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An exploration of women's body image: a qualitative analysis of the thoughts, feelings and behaviours surrounding body image in younger and older women.

Chloe Burbidge

Supervised by: Professor Sarah Grogan   April 2017

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the thoughts, feelings and behaviours surrounding body image in two female focus groups. One focus group was carried out with five people aged 18-25 years referred to as the 'younger' group. The other focus group was carried out with five people aged 60-70 years referred to as the 'older' group. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, highlighting five main themes for each focus group, some containing sub-themes. Thematically using the comparison method, this study found similarities and contrasts for the two focus groups. Similar themes were social influences, negative thoughts and feelings, dieting and comparisons (to a certain extent). Contrasts outweighed the similarities, the younger group discussed appearance, influences, positive thoughts and feelings, dieting and exercise for health and comparisons to others. The older group discussed the impact of age, influences, dieting for weight loss and comparisons to their younger self, which impacted their body image. The results better our understanding of the similarities and contrasts of female body image in younger and older women, the unexpected findings identify areas which can be explored in future research.

KEY WORDS:	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	FEMALE BODY IMAGE	QUALITATIVE	FOCUS GROUPS	ATTITUDES

Background

Women's body image

Body image is described as a complex construct with many dimensions that have an important role in women's lives (Cash, 2004), involving "a person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body" (Grogan, 2008:3). Previous research on body image is weighted towards females due to the idea that women face a variety of pressures and are constantly changing their bodies to fit what is socially desirable (Grogan, 2008). Body dissatisfaction is very common among women of all ages and can cause significant suffering (Stapleton et al, 2017). This study aims to build on previous research in this field, as recommended by Tiggemann (2004) who states that more research should look at changes in women's body image and how this relates to age. This study explores how the 'younger' and 'older' groups of women think and feel about body image and how this reflects in their behaviour. Age differences are expected to emerge. It will be interesting to see any likeness or contrasts that emerge and how this could be related to age.

Comparing two age groups

Pruis and Janowsky (2010) compared a younger and older group of women using questionnaires. They found that body dissatisfaction occurred across both groups, however, the younger group had a greater desire to be thin and experienced more pressures from society, suggesting that age effects some aspects of body image but not all. Similarly, Dunkel, Davidson and Qurashi (2010) found a greater difference between older women's body image and their ideal body image, with older women feeling less pressure to achieve their ideal. However, Grogan (2017) highlights that women are always changing their shape and weight to conform to current trends. This shows that even though women's body image can differ with age, some things remain similar across the lifespan. Other quantitative research has found body dissatisfaction being stable across all ages; but differed in some areas such as, self-esteem and comparing themselves to others (Kozar and Damhorst, 2009; Webster and Tiggemann, 2003). However, quantitative data lacks detail, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to get a better understanding of what that person means in their own terms (Liechty and Yarnal, 2010). This allows themes to emerge from each focus group and for them to be compared. Part of the rationale is based on the limited research comparing likeness and contrasting themes from two separate focus groups using a qualitative method.

Younger women's body image

Perlof (2014) highlights factors such as strong peer presence, negative comparisons and peer norms as factors that can influence body image in young women. Showing, that young women experience societal influences and pressures. These influences could be from increased internet use, including social media, which has recently been reported to increase body dissatisfaction in young women. (Carter et al, 2017). This study also highlighted that no previous studies have used nationally representative data which is limiting. The negative comparisons can be related to comparing their own body to magazine standards (Pompper and Koenin, 2004). As

younger women are more sensitive to their own body image (Smeets, 1999). The factors highlighted by other researchers can influence how younger women think, feel and behave for example, younger women feel more anxious when involving their own body image (Tiggemann and Lynch, 2001) and have a stronger desire to be thin with a stricter diet (Lewis and Cachelin, 2001). This could be a result of such factors that influence their lives. However, these studies do not take into account other factors which may also have an influence, for example environmental, cognition and developmental factors. Negative comparisons may not be made due to magazines but could be the outcome of being brought up to think like that. The study uses open ended questions to explore any influences.

