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Positive Body Image and Cognitive Processing Style

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Positive Body Image and Cognitive Processing Style

By

Brittney Dumas, Bachelor of Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Stephen F. Austin State University
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ABSTRACT

Social media use among young people is ubiquitous and has been associated with body image concerns. Though prior work has overwhelmingly focused on “screen time,” increasing evidence highlights the role of subjective social media experiences in driving this association, rather than mere frequency of use. In the current study, body appreciation was tested as a trait-level variable that may protect women from the negative impact of appearance-focused fitspiration images, which have become common in social media platforms. Appearance schema activation and appearance-related self-discrepancy were examined as two social-cognitive processes in which self-protective tendencies may emerge. Fitspiration exposure predicted appearance schema activation but not appearance-related self-discrepancy.

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Positive Body Image and Cognitive Processing Style

Many women have a negative perception about their bodies that extends from an apparent difference between self-perception (i.e., observations, reflections, and opinions concerning one's original physical appearance; e.g., Heider et al., 2015) and appearance ideals, also known as body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction is found in a majority of female college students; high levels of dissatisfaction are associated with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and binge eating (Brockmeyer et al., 2018). Because body dissatisfaction co-occurs with multiple eating disorders, it can play a crucial role in the development of women's lives (Cho & Lee, 2013).

Social Media and Body Image

One major factor in the increase of body dissatisfaction is mass media; media promote the ideal standards of beauty in different forms (Cho & Lee, 2013; Thompson et al., 1999). With the growth in technology and new forms of media, research has focused more recently on negative media exposure effects that involve the Internet and social media. Social media use among young people is ubiquitous and has been associated with body image concerns. The Pew Research Center reports that 95% of adolescents have access to a smartphone, and 89% go online multiple times a day (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Villanti and colleagues (2017) reported 97.5% of young adults (ages 18-24) use at least one social media platform, and 85% use six or more (social media platforms) on a regular basis. Time spent online and exposure to social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram have been linked to poorer body image outcomes in adult women and adolescent girls (Fardouly et al., 2015; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Slater et al., 2017).

Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Though prior work has overwhelmingly focused on “screen time” (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), increasing evidence highlights the role of subjective social media experiences in driving this association, rather than mere frequency of use (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2013). A consensus among social media researchers is emerging: the focus on frequency of use (i.e., “screen time”) must be replaced with attention to the nature of social media experiences (see Granic et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020; Marino, 2018; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Appearance-related preoccupation can stem from appearance-focused social media that contributes to a distorted perception of one’s own body and decreased self-esteem (Dignard & Jarry, 2021). Theoretically, selective presentation of the most flattering images, filtered and enhanced, a common practice on social media sites such as Instagram and Twitter, may bias views of the success of others and exacerbate users’ appearance focus (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). In return, many women pressure themselves to acquire an unrealistic physique, which can contribute to negative self-evaluations. Social media sites such as Instagram and Twitter give people a voice to be heard and liked by strangers, friends, and family members. The use of hashtags brings an online community together that share the same interests. Hashtags such as “#thinspiration” attract individuals who desire inspiration to lose weight or maintain low body weight, but posts on thinspiration pages can be detrimental to body image by promoting an unrealistic thin ideal (Dignard & Jarry, 2021).

Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1989) is a social psychological theory that has been applied in examining viewers’ emotional and coping responses (e.g., self-esteem, body esteem, eating behaviors) to appearance-focused media. Higgins proposed two types of self-guides that can influence perceptions of the self, the ideal self (who one wants to be) and the

ought self (who one feels they have a duty or obligation to be). Research suggests the ideal self has the most important implications for concerns about the body and one's physical appearance (Forston & Stanton, 1992; Snyder, 1997; Strauman & Glenberg, 1994). That is, if discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal self are perceived as large and personally relevant, they are likely to influence body image. To better understand the role of social media use in young women's body image concerns, calls for research recommend identifying trait-level protective factors and cognitive processing styles which may buffer the negative impact of appearance-focused images and messages which are so common in social media (e.g., Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Notably, the vast majority of work in this literature has used cross-sectional designs, limiting our understanding of the direction of effects. Body appreciation, for example, has been implicated as a trait-level variable which may protect young women from the negative impact of appearance-focused images which are quite common on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

Fitspiration

As an attempt to promote healthier body image and shift the focus away from extreme thinness, some social media influencers have forwarded the "fitspiration" movement. Fitspiration purportedly differs from thinspiration in its aims to promote fitness, strength-building, and healthy eating over extreme thinness and undereating. However, content analyses suggest fitspiration blogs and posts do contain messages that are similar to those on thinspiration websites in their emphasis on appearance, stigmatization of being overweight, and normalization of dieting and restrictive eating (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Boepple et al., 2016). Holland and Tiggemann (2017) observed that women who post fitspiration images scored significantly higher

on the drive for thinness, bulimia, drive for muscularity, and compulsive exercise compared to the users posting travel photos. Similarly, Watkins (2018) examined participants viewing fitspiration or landscape images. Participants who viewed fitspiration exhibited higher body dissatisfaction and a stronger bias to body-related words. The fitspiration movement in social media features images of female body images that are exceptionally lean and muscular. In line with social discrepancy theory, exposure to fitspiration images increases women's aspirations for trimmer and stronger bodies (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), and has been shown to increase body dissatisfaction (Arya & Rai, 2018; Dignard & Jarry, 2021; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Positive Body Image

