

Fiction, Fashion, and Function: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Gendered Body Image, Part I

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Abstract In this special issue, we showcase innovative research demonstrating the process by which gendered experiences of the body constrain and impact body image. In this first volume, we organized the papers into three research streams that highlight this process. The first stream explores the link between social and/or interpersonal experiences of objectification and body-related self-perceptions and behaviors. The second stream explores different media sources and messages as potent transmitters of gendered body ideals. The third stream calls attention to the wider cultural prescriptions for attractive and acceptable bodies across gender, race, and age—and how body image may shift according to these more specific prescriptions. This issue concludes with a discussion of these papers within the context of objectification theory.

Keywords Gendered bodies · Body image · Objectification · Cultural ideals · Masculinity · Media

An Introduction to the Special Issue

Body image is a multi-faceted construct that consists of bodily self-perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors (Cash and Pruzinsky 1990; Grogan 2008; Thompson et al. 1999). Over the last decade, advances in the study of this construct have shifted our view of body image from being

that of a fixed property to that of a dynamic relationship between the individual, the body, and the social environment (Cash 2004; Grogan 2008; Thompson et al. 1999). In this special issue, we showcase new research that demonstrates how gendered experiences of the body serve to constrain and impact this dynamic.

It may seem obvious that gender has a considerable impact on body image based on the considerable attention paid to women's and men's bodies in popular culture (Thompson et al. 1999; Wolf 1991). Yet, while qualitative and quantitative differences in how women and men experience body image have been illustrated in the psychological literature (Feingold and Mazzella 1998; Franzoi 1995; Frederick et al. 2007; Frederick et al. 2006; Grogan 2008; Harrison et al. 2006; Muth and Cash 1997; Ricciardelli and McCabe 2001), less research is available that investigates why men and women or boys and girls differ (or not) in their bodily perceptions, feelings, and behaviors.

The papers in this special issue constitute novel avenues in body image research that extend beyond a demonstration of gender differences to test the various ways in which gender becomes embodied to impact body image. Indeed, human bodies are not allowed to naturally develop into a diverse range of shapes, sizes, and attributes. They are shaped by societal stressors and pressures that render the majority of people's natural bodies deficient in some capacity, and thus in need of chronic bodily evaluation and modification in order to produce bodies that meet prescriptive social roles, enhance social value, and secure social power. In other words, gender is critical not only for determining what people's bodies are capable of, but also for constructing how bodies should look and be looked at to meet societal expectations for what it means to be a heterosexual woman or man (nb. Calogero et al. 2007; Calogero and Thompson 2010; Henley 1977; Jackson

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1992; Kozee and Tylka 2006; Martin 1998; Smolak and Murnen 2001; Thompson and Cafri 2007).

Due to the tremendous interest in this topic, the research papers included in this special issue will be published in three parts, with each set of papers reflecting both qualitative and quantitative explorations of gendered body image. The researchers represented across these volumes draw on different theoretical frameworks, methodologies, cultural contexts, psychological mechanisms, and outcomes—but they are all guided by the same basic assumption that gender is inscribed on, and reinforced through, people's bodies. These research programs highlight how gender informs body image through the different fictions about women's and men's bodies embedded within wider ideological frameworks, the different fashions for women's and men's bodies communicated by formative sociocultural agents, and the different biological and social functions served by women's and men's bodies that define their respective social roles and social value.

In this first volume (Part I), we have organized the papers into three research streams, with each highlighting new sources of gendered body messages that may impact body image. The first stream of papers explores the link between social and/or interpersonal experiences of objectification and body-related self-perceptions and behaviors. The second stream of papers explores different media sources as potent transmitters of gendered body ideals. The third stream of papers calls attention to the wider cultural prescriptions for attractive and acceptable bodies across gender, race, and age—and how body image may shift in response to these more specific prescriptions.

Stream One: Interpersonal Encounters of Objectification

The first set of papers addresses the role of being objectified—of being viewed and treated as a body—in body-related self-perceptions. These papers provide evidence for the role of objectification experiences in body image by identifying a new *context* in which interpersonal encounters of objectification may occur (sorority rush; Rolnik et al. 2010), new *extension* to Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory framework that incorporates new moderating and mediating mechanisms to explain the link between sexual objectification and disordered eating (body comparison and self-esteem; Tylka and Sabik 2010), new *body-related outcome* variable accounted for by objectification theory (cosmetic surgery attitudes; Calogero et al. 2010a) and new *target population* for the study of objectification experiences and body image (Australian mid-adolescent boys; Slater and Tiggemann 2010).

First, Rolnik et al. (2010) examined the role of an understudied social context in relation to women's body image: sorority rush. Sorority rush is a real-life objectifying context whereby women (i.e., rushees) are evaluated and then offered bids to join a sorority based on how well they fit a sorority member archetype—which is heavily based on their physical appearance. In a sample of American college women, their findings revealed that those women involved in the rush process had higher self-objectification and disordered eating, compared to those who were not involved, when examined at multiple time points during the rush period. Moreover, those women who joined a sorority after rush reported significantly higher body shame in comparison to their pre-rush levels. Those women involved in rush with higher BMIs had more negative experiences with the rush process and they were more likely to drop out, which may reflect their awareness of the sororities' expectation that they conform to the thin ideal. This research provides new evidence that the evaluation and objectification of women's bodies in the sorority context, and especially during the rush process, may contribute to body image disturbances in young women.

