

Naked and Unashamed: Investigations and Applications of the Effects of Naturist Activities on Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction

Abstract Body image dissatisfaction is a serious, global problem that negatively affects life satisfaction. Several claims have been made about the possible psychological benefits of naturist activities, but very little empirical research has investigated these benefits or any plausible explanations for them. In three studies - one large-scale, cross-sectional study (n = 849), and 2 prospective studies (n = 24, n = 100) this research developed and applied knowledge about the possible benefits of naturist activities. It was found that more participation in naturist activities predicted greater life satisfaction - a relationship that was mediated by more positive body image, and higher self-esteem (Study 1). Applying these findings, it was found that participation in actual naturist activities led to an increase in life satisfaction, an effect that was also mediated by improvements in body image and self-esteem (Studies 2 and 3). The potential benefits of naturism are discussed, as well as possible future research, and implications for the use of naturist activities.

Introduction

Dissatisfaction with one's body is a serious, international problem. Large-scale surveys in countries as diverse as the United States, Brazil and Finland find high rates of unhappiness with one's body, weight control behaviours, and symptoms of body image distortion, even among non-overweight participants. Naturist activities may reduce dissatisfaction with one's body through exposure to non-idealised bodies, or positive (or even neutral) feedback about one's own body. This research is the first to test a specific mediated model of the effect of naturism on body image, self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Body Image, Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction

Prior research suggests that negative body image in both women and men stems from media and other pressures to achieve unrealistic ideals of attractiveness leading to more negative perceptions of one's own body.

One's body-concept is an important aspect of one's overall self-concept, and a well established body of research demonstrates the relationship between body-image and self-esteem. Some of this research specifically supports a causal relationship from body image to self-esteem, rather than the reverse. Similarly, a well established body of prior research provides ample evidence of the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. This research cannot confirm the causal direction of this relationship, however, the direction from self-esteem to life satisfaction has been supported statistically.

If positive body image improves self-esteem, which in turn affects life satisfaction, it is important to bolster or improve one's body image. For example, it has been found that brief exposure to heavier bodies increased participants' preference for heavier looking individuals and that women reported more positive body image after doing life drawing. However, a potentially underused strategy might be found in naturist activities, which could offer a low-cost, widely available solution to the problem of body dissatisfaction.

Possible Psychological Benefits of Naturism

Naturism is a multi-faceted concept the primary element of which is going without clothes. However, this can have complex interactions with other elements of the dominant cul-

tures in which it is based, or with other concerns, such as the potential for eroticism. Naturism and nudism may also have a variety of political meanings; hence, some people may be willing to take part in public nudity, but hesitant to identify themselves as naturists or nudists. For these reasons, it is difficult to identify a single, universal definition of naturism. However, the consensus of contemporary naturist organisations define naturism as going without clothes in the presence of non-intimate others, or being nude in public without the intention of any sexual stimulation.

Across many countries, attitudes toward public nudity appear to be improving. Large-scale, representative surveys conducted in 2001 and 2011 show that about a quarter of all Britons have taken part in some naturist activity (e.g., nude sunbathing), and this number is likely growing. Other signs of internationally softening attitudes toward public nudity include the rising popularity of the World Naked Bike Rides - events where many people cycle naked through cities to call attention to the vulnerability of cyclists.

Initially, there was significant concern that naturism either reflected or resulted in negative psychological effects, particularly for children. However, empirical research on naturism and public nudity has failed to support these assumptions. Oleinick and others found no relationship between exposure to nudity in childhood and any later psychiatric symptomology. Lewis and Janda found a positive association between exposure to nudity early in life and willingness to engage in casual sex, but no associations with any other measure of sexual or emotional adjustment. In an 18-year longitudinal study Okami and others found no effects of exposure to parental nudity on sexual activity during adolescence, teenage pregnancy, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, or antisocial behaviour such as shoplifting. Indeed, exposure to parental nudity was positively associated with less use of recreational drugs and greater self-acceptance.

