The Functionality Appreciation Scale (FAS): Development and psychometric evaluation in U.S. community women and men

Jessica M. Alleva a, b, *, Tracy L. Tylka c, Ashley M. Kroon Van Diest d

a Department of Clinical Psychological Science, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands
b Centre for Appearance Research, University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom
c Department of Psychology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, United States
d Cleveland Clinic Pediatric Behavioral Health Institute, Case Western Reserve University, Lerner College of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, Cleveland, OH, United States

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Body functionality has been identified as an important dimension of body image that has the potential to be useful in the prevention and treatment of negative body image and in the enhancement of positive body image. Specifically, cultivating appreciation of body functionality may offset appearance concerns. However, a scale assessing this construct has yet to be developed. Therefore, we developed the Functionality Appreciation Scale (FAS) and examined its psychometric properties among three online community samples totalling 1042 women and men (n1 = 490 and n2 = 552, respectively). Exploratory factor analyses revealed a unidimensional structure with seven items. Confirmatory factor analysis upheld its unidimensionality and invariance across gender. The internal consistency, test-retest reliability, criterion-related, and construct (convergent, discriminant, incremental) validity of its scores were upheld. The FAS is a psychometrically sound measure that is unique from existing positive body image measures. Scholars will find the FAS applicable within research and clinical settings.

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1. Introduction

Body image can be defined as an individual’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behaviours concerning his or her own body (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Yet, the majority of research on body image has focused on these aspects as related to one's physical appearance, to the exclusion of body functionality. In fact, the paucity of research incorporating body functionality has been identified as one of the key limitations in the field (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Body functionality can be defined as everything that the body can do or is capable of doing and encompasses functions related to (a) physical capacities (e.g., flexibility, walking), (b) internal processes (e.g., digesting food, healing from a cold), (c) bodily senses and perceptions (e.g., seeing, feeling physically relaxed), (d) creative endeavours (e.g., drawing, singing), (e) communication with others (e.g., body language, shared laughter), and (f) self-care (e.g., showering, brushing one’s teeth; Alleva, Martijn, Van Breukelen, Jansen, & Karos, 2015). Yet, body functionality may be limited by various factors (e.g., diseases, acquired injuries, structural differences); thus, it is more consistent with the definition of positive body image to focus on appreciating what the body can do or is capable of doing, rather than simply whether it can do or is capable of doing something (Alleva, Martijn et al., 2015; Bailey, Gammage, van Ingen, & Ditor, 2015; Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015). As an example, Bailey et al. (2015) interviewed adults with spinal cord injuries. Many participants appreciated what their bodies could do (e.g., being grateful for the function of the upper body) and celebrated functional gains (e.g., regaining some mobility). The appreciation of body functionality has been noted in many additional qualitative studies of individuals who espouse a positive body image (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; McHugh, Coppola, & Sabiston, 2014; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010), leading Halliwell (2015) to conceptualise it as a central component of positive body image in need of more research.

Researching body functionality, especially the appreciation of body functionality, in addition to physical appearance is important for obtaining a more complete and comprehensive understanding of body image. After all, the human body is not only its outer appearance, but also its capabilities; as such, body image research must incorporate both of these “halves” (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Much can be gained from investigating
body image in this manner, such as discovering how experiences of body functionality and physical appearance affect one another and develop across time, how perceptions of body functionality are shaped by individual identities (e.g., ethnicity, culture, profession), and in what ways perceptions of body functionality impact self-care behaviours. In addition, researching the appreciation of body functionality is important because it could inspire novel and fruitful approaches for improving body image. More specifically, emphasising the appreciation of the functionality of one’s body might be a useful strategy for enhancing positive body image and reducing aspects of negative body image.

Indeed, experimental research has shown that training women with a negative body image to focus on functions that their body performs and discuss why these functions are personally meaningful to them leads to improvements in body image such as increased body appreciation and reduced appearance dissatisfaction, relative to a control group that focused on creativity training (Alleva, Martijn et al., 2015). This approach has also been successful in improving satisfaction with body functionality in undergraduate men and 30–50-year-old women (Alleva, Martijn, Jansen, & Nederkoorn, 2014). Physical activity and yoga-based interventions, as well as some forms of dance (e.g., belly dance and street dance), might also work to improve positive body image by helping individuals shift their attention to the functional aspects of their body (Cook-Cottone, Kane, Keddie, & Haugli, 2013; Mahlo & Tiggemann, 2016; Martin & Lichtenberger, 2002; Tiggemann, Couts, & Clark, 2014; Swami & Tovée, 2009) and appreciate the ways that their body can meaningfully and actively engage with the world (Piran, 2016). Given that most intervention techniques designed to improve body image focus predominantly on appearance-related aspects of body image (Alleva, Sheeran, Webb, Martijn, & Miles, 2015), the development of techniques focusing on the appreciation of body functionality could complement existing techniques and potentially strengthen overall intervention effects.