Older women's body image

With age, body image is said to be increasingly related to ability rather than appearance (Liechty and Yarnal, 2010). With health being the reason why older women lose weight, due to appearance not being a key achievement (Clarke, 2002). Older women are less likely to compare themselves (Kozar and Damhorst, 2009, 2008). However, similar findings to younger women are also found, with body image concerns being related to self-esteem (Baker and Gringart, 2009). Older women are clearly at an increased age and may have encountered physical changes in their life e.g. having children, the menopause and reducing health, which can influence their body image (Rostosky and Travis, 2000). Therefore, older women can differ based on age. The proposed study explores a selected age range of both younger and older women to gain a better understanding of the changes or similarities from the two groups and whether these are age related.

The influence of age on body image

Tiggemann and Lynch (2001) looked at body image across the lifespan using women aged 20 to 84 years old. They found body dissatisfaction to be stable across all ages, but self-objectification, anxiety and eating disorders decreased with age. Similarly, Webster and Tiggemann (2003) found that self-esteem and self-concept was related to body dissatisfaction in women across all ages, however, as age increases body satisfaction decreases. Both of these studies used questionnaires so have limited knowledge behind why this occurs. Liechty and Yarnal (2010) found interpersonal relationships, macro-environments and also key life events as factors which may influence body image. If such life events are negative this could cause body satisfaction to decrease with age (Mangweth-Matzek et al, 2006). A lifecourse perspective looks at women of various ages, who are at different stages of their lives. Therefore, it may be hard to distinguish the influences which impacted their behaviour, having two specific age groups controls what the women are expected to have experienced. It would be interesting to explore specific ages of women, gaining a richer understanding of the two age cohorts through emerging themes.

Previous themes in literature

Themes highlighted in previous research can be categorised as thoughts, feelings behaviours or influences placed on women and therefore treats body image as an

attitude. Body satisfaction and body measurements had an impact on the way women view their body (Cundall and Guo, 2017). Bailey et al (2016) found themes such as body satisfaction/dissatisfaction, thoughts and feelings on body image and positive body image in older women. Body satisfaction can be compared in younger and older women when talking about thoughts and feelings (Webster and Tiggemann, 2003). Related to this, Peat et al (2008) found that younger and older women mentioned negative feelings regarding their own body image. Themes from younger women involved an increased desire to be thin, peer influences and negative social comparisons, that are placed upon them (Pruis and Janowsky, 2010; Perlof, 2014). However, older women may feel different pressures from society as younger women (Bedford and Johnson, 2006). Influences for older women may originate from events in their life e.g. the menopause and reducing health (Rostosky and Travis, 2000). Overall, the themes from previous research are used as a basis for the proposed questions and aims of this study. Exploring women's attitudes; as an overall concept, on body image.

Present study

The over-arching research question is 'Do the perceptions, feelings and behaviours about body image share any likeness or contrast with younger and older females? This study hopes to meet the aims by having an open discussion within each focus group, allowing for an in-depth exploration surrounding body image. The study intends to build on previous literature with either supporting or contrasting research. It will be interesting to explore the similarities and differences of both groups and whether this is a result of age.

Therefore, the aims of this study are:

1. To explore the thoughts and feelings about body image from each focus group and how they influence behaviour
2. To explore any influences on body image from either/both of the groups
3. To explore any likeness or contrasts between the two groups
4. To generate themes through thematic analysis as a way of understanding the two female focus groups

Methodology

Design

This study utilised a qualitative design using female focus groups as a way of exploring body image from the two different age groups. A qualitative method allows the topic of interest to be explored and for the researcher to become more familiar with the area (Gilmore and Carson, 1996). Gaining an understanding of the participants' unique understanding, experiences and interpretations of the topic (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Recruitment of participants