Given the apparent lack of negative effects, it was perhaps unsurprising that the potentially positive effects of naturism began to be considered. Naturist organisations themselves claim that participation in naturist activities leads to improvements in body image, self-esteem and overall life satisfaction, but there's been very little investigation of these claims. While some qualitative reports suggest that naturism may reduce self-consciousness, and a few quantitative studies have found an association between positive body image and naturist identity or pro-nudity attitudes, no studies to date have investigated the effects of actual naturist behaviour. This is important because identification and behaviour may not always be aligned; and many more people take part in some clothing-optional activity than would identify themselves as naturists or nudists.

Why should naturism have positive psychological effects?

The model suggested by naturist organisations is one in which naturist activities lead to an improvement in body image, which should in turn lead to an improvement in self-esteem and thus to increased life satisfaction. The aspect that remains to be tested and explained, is the proposed positive effect of naturism on body image.

As discussed, current models suggest that negative body image in both women and men derives from exposure to, and pressure to achieve, unrealistic ideals of attractiveness. However, this effect can be countered by exposure to bodies that differ from these idealised images. Hence, naturist activities,

in which one is able to observe a wide variety of bodies that differ from idealised images, should also be able to counteract these negative effects and promote a more realistic standard of physical attractiveness.

Alternatively, though, naturism may have positive effects due to feedback about one's own body. Abraczinskas and others found that negative weight-related and eating-related comments from one's parents can affect one's drive for thinness and encourage bulimia in teenagers. Naturist activities involve being seen naked by a large number of people in a fairly non-judgemental context, which might lead to less dissatisfaction with one's body. To date, however, neither of these two possible explanations for naturism's effects (seeing others vs. being seen by others) has been explored.

Current Research

There is a gap in the available empirical research concerning the possible psychological benefits of naturism and the mechanisms explaining these benefits. This study fills the gap by investigating a specific model in which naturist activity is associated with greater life satisfaction, and in which this relationship is mediated in turn by more positive body image and higher self-esteem. Furthermore, this research also investigates whether two specific aspects of naturism (i.e., seeing others vs. being seen by others) are associated with more positive body image. Finally, having tested a model of naturism's effects, this knowledge is applied at two genuine naturist activities to investigate whether improvements in body image, self-esteem and life satisfaction actually occur.

Study 1

Word-of-mouth and advertisements posted on various Internet forms resulted in 849 members of the British public being recruited to take part in this research.

Of these participants, 739 (87%) were male, 94 (11%) were female and 16 (.02%) did not identify their gender or reported a non-binary gender. The mean age was 57.19, with a standard deviation of 12.00. Ethnically, 831 (98%) identified as White, 3 (.4%) as East Asian, 2 (.2%) as South Asian, 0 as Black, and 13 (2%) as "other"; 405 (54%) identified themselves as having no religion, 366 (43%) identified as Christian, 0 identified as Muslim, 74 (9%) identified themselves as "other" and 4 (.5%) declined to identify a religion; 702 (83%) identified as heterosexual, 39 (5%) as gay, 94 (11%) as bi-sexual, and 14 (2%) as "other".

Participants were told that the study investigated the association between social activities and well-being, but not made aware of any specific hypotheses. All participants indicated whether they had ever taken part in any naturist activities, and if yes, when they began doing so and how frequently they did so. All participants completed measures of body image, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.

Measures

To assess participation naturist activities, participants were asked to indicate whether they had ever taken part in "in clothes-free activities (i.e., activities in which you have been fully or partially undressed outdoors and/or in the company of other people (other than your close family or romantic partner)."

