

INTRODUCTION

From Change Comes Growth, and from Growth Comes Change

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Fifteen years have passed since the publication of Thomas Cash and Linda Smolak's (2011) *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention* (2nd ed.; *Handbook* for short), the predecessor of our current *Handbook of Body Image*. During this time, the body image field has witnessed exponential growth in conceptualization, theory, and research—so much so that we needed to reorganize the basic structure of the book and extend its length considerably to accommodate the knowledge gained and chart fruitful paths moving forward.

FROM CHANGE COMES GROWTH

Why did the body image field experience so much growth in a relatively short amount of time? The answer is Thomas Cash. Tom critically transformed the field from one that focused mainly and narrowly on psychopathology and perception to one that explored the multifaceted intersections of body image with everyday life and well-being. Alongside this paradigm shift, Tom revolutionized the field via his scholarly contributions. In addition to altering the field by developing scales of body image constructs that he envisioned as important to quality of life and writing the *Body Image Workbook*, Tom founded the academic journal *Body Image: An International Journal of Research* (*Body Image* for short), which was released in 2004 and created a resounding ripple effect for interest and engagement in body image research. Prior to 2004, there had not yet been a journal devoted solely to body image scholarship; it was published in more general journals, such as the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, or more specific journals of topics

related to body image such as the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. Tom recognized the need for a journal devoted to body image scholarship, believing that to have this work in a centralized dissemination outlet instead of scattered among other journals would catalyze body image scholarship and clinical practice. Indeed, it did: Submissions to *Body Image* rose considerably each year, with tremendous growth occurring from 2011 to 2026. Furthermore, in collaboration with colleagues, Tom edited *Body Image: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice* (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002) and *Body Image: A Handbook of Science Practice and Prevention* (Cash & Smolak, 2011). These editions provided ideas that sparked additional conceptualization, interest, and hypothesis generation within readers. The journal and both *Handbooks* prompted talented undergraduate and graduate students to envision a career in conducting body image research and developing body image interventions. Research groups around the globe formed to investigate body image; these national and international collaborations compounded and were further sustained through the rise of professional conferences such as Appearance Matters that uniquely centered body image and physical appearance scholarship.

Alas, Tom passed away in February 2025. With immense gratitude, we dedicate the present handbook to Tom. Tom reshaped the landscape of body image with his contributions, which were vast and indelible—indeed, you will see his name again and again throughout the chapters of this handbook. In summary, Tom’s insights reimaged, fertilized, and expanded the field.

FROM GROWTH COMES CHANGE

The growth of body image scholarship has brought forth many changes in our understanding of body image. Here are some changes in how body image is conceptualized, measured, and studied since the publication of the previous *Handbook* in 2011.

- Body image is no longer overwhelmingly focused on “appearance”; the study of body functionality, and constructs such as functionality appreciation, has flourished.
- Positive body image is now conceptualized as multidimensional rather than simply “positive psychological perspectives of body image” that can be addressed in a single chapter. We devote multiple chapters to positive body image constructs.
- We now understand that body image cannot be separated from embodiment, or the lived experiences of inhabiting one’s body that are shaped by social, cultural, and structural forces across development—these experiences of embodiment (see Chapter 9) also shape our understanding of body image.
- We recognize the importance of appearance-focused social media to body image and have applied theoretical frameworks to investigate the connections between social media use, variables such as appearance comparison, and body

image. Nearly all this work occurred after the publication of the previous *Handbook*.

- We emphasize the importance of taking intersectional, social justice, and body liberation approaches to understanding body image and have considered how these approaches can best be considered within our theories and research. For example, this philosophical shift has ignited a more robust evaluation and critique of systemic drivers of body image development over the lifespan stemming from diet culture as an alternative to overemphasizing individual-level/within-person factors. This contemporary stance is infused throughout many of the ensuing chapters.

- We now have a more balanced approach of studying body image within clinical *and* nonclinical contexts, as well as medical *and* nonmedical samples, to be able to understand and improve the experience of body image for all individuals.

- We conceptualize certain behaviors (e.g., muscle-building practices, reconstructive and cosmetic procedures) along a continuum that may include healthy aspects on one end to more pathological aspects on the other end. This dialectical view challenges past notions of body-related behaviors as all-adaptive versus all-maladaptive.

- We no longer heavily rely on college and university samples. Crowdsourcing programs (e.g., Prolific, Qualtrics) and social media recruitment have opened access to diverse samples in terms of age, country, socioeconomic status, gender, gender identity, racialized status, health conditions, and so forth, although we do have to be careful to include safeguards to recognize and remove artificial intelligence (AI) bots.

- Ecological momentary assessment has revealed interesting moment-to-moment shifts in body image as a result of situational factors, helping us understand body image as a state.

- Scales for many body image constructs have been developed using contemporary best practices. Guidelines for translation and validation of body image scales have facilitated measurement of body image constructs in a wide range of countries and cultures as well as cross-country comparisons.

