyses, but these variables were not significantly associated with feminist belief and empowerment scores, respectively. There were also no significant relationships between age and scores on the three positive body image measures. Finally, higher BMI was significantly associated with lower positive body image scores across all three measures, although the strength of the associations was weak.

To test whether feminism uniquely predicted positive body image once empowerment had been accounted for, we conducted three separate multiple hierarchical regressions with body appreciation, body pride, and functionality appreciation, respectively as the criterion variables. In these regressions, empowerment facets (i.e., Power/Powerlessness and Self-esteem/Self-efficacy) entered in a first step and feminist beliefs (Active Commitment and Synthesis) entered in a second step. Multicollinearity was not a limiting factor in any of the regressions (all variance inflation factors < 1.75). Cohen (1992) recommended that Δ*R*2 values should be ≥ .02 to be considered to make a meaningful contribution to the criterion.

In the first regression with body appreciation, the first step of the regression was significant, *F*(2, 299) = 82.00, *p* < .001, Adj. *R*2 = .35. The second step of the regression was also significant, *F*(4, 297) = 44.24, *p* < .001, Adj. Δ*R*2 = .02 (Δ*F* = 4.54, *p* = .011). However, inspection of the regression coefficients (see Table 2) indicated that feminist beliefs were not significantly associated with body appreciation. The first step of the regression with body pride was significant, *F*(2, 299) = 34.13, *p* < .001, Adj. *R*2 = .18, as was the second step, *F*(4, 297) = 19.62, *p* < .001, Adj. Δ*R*2 = .02 (Δ*F* = 4.35, *p* = .014). Here, Power/Powerlessness was not significantly associated with body pride in either step, but Synthesis was significantly associated with body pride in the second step (see Table 3). Finally, in the regression with functionality appreciation, the first step of the regression was significant, *F*(4, 297) = 56.42, *p* < .001, Adj. *R*2 = .27. The second step was also significant, *F*(4, 297) = 32.38, *p* < .001, Adj. Δ*R*2 = .02 (Δ*F* = 6.32, *p* = .002), with Active Commitment being significantly associated with the criterion variable in the second step (see Table 4).

**Self-Labelling Differences**

To test the second hypothesis, we examined between-group differences across all measures between women who self-labelled as a Feminist (*n* = 76), Non-Feminist (*n* = 126), or agreed with most of the objectives of the feminist movement but did not self-label as feminist (henceforth the “Agreed” group; *n* = 99). One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) indicated that there were no significant between-group differences in terms of mean age, *F*(2, 301) = 2.02, *p* = .135, ηp2 = .01, and mean BMI, *F*(2, 301) = 2.32, *p* = .100, ηp2 = .02, so these variables were not included as covariates in the analyses reported below. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was run, with the self-labelling groups as the independent variable, and all variables described above as the dependent variables. Results indicated a significant omnibus effect, *F*(16, 582) = 6.81, *p* < .001, Wilks’ Λ = .70, ηp2 = .16. Descriptive statistics and the results of follow-up ANOVAs are reported in Table 5.

There was a significant ANOVA result for Active Commitment scores, and *post hoc* Tukey testing indicated that the Feminist group had significantly higher scores than the Non-Feminist group, *M*Δ = .99, SE = .14, *p* < .001, CI = 0.67-1.33, but not the Agreed group, *M*Δ = .22, SE = .14, *p* = .261, CI = -0.11-0.53, whereas the Agreed group had significantly higher scores than the Non-Feminist group, *M*Δ = .79, SE = .12, *p* < .001, CI = 0.49-1.08. There was also a significant ANOVA result for Synthesis scores, with the Feminist group having significantly higher scores than the Non-Feminist group, *M*Δ = .51, SE = .12, *p* < .001, CI = 0.22-0.79, but not the Agreed group, *M*Δ = .13, SE = .11, *p* = .510, CI = -0.40-0.14, whereas the Agreed group had significantly higher scores than the Non-Feminist group, *M*Δ = .63, SE = .11, *p* < .001, CI = 0.38-0.88. In terms of Self-Esteem/Self-Efficacy, the Feminist group had significantly lower scores than the Agreed group, *M*Δ = .20, SE = .08, *p* = .033, CI = -0.40-0.01, but not the Non-Feminist group, *M*Δ = .16, SE = .09, *p* = .158, CI = -0.36-0043. There was also no significant difference between the Agreed and the Non-Feminist group, *M*Δ = .05, SE = .07, *p* = .800, CI = -0.12-0.22. Finally, there was a significant ANOVA result for body functionality, with *post hoc* Tukey tests indicating that the Feminist group had significant higher scores than Non-Feminist group, *M*Δ = .39, SE = .12, *p* = .005, CI = 0.10-0.68, but not the Agreed group, *M*Δ = .08, SE = .12, *p* = .781, CI = -0.20-0.36, whereas the Agreed group had significantly higher scores than the Non-Feminist group, *M*Δ = .32, SE = .11, *p* = .013, CI = 0.05-0.57. All other ANOVA comparisons did not reach significance.