The language deliberately avoided the labels "nudist" and "naturist". The product of the time spent doing naturist activities (in years) and frequency of naturist events per year was used as the index of naturist activity. Positive body image was measured by the 13-item Body Ap-

preciation Scale. Using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree) with the following statements:

- "I respect my body",
- "I do not feel good about my body" (reversed),
- "On the whole, I am not satisfied with my body" (reversed),
- "Despite its flaws, I accept my body for what it is",
- "I feel that my body has at least some good qualities",
- "I take a positive attitude towards my body",
- "I am attentive to my body's needs",
- "Despite its imperfections I still like my body",
- "My self worth is independent of my body shape or weight",
- "I focus a lot energy being concerned with my body shape or weight" (reversed),
- "My feelings toward my body are positive, for the most part",
- "I engage in healthy behaviours to take care of my body",
- "I do not allow unrealistic images presented in the media to affect my attitudes toward my body".

Self-esteem was measured with the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Using 4-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree) in agreement with the following statements:

- "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself",
- "At times, I think I am no good at all" (reversed),
- "I feel that I have a number of good qualities",
- "I am able to do things as well as most other people",
- "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" (reversed),
- "I certainly feel useless at times" (reversed),
- "I feel that I'm a person of worth",
- "I wish I could have more respect for myself" (reversed),
- "All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure" (reversed),
- "I take a positive attitude toward myself".

Overall life satisfaction was measured with the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale. Using the 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree) with the following statements:

- "In most ways my life is close to ideal",
- "The conditions of my life are excellent",
- "I am satisfied with my life",
- "So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life",
- "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing".

Results: Preliminary Analyses

In total 861 people started the survey. Twelve participants (10 men and 2 women) were discarded for giving the same answer to a reversed and non-reversed question, leaving 849 participants for analysis. Overall, 805 participants (95%) indicated that they had taken part in naturist activity at least once in their lives; participants also indicated that they took part in a mean of 36.75 naturist events per year. However, this number may be misleadingly high. 50% of participants took part in 17 or fewer naturist activities per year, suggesting that they were not ardent naturists, but rather people who would occasionally take part in clothing-optional activities.

Mediation Analyses

Differences in the scales used to measure each of the variables could make statistical relationships between them difficult to interpret. However, the hypothesised mediated relationships were supported by the data. Naturist activity predicted more positive body image, which in turn predicted higher self-esteem, and greater life satisfaction. Higher self-esteem also predicted greater life satisfaction. The total indirect effect of naturist activity on life satisfaction was positive and significant.

Testing the Reversed Model

Although the data fits the proposed model well, ie that it is

possible that taking part in naturist activity causes improvements in body image, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, it is equally possible that people who are happier with themselves and their bodies are consequently more likely to take part in naturist activities. But this reversed model does not fit the data as well as the original, proposed model. Life satisfaction predicted both higher self-esteem and more positive body image. Self-esteem also predicted more positive body image, but body image failed to predict participation in naturist activities, as did self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Effects of Gender

This sample has a large ratio of male participants (739) to female participants (94), and the men reported more positive body image than did the women, which made it important to verify that these findings apply to women as well as men. To this end, participants' gender was investigated as a potential moderator of the relationship between naturist activity and body image. This moderation by gender was not significant. When only female participants were selected, naturist activity continued to significantly predict positive body image.

Different Levels of Naturist Activity

It is notable that the proportion of participants in this sample who reported ever taking part in any clothes-free activity is much higher than the proportion reported in previous research. Even accounting for the inclusive language of the survey, people who frequently take part in naturist activities are likely overrepresented in this sample, which raises questions about the generalisability of the findings to the broader public who do not frequently take part in naturist activities.

Moderation Analyses

The moderated analysis revealed that the relationship between naturist activity and body image was strongest for participants who took part in the least naturist activities, weaker for those in the middle of the distribution, and weakest for participants who took part in the most naturist activities. In sum, both the moderation analyses and the median split analyses found that the relationship between naturism and positive body image was strongest for those participants who took part in fewer naturist activities. Indeed, it appears that the relationship no longer exists for individuals who pass a certain threshold number of naturist activities. This is similar to other psychological relationships like the association between income and subjective well-being which is strongest for poorer individuals, and weakens or ceases to apply above a certain level of income.

Seeing or Being Seen?