Five participants were identified for each focus group based on whether they met the criteria of being female in the wanted age groups. This is an appropriate sample to

use in qualitative data when looking for patterns and does not produce overwhelming amounts of data (Patton, 2002). The younger participants are aged 18-25, previously used in research (Poobalan et al, 2012) due to being categorised as a young adult transitioning into adulthood. Who may experience living independently, employment and finding a partner (Graham and Jones, 2002; Anderson et al, 2003; Burke et al, 2004) all of which can affect body image. The older focus group is aged 60 to 70, labelled 'older' in a previous study by Meneghetti et al (2012) who also looked at the differences between older and younger age groups. This older age range are likely to have found a partner and had children, whilst reducing the likelihood of factors such as serious health issues or the menopause which may have impacted their lives (Baltes and Smith, 2003).

The participants were recruited through an opportunity sample and on a volunteer basis. The younger group were students at Manchester Metropolitan University and were recruited through the online participation pool. The older group consisted of women who all attend a local bingo hall on a weekly basis and were recruited through face-to-face interaction. Participants in each focus group were friends and knew each other.

The study was advertised through the MMU online participation pool for the younger group (see Appx. 3) and those interested received an online invitation (see Appx. 4). The older group received hard copies of the invitation only (see Appx. 5). By directly giving out hard copies of the invitation they had a better understanding of what is being asked of them, an advertisement alone may be confusing. Interested participants were given an information sheet that gave more detail about the study, this was online for the younger group and a hard copy for the older group (see Appx. 6), both containing the appropriate resources of help for each group. All participants are from various backgrounds and have various appearances, there was no essential criteria set for this.

The Interviewer

At the time of both of the focus groups the interviewer was a 21-year-old female BSc Psychology student who wore make-up and styled her hair on a day-to-day basis and wore casual clothing during both focus groups.

Data collection

Each focus group involved a group lead discussion involving pre-planned semi-structured questions, which can be found in Appendix 2. The list of questions involved prompts, such as "If so, in what way?" which helped the participants to expand on or explain, what they had previously said. This study is deductive as the questions are based on themes found through extensive research of previous literature. The study is also inductive due to the exploratory approach to female body image. Data collection took place at Manchester Metropolitan University for the students in the younger group and at a local café for the older group, this was during closing time to minimise any risk of being interrupted or confidential information being overheard. A familiar environment was to make the participant feel more comfortable and at ease. The questions were delivered by the researcher and discussed amongst the group as an answer. Beforehand, the participants had a general talk, to familiarise themselves with talking in a group. A researcher and participant relationship can succumb to an imbalance of power (Parker, 2005). This

was minimised by using a focus group collection method, which enabled the researcher to be there for guidance, instead of interrogation.

The researcher informed participants when the Dictaphone was turned on and when the first question was going to be read out. Focus groups allow the collection of interactive data as well as participants focusing together on a topic (Grogan and Richards, 2002); they also generate natural speech (Wilkinson, 1998) and are less susceptible to researcher influence (Morgan, 1988). The focus groups varied in length due to how much information was shared. Participants were made aware that they could take a break at any point. A consent form was read and signed by each participant before the focus group took place (see Appx. 7). When the last question was discussed the participants were notified that the focus group had ended. They were given a de-brief sheet, where they had the opportunity to address any issues if needed or seek any support (see Appx. 8). A full protocol of the study can be found in Appendix 9.

Data analysis methods

The data collected was manually transcribed (Appx 10). Thematic analysis was used to summarise the accounts and develop categories to explain the data collected, giving insight into the accounts of women (Grogan et al, 2013). The process involved looking for common concepts and producing codes which may be similar or contrasting (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The transcription from each focus group went through a process of thematic analysis, guided by the processes highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006).