Second, using structural equation modeling, Tylka and Sabik (2010) extended the objectification theory framework by demonstrating that sexual objectification (in the form of appearance feedback) predicted not only body surveillance—as specified by objectification theory—but also body comparison, low self-esteem, and disordered eating in American undergraduate women. Body comparison and low self-esteem were important mediating variables in the link between appearance feedback and body shame. They also showed that those women high in body comparison and chronic body surveillance exhibited much more eating pathology—highlighting body comparison as an important moderator of these objectifying experiences. This novel integration of social comparison theory and self-esteem into the objectification theory framework extends and enriches our understanding of the multiple mechanisms simultaneously engaged in women's body-related self-perceptions.

Third, Calogero et al. (2010a) provided the first examination of cosmetic surgery attitudes in British college women using the objectification theory framework. They demonstrated that interpersonal experiences of being sexually objectified, self-surveillance, and body shame predict greater consideration of having cosmetic surgery in the future. They also revealed unique links between objectification theory variables and specific types of motivation for undergoing cosmetic procedures. These findings implicate experiences of sexual objectification in women's endorsement of more extreme attempts to modify and control their physical appearance. By relying on a systematic framework to examine women's cosmetic surgery attitudes, this research underscores the need for

more theory-driven research on cosmetic surgery as a gendered social practice.

Finally, Slater and Tiggemann (2010) offered a new test of gendered body image by examining body-related self-perceptions and behaviors in Australian girls and boys (ages 12–16) using the objectification framework. Notably, this is the first study to investigate objectification theory variable among mid-adolescent boys. They found that girls had higher levels of body surveillance, body shame, appearance anxiety and disordered eating than boys (consistent with prior work); but the model proposed by objectification theory appears to be applicable to both genders for explaining variability in disordered eating. That is, body surveillance predicts body shame and appearance anxiety, which, in turn, predict disordered eating, in both boys and girls—and the strength of each pathway within the models was comparable between girls and boys. These findings suggest that adolescence itself—as a period of marked self-consciousness and identity development for both genders—seems to render both boys and girls more vulnerable to viewing their bodies critically in light of increased social pressures to meet expectations for their respective gender roles.

Stream Two: Media Messages

The second set of papers addresses the role of different mass media in the socialization of individuals to objectify their own bodies and to engage in appearance management in an effort to match societal expectations for their gender. Some papers provide new evidence for the role of popular magazines in communicating and framing appearance control as central to achieving health and well-being (in women's health magazines; Aubrey 2010) and to achieving life success (in men's lifestyle magazines; Ricciardelli et al. 2010). In addition, new evidence is presented that highlights the significant predictive role of Internet exposure, an understudied social information source, in adolescent girls' drive for thinness and weight dissatisfaction (Tiggemann and Miller 2010).

To begin, Aubrey (2010) examined the messages communicated by women's health magazines to identify whether their focus was actually on health or appearance. The findings of a content analysis suggested that a focus on appearance is equally prevalent to a focus on health in these health magazines. In a second experimental study, Aubrey investigated whether women's body-related self-perceptions differed as a function of exposure to appearance-framed messages versus health-framed messages embedded in women's health magazines. The findings of this study indicate that exposure to appearance frames leads to more body shame and appearance-related motivation to exercise

compared to exposure to health frames. Together, these studies suggest that health magazines are no less likely to foster negative body image than fashion and beauty magazines, although they purport to focus on women's health and well-being.

Next, in a content analysis of eight different Canadian lifestyle magazines marketed to men, Ricciardelli et al. (2010) explored how culturally normative ideals and practices for masculinity are communicated through appeals to men's bodies and appearance. A critical finding from this analysis is that these magazines contain a variety of subtypes of masculinity that call on men to manage and manipulate their appearance in different ways in order to assert social power and dominance, especially within the context of heterosexist relationships. Lean, toned, and muscular body shapes represented the predominant male body ideal across the magazines, although attention to grooming and fashion were also represented as ways through which success could be achieved. This research highlights how gendered messages in popular men's media communicate that appearance can be manipulated—and should be manipulated—to maintain masculine hegemony.

Finally, Tiggemann and Miller (2010) investigated a previously unexplored medium for communicating gendered information about the body—the Internet. Using a cross-sectional, correlational design with Australian adolescent girls, they showed that both magazine reading and Internet exposure were related to thin-ideal internalization, appearance comparisons, weight dissatisfaction, and drive for thinness, whereas television exposure was unrelated to these body image variables. Their research also revealed that both magazine reading and Internet exposure indirectly predicted weight dissatisfaction via internalization and comparison. Further, Internet exposure directly predicted drive for thinness even after accounting for the effects of these mediating variables. This initial evidence for the potential role of Internet exposure in negative body image serves as a call for more research to examine the nuances of Internet usage and gendered experiences of body image.