The final analyses investigated whether seeing others naked or being seen naked by others was more strongly related to positive body image. Age, gender, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation were included as covariates. Seeing others naked predicted more positive body image, though being seen by others did not predict more positive body image. There was also an interaction between seeing others and being seen. However, being seen naked by others did not significantly predict positive body image whether participants reported benefiting from seeing others naked or not.

Study 2

Having found positive associations between naturist activity, body image, self-esteem and life satisfaction, the following two studies apply these findings to real naturist activities.

Method, Participants and Design

Participants were 24 White British individuals (12 men, 12 women) whose age ranged from 22 to 67 years. They completed a questionnaire immediately before and after taking part in a real naturist activity.

Procedure

This study took advantage of a previously organised event - *Bare all for Polar Bears* - that took place in Doncaster, UK. Participants at this event completed a naked stroll around the Yorkshire Wildlife Park to raise money in support of polar bear preservation. Before participants disrobed, and if they provided written consent, they were then given a request for basic demographic information and asked to indicate whether they had engaged in public nudity before (10 had not). The event lasted approximately 90 min. After redressing, participants completed the post-test questionnaire, which included the same items as the pre-test questionnaire. To facilitate quick and easy participation, the measures for this study were abbreviated versions of those used in Study 1. Participants indicated their responses to all measures anchored by two extremes: Not at all, and Very much.

Positive Body Image

Both before and after the naturist activity, participants completed an abbreviated 8-item version of the 13-item Body Appreciation Scale. Two items were reverse-coded prior to analysis so that a higher overall score indicated more positive body-image.

Self-Esteem

Participants completed an abbreviated 4-item version of the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

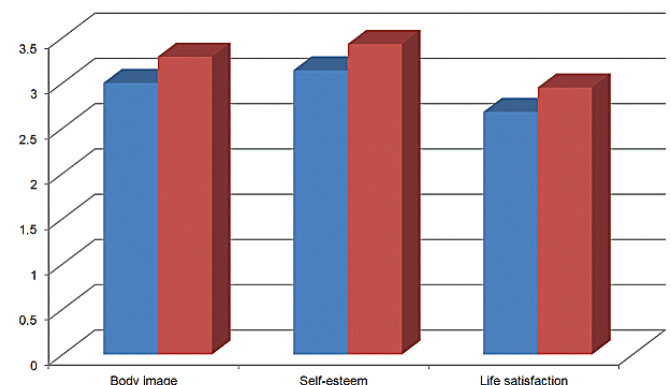
Life Satisfaction

Participants also completed an abbreviated 4-item version of the Satisfaction with Life scale. Again, higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction.

Table 1 Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of all variables used in Study 2, according to time

	Before activity	After activity
Body-image	3.00 (1.02)	3.29 (0.91)
Self-esteem	3.14 (0.98)	3.43 (0.81)
Life satisfaction	2.68 (1.13)	2.95 (0.97)

Results



Descriptive statistics are reported above. Neither age nor gender predicted any of the dependent variables. Differences between pre-event and post-event scores were investigated

using time (pre-naturist activity vs. post-naturist activity) as the independent variable and body-image, self-esteem and life satisfaction as dependent variables.

The expected effect of naturist activity was found. Compared to before the event, participants after the event reported more positive body-image. Subsequent analyses showed no significant interaction between time and either participant gender, or previous naturist experience. These results indicate that taking part in the event had positive psychological effects, and a possible interpretation is that communal nudity during the event improved body-image, self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Study 3

Method, Participants and Design

The participants were 100 British individuals (83 men, 16 women, 1 who did not indicate a gender), of whom 96 were White. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 79 years. Again, a prospective design was employed; with participants completing a questionnaire immediately before and after taking part in the naturist activity.

Procedure

This study took advantage of another previously organised event - Waterworld - that took place at a water-park in Stoke-on-Trent, UK. Participants at this event spent 3 hours naked at the water-park with no requirement to take part in any specific activity. After the event, immediately after re-dressing, participants were asked to complete the post-test questionnaire, including the same measures as the pre-test one.