- We rely less on findings from cross-sectional research designs. Prospective/longitudinal designs, such as cross-lagged panel models, have revealed interesting and often reciprocal relationships among variables. This has encouraged us to conceptualize body image's role in "upward" and "downward spirals," whereby it both influences and is influenced by other markers of well-being.

- We no longer rely on figural rating scales to assess body dissatisfaction, understanding that they do not account for distress experienced as a result of deviating from an idealized standard, and their simplified nature does not account for the complexity of appearance ideals. There are many psychometrically sound, survey-based measures of body dissatisfaction that are better able to assess body dissatisfaction.

- We have reconsidered using body mass index (BMI) as a predictor or covariate of body image, recognizing that it is problematic, flawed, and racist. Rather, societal stigma associated with higher-weight bodies and the internalization of this stigma are conceptualized as driving the links between BMI and body image.
- We have developed theories describing how structural and economic factors using capitalism and biopower are reflected in individual values, such as materialism, and contribute to a system of body capital that perpetuates injustices based on appearance and is detrimental to body image.
- We consider corporate social responsibility's role in body image, and how to best partner with businesses to offset harm and promote positive attitudes toward viewers' bodies.
- In the public health area, modern initiatives have showcased the power of harnessing body image scholarship to shape social policy resulting in the potential for larger segments of society to experience benefits and/or to prevent from being harmed. For example, data generated by the Dove Foundation's research arm was instrumental in supporting the passage of legislation known as the CROWN Act in several U.S. states that protects against hairstyle-related discrimination frequently encountered by women of color in schools and workplace settings.
- We have witnessed considerable growth in the value of implementing qualitative and mixed methods designs informed by best practices in community-based participatory research (CBPR) that place the equitable co-creation of knowledge on center stage, stimulating greater scientist-practitioner–community stakeholder partnerships and team-based science collaborations in carrying out the research enterprise.

For each of the 58 chapters within this handbook, an internationally recognized body image scholar or team of scholars succinctly has reviewed a specific topic within their domain of expertise. These experts were asked to write to capture a wide audience, from students to experts. Rather than providing citations and corresponding references for every statement or report of research, we had scholars thoughtfully generate a list of informative readings that readers can consult for further information about the topic. We strive to use gender-neutral language whenever possible, using the pronouns *they*, *them*, and *their* throughout. We believe that this makes the material more inclusive and generalizable to the range of people and populations we may reach in this handbook. However, in some case examples and participant quotes, we do use masculine and feminine pronouns if these are the chosen or preferred pronouns for these individuals.

As in the previous *Handbooks*, chapters are meaningfully organized into sections; yet some sections and chapters are novel to this handbook in order to capture the growth of the field illustrated in the earlier bulleted statements. In Part I, Foundations, we discuss how we define and conceptualize body image today, illustrate how this definition and conceptualization has shifted over time, as well as review advances in research design and measurement to facilitate the study of body

image globally. In Part II, Dimensions, we present the nine most identified facets of the (multifaceted) body image construct. Some represent positive body image, and others represent negative body image. Some represent appearance, and others represent functionality. Some represent body image evaluation, and others represent body image investment. Furthermore, some represent how people inhabit their bodies in the world, amid social influences, hardships, discrimination, and objectification. Part III, Influences, reviews 10 various factors that are conceptualized to impact the various facets of body image. Biological, psychological, interpersonal, media, and wider sociocultural factors are considered within this section. Part IV, Individual Considerations and Social Positions, examines how social locations (e.g., race, gender, gender identity, food insecurity, ability), conditions, and developmental turning points (and how they intersect) may shape the varied expressions of body image. In Part V, Outcomes, we identify how body image tends to shape nine behavioral and psychological factors, such as eating, exercise, elective cosmetic and reconstructive procedures, well-being, self-care, and sexuality. Parts VI and VII showcase a wide variety of theoretically and empirically supported prevention programs and interventions that can be implemented to improve facets of body image at the individual level (Part VI) and at the societal level (Part VII).

THE CYCLE CONTINUES . . . FROM PRESENT CHANGE COMES FUTURE GROWTH

While the body image field has rapidly expanded since the publication of Cash and Smolak's *Handbook*, we are currently undergoing monumental global and cultural changes that certainly will lead to tremendous and fruitful growth in body image theory and research moving forward. These changes, as well as our ideas for how they can manifest in our work, are discussed in detail within Part VIII, Conclusions and Future Directions. We briefly mention five changes here. First, one potential paradigm shift affecting all aspects of body image (theory, research, and practice) is artificial intelligence (AI). Body image researchers are starting to consider the various implications of AI for promoting both positive and negative body image. Body image research on AI has commenced, and we forecast that it will burgeon within the next decade and be a central feature of the next edition. Second, as income disparities rise within many countries, socioeconomic factors such as food insecurity will likely become more prevalent and salient in relation to body image and disordered eating. Third, the political climate that surrounds funding opportunities and policies that govern well-being will likely greatly shape our body image research and what can be investigated with grant support. For example, the cancellation of U.S. federal grants that include diversity, equity, and inclusion components will stifle the development and dissemination of body image programming, as well as our understanding of body image within all individuals, which will have trickle-down effects globally. Fourth, the important roles of hormones, such as GLP-1s, estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone, are being acknowledged in relation to appetite and body-related (appearance and