Historically, research has focused more on predictors and antecedents of negative body image and body dissatisfaction. Research on positive body image is relatively less established but is a continuously growing subfield for body image research. Some researchers report that positive body image and negative body image are separate constructs. In other words, positive and negative body image does not exist at opposite ends of one continuum (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). According to Menzel and Levine (2011) three distinguishing facets of positive body image include (a) an appreciation of the body's appearance and function, (b) salience of and attentiveness to the body's needs and experiences (c) maintaining a protective cognitive style for processing body-related messages. These lower order facets of positive body image are less well understood and have not been empirically evaluated as intensively as those for negative body image (Halliwel, 2015).

Body Appreciation

The Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) is a widely used trait-level measure for positive body image (Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). The original BAS has items which reflect the three facets of positive body image identified by Menzel and Levine (2011) and has since been amended with items that reflect additional concepts: (a) broadly defining beauty, (b) body acceptance, and (c) an inner positivity which influences outward demeanor. Researchers however describe the BAS as a measure of the higher order concept of positive body image (Halliwell, 2015). Supporting this conceptualization, the unidimensional factor structure of the scale has been well documented in Western samples (Avalos et al., 2005; Lobera & Ríos, 2011; Swami, Hadji-Michael, et al., 2008).

Self-Protective Cognitive Style

Of the proposed lower order concepts underlying positive body image, self-protective cognitive style is perhaps the least well understood (Avalos et al., 2005; Menzel & Levine, 2011). Few studies have empirically tested the argument that women with positive body image cognitively process appearance-related images differently than non-appearance-related images (Halliwell, 2013).

Appearance Schema Activation

Researchers have suggested that positive body image may motivate women to downplay appearance-related concerns triggered by appearance-focused media and perhaps by shifting focus to alternative domains of self-worth (Halliwell, 2015). Women with positive body image do consume less appearance-focused media (Swami, Steiger, et al., 2008). Moreover, they report an

intention to minimize the importance of appearance-related information (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). If successful in deemphasizing appearance-related thoughts evoked by viewing appearance-focused images, women with positive body image should exhibit weaker accessibility for appearance-related schemas. Cognitive theories of body image (e.g., Vitousek & Hollon, 1990) suggest that women and especially those with body image concerns may develop schemas (organized cognitive structures) that increase the efficiency of information processing, specifically related to the issues of weight and appearance. Appearance-related schemas can be activated in situations that make individuals think about their weight and shape (Vitousek & Hollon, 1990). For women with high levels of body appreciation, downplaying physical appearance and considering other domains for self-comparison while consuming appearance-related media could prompt reduced activation of appearance-related schemas, for women with low levels of body appreciation however appearance-related media should prompt increased activation of appearance-related schemas. One tool that has been used to measure appearance-related schemas in naturalistic and experimental environments is the word-stem completion task (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002; Myers et al., 2015). This task was expanded by Tissot (2007) to include 60-word stems. It is considered an implicit or direct measure of appearance focus in that each word stem can be completed to form either an appearance-related word or a non-appearance-related word and participants are asked to respond with the rest of the word that “comes to mind first” when they see each word stem.

Appearance-Related Self-Discrepancy

Another way that women with positive body image may protect themselves from appearance-related stressors is by minimizing the size and salience of appearance-related self-

discrepancies. Halliwell (2013) observed that this was the case following exposure to thin ideal media. This tendency has not been explored following exposure to fitspiration images. Because of the mixed messages presented in fitspiration (inspirational goals messages that emphasize fitness and strength confounded with stigmatizing messages that emphasize weight loss and fear of excess weight), women with higher levels of positive body image may not exhibit the same wary self-protective response they do to thin ideal media. Dignard and Jarry (2021) have described this as the, “Little Red Riding Hood Effect” pitting fitspiration as the wolf disguised as harmless fitness promotion while still posing risks for women’s body image. The proposed study will thus aim to extend the work of Halliwell (2013) by replicating a buffered negative media effect with fitspiration images instead of thin ideal images.

Current Study

While a protective cognitive processing style is a theorized component of positive body image, little research has examined it empirically. The proposed study addressed this limitation in the literature by exploring the activation of appearance focused schemas with repeated word stem completion tasks before, during, and after exposure to fitspiration images. The task consisted of 60-word stems broken into three trials, completed at the beginning middle and end of the presentation of fitspiration images. The word stem completion task was staggered in this way to determine if initial appearance activation levels induced by the fitspiration were followed by weaker activation in women with higher levels of body appreciation. Body appreciation was examined as a moderating trait level variable.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Compared to women with low levels of body appreciation, women with high levels of body appreciation would exhibit lower overall appearance schema activation across the presentation of fitspiration and travel images.

Hypothesis 2. Compared to women with low levels of body appreciation, women who report high levels of body appreciation would exhibit greater declines in appearance schema activation across the presentation of fitspiration images.

Hypothesis 3. Compared to women with low levels of body appreciation, women with high levels of body appreciation would exhibit no significant difference in the rate of decline across the presentation of travel images.