Measures

Study 3 used the same measures of body-image, self-esteem and life satisfaction that were used in Study 2, also completing the same measures before and after the event.

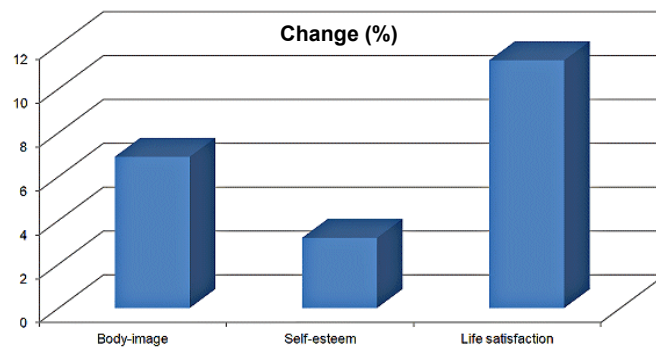
Table 2 Means and standard deviations of all variables used in Study 3, according to time

	Before activity	After activity
Body-image	3.32 (0.93)	3.55 (0.85)
Self-esteem	3.42 (0.91)	3.53 (0.91)
Life satisfaction	2.74 (1.13)	3.05 (1.15)

Results

Neither age nor gender predicted any of the dependent variables. The expected effect of naturist activity was found again. After the naturist event, participants reported more positive body-image and greater life satisfaction after the naturist event than they did before the event, though the higher self-esteem was not quite significant at the 5% level. Subsequent analyses showed no significant interaction between time and either participant gender, or previous naturist experience.

To conduct mediation analyses, change scores were calculated for each variable by subtracting participants' scores before the naked event from their scores after the naked event. The relationship change between body-image and life satisfaction, mediated by self-esteem, was investigated. The data fits the hypothesised mediated relationship; body image change predicted self-esteem change, which predicted life satisfaction change. There was no significant direct relationship between body-image change and life satisfaction change, but there was a significant indirect effect via self-



esteem change. These results indicate that taking part in this event also improved life satisfaction, and that this effect was mediated by changes in body image and self-esteem.

Discussion

Naturist activities contain elements that should promote a more positive body image, higher self-esteem and greater life satisfaction. However, prior research has not investigated these potential positive effects, or elucidated a model to explain them. This gap was addressed in these three studies. A large cross-sectional study (Study 1) found that participants who engaged in more naturist activities also reported greater life satisfaction, and that this relationship was mediated by more positive body image and higher self-esteem. This proposed mediated model fits the data better than a reversed model (in which life satisfaction, self-esteem and body image predicted naturism), was not dependent on gender, and applied more strongly to participants who took part in naturist activity less frequently. Among participants who took part in naturist activities, seeing others naked appeared to be a more important predictor of positive body image than being seen naked by others. Furthermore, in 2 prospective studies of real naturist events (Studies 2 and 3), participation in actual naturist activities resulted in immediate improvements in life satisfaction, an effect that was also mediated by improvements in body image and self-esteem.

Concluding Remarks

Naturism remains unconventional, and is sometimes seen as psychologically or sexually unhealthy, even by mental health professionals. However, in recent decades, a significant body of research has failed to find negative effects of naturism on either adults or children. Perhaps unsurprisingly, an increasing number of people are taking part in naturist activities and the focus of some research has shifted toward the potential positive effects of naturism. These current findings add meaningfully to the scant empirical literature on the effects of naturism, and are the first to provide evidence for specific mechanisms behind naturism's effects. This research should be considered the suggestive beginning of a body of research, rather than a definitive conclusion of one. Nonetheless, it should not only be interesting to those hoping to academically understand the factors affecting our perceptions of our bodies, but also to public health practitioners who may come to see naturism as a cheap, almost universally available means of promoting healthy body-image, positive self-esteem and overall life satisfaction. As more people participate in clothing-optional activities, these potential benefits of naturism are worth exploring.

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