functionality) changes. The impact of medications and supplements to increase these hormones is a novel and potentially prosperous area of investigation within the body image field. Fifth, as we continue to navigate the vestiges of the global COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream society as a whole has witnessed a heightened preoccupation with “orthorexic tendencies” such as “clean eating” and a boom in consumerism surrounding products purportedly designed to improve gut health and immunity (e.g., probiotic sodas, supplements, etc.). In reaction to the rise in body image and eating disturbances triggered during and potentially persisting beyond COVID-19, it will be critical for researchers and clinicians to stay on the pulse of these broader public health trends likely reflecting the latest metamorphosis of diet culture and to evaluate their impacts on body image and embodiment as the field continues to evolve into the next generation.

As researchers and editors, we reflect on the continuous upward spiral of growth and change within the field of body image with pride and gratitude for those who have contributed. This spiral has created an exponential broadening of activity, as well as interested scholars and research teams globally, and we collaborate to work toward a prosperous future in which it is easier for all individuals to value their bodies and live within environments that nurture their bodies.

INFORMATIVE READING

- Cash, T. F., & Pruzinsky (2002). *Body image: A handbook of theory, research, and clinical practice*. Guilford Press.
- Cash, T. F., & Smolak, L. (2011). *Body image: A handbook of science, practice, and prevention* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

PART I
FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER 1

What Is (and What Is Not) Body Image?

Tracy L. Tylka and Jennifer B. Webb

“What is body image?” While this question begs a simple answer, body image is actually a complex, multifaceted construct shaped by the historical context in which it is studied, prompting its continual conceptualization, refinement, and understanding. In Chapter 2 of this volume, Viren Swami comprehensively reviews the evolution of body image theory and research. To preface Swami’s review, we focus Chapter 1 on how body image is understood today—after all, it is useful to know what body image means today before tracing how we came to our current understanding of this construct. We first define body image, then in more detail, reflect on what body image is and what it is not. In doing so, we parse out body image from its proposed contributors (e.g., risk and protective factors) and outcomes, detail and describe its various components and expressions (e.g., within a table and taxonomy), and indicate how it can be shaped, based on the intersections of identity and privilege.

DEFINING BODY IMAGE

In the inaugural 2004 issue of *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*, the founding Editor-in-Chief Thomas Cash defined body image as the “multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one’s physical appearance” that “encompasses one’s body related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors” (p. A1). Cash further argued that body image is actually body images, meaning that body image is an overarching term with many components.

There are similarities in the way Cash described body image more than 20 years ago with how we conceptualize it today. Like then, we consider it to be multifaceted and encompass body image-related thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Yet we have expanded the number and emotional valence of factors, recognized differences between body image and embodiment, pioneered research on body functionality to complement the historical emphasis on appearance, and considered overt behaviors (e.g., acts of self-care, eating behaviors, exercise) as potential outcomes of and contributors to body image rather than components of body image itself. We also have acknowledged the role of body image perceptions (i.e., how a body is perceived in relation to reality) and sensations (e.g., interoceptive awareness, comfort–discomfort, pain). We have moved from more simple considerations of body image attached to societal appearance and functionality ideals (e.g., “I am good looking in comparison to others, so I have good body image”; “My body can move well and better than others’ bodies, so I have good body functionality”) toward more complex considerations of body image as reflected in levels of gratitude toward our bodies, even when they do not meet societal ideals (e.g., “I am grateful for the ways my appearance reflects who I am”) and functionality (e.g., “I am grateful for my health, even when my body isn’t as healthy as I’d like it to be”). We have further expanded the conceptualization of body image to integrate Eastern philosophical traditions such as mindfulness, designed to bring greater nonjudgmental present-moment awareness to how one experiences their body. Although not implicit in Cash’s definition, but characteristic of the time (2004, prior to positive body image conceptualization), we now incorporate a positive lens to consider how to cultivate and maintain a positive body image.

Therefore, we currently define body image as “An internal experience that comprises the multifaceted and dialectical adaptive and maladaptive thoughts, emotions, perceptions, sensations, and covert behaviors we experience related to our own body, both in terms of its functionality and appearance, that can impact (and can be impacted by) how we treat our body and how we engage our body with the world. Individual differences, such as the salience of appearance and functionality within our lives, our psychological flexibility, and our self-compassion, as well as contextual factors such as how our bodies are evaluated and treated in certain settings and the internalized sociocultural messages shaping what bodies are valued, can strengthen or weaken these impacts and the overall presence and emotional valence of body-related thoughts, emotions, perceptions, sensations, and covert behaviors.” Below, we consider this definition in more detail within the context of describing what is, and what is not, body image.

WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

Body image is a multifaceted, dialectical construct that is different across persons. It is separate from, but related to, overt behaviors, situational factors, and embodiment. It is stable, but it also can fluctuate and can be improved through interventions. It is shaped by social identities and context. We discuss each feature below.