Another way that women with positive body image may protect themselves from appearance-related stressors is by minimizing the size and salience of appearance-related self-discrepancies. Halliwell (2013) observed that this was the case following exposure to thin-ideal media. The proposed study thus aimed to extend the work of Halliwell (2013) by replicating a buffered negative media effect with fitspiration images instead of thin-ideal images. We expected that body appreciation and the interaction between body appreciation and experimental condition would predict appearance-related self-discrepancy size and salience.

Hypothesis 4. For women with high levels of body appreciation, there would be no difference in appearance-related self-discrepancy size or salience after viewing fitspiration versus travel images.

Hypothesis 5. Women low on body appreciation would report more appearance-related self-discrepancies and more salience for appearance-related self-discrepancies after viewing fitspiration images than after control images.

Method

Participants

Seventeen female undergraduate students from Stephen F. Austin State University were recruited from the Department of Psychology with the use of the SONA software system. One hundred fifty-one female participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk has been found to be a reliable and valid method for data collection on body image (Gardner et al., 2012). Participants who were under the age of 18 or male were excluded. Participants received course credit or MTurk payment (\$0.25) upon completion of the study. Within the 134 participants included in the main analyses, age ranged from 19 to 74 ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.27$). Body Mass Index ranged from 15 to 73 ($M_{\text{BMI}} = 27$). Two participants identified as American Indian/Alaska Native (1.5%), five as Asian (3.7%), 15 as Black or African American (11.2%) and 109 as White (81.3%), and 3 as more than one race (2.2%). Fourteen (10.4%) participants identified as Hispanic or Latino and 117 (87.3%) did not identify as Hispanic or Latino. Four participants identified as freshmen in college (3.0%), five as sophomores (3.7%), thirteen as juniors (9.7%), 26 as seniors (19.4%), and 86 as not currently enrolled in college (64.2%).

Design and Experimental Manipulation

The study used a randomized 2 (image type: fitspiration, neutral) \times 3 (time: pre-image exposure, mid-image exposure, post-image exposure) mixed design. Experimental condition was a between-subjects factor and time was a within-subjects factor. The primary dependent variables

were appearance schema activation, and appearance-related self-discrepancies. Trait level body appreciation was examined as a moderating variable.

Experimental Condition and Image Type

Two sets of images were presented. Half of the participants viewed 12 fitspiration images (see Appendix D and half viewed 12 travel images as a neutral comparison group (see Appendix E). The fitspiration images depicted thin and toned women either in posed positions (i.e., yoga poses, “selfie” poses) or engaged in physical activity (i.e., running, squatting). These images were previously used by Prichard et al. (2018). Travel images and fitspiration images were sourced from public social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram). Travel images depicted landscapes (e.g., beaches, mountains) and historic sites (e.g., Eiffel Tower, castles, bridges).

Measures

Appearance Schema Activation

Appearance schema activation was examined using Hargreaves and Tiggemann's (2002) word-stem completion task. Participants were asked to complete 3-letter word stems, that could be completed as appearance-related words or non-appearance-related words (see Appendix B). For instance, the stem PRE___, which could be completed as PRETTY (appearance-related) or PRESENT (non-appearance-related). Each item was coded by the researcher. Words included in the word stem completion task were taken from Tissot (2007), who expanded the task to contain 60-words. The task was split into three separate series; each consisted of a random set of 20-word stems (randomized without replacement). Randomization served to maintain variability within the scale and prevent familiarity effects that could result from participants completing the same word stems each time they completed the task. Composite scores were computed as sums of the completion responses coded as appearance-related words in each series (pre-exposure, mid-exposure, post-exposure). Three difference scores were computed: a mid-pre difference score (mid-exposure sum – pre-exposure sum), a post-pre difference score (post-exposure sum – pre-exposure sum), and a mid-post difference score (post-exposure sum – mid-exposure sum).

Appearance-Related Self-Discrepancy

To measure the degree to which participants considered appearance-related social comparison following exposure to the experimental or control images and how important they perceived these comparisons to be, participants completed the Appearance-Related Self-

Discrepancy Index (Ditmar et al., 1996; Halliwell, 2002). Following the procedure used by Halliwell and Dittmar (2006), participants were given the following instructions:

Like most people there are probably some things about your appearance that you like, while there are other things that ideally you would like to change. Please think about the way that you actually look and the way that you would ideally like to look.

Next, they were asked to complete up to five sentences in the format of “I... but I would like....,” describing aspects of their appearance that they would ideally like to change (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006). Following the sentence completion as seen in Appendix F, participants were asked to rate the perceived importance and magnitude of each self-discrepancy statement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not important*) to 5 (*extremely important*) and 1 (*a little different*) to 5 (*extremely opposite*). This method was developed by Ditmar and colleagues to elicit subjectively meaningful self-discrepancies (Ditmar et al., 1996; Halliwell, 2002). The rating of self-discrepancy was calculated by summing the products of all items’ importance and magnitude ratings. Internal consistency for the self-discrepancy importance and magnitude items collectively was acceptable (Cronbach’s alpha = .886).