This process involves 6 steps as follows: (1) read through the data collected to familiarise yourself, (2) find initial codes from the data, (3) themes are generated from the codes, (4) when all of themes are highlighted they are then reviewed, (5) after reviewing, themes are defined and named, (6) these final themes are then reported.

The data was read and re-read to form initial codes for the younger group (Appx. 10) and for the older group (Appx. 11). These initial codes were grouped together to generate themes (Appx. 12). All potential quotes for each theme can be viewed for the younger group (Appx. 13) and the older group (Appx. 14) however, the most appropriate quotations were used in the results section. The themes were reviewed and then reported in the results section. This process allowed for a better understanding of the data, highlighting the main themes from each focus group showing likeness and contrasts from the two groups. The use of thematic analysis also highlights any unanticipated findings (Krippendorff, 2004). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that thematic analysis is not tied to an epistemology and is flexible as it can be used in a range of theoretical frameworks. This study is conducted with a realist/essential paradigm. This method allows the researcher to theorise motivations, experience and meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Justification for chosen methodology

Participants in a focus group are more likely to share information in a group rather than being interviewed (Morgan and Kreuger, 1993). By using the method of thematic analysis, it gives insight into the accounts of women (Grogan, 2013) and

generates themes which can be compared between the two groups. These justifications directly address the aims, providing a better way of understanding body image from a younger and older group of women. Focus groups and thematic analysis combined enables the researcher to answer the over- arching research question.

Ethical considerations

An application for ethical approval was submitted and approved (Appendix 1). The research is subject to ethical guidelines outlined by the British Psychological Society. By using direct quotes confidentiality was not ensured. However, anonymity was kept by using pseudonyms and identities were not revealed. Participants were asked to keep all information discussed in the focus groups confidential. As well as all data being stored on a password protected computer and being erased after the submission deadline on the 18th April. The participants had the right to withdraw at any time. Support information was given on the information sheet and de-brief sheet and written consent was gained. Scanned files of consent forms will be destroyed after the submission deadline. The older focus group took place at a local café. Any risk of confidentiality or anonymity being broken; due to be overheard, was minimised by arranging the focus group to occur during closed hours. Any safety risk to the participant was minimised by providing the research supervisor with the focus groups details. Participants were ensured that they should only disclose information they want to. Safeguards were put in place i.e. no names, addresses or dates of birth were taken from the participants. Computerised data complied with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998. Audio recordings on the Dictaphone (and any copies) will be deleted once the project has been submitted for publication/examined. The files on the computer will only be accessible to the researcher.

Results

Initial analysis of the older and younger group of women produced five key themes from each, some divided into sub-themes. All of which are shown in the table below.

Table 1. Themes and Sub-themes from the younger and older female focus groups

Younger Group	Older Group
Main theme: Appearance Sub-theme: 1. Weight loss 2. Size and clothing	**Main theme:** Impact of ageing on appearance

Main theme: Perceived influences
Sub-themes:
   1. Society
   2. Media
   3. Relationships
	Main theme: Perceived influences
	Sub-themes:
	   1. Society
	   2. Life experiences
	   3. Holidays

Main theme: Thoughts and feelings
Sub-themes:
   1. Positive
   2. Negative
	Main theme: Negative thoughts and feelings

Main theme: Dieting and exercise for health	**Main theme:** Dieting for weight loss
Main theme: Comparisons to others	**Main theme:** Comparisons to younger self

The themes are explained through the quotations below; these are then later discussed.

Younger group

Main theme: Appearance

Sub-theme 1: Weight loss

The younger focus group emphasised how weight loss impacting how they perceive themselves, placing a large emphasis on appearance. Merida discussed experiences of not losing weight which negatively impacted how she felt about her own appearance.

> **Merida:** …every time I go on holiday in summer and put a bikini on and like ohh if I'd have just sticked with that diet I would have looked a bit better **(Lines 749-751)**

Sub-theme 2: Size and clothing

Sophie discussed clothing in relation to body image and appearance. Suggesting that clothing appears better on certain body types than others. These body types were set as an ideal body image.