Body Image Is Multifaceted

As Editors of *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*, we often get empirical submissions indicating that the authors are studying and assessing *body image* as a singular variable. These papers are most often desk rejected. Why? Body image is not a unitary construct that can be assessed with any one measure. Rather, body image is multifaceted—it is an overarching term that represents a collection of many different constructs. What the authors are actually measuring is a specific facet of body image (e.g., body satisfaction, body appreciation, body shame) and erroneously stating that this narrow facet represents the complexity of body image as a whole. The various facets of body image are not interchangeable, and while they *together* represent body image, they are quite distinct from each other. Alone, each simply represents a narrow facet. Overall, researchers need to consider which component(s) of body image to assess to align with their research goals, and label them accordingly.

We include many of the most commonly studied facets in Table 1.1. Some facets of body image are adaptive or positive (e.g., body appreciation, functionality appreciation, body image flexibility), others are maladaptive or negative (e.g., body preoccupation, body shame), yet others can be positive or negative depending on a person's level (e.g., body (dis)satisfaction, appearance evaluation, experience of embodiment). While “body neutrality,” galvanized by the eating disorder recovery movement, is gaining recognition in media and academic outlets, it overlaps considerably (if not completely) with existing positive body image constructs that are considered to be adaptive, such as functionality appreciation, body compassion, and body image flexibility (see Wood-Barcalow et al., 2024 and Mulgrew & Hinz, 2024 for recent critical reviews). Like positive body image, but despite its name, body neutrality is treated by its proponents as an adaptive way of relating to the body. A body-neutral stance encourages liberation from experiencing the body as intrinsically tied to a particular affectively valenced outcome evaluated as “positive” or “negative.” Proponents place greater emphasis on relinquishing pressure to exclusively “love your body” as countermessaging that epitomized the body positivity movement. Nevertheless, finding consensus on what distinctively constitutes the strand of body neutrality within the overall tapestry of body image concepts remains an ongoing debate in contemporary literature (Mulgrew & Hinz, 2024; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2024).

In Figure 1.1 (p. 15), we offer a taxonomy of body image dimensions. At the broadest level (the *domain*) is whether a professional (researchers, clinicians, providers, practitioners) wants to assess body image evaluation (how one evaluates their body) and/or body image investment (the importance of body image to their self-concept). At the second level, the researcher determines which body-related mental or physical *processes* to measure: body-related emotions (e.g., body shame), thoughts (e.g., body appreciation), perceptions (e.g., body dysmorphia), sensations (e.g., interoceptive awareness, pain, appetite), and/or covert behaviors (e.g., rumination, reappraisal to help regulate one's experience in the moment). At the third level, the researcher considers the *focus* of body image to assess: body

TABLE 1.1. Common Body Image and Body Image–Related Constructs Often Studied Today

Common constructs	Definition
Appearance investment	• Importance placed on appearance and its significance to identity. • Also includes appearance orientation.
Self-evaluative salience	• Extent appearance is a centrally defining feature of the self.
Motivational salience	• Attention to appearance with the goal of making it aesthetically pleasing.
Body preoccupation	• Unhealthy and excessive preoccupation with one's appearance.
Body dysmorphic disorder	• A clinical diagnosis that is characterized by preoccupation and distress with a perceived physical anomaly in the appearance of a body area or body areas. • Also includes body dysphoria, muscle dysphoria, dysmorphic concern, appearance anxiety, and so forth.
Appearance-based rejection sensitivity	• Extent one anxiously expects and readily perceives rejection from another person based on their appearance. • Also includes fear of negative appearance evaluation.
Transgender congruence	• How comfortable and authentic transgender individuals feel about their gender identity and appearance.
Body image disturbance	• Altered perception of one's own body, often seen in individuals with eating disorders. Also includes body size/weight misperception. • Conversely, in many instances, <i>body image disturbance</i> is used as an umbrella term to refer to negative body image (not limited to perception) in terms of body dissatisfaction, body image distress, and/or body image dysfunction.
Appearance evaluation	• Appraisals of and beliefs about one's appearance.
Appearance overevaluation	• Placing undue importance on appearance as an indicator of self-worth. • Also includes weight/shape overevaluation, and so forth.
Appearance (dis) satisfaction	• (Dis)satisfaction with one's appearance, with satisfaction on one end and dissatisfaction on the other end. • Also includes body esteem, body (dis)satisfaction, and aspects of appearance such as weight (dis)satisfaction, facial (dis)satisfaction, shape (dis)satisfaction, and so forth.
Appearance concerns	• Concerns about one's appearance. • Also includes body concerns, shape concerns, weight concerns, and so forth.