Appearance Processing

As a manipulation check, explicit appearance schema activation was measured using a single-item scale, “To what extent did you think about your physical appearance while viewing the images?” (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Participants' responses were calculated on a seven-

point scale that ranged from 1 = *no thought about my appearance* to 7 = *a lot of thought about my appearance*.

Inspiration Ratings

To ensure attention, participants were asked to look at each image and rate how inspirational they found the image on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all inspirational*) to 5 (*extremely inspirational*).

Trait-Level Body Appreciation

Trait-level body appreciation was measured with the Body Appreciation Scale (Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Participants responded to 13 items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The scale has demonstrated evidence of internal consistency, test–retest reliability, and construct validity for women (Avalos et al., 2005; see Appendix C). In the current study, internal consistency among the body appreciation items was good (Cronbach’s alpha = .926).

Attention Checks

Three attention checks were embedded in the word stem completion task and survey items (e.g., “To make sure you are paying attention, please answer strongly disagree”).

Demographics

Participants reported age, ethnicity, weight, height, and college classification in a series of demographic items.

Procedure

This study was advertised to Amazon MTurk respondents and the psychology department participant pool in the SONA system as a two-part study on online fitness and exercise motivation. Participants who signed up for the study were given a link to complete part one of the study as an online survey in Qualtrics. The consent form was presented upon accessing the Qualtrics link. Participants were told that personality, mood, and thoughts about oneself influence motivation for exercise and that part one of the study would include questions relating to these factors. They completed the trait-level measure of body appreciation as well as filler items about personality and exercise to disguise the true focus of the study.

Three days later, participants were able to access part-two of the study in Qualtrics. Part-two began with the first 20-word stems. Next, participants were presented with six images (fitspiration or travel). Participants were allocated to conditions randomly by Qualtrics and were asked to rate each image using a separate inspiration rating scale. After rating the sixth image, participants were presented with the second set of 20-word stems. They rated six additional images using the inspiration scale and were presented with the third set of 20-word stems. Participants rated the images and completed the word stem at their own pace, then complete the Self-Discrepancy Index. As a naivety check, participants were asked to type a description of the purpose of the study using their own words. Part two ended with a debriefing page (see Appendix G).

Plan of Analyses

Four separate hierarchical multiple regressions analyses were conducted to test body appreciation as a moderator of the relationship between experimental condition and the three

appearance schema activation difference scores (mid-exposure - pre-exposure, post-exposure - pre-exposure, post-exposure - mid-exposure) as well as appearance-related self-discrepancy. Preliminary analysis included an exploration of differences in age and body mass index (computed based on self-reported height and weight), by experimental condition.

Results

Data Cleaning and Assumptions

Prior to main analyses, data were screened, cleaned, and tested for assumptions using IBM's SPSS statistical software. Of the 168 total participants recruited, 34 participants' data were removed in total. Twenty-four participants were removed from the dataset for not answering 15 or more of the study items. Ten additional participants were removed from the dataset for not passing one or more of the attention checks. Therefore, a total of 134 participants' data was used for analyses. Mean scores on the appearance processing manipulation check were significantly higher in the fitspiration condition ($M = 4.903$, $SD = 1.555$) compared to the travel condition ($M = 3.672$, $SD = 2.211$), $t(124) = -3.605$, $p < .001$. Prior to running the regressions, the data was screened for any univariate outliers that were outside of the interquartile range. This indicated no outliers in the data. An independent samples t -test indicated no significant difference in BMI across experimental conditions ($p = .561$); therefore, BMI was not controlled for in the regressions. Similarly, an independent samples t -test indicated no significant difference in age across experimental conditions ($p = .827$); therefore, age was not controlled for in the regressions. Prior to running the regression analyses, the Durbin-Watson statistic was computed to determine whether there was independence of errors (residuals). Durbin-Watson statistics of 2.077, 1.887, 1.955, and 2.192 for the mid-pre difference score, the post-pre difference score, the mid-post difference score and the SDI composite analyses respectively, indicated there was no correlation between residuals. To determine whether a linear relationship existed between the dependent variables in the regression models and the independent variable (collectively), the researcher

examined scatterplots of the studentized residuals against the unstandardized predicted values. To determine whether a linear relationship existed between the dependent variables in the regression models, the researchers examined partial regression plots between each dependent variable and each continuous independent variable. These plots revealed that the independent variables collectively were linearly related to the dependent variable for each model and the separate independent variables were linearly related to the dependent variable for each model. To test for homoscedasticity, the researcher again examined scatterplots of the studentized residuals against the unstandardized predicted values. None of these plots revealed uneven spreads, thus homoscedasticity was assumed. No tolerance values were less than 0.1 indicating no problems with collinearity in the models (Hair et al., 2014). There were no problematic Leverage values (all values were under .2; Huber, 1981). For all four regression models, all standardized residuals fell within ± 3 SDs thus no participants were removed as outlier cases. Cook's Distance values were all under 1 thus it was assumed there were no highly influential points (Cook & Weisberg, 1982). An examination of P-P plots raised no concerns of deviations from normality.