> **Sophie:** My friend is slim, tall like banging body (laughs) and I think every single type of clothing looks good on her so I definitely think that's an ideal body, whether I can get that, I can't **(Lines 294-296)**

The difference in clothes sizes between shops negatively impacted the participant's own perception of size. Merida's experience of jeans being too small caused her to think negatively about her own body image.

> **Merida:** …buying jeans, every shop their size 16 is not the same size in every shop so I'll like put on a size 16 in River Island and be like oh my god I can't even button it up **(Lines 256-258)**

Main theme: Perceived influences

Sub-theme 1: Society

Participants in the younger focus group discussed the importance placed on body image by society. They felt that society has social trends as well as social expectations they had to meet to be accepted. Merida explained this as a barrier to being happy.

> **Merida:** …you're never allowed to be happy in what you are now, like society doesn't accept you **(Lines 326-327)**

Sub-theme 2: Media
The younger group discussed the importance that media had on their own body image. Influences included social media platforms, which included peer influences. Social and entertainment media were highlighted as a constant influencing factor on body image by Sophie.

> **Sophie:** Yeah, I think social media…programs like keeping up with the Kardashians you know like I think just social media especially, entertainment media is all about body image **(Lines 50-53)**

Sub-theme 3: Relationships
Relationships with family and friends were discussed as a main influence on body image. The sizes of those closest to them were influential as well as the support they were given about their own body image from others.

> **Harriett:** …so for me I've grown up with a mum size 10 or 12 who hates her body **(Line 150)**

Other relationships, such as having a boyfriend also influenced the younger group and continues to influence how they perceive their own body image. Both in positive and negative ways.

> **Sophie:** …if you've got the right relationship then it just like literally makes you really comfortable and I think, I think that's a massive thing

Main theme: Thoughts and feelings

Sub-theme 1: Positive

The younger group could highlight positive aspects of their body image as shown by Merida. Even though Amy expressed overall positive thoughts and feelings about her body image she still had to change her behaviour to maintain happiness.

> **Merida:** I've got like good positive things about me **(Line 112)**

> **Amy:** I guess I feel positive but like we've just discussed I always feel like I should go to the gym and lose a bit of weight, I do feel overall happy **(Lines 137-138)**

Sub-theme 2: Negative

Negative thoughts are held by most of the group and are expressed throughout the discussion. Merida concludes her thoughts as being negative. The influences of these negative thoughts impacted behaviour and body satisfaction.

> **Merida:** I'd say the majority of my thoughts are probably quite negative **(Line 110)**

Main theme: Dieting and exercise for health

The younger group discussed behaviours such as diets and exercising to improve their body image in relation to health. Sophie, Harriett and Amy described their body image as being health driven. They placed emphasis on health as the main motivation for behaviour change.

> **Katie:** …when I think of my body image, like gosh I need to stop myself getting type 2 diabetes, I need to stop all of this, which I think is really important in body image.
> **Sophie:** So it's like health, more more health
> **Harriett:** Yeah, definitely health driven I think –
> **Amy:** Yeah I completely agree with that **(Lines 166-171)**

Main theme: Comparison to others

The younger group are in constant comparison to others. Harriett discusses the negative perception she has on body image by comparing herself to models in magazines, Whilst, Merida highlights social media platforms where she compares herself to her peers. They strive to look like others who they perceive as having a more ideal body image.

> **Harriett:** …it's more of a comparison, in magazines **(Lines 147)**

> **Merida:** …like I follow a girl on Instagram and she is like beautiful she's really curvy…she's the same size clothes as I am but I still look at her and think oh my gosh she's beautiful I wish I could look like her **(Lines 196-199)**

Older group.