(continued)

TABLE 1.1. (continued)

Common constructs	Definition
Drive for appearance	• Extent one desires and is motivated toward achieving a certain appearance (e.g., thinness, muscularity, and leanness). • Also includes drive for thinness, drive or muscularity, drive for leanness.
Body appreciation	• Acceptance of, as well as love, gratitude, and respect for, one’s body.
Functionality appreciation	• Appreciating the body for what it is capable of doing (physical capabilities, internal processes, creative endeavors, communication, senses, and self-care).
Body image flexibility	• Ability to openly experience body experiences (thoughts, feelings, etc.) without acting on them or trying to change them.
Body image-related cognitive fusion	• Extent one is entangled with thoughts related to their body, perceiving them as true events of reality instead of subjective and transitory experiences.
Body compassion	• Orienting toward the body with mindfulness, kindness, and an awareness of common humanity (connection with others’ bodies and others’ struggles with their bodies).
Experience of embodiment	• How a person engages their body within the world, includes body connection/comfort, functionality, attuned self-care, honoring desires, and resisting objectification.
Broad conceptualization of beauty	• Perceiving many looks, appearances, and body sizes/shapes as beautiful and drawing from inner characteristics (e.g., confidence) when determining a person’s beauty. • Also includes broadly defining beauty.
Body-related self-conscious emotions	• A range of social emotions that relate to our bodies and our awareness of how others react to our bodies. • Includes specific emotions such as body shame, body pride, body guilt, body embarrassment.
Body surveillance	• Habitual monitoring of one’s appearance, as if one is viewing their body from an observer’s perspective.
Appearance-related social media consciousness	• Ongoing awareness of one’s physical attractiveness to a social media audience.
Internalization of appearance ideals	• Extent to which one adopts societal appearance ideals as their personal ideal. • Also includes thin-ideal internalization, muscularity-ideal internalization, internalization of the mesomorphic ideal, curvy ideals internalization, weight-bias internalization, muscularity-bias internalization, and so forth.

(continued)

TABLE 1.1. (continued)

Common constructs	Definition
Body comparison	• Extent to which one compares their body to others' bodies in an upward, downward, and/or lateral fashion. • Also includes appearance comparison, social comparison, and so forth.
Appearance-contingent self-worth	• Extent to which one bases their self-worth on their appearance.
Body image quality of life	• How body image impacts multiple aspects of psychosocial functioning, such as sexual intimacy, interpersonal relations, engagement in activity, feelings of self-adequacy, and so forth.
Body image self-consciousness	• Extent to which one is self-conscious about their own appearance during sexual intimacy.
Body acceptance by others	• Extent to which one perceives that important others in their life accept one's body and appearance.
Appearance-related pressures	• Extent to which one perceives pressure from peers, family, partners, and/or the media to achieve societal appearance ideals.
Body awareness	• Noticing and interpreting sensory signals originating from inside the body that provide information about its physiological states, processes (pain, emotion, hunger), and actions (movement). • Also includes interoceptive awareness.

appearance and/or body functionality. Next, the researcher considers the *quality* of the desired body image construct to assess at the fourth level: Is it an adaptive (e.g., body appreciation) or maladaptive (e.g., body shame) construct? At the fifth level, the researcher decides the *term* for the construct: Do they want to assess how the construct may fluctuate across situations or time (e.g., state body appreciation) and/or do they want to assess a person's general level of the construct (e.g., trait body appreciation)?

Unlike biological taxonomy, however, the dimensions within each level of the taxonomy can be permeable. For example, at the process level, body image flexibility may involve emotions, thoughts, perceptions, sensations, and covert behaviors rather than just one. Similarly, at the foci level, appearance and functionality can merge, as in Vinoski Thomas and colleagues' (2019) conceptualization and measurement of *body functionality aesthetics* (i.e., how the body appears or looks while it is moving), which may be salient for those with disabilities, athletes, and others. This taxonomy may be useful to identify important areas of body image without much existing research. For example, chronic gastrointestinal pain (body image investment, sensations, functionality, maladaptive, trait) may be an important body image construct to examine.

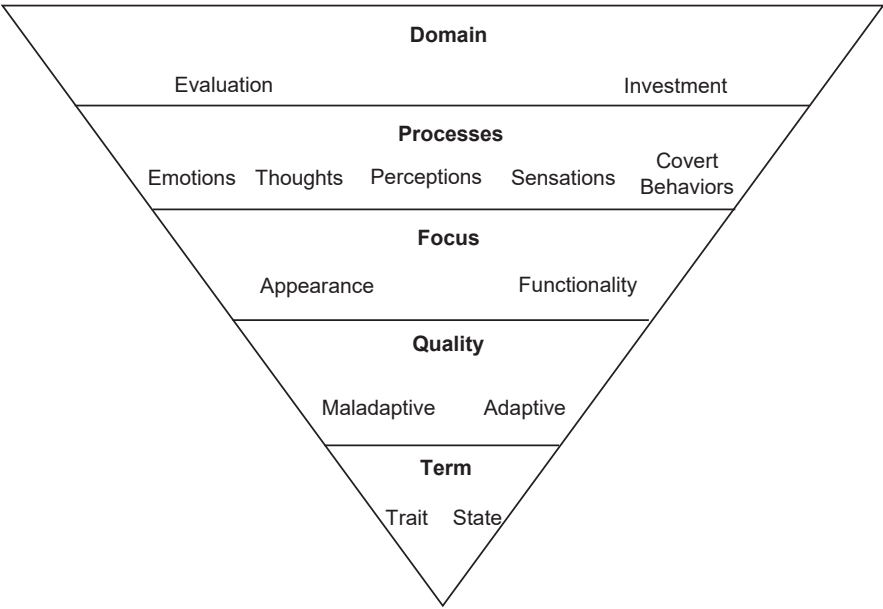


FIGURE 1.1. Proposed taxonomy of body image.

