



# Positive appearance and functionality reflections can improve body satisfaction but do not protect against idealised media exposure



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## ABSTRACT

We tested the effectiveness of a positive appearance or functionality reflective writing task on women's body satisfaction and whether these writing task reflections offered any protective advantage when exposed to idealised imagery. Young adult women ( $N = 230$ ;  $M_{age} = 23$  years) wrote about positive elements of either their appearance or their body's functionality, and then were exposed to images of scenery, or thin and attractive models presented in posed or active form. Direction and amount of social comparison were also examined. Women reported immediate gains in both appearance and physical functionality satisfaction regardless of reflection type. However, neither reflection was protective against decreased satisfaction after exposure to idealised images. Greater upward comparison on either appearance or physical functionality domains was related to poorer outcomes. Our reflection task has potential to shift body focus but future research could examine multiple sessions and reflections on a broader range of self-relevant domains.

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## 1. Introduction

Mass media are recognised as a prominent force behind the distribution of idealised images of women (Tiggemann, 2011). The pervasive display of thin, attractive, and airbrushed models can create a sociocultural pressure to meet unrealistic and often unattainable beauty standards (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Findings from reviews and meta-analyses provide evidence for a small to moderate link between exposure to idealised images and body dissatisfaction in women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Thus, it is important to examine individual-level strategies that may alleviate media-induced dissatisfaction. Recently, there has been a shift towards exploring positive body image to inform such strategies (e.g., Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). At its core, positive body image involves an appreciation of, and respect for, one's body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). It is conceptualised as a multifaceted and holistic construct which includes adaptive investment in appearance, accepting multiple views of beauty, and the ability to accept and value one's body (Tylka, 2011, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). An important element is a focus on body functionality or what the body can

'do' – the instrumental and functional qualities that can be valued over appearance, which may allow people to experience their bodies in non-objectified ways (Abbott & Barber, 2011; Franzoi, 1995; Menzel & Levine, 2011). Researchers have begun to test strategies designed to shift focus away from body appearance and instead towards body functionality (e.g., Alleva, Martijn, Jansen, & Nederkoorn, 2014; Alleva, Martijn, Van Breukelen, Jansen, & Karos, 2015).

A number of theoretical approaches discuss the relationship between aesthetic (appearance) and functionality body components. According to body conceptualisation theory, the body can be represented and experienced in two ways (Franzoi, 1995). First, the body can be portrayed as a posed and passive object, with the focus narrowed to aesthetic qualities of body parts (body-as-object; Franzoi, 1995). Second, the body may be seen as an active holistic entity, with the focus on physical capabilities and instrumentality that contribute to what the body can do (body-as-process; Abbott & Barber, 2011; Franzoi, 1995). Women typically endorse a stronger orientation towards appearance than men (Abbott & Barber, 2010; Wasylkiw & Butler, 2014), and express more negative attitudes about how their body looks, and neutral attitudes towards what the body can do (Franzoi, 1995). Embodiment theory likewise focuses on "positive ways of inhabiting the body" (Piran, 2015, p. 148), in particular, the sense of physical freedom to engage in activities which enhance connection to the body and are unrelated to harsh standards about appearance. Objectification theory posits that women have been socialised to focus on the body as an

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aesthetic object and to evaluate their figure based on its visual appeal due to routine experiences of the objectifying gaze in interpersonal encounters and recurrent exposure to objectified depictions in the media (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification, which refers to appearance evaluation from an internalised observer's perspective, can result in lower state and trait body satisfaction, body esteem, and higher anxiety, depression, and disordered eating (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Strelan, Mehaffey, & Tiggemann, 2003). Further, self-objectification disconnects women from body functionality, as it encourages a focus on the body as passive and aesthetic (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Finally, qualitative and correlational research have consistently found that a functional orientation towards the body, that is, a focus on how the body feels and what it can do, is a key component of positive body image, in young girls (Abbott & Barber, 2011; Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010) and adult women (Avalos & Tylka, 2006; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

Given the focus on functionality, recent experimental research has begun to investigate whether functionality-based interventions can improve women's body satisfaction. Alleva et al. (2014) asked a sample of undergraduate women to write a reflection on their body's functionality, body's appearance, or route to campus. In this initial study, writing about functionality did not increase state appearance satisfaction, state functionality satisfaction, or trait self-esteem in women. However, later work showed more positive results with an expanded 3-session writing task that focused on a broader array of functions including health, creative endeavours, and communication with others in a targeted sample of women with elevated levels of trait body concern (Alleva et al., 2015). Women who completed the functionality reflection reported greater trait appearance and functionality satisfaction, body appreciation, and reduced self-objectification, when compared to women who wrote fictional stories.