Main theme: Impact of ageing

Sub-theme: Changes in appearance

The older participants discussed how their body shape had changed over the years due to age, which can be seen from Rosy and Maggie. This had a negative effect on how they perceived themselves. Maude felt like physiological aspects of the body had been lost, with others discussing how the appearance of their body will never be the same.

> **Rosy**: With getting older, your body shape, even if I was nine stone four like I were when I was nineteen and into my forties, my body shape would change **(Lines 250-251).**

Maggie: Size fourteens, I don't think I'll ever be that again (Laughs) **(Line 18)**

Maude: you lose your waist **(Line 257)**

Main theme: Perceived influences

Sub-theme: Society
Society was highlighted by Rosy to be the most important influence in the older women's focus group. The group highlighted that they struggle not to listen to society when perceiving their own body image and feel as though their behaviour are ruled by what society deems to be acceptable.

Rosy: Society I think more than anything, they're always telling you what you can and can't eat **(Lines 344-345)**

Sub-theme: Life experiences
The older focus group had more life experience due to their age, which influenced the way they perceived their body image. Rosy highlighted how having children changed her body, with Maude also discussing how this has a negative influence. Other experiences like losing a partner as discussed by Maggie, also had a negative influence.

Rosy: Having children, bearing children changes your body image, definitely **(Lines 392)**

Maggie: …I think you know it's about losing Brian and then I just go to pot, you know, I'm depressed actually most of the time **(Lines 122-123)**

Sub-theme: Holidays
They all agreed that they change their behaviour to lose weight before going on holiday, if not then this would have a negative influence on their thoughts and feelings about their body, influencing how they behave e.g. covering up and not wearing a bikini or not going at all.

Rosy: Yeah like erm going on holiday i would say, that if you're over weight you don't feel comfortable, going swimming I don't feel comfortable, I feel over weight
Deb: I always keep myself covered up, even if it's hot in the sun
Maude: If I didn't diet for my holidays
Lucy: She wouldn't be able to wear a bikini (Laughs)
Maude: I'd make sure I'd get to the weight that I aimed for, I don't think I'd go **(Lines 188-193)**

Main theme: Negative thoughts and feelings

Participants in the older focus group admitted to their thoughts and feelings mainly being negative towards their own body image, which can be seen from the discussion between Lucy, Rosy and Maude. They discussed positive thoughts and feelings only in relation to weight loss.

Rosy: yeah negative, mine are negative about body image

Lucy: yeah definitely negative
Maude: Mine are always negative **(Lines 138-140)**

Main theme: Dieting for weight loss

The older focus group discussed the behaviour of dieting to improve their body image, this was driven by the desire to lose weight and be thin/slim as shown by Rosy and Lucy. Dieting clubs were highlighted to be the best strategy for weight loss.

Rosy: I'd like to be slim
Lucy: I'd like to be thin **(Lines 75-76)**

Rosy: I think that well for me personally I have to go to slimming club, slimming club is the answer for me **(Lines 335-336).**

Main theme: Comparisons to younger self

The participants in the older focus group compared their current self to their younger self throughout the discussion. Maggie referred to how she looked when she left school and perceived this as being more ideal. Rosy compared certain features of her body image that have changed with age, expressing this as a negative in comparison to her younger self.

Maggie: I wish I were size I were when er (.) I left school **(Line 16)**
Rosy: Well when you're older you start looking drawn don't you, yeah I go very drawn, your face doesn't go like when you were younger **(Lines 160-161)**

Discussion

Appearance

The findings show the importance placed on appearance from the younger focus group. Either with losing weight or having a more ideal body size to appear better in clothing, both, if not achieved, had a negative impact on participants. This was expected due to younger women generally placing more importance on body image when it related to physical appearance (Roy and Payette, 2012) and having a strong desire to be thin (Lewis and Cachelin, 2001). The negative thoughts and feelings associated with the dissatisfaction of their body image appearance would impact behaviour such as dieting. This has previously been mentioned as 'appearance fixing' by Cash et al (2005) as a coping strategy for younger women who allow their physical appearance to define their self-worth, as well as expressing greater body dissatisfaction, which was also reported by Stapleton et al (2017). This can be seen from Sophie discussing how she is unable to achieve the ideal body showing low levels of self-esteem.