**Discussion**

In the present study, we first examined associations between feminist beliefs and facets of positive body image, finding weak-to-moderate positive associations between all constructs. We also examined the extent to which feminist beliefs predicted positive body image once the variance accounted for by empowerment constructs had been explained. Our results showed that higher Synthesis scores were significantly associated with body pride and higher Active Commitment scores were significantly associated with functionality appreciation, once the effects of empowerment facets (Power/Powerlessness and Self-Efficacy/Self-Esteem scores) had been taken into account. On the other hand, feminist beliefs were not significantly associated with body appreciation once empowerment had been accounted for. Although one might conclude on the basis of these findings that feminist beliefs are significantly associated with positive body image, it is important to note that feminist beliefs accounted for only a very small proportion of added variance – 2% across all facets of positive body image – and only just met Cohen’s (1992) cut-off for a meaningful predictive contribution to the criterion. Moreover, direct associations between feminist beliefs and all three facets of positive body image were weak at best.

Conversely, empowerment was significantly associated with all three positive body image facets, though even here some nuance was evident. Specifically, and in contrast to previous work (Peterson et al., 2008), we found that Self-Efficacy/Self-Esteem was more strongly associated with positive body image than Power/Powerlessness. As defined by Rogers and colleagues (1997), the Self-Efficacy/Self-Esteem measures one’s feelings of self-worth and an internal belief that one has control over one’s destiny and life events. As such, it is possible that greater feelings of self-worth and positive expectations of personal efficacy allow women to develop greater resiliency to negotiate or reject restrictive appearance ideals or initiate and maintain behaviours that lead to positive body image. For example, individuals high in Self-Efficacy/Self-Esteem may be better able to exert greater control over their selves (e.g., affect, desires, and actions), which in turn results in them acting in a way that promotes positive body image. More broadly, higher Self-Efficacy/Self-Esteem may also mean women have greater ability to gain mastery over wider their lives (e.g., work, family, society, politics), including greater participation in the public domain in a manner that is consistent with feminist ideals.

In the present study, we also examined between-group differences in positive body image between women who self-labelled as feminists, agreed with most of the objectives of the feminist women but did not self-label as feminists, or who did not self-label as feminists. Our results in this regard suggest that feminists and those who agreed with the objectives of feminism had significantly higher functionality appreciation than those who did not label as feminists. That is, women in the former two groups appear to have greater appreciation for what their bodies could do, rather than what their bodies look like. However, it should be noted that the effect size of the difference was small and may have limited practical value in real-world terms. Moreover, we found no significant between-group differences in terms of two other facets of positive body image, namely body appreciation and body pride.

These findings are important because participants who identified as feminists or agreed with most of the objectives of the feminist women but did not self-label as feminists did in fact have significantly higher feminist beliefs (as measured on the Synthesis and Active Commitment dimensions) than women who did not self-label as feminists. Thus, one broad conclusion that may be drawn is that feminist self-labelling does not promote more positive body image in the manner that has been previously discussed by a number of scholars (Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999). Instead, as suggested by qualitative research (Coles & Swami, 2013; Rubin et al., 2004), although self-labelling as a feminist may allow women to intellectually reject beauty ideals, they may yet struggle to combat tendencies toward harmful self-monitoring and self-objectification. That is, feminist beliefs and knowledge may not be sufficiently powerful to overcome negative body-related thoughts and, conversely, may contribute to shame at struggling to divorce one’s self from sociocultural messages about beauty ideals, which in turn undermines efforts to develop positive body image (Coles & Swami, 2013; Rubin et al., 2004).