Impact of Fitspiration on Appearance Schema Activation

It was hypothesized that, compared to women with low levels of body appreciation, women with high levels of body appreciation would exhibit lower overall appearance schema activation across the presentation of fitspiration and travel images (hypothesis 1). Compared to women with low levels of body appreciation, women who reported high levels of body appreciation were expected to exhibit a greater decline in appearance schema activation across the presentation of fitspiration images (hypothesis 2), but no decline across the presentation of travel images (hypothesis 3). The regression model predicting the difference in weight schema activation from pre-exposure to midpoint-exposure was significant with experimental condition

making a unique contribution to variance in the first step of the model, $R^2 = .074$, $F(2, 131) = 5.188$, $b = 1.379$, $t = 3.198$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.526, 2.233]. There was a greater increase in appearance schema activation from pre-exposure to midpoint-exposure in the fitspiration condition compared to the travel condition. Body appreciation and the interaction term for body appreciation and experimental condition made nonsignificant contributions to variance in the difference in weight schema activation from pre-exposure to midpoint-exposure. The regression models predicting the post-pre difference score and the mid-post difference score indicated that body appreciation, experimental condition, and the interaction term for body appreciation and experimental condition made no significant contributions to variance in the difference in weight schema activation from pre-exposure to post-exposure or mid-exposure to post-exposure. The means for appearance schema activation as a function of time and level of body appreciation are depicted in Figure 1 (travel condition) and Figure 2 (fitspiration condition). In the travel and the fitspiration condition, the trend in means across time did vary as expected by levels of body appreciation. However, the nonsignificant interactions between body appreciation and experimental condition indicate the difference in these trends was not significant. Thus, while hypothesis 3 was supported, hypotheses 1 and 2 were not.

Figure 1

Travel Condition Appearance Schema Activation as a Function of Time and Body Appreciation

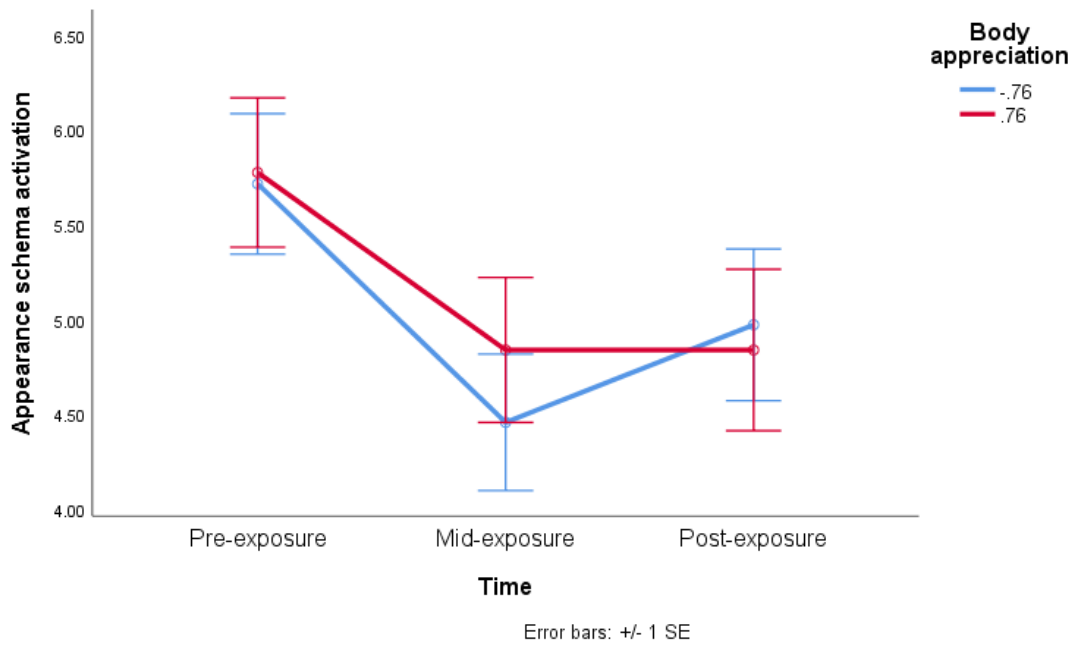
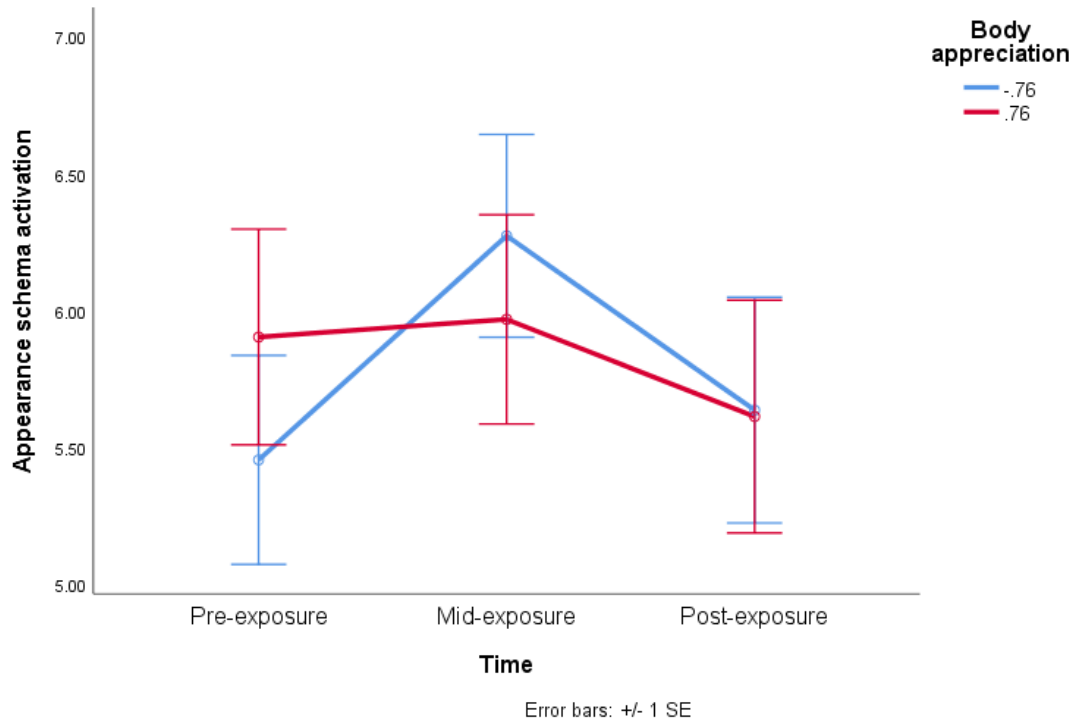