It might be that an aesthetic body focus need not be detrimental if women can reflect *positively* upon their appearance. Examination of the responses to the appearance and functionality writing tasks used by Alleva et al. (2014) revealed that participants wrote more positively about their functionality than their appearance, although mean valence scores were close to 'neutral' in both conditions. The authors suggested that it may be beneficial to alter the instructions of the writing reflection task to encourage explicitly positive reflections. In later studies where women were instructed to think about what their body can do and how it is personally meaningful for them, the authors found more positive results (Alleva et al., 2015, 2016). Support for the benefits of positive appearance reflections can be found in a mirror exposure intervention which found that teaching women to verbally describe body parts in a positive self-enhancing way immediately increased state positive feelings, led to greater trait body satisfaction, and reduced trait body shape concerns (Jansen et al., 2016). Such approaches may encourage an internally-driven adaptive reflection on appearance, consistent with the construct of adaptive investment in appearance as noted in the positive body image literature (e.g., Webb, Wood Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015), as opposed to an externalised self-objectified view (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Therefore, women may benefit from a written reflection that explicitly instructs and provides examples on how to reflect on the body in a positive manner.

If beneficial effects can be gained from teaching women to appreciate the positive elements of their body's appearance and functionality, then these gains may serve to make women more resilient to idealised media exposure. Research has indeed shown that trait body appreciation can protect women from experiencing the typically observed negative outcomes associated with exposure to idealised images (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015; Halliwell, 2013). Similarly, directing women's focus away from appearance and towards functionality has been proposed as a

protective strategy against media exposure (Alleva, Veldhuis, & Martijn, 2016; Mulgrew & Tiggemann, 2016). For example, Alleva et al. (2016) found that women asked to reflect upon body functionality before being exposed to thin-ideal imagery reported greater state functionality satisfaction and trait body appreciation post image exposure than those who wrote about their travel to campus. These findings provide support that a functionality focus may protect women from the negative effects of thin-ideal images (Alleva et al., 2016).

Recent research has also examined how a functionality body focus can serve as a protective mechanism when women are exposed to images of the fit ideal. Although there has been a shift in the ideal female form toward a fit and athletic figure (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), these images are still thin and idealised (Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012). As such, there is an increased pressure on women to achieve a fit and athletic body that is also slender in shape (Homan et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2004); an alternate 'fit ideal' to replace the traditional 'thin ideal.' Research has shown that women experience equally negative effects when exposed to thin posed, i.e., body-as-object, or active, i.e., body-as-process, images (Mask, Blanchard, & Baker, 2014; Mulgrew & Hennes, 2015). A study by Mulgrew and Tiggemann (2016) found that women who focused on the physical functionality of models they viewed reported decreased state satisfaction with their own body's physical functionality after exposure to images of posed and active thin ideal models. Additionally, the exposure to models depicted in an active body-as-process manner produced worse state outcomes than exposure to posed body-as-object images. Thus, the relationship between functionality reflections and body disturbance is not straightforward. Mulgrew and Tiggemann (2016) have speculated that reflecting on one's own functionality may buffer against the negative effects of idealised images, whereas reflecting on the functionality of the models may actually increase negative outcomes.

Sociocultural theory and social comparison theory propose that one way through which appearance and functionality dissatisfaction can occur is via social comparison (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Social comparison theory suggests that individuals make evaluations of the self based on comparisons with others (Festinger, 1954). Comparisons can be upward, where comparisons are made with those considered socially superior in some way, or downward, where comparisons are made with those considered less fortunate (Bessenoff, 2006). Women frequently engage in comparisons with idealised images even when these are unfavourable and result in negative self-evaluations (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Myers, Ridolfi, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2012). Experimental findings have demonstrated that exposure to idealised imagery elicits appearance-based comparison, with the extent of comparison predicting increased weight-related thoughts (Bessenoff, 2006), state body-focused anxiety (Dittmar & Howard, 2004), negative mood, and state body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010; Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009). Young adult women are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of appearance ideals as media images typically contain models of a similar age (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009), and can be seen as pertinent targets for comparison. Recent research has suggested that women also make comparisons on the basis of physical functionality, and functionality-based comparisons to idealised images can also lead to state dissatisfaction with one's own physical functionality (Mulgrew & Tiggemann, 2016).

### 1.1. Current study

The current study tested the effectiveness of inducing a positive functionality focus as compared to a positive appearance focus on young women's body satisfaction. This focus was achieved via

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