(The Importance of) Body Image Is Different across Persons

People differ in how much their appearance and/or functionality matters in the context of their lives. For example, some people are very concerned and distressed about their appearance, and thereby strive to attain or maintain an appearance they or others (e.g., family, friends, media) consider ideal or at least acceptable, while others are relatively unconcerned about their appearance. Others fall in between these extremes. According to Cash and colleagues (2004), *body image investment* is the extent to which a person places importance on their appearance or functionality in defining themselves and determining their self-worth. People differ in how much they tend to their appearance and functionality (motivational salience), as well as how much they view appearance and/or functionality as a defining feature of themselves (self-evaluative salience) (see also Chapter 8).

Typically, greater body image investment corresponds with greater distress when a person experiences their body as different than what they consider ideal or at least acceptable. This has implications for assessment. Because figural rating scales (whereby a person chooses their actual and ideal figures) do not assess the distress experienced by the person when their actual figure does not match their ideal figure, they are not valid measures of body dissatisfaction.

Body Image Is Dialectical

The term *dialectical* refers to discovering truth by considering and fusing opposite ideas or views. As applied to body image, we can hold conflicting attitudes

about our bodies at the same time, and both attitudes represent, in part, our body image. For instance, we can love and respect our legs for all the valuable activities in which they help us engage and still wish they looked differently than they do. Likewise, we can appreciate our bodies, even when feeling negatively about our appearance. Conversely, we can be proud of our appearance but not respect our bodies. Understanding that body image is dialectical has important clinical implications.

For instance, clients with body image disturbances and eating disorders may resist working toward a positive body image because they perceive that they will never look how they want to look; therefore, they believe that espousing a positive body image would be inauthentic. Furthermore, clinicians may believe, as well as reinforce to clients, that aiming toward a positive body image is unrealistic because it is “too far of a leap” from clients’ negative body image. This belief represents a fundamental misunderstanding of positive body image. Research shows that positive body image does not lie at the opposite end of the same continuum as negative body image (and thus cannot represent “too far of a leap”), and those with a positive body image do not feel positively about their bodies all the time. To illustrate, participants who espoused a positive body image authentically described moments when they do not feel positively toward their bodies (Alleva et al., 2023). Yet having a positive body image facilitated their resilience, allowing them to “bounce back” from having a negative body image experience. Similarly, this dialectical understanding of body image reinforces the need to continue to design research that clarifies the nuances of how positive and negative body image operate within individuals across contexts and over the lifespan.

Body Image Is Separate from (but Related to) Overt Behaviors

As defined previously, body image is an *internal* experience that can impact (and can be impacted by) our overt behaviors, such as how we treat our body and how we engage our body with the world (e.g., our eating, exercise, and body comparison and checking behaviors, our engagement with social media). Therefore, overt body-related behaviors are an outward expression of our internal, body image experience. Much research has supported negative body image variables as *risk factors* for certain behaviors (e.g., disordered eating), and positive body image variables as *protective factors* for these behaviors. Interestingly, the direction may be reciprocal. For instance, Linardon (2022) found that two positive body image components—body appreciation and functionality appreciation—predicted increased intuitive eating behaviors over time, but also intuitive eating behaviors predicted increases in both these positive body image components, as well as another component (body image flexibility) over time, thereby promoting upward spirals in women’s well-being. As another example, Jarman and colleagues (2021) found that initial appearance-focused social media use predicted higher body comparisons over time, which then subsequently predicted lower body satisfaction *as well as the opposite*, in that lower initial body satisfaction predicted higher body comparisons over time, which then predicted subsequent

higher appearance-focused social media use, suggesting a downward spiral among Australian adolescents.

Body Image Is Separate from (but Related to) Situational Factors

Likewise, as an internal experience, body image is a distinct construct from the environments that shape it, such as destructive environments that promote sexual objectification and appearance-related pressures, and encourage appearance comparisons, as well as adaptive environments that promote body acceptance. Body image may have reciprocal relationships with these environments as well. Those with positive body image choose to seek others who offer body acceptance (Alleva et al., 2023), and those who have negative body image may seek out environments that confirm their internalized appearance-related beliefs. Also, algorithms may be at play, in that they can direct greater appearance-related content to a person's feed (based on the user's social identities, the user's pause rates on content, likes, comments, shares, offering similar content based on past interactions, etc.), which may then intensify the negative impacts of appearance-related social media on their body image (Harriger et al., 2022).

