Positive Body Image, Fear of Fat, and Attentional Biases for Thin and Overweight Figures

Neusha Khaleghi, Sarah Savoy, & Scott Drury
Stephen F. Austin State University

Introduction

Negative body image is associated with emotional distress (Johnson & Wardle, 2005), depression (Siegel, 2002), and eating disorder-related pathology in women (Prolivy & Herman, 2004).

It has been theorized that attentional biases toward body-related information drive negative body image (Williamson, White, York-Crowe, & Stewart, 2004), but attentional biases have not been examined in relation to positive body image or fear of fat.

We tested the hypothesis that attentional bias for thin bodies would be negatively associated with body image flexibility and positively associated with fear of fat.

Method

Participants

54 undergraduate women (M_{age} = 19.5; 66.7% White)

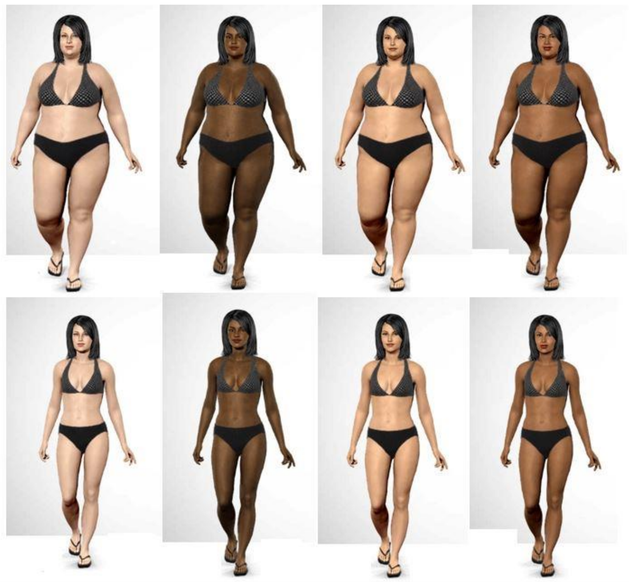

Figure 1. Sample images participants were exposed to in the dot-probe task.

Participants completed a modified dot-probe task and self-report measures in counterbalanced order.

Dot-probe task

- The modified dot-probe task measured participants' reaction time of pressing keyboard keys according to the direction of an arrow-probe. In each trial a pair of body figures were presented which differed in size (Figure 1). The arrow replaced one of the figures (Figure 2). Participants completed a total of 120 trials counterbalanced for skin color, location of the thin body (top or bottom), arrow direction (left or right), and arrow location (top or bottom).

Fear of fat

- 3-item subscale of the Anti-fat Attitudes Questionnaire (α = .878; Crandall, 1994)

Body image flexibility

- 12-item Body Image Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (α = .937; Table 1; Sandoz, Wilson, & Merwin, 2013)

Table 1

Body Image Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (BI-AAQ)

1. Worrying about my weight makes it difficult for me to live a life that I value.
2. I care too much about my weight and body shape.
3. I shut down when I feel bad about my body shape or weight.
4. My thoughts and feelings about my body weight and shape must change before I can take important steps in my life.
5. Worrying about my body takes up too much of my time.
6. If I start to feel fat, I try to think about something else.
7. Before I can make any serious plans, I have to feel better about my body.
8. I will have better control over my life if I can control my negative thoughts about my body.
9. To control my life, I need to control my weight.
10. Feeling fat causes problems in my life.
11. When I start thinking about the size and shape of my body, it's hard to do anything else.
12. My relationships would be better if my body weight and/or shape did not bother me.

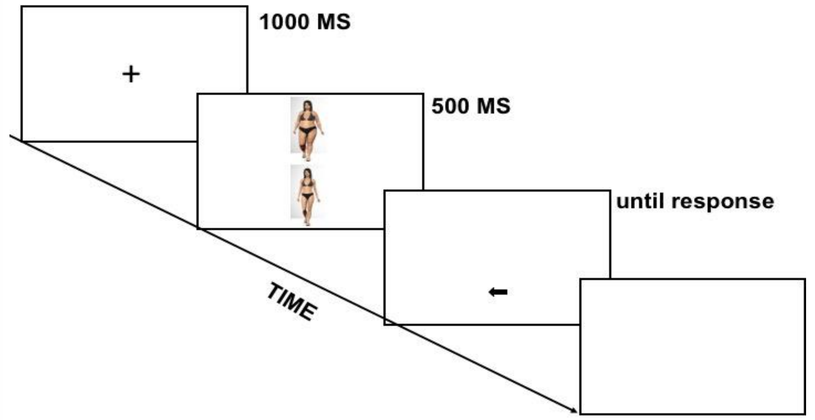

Figure 2. Order of stimuli presentation in the dot-probe task

Results

Body image flexibility was associated with quicker responses for trials in which arrows replaced the thin figure and trials in which the arrow replaced the overweight figures. Fear of fat was associated with slower responses on trials with arrow probes replacing overweight figures.

Table 2

Intercorrelations for Study Variables

	1	2	3	4
1. Flexibility	—			
2. Fear of Fat	-.606**	—		
3. Latency Thin	-.332*	.199	—	
4. Latency Overweight	-.372**	.282*	.856**	—

Note. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Conclusion

Those high in body image flexibility may have been more efficient in both types of trials due to ease in tuning out irrelevant information related to appearance or body size.

Those high on fear of fat may have been slower to respond to arrows replacing overweight figures due to direction of attention away from overweight bodies.