



BODY IMAGE ACROSS THE ADULT LIFESPAN: IT'S MORE GENDER THAN AGE

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*Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA),
Washington, D.C., U.S.A., August, 2005*

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ABSTRACT

The majority of research on body image has focused on female adolescent and young adult student samples. Limited research has examined differences in body image by gender across the adult lifespan. The purpose of the present study was to simultaneously examine age and gender differences in body image in 276 community-dwelling adults (130 men and 146 women) aged 20-80 years ($M = 49.8$, $SD = 17.2$) whose years of education ranged from 4 to 21 years ($M = 13.7$, $SD = 2.3$). A variety of body image measures were used. Results showed that there were scarcely any age differences on the body image measures, but gender differences were apparent on nearly all measures.

INTRODUCTION

Relatively little research has explored body image across the adult lifespan and most of what exists has focused on women. The majority of research exploring the effects of age suggests that older women are just as dissatisfied with their bodies as younger women (e.g., Deeks & McCabe, 2001; Grogan, 1999; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001; Wilcox, 1997). A few studies have differed in their conclusions, with some (e.g., Rozin & Fallon, 1988) reporting older generations to be much more dissatisfied with their current body image than younger generations, others (e.g., Davison & McCabe, 2005) reporting middle-aged men and women to be less satisfied with their bodies than younger or older individuals, and still others (e.g., Deeks & McCabe, 2001; Franzoi & Koehler, 1998) reporting that age differences depended on the specific body image variable (e.g., weight concern vs. body functioning) examined.

Considerably more research has focused on gender differences in body image. Most researchers have reported that women hold more negative body images than do men (e.g., Cash & Brown, 1989; Davison & McCabe, 2005; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Furnham & Greaves, 1994; Janelli, 1993; Rozin & Fallon, 1988) with only a few (Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1988; Wilcox, 1997) finding no gender differences in degree of body image dissatisfaction. A number of researchers have reported gender differences in attitudes toward specific body parts (e.g., Franzoi & Koehler, 1998; Furnham & Greaves, 1994; Muth & Cash, 1997; Silberstein et al., 1988). Generally, it has been found that women are more negative about a wide range of physical attributes, including thighs, buttocks, chest, hips, weight, physical condition, strength, skin complexion, hair, facial features, and overall appearance. Men tend to be more dissatisfied with the appearance of their biceps, shoulders, and chest.

Study Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to simultaneously explore age and gender differences in body image across the adult lifespan using a variety of body image measures.

METHOD

Participants

Participants consisted of 276 community-dwelling adults (130 men and 146 women) aged 20-80 years ($M = 49.8$, $SD = 17.2$) whose years of education ranged from 4 to 21 years ($M = 13.7$, $SD = 2.3$).

Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire packet containing the following measures:

Age-Related Concerns Questionnaire (ARC; Gupta & Schork, 1993)

Three subscales, based on factor analysis, were created using a slightly modified version of the ARC. Appearance dissatisfaction is the sum of item 1 and new item 7 (range = 2-20; $\alpha = .75$); higher scores reflect greater dissatisfaction with one's appearance. Aging concerns is the sum of items 2, 5, and 6 (range = 3-30; $\alpha = .74$); higher scores reflect greater concern about the impact of aging on appearance. Weight & age is the sum of items 3 and 4 (range = 2-20; $\alpha = .88$); higher scores reflect the belief that losing weight makes one look younger.

Anxiety about Aging (AAS; Lasher & Faulkender, 1993)

Only a modified four-item Physical appearance subscale, which measures anxiety about changes in one's physical looks that occur in the aging process, was used. Higher scores (range = 4-20) reflect greater anxiety about one's physical appearance with age. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .75.

Body-Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ; Cash & Syzmanski, 1995; Syzmanski & Cash, 1995)

This questionnaire measures (a) the discrepancy between self-perceived and ideal physical attributes, and (b) the relative importance of these ideals for 11 aspects of the body. Higher scores (range = 0-3) reflect greater discrepancies and greater importance, respectively. Cronbach alphas obtained in the present study were .82 for discrepancy and .84 for importance.