Body Image Is Stable and Fluctuates

Many body image constructs have trait *and* state components that are stable over time (e.g., trait appearance dissatisfaction) and fluctuate “in the moment” across and within situational contexts (e.g., state appearance dissatisfaction). Trait body image constructs are often assessed via surveys that ask participants to report their “general” or “overall” body attitudes along a Likert-type (e.g., 5- or 7-point scale), whereas state body image constructs are often assessed via surveys that ask a person to report their attitudes about their body “right now” or “in the moment” on a Likert scale or a brief, visual analogue scale (VAS) whereby participants indicate their body attitudes on a line ranging from 0 or 1 to 100. State body image constructs are often implemented in experimental designs that expose participants to situations thought to shift their body attitudes, as well as naturalistic designs (i.e., experience sampling methodology) such as ecological momentary assessment whereby participants report their levels of body attitudes and other characteristics on their smartphones in real time (e.g., throughout the day for a month).

State body image often shifts within contexts that increase the salience of appearance. Situations that prompt appearance comparisons are commonly studied within body image research, and upward appearance-based comparisons are associated with state appearance dissatisfaction, among many other negative affective responses and behaviors (e.g., body checking). Other situational factors such as weight stigma, objectification, and sexual interactions with a partner have been known to increase state appearance dissatisfaction, whereas practicing yoga, interacting with nature, and viewing images of models who do not conform to societal standards of thinness are linked to increased state body appreciation.

Furthermore, trait and state body image connect in interesting ways. According to Cash, trait body image constructs can moderate, or impact, the relationship between situational factors and state body image experiences. For instance, a high level of trait appearance investment may intensify the negative impact of viewing appearance-focused social media influencers on a person's state appearance satisfaction: In other words, those high in appearance investment may experience greater decreases in state appearance satisfaction when looking at these influencers.

Body Image Is Malleable and Can Be Improved

Because body image can fluctuate, body image can be improved within interventions (Guest et al., 2019). Two interventions that have been shown to consistently improve body image, both negative and positive dimensions, are the Body Project (see Chapter 46) and Expand Your Horizon (see Chapter 11), although there are additional interventions that show effectiveness in improving state- and trait-based body image, such as the yoga-based intervention Eat, Breathe, Thrive (see Chapter 47), compassion-based approaches (see Chapter 45), as well as general integrational approaches such as acceptance and commitment therapy (see Chapter 50) and dialectical behavior therapy (see Chapter 51). These interventions can be delivered in various formats, such as within individual one-on-one counseling, groups, writing assignments (see Chapter 11), schools (see Chapter 52), yoga studios (see Chapter 47), and even through technology (see Chapter 48). Recently, microinterventions (i.e., short, targeted interventions designed to promote positive body image and challenge harmful appearance ideals) have shown promise. For example, short, animated films and music videos developed for young children improved body appreciation and reduced weight bias after just a single viewing.

Body Image Is Shaped by Social Identities and Context

In line with prevailing sociocultural theoretical frameworks, myriad contextual factors drive one's experience of body image over the life course. Indeed, from an ecological systems perspective (Chapter 3), the cumulative evidence attests to the crucial importance of the dynamic interaction unfolding among the multiple levels of the individual's social ecology and their intraindividual processes to influence body image development. For example, the existing literature has extensively examined the impact of holding various social identities as a common type of intrapersonal component on positive and negative body image. These dimensions have frequently included race and ethnicity (Chapter 26), gender and gender identity (Chapter 27), sexual orientation (Chapter 28), socioeconomic status (Chapter 29), visible differences (Chapter 30), disability (Chapter 31), chronic illness (Chapter 32), as well as age and developmental considerations (Chapter 33) among others. As one example, research has cited an alarming positive association between severity of food insecurity and body image disturbance, while other emerging research has started to uncover the intricacies of body image among

neurodivergent populations. Moreover, greater awareness is being given not only to elucidating between group differences in body image outcomes (e.g., Black vs. white; sexual minority vs. heterosexual) but also to highlighting the nuances of within group variation. This has included clarifying the risk and protective effects of strength, centrality, and/or salience of the particular identity under investigation. Critically, there has also been increased consideration of the complex realities inherent in embodying intersectional identities (Chapter 25).

Nevertheless, as noted earlier, these identities do not occur in isolation from environmental factors that may be either salutogenic (e.g., perceived body acceptance by others) or detrimental (e.g., caregiver appearance criticism) to the experience of body image, perhaps even more so for members of vulnerable groups occupying historically marginalized social locations. For instance, unsurprisingly, research has documented the harms exacted by oppression-related stress (e.g., sexism, racism, cisgenderism, heterosexism, ableism, colorism, etc.) and appearance-related commentary (e.g., “fat talk,” weight-related teasing and bullying). Newer conceptualizations also take into account the relevance of intersectional appearance pressures (e.g., gendered racism, body image double consciousness, racial identity invalidation in biracial samples). Meanwhile, other macrolevel factors (e.g., societal values, diet culture, religious beliefs) contribute to the internalization of culturally dictated appearance norms (e.g., thin ideal, curvy ideal, muscular ideal, preference for lighter skin tones, clear complexions, modest attire, double eyelids, body hair removal). Relatedly, the promulgation of toxic weight stigma has become endemic to the culture of modern health care systems in the wake of the persistent “obesity epidemic” narrative in general and has specifically undermined more adaptive body image experiences of (larger-bodied) pregnant individuals with the perpetuation of rigid gestational weight gain guidelines. Whereas the postpartum is now a period fraught with navigating the gauntlet of pronouncements conveyed by multiple sources to “get one’s body back” (see Chapter 34), and may at times be veiled in health-promoting discourse seemingly aimed to mitigate future diabetes risk. Finally, scholars have very recently underscored the unprecedented adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on body image on a global scale.

