

Writing About My Adamantium Skeleton: Media Self-Assimilation Bolsters Grip Strength When Embodying a Personal Ideal

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Background

Body image research focuses on deleterious effects of masculine ideals in the media, e.g., muscularity. Failure to achieve the ideal results in feeling inadequate (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Parasocial relationships (PSR) bolster self-regard and physical prowess (Derrick, 2013; Young, et al., 2013). The self and other become congruent (Gabriel & Young, 2011). A first-person perspective can augment these effects (Libby et al., 2007).

Media Self-Assimilation (MSA) is a process in which a person enters a personal collective's ideal and become the ideal.

Hypotheses

Can we increase positive feelings and physical strength following an empowering experience?

- MSA with a favorite superhero will increase both physical strength and confidence and decrease for MSA with least favorite superhero
- MSA with a PSR superhero will result in higher body-esteem and confidence in performing feats of strength

Methods

Sixty men gave baseline grip strengths and confidence in a weightlifting task. They subsequently wrote first-person narratives as their favorite (or least favorite) superhero. They gave grips and confidence again, then completed measures.

Materials

- Grip Strength**- 90 kg Camry (Model EH101) hand dynamometer
- Confidence in Strength**- A 5-point weight request form indicating a weight desired for a generic weightlifting task
- Body-Esteem**- Body-Esteem Scale, 18-item questionnaire assessing positive/negative feelings toward difference body parts, e.g., biceps
- Feats of Strength**- Feats of Strength Scale, 7-item scale assessing one's confidence in performing athletic feats, e.g., "Compared to the average person, how strong do you think you are right now?"

Results

Grip Strength- Participants exhibited significantly increased grip strength following MSA with a favorite superhero, $F(1, 29) = 6.79, p < 0.05$. There was an MSA x Time interaction, $F(1, 58) = 6.01, p < 0.05$.

Confidence- Participants requested significantly more weight following MSA with a favorite superhero, $F(1, 28) = 5.06, p < 0.05$. Participants requested significantly more weight following MSA with a least-favorite superhero, $F(1, 29) = 6.41, p < 0.05$.

Body-Esteem- There was no significant difference in body-esteem.

Feats of Strength- There was no significant difference in feats of strength.

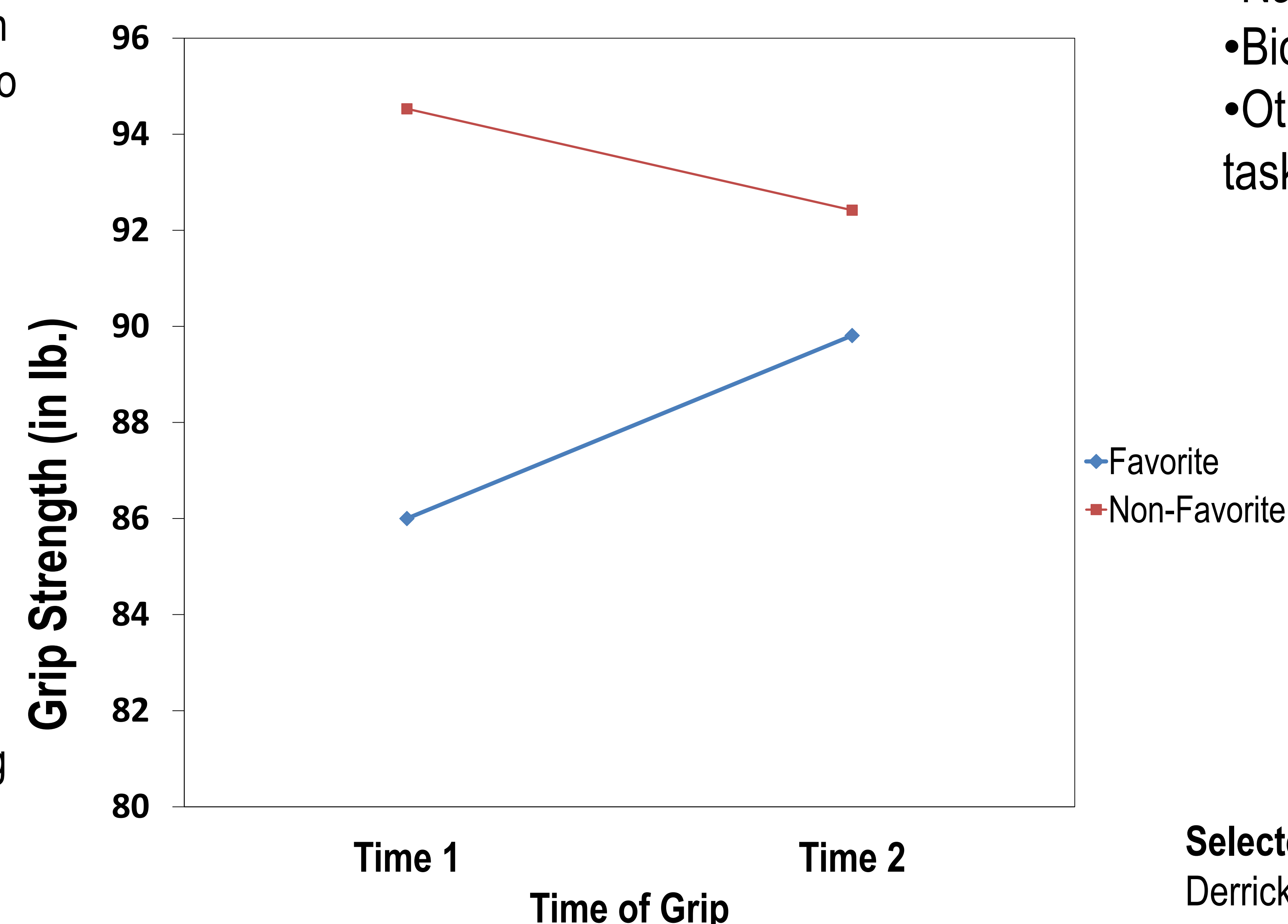


Figure 1. Interaction plot of grip strength change (from baseline) following MSA with a favorite vs. non-favorite superhero.

Discussion

Thinking about oneself as part of the masculine ideal bolsters confidence in ability. However, changing one's self-perception to a personal ideal is empowering in terms of physical strength.

Results do not suggest that MSA can buffer negative body image processes. This may be due to not using BES as a within measure.

Can we parse MSA from social comparison? Will third-person perspective change results in comparison to first-person?

Future Directions

- Self-Enhancement, Self-Affirmation?
- Narrative Themes (Bauer & McAdams, 2010)
- Biological Challenge Responses
- Other classes of superheroes and relevant domains of tasks



Selected Readings

Derrick, J. L. (2013). Energized by television: Familiar fictional worlds restore self-control. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 4, 299-307.
Young, A. F., Gabriel, S., & Hollar, J. L. (2013). Batman to the rescue! The protective effects of parasocial relationships with muscular superheroes on men's body image. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49, 173-177.

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