Multidimensional Body – Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ; Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990)

Only three of the 10 MBSRQ subscales were used in this study. Appearance evaluation (7 items; range = 1-5; $\alpha = .83$) assesses satisfaction with one's appearance; higher scores reflect greater satisfaction. Appearance orientation (12 items; range = 1-5; $\alpha = .85$) assesses the extent to which one believes physical appearance is important and the extent to which one engages in appearance-related activities; higher scores reflect stronger beliefs and greater activity. Weight preoccupation (4 items; range = 1-5; $\alpha = .88$) assesses the extent to which an individual worries about weight and takes actions to control weight; higher scores reflect greater preoccupation with weight.

Analyses

To simultaneously examine age and gender differences in body image and physical attributes, linear

regressions were conducted using standardized scores for each of the 9 body image measures or subscales. Age and gender were entered on step 1 and the age x gender interaction was entered on step 2. To control for Type I error, the alpha level was set to .0055 for the body image measures and .0045 for the physical attributes using the Bonferroni procedure.

RESULTS

Body Image: Age and Gender Effects

- **Table 1** presents mean performance on the 9 body image measures for men, women, and the total sample. There were no significant age x gender interactions.
- Age was a statistically significant predictor only for the ARC Aging Concerns and Weight & Age subscales, indicating that older individuals were slightly more likely to be concerned about the impact of aging on appearance ($r = .19, p < .01$) and believe that losing weight makes one look younger ($r = .18, p < .01$).
- Gender was a statistically significant predictor variable for all but one of the body image measures. Relative to men, women tended to:
 - report greater dissatisfaction with their physical appearance
 - report greater concern and anxiety about the impact of aging on their appearance
 - assign greater importance overall to their ideals about physical attributes
 - report larger average self-ideal discrepancies for physical attributes
 - have a greater belief that physical appearance is important and report more involvement in appearance-related activities
 - worry more about weight and report more weight control activity

Physical Attributes: Age and Gender Effects

- **Table 2** presents mean Importance and Discrepancy scores on the 11 BIQ physical attributes for men, women, and the total sample.
- An age x gender interaction was the only significant predictor of the importance of one's ideal for physical strength. On average, men tended to rate the importance of this ideal pretty much the same across the adult lifespan. Women, on average, provided similar importance ratings until about age 55 after which women rated the importance of this ideal significantly higher than did men.
- Age was not a significant predictor for any of the BIQ importance or discrepancy scores.
- Gender was the only statistically significant predictor variable for six of the importance and seven of the discrepancy scores (see Table 2 for details).
- Focusing on the results within gender,
 - men, on average, ascribed the most importance to their ideals for physical coordination, weight, overall appearance, and muscle tone/definition and felt they were most discrepant from their ideals in terms of muscle tone/definition, weight, and physical strength
 - women, on average, ascribed the most importance to their ideals for weight, overall appearance, skin complexion, muscle tone/definition, body proportions, and physical coordination and felt they were most discrepant from their ideals in terms of weight, muscle tone/definition, body proportions, overall appearance, and physical strength

DISCUSSION

The present study suggests that there are no significant differences in body image across the adult lifespan when a variety of body image measures are used. These results support the previous findings by Deeks and McCabe (2001), Tiggemann and Lynch (2001), and others. The only age effects were that older individuals were slightly more likely to be concerned about the impact of aging on appearance and believe that losing weight makes one look younger. These results seem to suggest less of a difference in body image than a *belief* that age-related changes have a negative impact on body image. Like the majority of prior research on gender differences (e.g., Davison & McCabe, 2005; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Furnham & Greaves, 1994), the present study also found that women put more emphasis on appearance and held more negative body image attitudes than did men.

In addition, ratings of (a) the importance of one's ideals for specific physical attributes and (b) the self-ideal discrepancies for these attributes generally did not differ across the adult lifespan. The only exception was ratings of the importance of their ideals for physical strength wherein men and women tended to produce the same ratings until about age 55 after which women rated the importance of this ideal significantly higher than did men. Men and women did differ, however, in many of their importance and discrepancy ratings for specific physical attributes. Similar to Muth and Cash (1997), the present study found that women reported a significantly greater self-ideal discrepancy for skin complexion, hair texture/thickness, facial features, muscle tone/definition, body proportions, weight, and overall appearance than did men. Unlike Muth and Cash, however, no gender differences in self-ideal discrepancy were found for height or physical strength.