Impact of ageing

The focus groups both had a negative view on their appearance. However, the older group had a negative view on appearance because of ageing. As previously reported, age is often accompanied with physical changes to their appearance (Bailey et al, 2016) and therefore can generate negative thoughts and feelings older

women have on their body image. This is shown by Maude who describes the physical changes as a loss, expressing negative connotations. However, the older participants accept changes to their appearance as being inevitable with age, the quote from Maggie is an example of this. Even though, the desire for physical change is still there through weight loss. Leichty (2012) explains this as a dual existence of contentment and the desire for physical change. Any unrealistic ideal becomes increasingly irrelevant with age (Bailey et al, 2016).

Influences on body image

The results support Bedford and Johnson (2006) who reported that both age groups succumb to pressures from society. Sophie described social expectations set by society, causing behaviour change to meet expectations of what is socially desirable (Grogan, 2008). The older group perceived societal influences as a guideline to acceptable body image with Rosy also highlighting this to be the largest influence. Bedford and Johnson (2006) found correlations between societal influences and body image dissatisfaction, which has further support from this study. In contrast, different influences were discussed. The younger group discussed media influences, such as social media, tv programmes and magazines. These portray societal norms and trends which Perlof (2014) reported to impact body image. Both negative and positive relationships had an influence on the younger focus group, which supports Forbes et al (2006) findings of young women with boyfriends attenuating less to body satisfaction, this is expressed by Sophie. Peers on social media, adult relatives and the media have all previously been reported to predict body dissatisfaction and behaviour change (Xu et al, 2010). The older group discussed life experience influences, which was expected because of age. The group discussed bearing a child as a negative influence on body image as well as losing a partner and the support of that partner. Which shows strong support for Rostosky and Travis (2000) who also found such life experiences to have an influence on body image. Going on holiday was discussed as an influence, highlighting the negative impact on behaviour such as restricted dieting. This builds on Berdevchesky et al (2014) who highlighted the importance women place on body image when going on holiday.

Thoughts and feelings

Webster and Tiggemann (2003) previously said that the thoughts and feelings from younger and older women are comparable, more specifically as negative feelings (Peat et al, 2008). Throughout the findings, the thoughts and feelings are negative, therefore, body dissatisfaction is found to be stable across both age groups, supporting Roy and Payette (2012). In contrast to previous research, only the younger group had positive thoughts and feelings surrounding body image. This was unexpected because the younger group are still exposed to social pressures which increases body dissatisfaction. Baker and Gringart (2009) suggested that women experience more benefits with age on body image due to no longer experiencing social pressures. This study contrasted as the older group discussed social influences and had no positive thoughts and feelings on their own body image. Wood-Barcalow et al (2010) explained, younger women who had positive thoughts and feelings about their body as part of the holistic model, perceive their body image to be more positive

Dieting and weight loss

Both the younger and older focus group discussed dieting as an adopted behaviour to lose weight, to think and feel more positive about their own body image. Both using diets as a body management strategy which has previously been found (Garrusi et al, 2012). The younger group discussed that their main motivation for dieting and exercise was to improve their health. This finding was unexpected for the younger group and contrasts with previous research reporting younger women exercising to lose weight (Abraham, 2003) and having a greater desire to be thin (Lewis and Cachelin, 2001; Pruis and Janowsky, 2010). The older focus group discussed dieting to better appearance, with little regard to their health. Rosy and Lucy discussed their ideal image of being slim/thin which would only be achieved through weight loss. The strategy of slimming clubs were previously used to achieve this. Based on previous findings from Clarke (2002) the absence of health as a motivation to lose weight for older women was unexpected. However, Clarke (2002) reported that appearance benefits such as improved body image are a key motivation for altering body image at an older age, this provides support for the findings.