Figure 2

Fitspiration Condition Appearance Schema Activation as a Function of Time and Body Appreciation



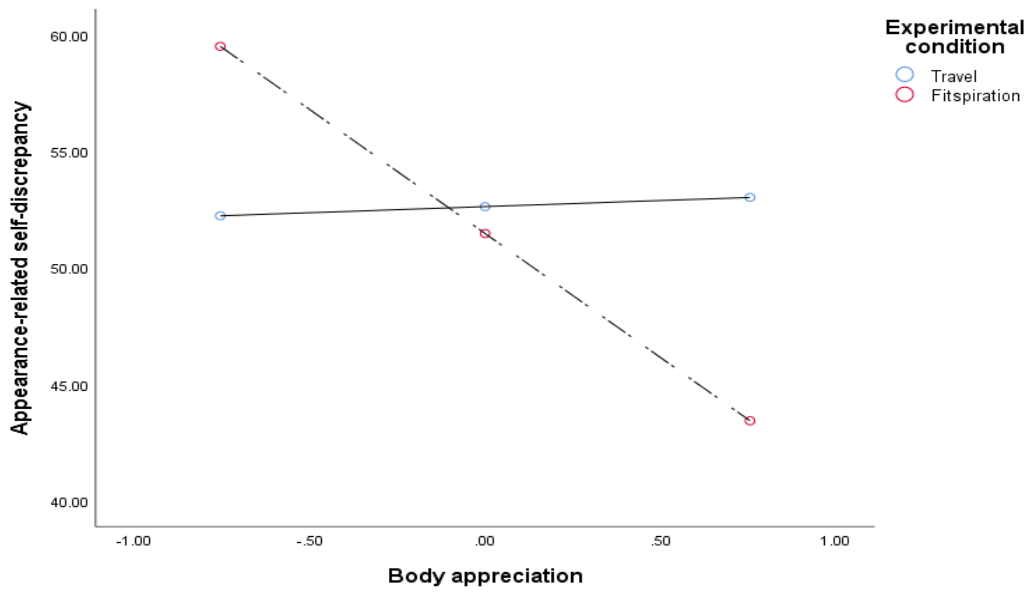
Impact of Fitspiration on Appearance-Related Self-Discrepancy

It was hypothesized that, for women with high levels of body appreciation, there would be no difference in appearance-related self-discrepancy size or salience after viewing fitspiration versus travel images (hypothesis 4). Women low on body appreciation, however, were expected to report more appearance-related self-discrepancies and more salience for appearance-related self-discrepancies after viewing fitspiration images than after control images (hypothesis 5). The

pattern of results were the same for appearance-related self-discrepancy size and salience, thus the scores were combined as one composite by summing the products of size and salience for all appearance-related self-discrepancy items. The results for the regression analysis indicated that experimental condition did not make a significant contribution to variance in the appearance-related self-discrepancy composite. Neither did body appreciation or the interaction term for body appreciation and experimental condition. This indicates that fitpiration images did not significantly impact appearance-related self-discrepancies, regardless of participants body appreciation levels, thus supporting hypothesis 4 but contradicting hypothesis 5. The means for appearance-related self-discrepancy as a function of image type and body appreciation are depicted in Figure 3. The differences in means for appearance-related self-discrepancies across experimental condition did vary as expected by levels of body appreciation. However, the nonsignificant interaction between experimental condition and body appreciation indicates the difference in these trends was not significant.

Figure 3

Appearance-Related Self-Discrepancy as a Function of Body Appreciation and Experimental Condition



Discussion

While a protective cognitive processing style is a theorized component of positive body image, little research has examined it empirically. The current study addressed this gap by exploring the activation of appearance focused schemas with repeated word stem completion tasks before, during, and after exposure to fitspiration images and travel images. Body appreciation was examined as a moderating trait level variable. A primary aim was to determine if initial appearance activation levels induced by fitspiration are followed by weaker activation in women with higher levels of body appreciation. Women with positive body image may also protect themselves from appearance-related stressors by minimizing the size and salience of appearance-related self-discrepancies (Halliwell, 2013), thus a second aim was to extend the work of Halliwell (2013) by replicating a buffered negative media effect with fitspiration images instead of thin-ideal images.