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Table 1
Mean Scores on Body Image Measures for Men, Women, and Total Sample

Body Image Measures	Men (n = 130)	Women (n = 146)	Total Sample (N = 276)
<i>ARC:</i>			
Appearance Dissatisfaction	8.3 (3.42)	9.6 (3.50) ^a	9.0 (3.52)
Aging Concerns	13.3 (6.19)	15.9 (6.28) ^{a, b}	14.7 (6.36)
Weight & Age	8.8 (4.89)	9.1 (4.93) ^b	9.0 (4.91)
<i>AAS:</i>			
Modified Physical Appearance	9.0 (2.73)	10.5 (3.10) ^a	9.8 (3.02)
<i>BIQ:</i>			
Importance	1.5 (0.60)	1.7 (0.51) ^a	1.6 (0.56)
Discrepancy	0.9 (0.46)	1.2 (0.50) ^a	1.0 (0.50)
<i>MBSRQ:</i>			
Appearance Evaluation	3.5 (0.64)	3.1 (0.72) ^a	3.3 (0.71)
Appearance Orientation	3.1 (0.66)	3.5 (0.55) ^a	3.3 (0.64)
Weight Preoccupation	2.1 (0.85)	2.6 (0.88) ^a	2.4 (0.90)

^a p < .0055 (significant gender difference) ^b p < .0055 (significant age difference)

Note: Bolded values highlight the gender with the greatest dissatisfaction with physical appearance, greatest concern about the impact of aging on appearance, greatest anxiety about physical appearance, highest importance and discrepancy scores, greatest satisfaction with appearance, strongest beliefs in the importance of physical appearance and greatest worry about weight. BIQ = Body Image Ideals Questionnaire; MBSRQ = Multidimensional Body Self Relations Questionnaire; AAS = Anxiety about Aging Scale; ARC = Age-Related Concerns Scale.

Table 2
Importance and Discrepancy Ratings of Men's and Women's Ideals for Physical Attributes

Physical Attributes	Importance		Discrepancy	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Height	1.0 (0.95)	0.7 (0.86) ^a	0.6 (0.71)	0.6 (0.78)
Skin complexion	1.3 (0.92)	1.9 (0.86) ^a	0.6 (0.69)	1.1 (0.79) ^a
Hair texture / thickness	1.1 (1.01)	1.6 (0.99) ^a	0.7 (0.84)	1.0 (0.88) ^a
Facial features	1.3 (0.97)	1.7 (0.90) ^a	0.7 (0.71)	1.0 (0.67) ^a
Muscle tone / definition	1.8 (0.87)	1.9 (0.84)	1.2 (0.73)	1.6 (0.90) ^a
Body proportions	1.6 (0.88)	1.9 (0.78)	1.0 (0.73)	1.5 (0.90) ^a
Weight	1.9 (0.87)	2.3 (0.82) ^a	1.2 (0.87)	1.7 (1.00) ^a
Chest size	1.0 (0.89)	1.1 (0.88)	0.8 (0.75)	0.9 (0.93)
Physical strength	1.6 (0.84)	1.8 (0.89) ^c	1.1 (0.79)	1.2 (0.87)
Physical coordination	2.0 (1.00)	1.9 (0.93)	0.9 (0.84)	1.1 (0.88)
Overall appearance	1.9 (0.87)	2.2 (0.75) ^a	0.9 (0.68)	1.3 (0.74) ^a

^a p < .0045 (significant gender difference) ^c p < .0045 (significant age x gender interaction)

Note: Bolded values highlight the gender with the greatest importance or discrepancy score. The *importance* of one's ideals for these 11 physical attributes on the Body-Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ) range from 0 (not important) to 3 (very important) whereas the self-ideal discrepancy for these physical attributes range from 0 (exactly as I am) to 3 (very unlike me).