Stream Three: Wider Cultural Prescriptions for Appearance

The third set of papers addresses the wider cultural body and appearance ideals that tend to shape body-related self-perceptions. These papers provide a fresh look at racial and ethnic differences in idealized bodily attributes between groups of women (Black and White women; Overstreet et al. 2010) and groups of men (Chinese and American men; Jung et al. 2010) that move beyond thinness as the critical physical attribute that women, and some men, strive to

attain. These papers also provide novel evidence linking body-related self-perceptions to gender identity and sexuality (conflicted gender identity; Ålgars and Santilla 2010) as well as women's perceptions and use of anti-aging products (Muisse and Demarais 2010).

First, Overstreet et al. (2010) examined whether body shape ideals differ between Black and White American college-aged women—and how these ideals might differentially influence women's body dissatisfaction. Their findings suggested that most women prefer a more curvaceous body shape, although racial differences are apparent. White women were more likely to prefer a more slender body shape with medium breasts, whereas Black women were more likely to prefer a curvier body shape with medium breasts and large buttocks. Women who viewed themselves as discrepant from these more racially sensitive body ideals did indeed report more body dissatisfaction. This research challenges traditional conceptualizations of body dissatisfaction as stemming primarily from thinness and weight related concerns—and thus the notion that Black women are somehow protected from socio-cultural factors that can lead to negative body evaluations because thinness is often not the desired body type.

Second, a comparison of Chinese (Hong Kong) and American men by Jung et al. (2010) revealed that both groups were dissatisfied with their muscularity to a relatively large degree, which they referred to as a “normative discontent” among these samples of men. However, although Chinese men had lower global body satisfaction than U.S. men, they reported greater satisfaction with muscularity and lower drive for muscularity as well as associated fewer positive attributes with muscularity. Drawing from feminist theory, these researchers argued that because changing roles for women reduce male privilege in many rapidly modernizing societies, men in these societies might also use muscular development to demonstrate their masculinity. Yet, while Chinese men did report high levels of muscle dissatisfaction, they appeared less likely than American men to use muscularity to counter threats to their masculinity. This research sheds new light on cross-cultural differences in men's body image by considering the different ways that Chinese and American masculinity has been traditionally constructed.

Third, Ålgars and Santilla (2010) examined multiple indicators of negative body image and disordered eating among a sample of Finnish adults with a conflicted gender identity—a broader concept than gender identity disorder that entails wishing one had been born the opposite gender. Overall, they uncovered that participants with a conflicted gender identity reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction compared to a sample of gender and age-matched controls. Further, women with a conflicted gender identity revealed more eating disturbance than controls, especially

with respect to bulimic behavior. Their findings also implicated the gender of potential sexual partners, and not only personal gender identity, in participants' body-related self-perceptions and behaviors. That is, among men with a conflicted gender identity, male-male sexual experience was associated with more body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, whereas among women with a conflicted gender identity, female-female sexual experience was related to less body dissatisfaction. These researchers offer further evidence that people who seek or experience sexual involvement with men are more vulnerable to negative body image than people who seek or experience sexual involvement with women.

Finally, Muise and Desmarais (2010) conducted a thematic analysis to explore Canadian women's attitudes toward anti-aging products—a line of non-invasive beauty products that are still increasingly and disproportionately targeted at women. A critical finding from their analysis suggests a paradox: Women reported using these products to stall the aging process despite their criticism of those media messages that falsely market the effectiveness of the products, and while strongly endorsing the idea of natural aging. These researchers also found that higher levels of anxiety related to the aging process and highly valuing physical appearance predicted a greater likelihood of purchasing anti-aging products. Their analysis speaks to the interaction between cultural pressures and personal agency that may encourage women to take control of the aging process in order to stay consonant with idealized images of youth and beauty so pervasive in westernized societies.

An Integrative Summary

To conclude Part I of the special issue on gendered body image, Moradi (2010) considers how each of the papers represented here may be interpreted from the perspective of objectification theory. Objectification theory positions gender as central to the construction of bodies and body image (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997), and thus would seem especially relevant for research focused on gendered experiences of the body. To date, much of the work on objectification theory has focused on the gendered construction of women's bodies (Calogero et al. 2010b; Moradi and Huang 2008). Moradi's comprehensive analysis widens this focus, elucidating the myriad ways in which objectifying experiences and internalized appearance standards constitute critical factors in the understanding of body-related self-perceptions across different social groups. This discussion offers an integrated and parsimonious approach for theorizing about how all individuals are socialized to adopt gendered perspectives on their bodies.

In sum, these papers each offer compelling evidence for the ways in which body image is constructed that transcends discussion of media ideals and gender differences to include a broader analysis of how gender shapes and modifies body image. We hope that this first volume of the special issue will stimulate additional discussion and creative thinking about body image and gender, and offer fresh insights into the multiple intersections between gender and the body, as well as how gender and the body further intersects with race, sexual orientation, and age, among other intrapersonal and interpersonal variables. The papers in this issue stand to push our thinking forward in this important research area.

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