One major barrier to researching the appreciation of body functionality is the absence of adequate measures for its assessment. The Body Appreciation Scale’s original and revised versions (BAS and BAS-2; Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a) do not include items that assess the appreciation of body functionality specifically. Indeed, the BAS and BAS-2 items were designed to be nonspecific and encompassing (e.g., “I appreciate the different and unique characteristics of my body”), allowing the respondent the freedom to decide the extent to which they appreciate their body based on any characteristic(s), which could potentially include appearance, function, well-being, and/or other qualities salient to the individual. Thus, the BAS and BAS-2 cannot purely assess the appreciation of body functionality.

Furthermore, in their review of questionnaires to assess aspects of positive body image, Webb et al. (2015) identified commonly-used measures concerning body functionality: (a) the Body Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (e.g., “I think more about how my body feels than how my body looks”; McKinley & Hyde, 1996); (b) the Functionality Investment (e.g., “I always try to physically challenge myself during physical activities”), Satisfaction (e.g., “I am very happy with my performance in physical activities”), and Values (e.g., “One of the most important reasons why people should take care of their bodies is so they can be physically active”) subscales of the Embodied Image Scale (Abbott & Barber, 2010); and (c) the Functionality Awareness (e.g., “I have paid attention to the changing sensations of my body”) and Appreciation (e.g., “I have been grateful for what my body has allowed me to do”) subscales of an author-developed scale for pregnant women (Rubin & Steinberg, 2011). The Physical Condition subscale of the Body Esteem Scale (Franziou & Shields, 1984) has also frequently been used to gauge body functionality by having participants rate their satisfaction with body functions such as physical stamina, muscular strength, and energy level; as well as the Self-Objectification Questionnaire, in which participants rank-order the importance of functionality-based and appearance-based attributes (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998).

Although studies incorporating the above mentioned body functionality measures have helped to advance research concerning this construct, these measures are limited in many different respects. First, they do not capture body functionality in a holistic sense, as they focus predominantly on the domains of physical capacities and internal processes. Second, many of these measures are limited to able-bodied individuals or have been developed for specific populations (e.g., pregnant women; Rubin & Steinberg, 2011). Third, when using the Body Surveillance subscale and Self-Objectification Questionnaire, functionality-focused attitudes and behaviours are positioned at the opposite end of the continuum from appearance-focused attitudes and behaviours, even though it is unclear that body functionality and physical appearance are opposite ends of the same construct (Webb et al., 2015). Fourth, many of these measures capture evaluations of body functionality or domains of body functionality, such as satisfaction with one’s physical condition. Yet, research concerning positive body image has suggested that, when it comes to enhancing positive body image and well-being, gratitude and appreciation for one’s body may be more important than the degree of satisfaction with one’s body (Bailey et al., 2015; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Lastly, none of these measures assess participants’ appreciation of the functions that their body does perform, which is a less able-bodied construct and one that is consistent with the literature on positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b).

Given the importance and potential value of research concerning the appreciation of body functionality, as well as the lack of adequate measures for its assessment, the aim of the present research was to develop such a measure: the Functionality Appreciation Scale (FAS). Based on existing literature, we defined functionality appreciation as appreciating, respecting, and honouring the body for what it is capable of doing, extending beyond mere awareness of body functionality (e.g., knowing that the body can digest food vs. being grateful that the body can digest food). The FAS could provide a valuable contribution to the field by facilitating and inspiring investigations of body functionality, thus helping to fill an important gap in the extant literature (Cash & Smolak, 2011). In the following three studies, we report the development and preliminary psychometric evaluation of this measure.

2. Study 1

The aims of Study 1 were to develop the FAS, explore its factor structure, and evaluate its psychometric properties in a sample of U.S. community women and men. Specifically, we investigated the internal consistency, construct validity, and incremental validity of the FAS’s scores. We hypothesised that the FAS would adhere to a unidimensional solution (H1) and that FAS scores would be internally consistent (H2). We also predicted that the FAS would be positively correlated with other dimensions of positive body image (body appreciation, body image flexibility) and body satisfaction (appearance evaluation, satisfaction with physical condition), and negatively correlated with dimensions of negative body image (appearance orientation, internalisation of the thin and muscular ideal, self-objectification, body surveillance), yielding evidence for convergent validity (H3). Additional evidence of the FAS’s construct validity was examined via its connections to well-being. We hypothesised that the FAS would be positively correlated with components of well-being (self-esteem, gratitude) and negatively correlated with components of ill-being (anxiety, depression; H4). Indeed, individuals endorsing a positive body image have indicated
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