Implications

The findings of the current study did not support the hypotheses that 1) compared to women with low levels of body appreciation, women with high levels of body appreciation would exhibit lower overall appearance schema activation across the presentation of fitspiration and travel images or the hypothesis that 2) compared to women with low levels of body appreciation, women who reported high levels of body appreciation would exhibit a greater decline in appearance schema activation across the presentation of fitspiration images. However, there was higher appearance schema activation in the fitspiration condition compared to the travel condition across time and regardless of body appreciation level.

The significant prediction of appearance schema activation by experimental condition suggests that the fitspiration images activated participants' appearance related schemas and validates the media images chosen for the current study as appropriate for future experimental manipulations examining the effects of fitspiration. Experimental condition's lack of interaction with body appreciation goes against that argument that a protective cognitive processing style buffers the negative effects of appearance focused images on women with higher levels of body appreciation (Halliwell, 2015).

The findings of the current study did support the hypotheses that, for women with high levels of body appreciation, there would be no difference in appearance-related self-discrepancy size or salience after viewing fitspiration versus travel images. Women low on body appreciation, however, did not report more appearance-related self-discrepancy after viewing fitspiration images than after control images. While previous research has indicated a buffered effect of thin-ideal media on appearance-related self-discrepancy in women with higher levels of body appreciation (Halliwell, 2013), the results of the current study suggest that whatever buffer body appreciation may entail is not activated by or successful in reducing the negative effects of fitspiration images encountered while consuming social media.

The failure of both proposed interactions to reach significance adds credence to Dignard and Jarry (2021) proposed "Little Red Riding Hood Effect" and the idea that due to the mixed messages presented in fitspiration, women with higher levels of positive body image may not exhibit the same wary self-protective response they do to thin ideal media. Differences in motivation or effort could thus explain the discrepancy between findings of the current study and those of Halliwell (2013). On the other hand, it is possible that the fitspiration images presented

in the current study triggered an automatic appearance focused state which participants, even those who endorsed body appreciation, were not capable of suppressing. Lastly, while participants in the current study were not timed in their completion of the word stem completion tasks or image viewing, the number of stimuli and trials may have encouraged participants to rush through their tasks. This could have reduced motivation and effort among body positive women in retrieving alternative non-appearance-related stem-completions or shifting focus away from appearance-related discrepancies.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Though the current study included important improvements to extend previous studies, it is not without limitations. Because this study was completed online, there likely was wide variability in the type of electronic device used, amount of time spent viewing each image, outside noises, and presence of family members or friends during study participation. Had the current study been completed in a laboratory environment, the researchers would have had greater control over the participants' experience with the media and survey content. A related limitation was the presentation of social media images. Participants viewed these images one at a time, on a screen which presented only the image and the rating scale. A more ecological valid methodology with scrolling options and screen content that more closely resembled an actual Instagram feed or Facebook page may have captured the buffered effect expected among women with higher levels of body appreciation.

As mentioned above, the number of trials and the number of word-stems in the word stem completion task may have created too much of a burden on participants. Boredom, frustration,

and rushing through could be prevented from overriding protective cognitive style if future studies were to include fewer word stems in each trial.

Though body appreciation was chosen as a moderator variable due to its proposed links to a protective cognitive style, it is possible that other positive body image variables or perhaps lower levels of more traditionally examined negative trait level body image variables (e.g., self-objectification or appearance focus) would have been better predictors of the proposed buffered media effect. Further, there may be variables (e.g., social-comparison) which moderated the proposed buffering. Future studies could measure such variables and examine their roles using three-way interactions or covariate analyses.

The fact that women with higher levels of body appreciation did not exhibit more protective responses to the fitspiration images presented in the current study points to a need for development and empirical testing of psychoeducational strategies to enhance awareness of the risks associated with fitspiration.

Conclusion

Overall, the current study results did not support the idea that women with high levels of body appreciation exhibit a cognitive processing style that differs from women with low levels of body appreciation or protects against appearance schema activation or appearance-related self-discrepancies following exposure to fitspiration images. This is perhaps not entirely disappointing news when we consider the large percentage of women who openly endorse body dissatisfaction and low appearance-related self-esteem (Brockmeyer et al., 2018; Heider et al., 2015). Still, further work is needed to understand the cognitive processing styles of women who experience body appreciation. Moreover, psychoeducational programs that aim to foster body appreciation in

women and girls, may need to incorporate media literacy efforts that identify the risks of
fitspiration.

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APPENDIX A
Informed Consent Form

PURPOSE: To understand people's reactions to images on social media.

DURATION: The length of time you will be involved with this study is approximately 30 minutes.

PROCEDURES: If you agree to be a part of this study, we will ask you to do the following things: complete a survey asking about questions concerning yourself and your appearance. There are no right or wrong answers, and you can leave a question blank if you feel uncomfortable answering it. You will also be asked to complete a word completion task and rate the characteristics of several images.