A number of limitations of the present study should be considered in tandem with the conclusions drawn above. First, our reliance on an online sample of (mainly White) British women may mean that our findings are not generalisable to the wider population or women in other national contexts. Replicating our research in diverse cultural contexts will be an important direction for future research. Second, our primary findings are cross-sectional and, as such, any causal interpretations should be treated with caution. Although our interpretations are consistent with ongoing theorising (e.g., Peterson et al., 2006, 2008), there is a possibility that converse directional relationships exist: for example, it is conceivable that women with more positive body image may develop more positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, or more strongly identify with feminist beliefs. One way of furthering this line of research would be through carefully-conducted longitudinal studies that assess the impact of changes in feminist beliefs, self-esteem, and self-efficacy on facets of positive body image.

Finally, three aspects of our measurement selection are worthy of commentary. First, while we selected measures of positive body image that provide broad coverage of the construct, there are many other facets of positive body image that were neglected in the present work and that could be included in future studies (see Webb et al., 2015). Second, although our use of the Empowerment Scale is consistent with the measurement of the empowerment construct in previous studies (Kinsaul et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2008), it should be noted that the measure was originally validated in users of mental health services and may, therefore, offer an imprecise tool for measuring empowerment in community samples. Third, while we used a measure of feminist self-labelling that has been used in previous research (Borowsky et al., 2016), it would be useful in future work to utilise alternative self-labels. For example, some studies have suggested that there are differences between private feminist identities (e.g., “I consider myself a feminist”) and public feminist identities (e.g., “I identify as a feminist to other people”; Leaper & Arias, 2011). Other studies have articulated feminism as a continuum of orientations, as we did here, but have included additional response options (e.g., individuals who are unable to define feminism or individuals who identify as feminists with qualified support; see Kelly, 2015).

In conclusion, our results suggest that feminist beliefs are, at best, only weakly associated with facets of positive body image. Conversely, empowerment – and specifically greater self-efficacy and self-esteem – was more strongly associated with positive body image in our sample. In addition, our results suggest that women who self-label as feminists or who agree with most of the objectives of the feminist women but do not self-label as feminists may not have more positive body image than women who do not self-label as feminists. These findings raise interesting questions for scholars and practitioners seeking to develop interventions that promote more positive body image. One conclusion that might seem attractive is that intervention work should focus, not on feminist beliefs, but on feelings of empowerment at the level of the individual. For example, Kinsaul and colleagues (2014) have proposed that such interventions could specifically target resiliency that is tailored to the individual, rather than targeting more wide-ranging beliefs associated with feminist beliefs.

In this context, discussions of the limitations of individual empowerment are pertinent: as various authors have highlighted, casting empowerment as a state of individual being, untethered to the wider social and political context, risks turning the concept into a meaningless construct that is too easily co-opted and depoliticised (Bordo, 1997; Gill, 2008). Rather, while it is important to acknowledge the role that can be played by individual agency, our view is that it remains vital to hold on to the politics of change offered by feminism. As Gavey (2012, p. 719) put it, “… it is difficult to see how the notion of empowerment is useful if it doesn’t retain some deeper political analysis that takes seriously the sociocultural terrain in which individuals are crafting their lives”. Thus, developing interventions that are based on “empowerment education” (Bergsma, 2004; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006) – in which change is effected not just at the individual level, but also at the socio-political level – may offer the best tools not just for promoting healthier body image, but also for empowering individuals to take action that benefits all women.

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Table 1. *Bivariate Inter-Correlations Included between All Variables in the Present Study.*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) |
| (1) Active Commitment | .62\*\* | .08 | .21\*\* | .24\*\* | .15\* | .28\*\* | -.09 | -.02 |
| (2) Synthesis |  | .11 | .33\*\* | .31\*\* | .28\*\* | .28\*\* | -.03 | -.09 |
| (3) Power/Powerlessness |  |  | .37\*\* | .31\*\* | .13\* | .28\*\* | .08 | -.03 |
| (4) Self-esteem/Self-efficacy |  |  |  | .59\*\* | .43\*\* | .51\*\* | .09 | -.06 |
| (5) Body appreciation |  |  |  |  | .73\*\* | .65\*\* | .11 | -.24\*\* |
| (6) Body pride |  |  |  |  |  | .47\*\* | .04 | -.19\*\* |
| (7) Functionality appreciation |  |  |  |  |  |  | .05 | -.14\* |
| (8) Age |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | .11 |
| (9) Body mass index |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

*Note*. \* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .001.