Comparisons

The younger group compared themselves to others, this brought on negative thoughts and feelings surrounding body image. Supporting Perlof (2014) who also reported negative comparisons to be an influencing factor for younger women's body image. Pompper and Koenin (2004) explained this as a result of magazine standards, where Carter et al (2017) said this could be due to an increase in internet use and social media for younger women. All of which was reported to be influential by the younger focus group. The older group compared their current body image to how they looked at a younger age. This shows that age influenced how the older group perceived their own body image. Building on findings from Dunkel, Davidson and Qurashi (2010) who state that older women are further away from their ideal body image, suggesting older women compare to their younger ideal selves. The two focus groups differed with who they compared themselves to, supporting Webster and Tiggemann (2003) and Tiggemann and Lynch (2001). The results disagree with Kozar and Damhorst (2009, 2008), who stated that older women are less likely to compare, when this study shows a similar level of comparison form both groups.

Limitations of the present study

This study focuses on two groups of women in different age cohorts, uncovering individual experiences and views which can vary from one person to another. The groups consisted of friends with shared interests. Even though, the familiarity of the group was beneficial to the comfort and ease of disclosure, the results may have differed if the participants were strangers and from different backgrounds, this may cause the current results to vary. The experiences and views discussed are not representative of all women in the two age cohorts. Future research would benefit from looking at more than one focus group for each age cohort, multiple groups of varied participants could gain a better understanding. The questions used in each focus group can be perceived as leading due to their specificity. Although this was intentional, the questions were deductive and based on previously found themes which portrayed attitudes towards body image. However, if the study had used more general and open questions, a wider range of information may have been found.

Conclusions and implications

The younger and older focus groups showed similarities in their discussion of societal influences, negative thoughts and feelings, dieting and comparisons, which all impacted their perception of body image. The participants in each focus group had a negative body image with overall body dissatisfaction. However, the contrasts do outweigh the similarities. The main motivation for dieting differed among the groups as well as the reasons for making comparisons. The main contrast was the negative impact of age on body image for the older group. The younger group focused mainly on appearance because they are yet to feel the impact of age, also discussing media and relationships as being influential to body image. The older group discussed holidays and life experiences as an influence, showing again how this contrast is a result of ageing. Only the younger group discussed positive thoughts and feelings they had on their own body image.

Overall, this study met the aims of exploring the thoughts and feelings about body image and how they influence behaviour. The aim of exploring any likeness and contrasts is shown throughout the discussion, generated through thematically analysing the data as a way of understanding the female focus groups. This piece of research has revealed unexpected findings such as health as the main motivation for younger women to change their body image, as well as positive thoughts and feelings only being discussed by the younger group, which can be explored in future research on female body image. Future applications of research could aim to increase positive body image in older women.

Reflexive analysis

This research was conducted because of the personal interest I have with the topic area. I was motivated by my own lifestyle of experiencing body dissatisfaction. This gave myself a deeper understanding of body image and was found to be useful with interpreting the themes found. I was aware of the potential impact I could have had on the focus group process. My gender was more relevant to the research topic area but may have had an impact on disclosure, the negative comparisons to other females may have been occurring during the focus group, therefore some participants may have preferred a male interviewer. The younger group may have felt at ease being a similar age to myself or they may have preferred someone older with more experience. Again, the older group may have preferred someone of a similar age and more familiar with being in an older age group. By knowing the interviewer, the participants may have felt more at ease. However, I am aware that participants may have disclosed more information if they were being interviewed by a stranger. However, I was struck by the openness of participants in both focus group. disclosing sensitive information. From my own knowledge of the topic area I expected to find certain themes, however, I was presented with unexpected ideas from the participants' own interpretations of the questions surrounding body image.

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