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A structural equation model of the relationship between body perception and self-esteem: Global physical self-concept as the mediator

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Abstract

Objectives: The purposes of this study were to investigate: (1) whether three subscale scores (i.e., body fat, appearance, and strength) and the global physical self-concept and global self-concept scores of the Physical Self-Description Questionnaire (PSDQ) are applicable to Chinese children; (2) whether there is a gender difference in these relationships; and (3) whether global physical self-concept acts as a mediator of global self-concept.

Design: A cross sectional study of Chinese children (45% girls, 55% boys) from low to middle class families were randomly recruited. Participants attended grades 3 through 6 at a standard urban primary school in Hong Kong. Children in this study represented a socioeconomically matched population from Hong Kong.

Method: 320 Chinese children aged 7–12 years were recruited. The PSDQ was used to assess two global dimensions (global physical self-concept and global self-concept) and three specific dimensions (body fat, appearance, and strength) of self-worth. The children's version of the silhouette matching task (SMT) was adopted from Marsh and Roche [Marsh, H. W., & Roche, L. (1996). Predicting self-esteem from perceptions of actual and ideal ratings of body fatness: Is there only one ideal "supermodel"? *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 67, 13–26] to measure children's body perception.

Results: The factor structure of the modified PSDQ model was applicable in young Chinese children, regardless of their gender. Results of structural equation model (SEM) indicated that the model was

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acceptable. The structural paths of the model and the mediating effect of global physical self-concept on global self-concept were discussed.

Conclusion: The present study indicates that the physical self is an increasingly important correlate of self-esteem. It is particularly important relative to perceived self-presentation and social acceptance. Therefore, it is important to consider the impact of the physical self-concept on global self-concept from both cultural and worldwide perspectives.

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Introduction

The terms self-concept and self-esteem are often used interchangeably (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). However, in the context of this paper, it is important to distinguish between the two terms. Self-concept refers to the descriptors or labels that an individual attaches to him- or herself, often related to physical attributes, behavioral characteristics, and emotional qualities. Self-esteem refers to how a person *perceives* and *evaluates* him or her self within the context of experiences and the environment (Shavelson et al., 1976). It is different from self-concept in that it consists of qualitative judgments and feelings attached to a person's description of oneself.

Marsh and Roche (1996) extended the definition of global self-concept by proposing that it is a hierarchical, multi-dimensional, and global construct. Global self-concept is at the apex of the hierarchy, followed by second-order aspects of self-concept that are academic (e.g., Math, English) and non-academic (e.g., social, emotional, and physical). Physical self-concept can be global (e.g., a combination of health, coordination, physical activity, body fat, sports competence, appearance, strength, flexibility, and endurance scores) or specific (e.g., consisting of individual subscale scores) (Fox, 1997). This paper is designed to examine various aspects of physical self-worth relative to global self-concept in Chinese children.

Fox (1998) proposed that one's perception of his or her physical self is related to global self-concept. Sonstroem (1997) believed that when individuals experience a more favorable perception of themselves due to exercise participation, they feel better about themselves and maintain exercise behavior longer. Results of a meta-analysis by Spence, McGannon, and Poon (2005) demonstrated that over 60% of the studies reported significant and positive associations between global self-concept and physical activity involvement. The strong relationship between global self-concept and physical activity makes this an important area of study in exercise psychology.

Marsh and Roche (1996) extended the notion of global physical self-concept and included body fat, appearance, strength, and body ratings (actual vs. ideal) as significant correlates of global self-concept. Due to the cultural stigma associated with obesity or overweight status, it is logical that body fat is a strong correlate of global self-concept (Crandall, 1991; Harter, 1985, 1986; Marsh, 1990; Marsh & Roche, 1996). Related to body fat are self-rated appearance and body size (e.g., actual vs. ideal). Given the emphasis on the body beautiful in Western culture (Negrin, 2004), and the often inaccurate perception of actual vs. ideal body size in Western society (Conneely, 2004), it is important to consider both appearance and body rating as possible correlates of global self-concept. Strength is also related to global self-concept because

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