Body Image Is Distinct from Embodiment

According to Niva Piran, embodiment represents the lived experience of engaging the body with the world. While embodiment, much like body image, includes an internal experience of attunement to internal body experiences (how we live in and experience the world through our bodies), embodiment is a broader construct than body image (Tylka & Piran, 2019). More specifically, embodiment also includes a broad range of disembodied practices (e.g., disordered eating, self-harm) and embodied practices (e.g., intuitive eating, mindful self-care). Furthermore, embodiment involves a meaningful dialectical relationship between dominant social structures and these (dis)embodied practices. For example, experiencing sexual objectification often leads to self-objectification and beautification practices, and experiencing body acceptance by others may promote an emphasis on

body functionality rather than appearance. Because body image and embodiment share some similarities with internal experience of the body, we include it as a dimension of body image but also recognize its broader focus and impact.

WHAT IS NOT BODY IMAGE?

It is important to also identify what body image is not—namely, it is distinct from one's actual body. Below, we discuss the distinctiveness of body image from body size, shape, and appearance.

Body Image Is Not Actual Appearance

A person's body image does not equate to the extent they are consistent with societal appearance ideals. Holding assumptions that a person who is consistent with societal appearance ideals has a positive body image and another person who is inconsistent with societal appearance ideals has a negative body image is one example of stereotyping. A qualitative study conducted by Alleva et al. (2023) found that Canadian cisgender women who self-identified as having a condition or characteristics causing their body to deviate from societal appearance ideals described their journeys on how they overcame a negative body image to develop a positive body image. During their journeys, women noted shifts that occurred in their perceptions of their embodied selves in the world, represented by four overarching themes: "I am more than my looks"; "I am more than my body"; "I am more than myself" (characteristics of transcendence); and "I am inherently worthy of love, respect, and joy." In short, a person's actual appearance does not dictate whether they have a positive or negative body image.

In a recent project, Alleva interviewed women who expressed that they had "had enough" with having a negative body image and were willing to engage in a body image intervention. A few women believed that the path toward improving their body image was to change their *bodies* (e.g., losing weight, toning). In other words, they equated their body's appearance with their body image. By changing their appearance, these women mistakenly believed they could change their body image from negative to positive.

Body Image Is Not an Objective Marker of Weight or Body Size

Body image is qualitatively different from objective markers of weight or body size such as body mass index (BMI), BMI category, or body size estimators (e.g., waist circumference). In fact, contemporary body image research has shifted away from uncritically centering BMI, for example, as an explanatory variable and has increasingly embraced a more socially just, weight-inclusive philosophical stance. A recent publication by Dr. Aly Bailey and colleagues (2025) provides an authoritative, evidence-based analysis urging multiple stakeholders to question the validity of this metric and to dismantle its power within existing systems inclusive of body

image science and practice. This call to action is particularly timely as the BMI has become compromised as a tool for perpetrating weight stigma in the ongoing era of the “obesity epidemic,” transgressing beyond its original intended aims.

On the other hand, subjective markers of weight (e.g., perceiving oneself as “normal weight,” “overweight,” etc.) fall within the definition of body image. Perceived body weight or size is typically assessed with a single item that may hold appeal in reducing participant burden while simultaneously capturing an implied evaluation of these aspects of physical appearance. Notably, subjective weight perceptions demonstrated greater predictive power in accounting for variability in disordered eating risk (e.g., body esteem, body dissatisfaction) relative to the BMI among Canadian college women (Wilson et al., 2005). Additionally, distinct body size *misperception* (i.e., when a person’s actual body size is quite different than their perceived body size) is a component of body image disturbance that is often noted in certain eating disorder diagnoses (e.g., anorexia nervosa).

CONCLUSION

As we near a quarter of a century of contributions to the modern field of body image, it behooves us to reflect on how the core constituents of the construct have both endured and evolved over time. While body image remains a multidimensional experience, its lexicon has significantly grown to encompass a wider range of positive body image components, to find areas of alignment with and distinction from the construct of embodiment, and to grapple with ongoing tension in clarifying what distinguishes body neutrality from established positive body image concepts. This chapter has further outlined important qualities of the experience of body image and how it is differentiated from actual appearance characteristics and objective markers of weight or body size. Interested readers are encouraged to explore the ensuing chapters highlighted for a more in-depth look into specific body image facets and how they manifest with respect to particular social identities and lived experiences. Finally, as a novel organizational tool, an integrative taxonomy of body image was proposed. We invite scholars and practitioners to evaluate the utility of this conceptual heuristic in the years to come.

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