RISKS: Some of the questions and images presented in this survey could elicit emotional distress or boredom. Questions about the self and appearance and appearance-focused images can stir uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. We want you to know that, if at any point you feel distressed, you should discontinue your participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY: The records of this study will be kept private. Your name will not be attached to the answers you provide. The investigators will have access to the raw data. In any report that is published or presentation that is given, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. The numbers of the raw data will not be tied to any identifying information about you. Once collected, all data will be kept in secured files, in accord with the standards of SFASU, federal regulations, and the American Psychological Association. Also, please remember that the researchers are not interested in any one person responses. We are interested in how people, in general, respond to the measures.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY: Your participation in this study is voluntary. Also, you may choose not to respond to individual items in the survey. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with SFASU nor any of its representatives. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS:

Dr. Sarah Savoy: savoysc@sfasu.edu

Brittney Dumas: dumasba1@jacks.sfasu.edu

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak to someone other than the researchers, you may contact The Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (936) 468-6606.

BENEFITS: The benefits of participation are having your opinions and perspective included in this research.

Students recruited from participating introductory psychology classes will receive one credit for every 30 minutes of research participation. This study is worth one research credit. Students from other courses will receive credit in that class in an amount that is considered appropriate by the course instructor (e.g., 5 points extra credit or 1-2% of the overall points possible in the class).

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

The procedures of this study have been explained to me. The information that I provide is confidential and will be used for research purposes only. I am at least 18 years of age, and I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I have read the information in this consent form, and I agree to be in the study.

APPENDIX B

Word Stem Completion Task

1-12	13-24	25-36	37-48	49-60
Pre__	Hea__	Plu__	Sha__	Ath__
Cal__	Fig__	Chi__	Att__	Che__
Fla__	Gor__	Rea__	Blo__	Tal__
Boo__	Die__	Sli__	Chu__	Mus__
Ide__	Scr__	Tin__	Lan__	Ado__
Bin__	Tum__	Ski__	Gro__	Tig__
Sca__	Bon__	Han__	Div__	Abd__
Gla__	Fle__	Lea__	Obe__	Cel__
Tri__	Thi__	Mod__	Pet__	Wai__
Mou__	Sle__	Stu__	Ton__	Per__
Fre__	Cur__	Rou__	Sle__	Sma__
Pla__	Sty__	Fai__	Hus__	Tri__

Note: The words presented in this appendix will be distributed randomly throughout the experiment. These words will be used to provide details into the individual protective cognitive style. All words have been validated by a previous study (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002).

APPENDIX C

Body Appreciation Scale

1. I respect my body
2. I feel good about my body.
3. On the whole, I am satisfied with my body.
4. Despite its flaws, I accept my body for what it is
5. I feel that my body has at least some good qualities.
6. I take a positive attitude toward my body.
7. I am attentive to my body's needs.
8. My self-worth is independent of my body shape or weight.
9. I do not focus a lot of energy being concerned with my body shape weight.
10. My feelings toward my body are positive, for the most part.
11. I engage in healthy behaviors to take care of my body.
12. I do not allow unrealistically thin images of women presented in the media to affect my attitudes toward my body.
13. Despite its imperfections, I still like my body.

Note: The statements presented in this appendix will be presented in the pre-screening of the study. All words have been validated by previous studies (Avalos et al.,2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015)

APPENDIX D

Fitspiration Images



APPENDIX E

Travel Images



APPENDIX F

DEBRIEFING

Thank you for participating in this research today. We would like to inform you about what we are studying. We are interested in how exposure to fitspiration images relates to body image, thoughts about appearance, and social comparison. We asked you to complete a series of measures and view Instagram images (fitness or travel). Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this research, please e-mail Sarah Savoy at savoysc@sfasu.edu. In addition, if you wish to speak with someone other than the researchers, you may contact The Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects at Stephen F. Austin State University (936-468-6606).

If you would like to speak to a professional, information for counseling services and national confidential hotlines will be provided for you below.

Again, thank you for completing our study. Have a great day.

Counseling Information

If you feel distressed because of this study and would like counseling or support, please see the contact information below for campus counseling services.

Counseling Services – **Stephen F Austin State University**

Hours: 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. - Monday- Friday

(936)468-2401

**Located in the Rusk Building on the third floor. Appointments may be made in person or by telephone. If you are in need of assistance after hours or over the weekend or holiday break, please call: University Police (936) 468-2608 or MHMR Crisis Line: (800) 392-8343.

National Eating Disorder Services-trained operators will assist you, toll free, and confidential

Phone Support: 1-800-931-2237

Text Support: "NEDA" to 741741

Hours: Monday- Thursday, 9:00 am – 9:00 pm and Friday, 9:00 am- Friday 5:00 pm (closed on holidays)

Suicide National Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Vita

After completing high school at Deer Park High School, in Pasadena, Texas, Brittney attended Alcorn State University in Lorman, Mississippi. She completed her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in December of 2017. She then continued her education at Stephen F. Austin State University in August of 2018, where she received her Masters of Arts in Psychology in August of 2021.

Permanent Address: 22914 Volga Dr.
Porter, Texas 77365

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Seventh Edition)

This thesis was typed by Brittney Dumas