Table 2. *Multiple Hierarchical Regression Coefficients Predicting Body Appreciation.*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | | B | SE | β | *t* | *p* | CI Lower | CI Upper |
| Step 1 | Power/Powerlessness | .20 | .09 | .11 | 2.24 | .026 | .02 | .37 |
|  | Self-esteem/Self-efficacy | .82 | .08 | .55 | 10.91 | < .001 | .67 | .97 |
| Step 2 | Power/Powerlessness | .20 | .09 | .11 | 2.27 | .024 | .03 | .37 |
|  | Self-esteem/Self-efficacy | .75 | .08 | .50 | 9.64 | < .001 | .60 | .91 |
|  | Active Commitment | .06 | .05 | .07 | 1.18 | .238 | -.04 | .15 |
|  | Synthesis | .09 | .06 | .09 | 1.52 | .131 | -.02 | .57 |

Table 3. *Multiple Hierarchical Regression Coefficients Predicting Body Pride.*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | | B | SE | β | *t* | *p* | CI Lower | CI Upper |
| Step 1 | Power/Powerlessness | -.06 | .11 | -.03 | -0.59 | .557 | -.28 | .15 |
|  | Self-esteem/Self-efficacy | .74 | .09 | .44 | 7.88 | < .001 | .55 | .92 |
| Step 2 | Power/Powerlessness | -.06 | .11 | -.03 | -0.55 | .584 | -.27 | .15 |
|  | Self-esteem/Self-efficacy | .64 | .10 | .39 | 6.69 | < .001 | .46 | .84 |
|  | Active Commitment | -.04 | .06 | -.05 | -0.69 | .491 | -.16 | .08 |
|  | Synthesis | .21 | .08 | .19 | 2.71 | .007 | .06 | .36 |

Table 4. *Multiple Hierarchical Regression Coefficients Predicting Functionality Appreciation*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | | B | SE | β | *t* | *p* | CI Lower | CI Upper |
| Step 1 | Power/Powerlessness | .18 | .09 | .11 | 1.98 | .048 | .01 | .36 |
|  | Self-esteem/Self-efficacy | .70 | .08 | .48 | 8.98 | < .001 | .55 | .85 |
| Step 2 | Power/Powerlessness | .18 | .09 | .10 | 2.00 | .047 | .01 | .36 |
|  | Self-esteem/Self-efficacy | .64 | .08 | .43 | 7.94 | < .001 | .48 | .80 |
|  | Active Commitment | .13 | .05 | .16 | 2.58 | .010 | .03 | .23 |
|  | Synthesis | .03 | .06 | .03 | 0.42 | .674 | -.10 | .15 |

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics and Results of Follow-Up Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs).*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Feminists (*n* = 76) | | Agreed (*n* = 126) | | Non-feminists (*n* = 99) | | Total (*N* = 302) | | *F* | *p* | ηp2 |
|  | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |  |  |  |
| Active Commitment | 5.70 | 0.83 | 5.48 | 0.63 | 4.69 | 1.26 | 5.28 | 1.02 | 30.11 | < .001 | .17 |
| Synthesis | 5.53 | 0.87 | 5.66 | 0.57 | 5.03 | 0.94 | 5.42 | 0.83 | 19.00 | < .001 | .11 |
| Power/Powerlessness | 2.88 | 0.49 | 2.80 | 0.51 | 2.77 | 0.42 | 2.81 | 0.48 | 1.29 | .276 | .01 |
| Self-esteem/Self-efficacy | 3.01 | 0.53 | 3.22 | 0.55 | 3.18 | 0.59 | 3.15 | 0.56 | 3.27 | .039 | .02 |
| Body appreciation | 3.19 | 0.83 | 3.20 | 0.81 | 2.95 | 0.89 | 3.12 | 0.85 | 2.75 | .066 | .02 |
| Body pride | 2.69 | 0.91 | 2.92 | 0.90 | 2.72 | 0.98 | 2.80 | 0.93 | 1.94 | .145 | .01 |
| Functionality appreciation | 4.10 | 0.74 | 4.02 | 0.76 | 3.71 | 0.93 | 3.93 | 0.83 | 6.08 | .003 | .04 |

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