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Breda Fitzgerald

Washington State University, [breda.fitzgerald@email.wsu.edu](mailto:breda.fitzgerald@email.wsu.edu)

Carol J. Salusso

Washington State University, [salusso@wsu.edu](mailto:salusso@wsu.edu)

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A self-efficacy approach to mediating gender disparity in body satisfaction

Breda Fitzgerald, Carol J. Salusso, Washington State University, USA

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## Introduction

Researchers have reported for decades that men have higher body satisfaction than women and that regular exercise provides enhancement in body satisfaction for both genders (Garner, 1997; Tiggemann & Williamson, 2000). Exercise contributes to the self-efficacy component of how one feels about the body; developing an exercise habit can become motivating to keep gaining the psychological, emotional, and physical benefits (Bandura 1997; Tiggemann & Williamson, 2000). As young people mature into healthy adults, exercise can help increase body satisfaction and self-efficacy. Lennon & Rudd, 1994 introduced the 'hardy individual' as someone who was proactive (pursuing regular exercise) rather than reactive (disabled by body dissatisfaction). As a purposeful activity, the self-efficacy gained from exercise has a mediating impact on body dissatisfaction; it addresses the 'doing' balance to the 'being' components of image and satisfaction (Kaiser, 1998, p. 88). Social Cognitive Theory served as the theoretical framework for this project with a focus on being involved in the positive impact of regular exercise and motivation for continuing to exercise.

## Method

Our purpose was to take a self-efficacy viewpoint in examining gender disparity in body satisfaction and to the role of exercise within lifestyle. To address this purpose, two separate surveys were gathered. In each case, respondents were students at a Northwestern university. In the 1st study, 70 women and 48 men ages 18-27 responded to the Jourard and Secord 1953 body cathexis (satisfaction) scale with six additional fitness, health, self, and social life perceptions. In the 2nd study, 194 women and 63 men university students ages 18-27 using the Student Recreation Center responded to the same scale. Additional questions addressed motivations and approaches to exercise regularly.

## Findings and Discussion

In both studies, factor analysis profiled a significant difference (.01) between genders in level of body satisfaction where men were much more satisfied with their body as a whole. Interestingly, the first and most powerful factor showed that men focused on overall body build, fitness and health. Women on the other hand, focused on selected body components such as weight, arms and waist, thighs and hips, leg shape and fitness. Women's responses tended toward these features not being 'good enough'. For both genders, the second and lesser factor was focused on appearance of the face and hair, appearance, self-satisfaction and social life.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> study, asking subjects to select motivations for regular exercise was used to profile how both genders viewed exercise within their lifestyle. Among 23% of men and 7% of women,

exercise was a means for enhancing fitness and entertainment. However, fitness and weight management, entertainment, and socializing were the motivators for a majority of respondents (men 31%; women 66%). Thus, exercise for both genders is a largely a shared activity; an enjoyable experience; and frequently a way to manage body weight. That men approach this positively and women with more concern is the pivot point of differences in gender viewpoints.

#### Conclusions and Future Work

The results of these studies are collectively supportive of the role of exercise as a regular activity that is often pursued by both men and women university students. Thus, it seems probable that exercise could have impact on the self-efficacy of both men and women at a time in their lives when lifestyle habits could be confirmed and/or developed. By learning how holistically and positively men tend to perceive their bodies, young men might continue this tendency. At the same time, young women might shift toward being less judgmental about components their own bodies and develop more generalized advocacy and perhaps acceptance for their own body.

A visual analysis and aesthetics class has been tasked with using results of these studies to develop resources for middle school youth with a self-efficacy approach to mediating gender disparity in body satisfaction. This assignment is two-fold, helping both college students and middle school youth understand the benefits of well-developed self-efficacy traits and how regular exercise helps to increase body satisfaction for both genders. Seeing appearance as a component of wellness that takes a strategic self-efficacy approach will help to highlight the power of appearance and the need to direct that power in a positive direction.

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