

**Looking age-appropriate while growing old gracefully:
A qualitative study of ageing and body image among older adults**

Glen S. Jankowski^a

Phillippa C. Diedrichs^a

Heidi Williamson^a

Gary Christopher^b

Diana Harcourt^a

Author Note

^aCentre for Appearance Research, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, United Kingdom. ^bDepartment of Psychology, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, United Kingdom. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Phillippa Diedrichs, Address: Centre for Appearance Research, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, United Kingdom, E-mail: phillippa.diedrichs@uwe.ac.uk, Phone: +44117 328 3756.

Abstract

Body dissatisfaction can be significantly detrimental to wellbeing. Little is known about older adults' body image, despite that ageing causes unique bodily changes and that sociocultural pressures to resist these changes abound. We conducted six focus groups with a UK community sample of White British and South Asian older adults aged 65-92 years. Thematic analysis highlighted four themes: appearance indicates capability and identity; physical ability trumps appearance, felt pressures to age 'gracefully' while resisting appearance changes, and gender and cultural differences. These findings suggest that older adults' body image can have important implications for their wellbeing and merits researchers' attention.

Keywords: Ageing, Appearance, Health, Body Image

Looking age-appropriate while growing old gracefully:**A qualitative study of ageing and body image among older adults**

Ageing is accompanied by significant changes to physical appearance and functionality. These may include hair loss and change of colour, weight changes, the use of dentures, hearing and mobility aids, and changes in body shape and skin elasticity. Despite these changes reflecting normal ageing processes, individuals experience them within a culture that highly values and emphasises the importance of a youthful appearance (Becker et al., 2013). Older adults often experience sociocultural pressures to conform to youthful appearance ideals.¹ These pressures can impact their body image, which is an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviours associated with their appearance and physical ability (Cash, 2002). For many, such pressures can also significantly and detrimentally impact on their psychological and physical wellbeing (e.g., by engendering depression, low self esteem, social anxiety, steroid drug abuse, disordered eating, suicide among other serious health problems; Cash, 2002; McKinley, 2006a; Rumsey, 2008).

Despite the rapid increase in ageing populations in developed and less developed countries, whereby the number of people aged 65 and above has tripled in the last 50 years (United Nations, 2013), most appearance and body image research has focused on childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Only limited research has examined the presence and nature of body image and related sociocultural pressures during mid to older adulthood. Furthermore, such research has tended to produce inconsistent findings and has overly focused on White older adult women (McKinley, 2006b; Midlarsky and Nitzburg, 2008).

Qualitative research with White women aged between 50–70 years suggests that

¹ There is no definitive rule for what age constitutes the start of older adulthood. In ageing research, however, the convention is for older adulthood to be defined as 65 years and older (Erber, 2013).

concerns regarding the effect of ageing on body image are prevalent among this sample and that felt sociocultural appearance pressures are salient (e.g., Hurd-Clarke and Griffin, 2008; Liechty, 2012). Further, these pressures are difficult to resist, as although participants are aware of the inevitability of ageing, the injustices of ageism and reverence of youthful appearance ideals, they continued to engage in behaviours that attempted to mask the physical signs of ageing (e.g., dyeing hair; Hurd-Clarke and Griffin, 2008; Muise and Desmarais, 2010). A minority of studies have found these issues are also relevant to other groups including older Black women (Reel et al., 2008) and White men (Drummond, 2003). For example, Reel and colleagues (2008) found that their African American women (aged between 60 and 74 years) were concerned with ageing appearances and used dieting, cosmetic surgery and exercise in an attempt to resist this process. Drummond (2003) reported that Australian men (aged 58-85 years) associated ageing with a decline in physical functionality, a threat to their masculinity and societal devaluation. Other qualitative research has indicated that with age some individuals become less appearance-focused and susceptible to pressures to conform to cultural appearance ideals (e.g., Hogan & Warren, 2012; Tunaley et al., 1999), highlighting that the effect of ageing on body image may be a complex and somewhat contradictory process.

Quantitative findings are also mixed. Some cross-sectional studies focusing on specific aspects of body image have shown that men's dissatisfaction with their weight (e.g., Heatherton et al., 1997; Tiggemann et al., 2007) and muscularity (e.g., Jankowski et al., 2013), and women's dissatisfaction with body fat (McKinley, 2006b), increases with age. Alternatively, other studies have found different lifespan trajectories, with some finding decreases in body image concerns with age and others finding no significant relationship between aging and body image (McKinley, 2006a; Siegel, 2010; Tiggemann et al., 2007). Research is similarly equivocal about the effect of ageing on men's and women's general

dissatisfaction with their overall appearance (Kaminski and Hayslip, 2006; McKinley, 2006b; Peat et al., 2011; Reboussin et al., 2000), levels of appearance investment (Öberg and Tornstam, 1999; Tiggemann and Lacey, 2009), and engagement in appearance-related health behaviours and intentions (e.g., disordered eating, cosmetic surgery intentions and exercise frequency; Heatherton et al., 1997; Lewis and Cachelin, 2001; McKinley, 2006a).

These varied findings may be due to methodological issues, such as inconsistency in the use of outcome measures and variability of ages sampled across the studies (Tiggemann, 2004). Further, the majority of quantitative research has compared body image differences between age groups (i.e., cohort differences) rather than the body image of older adults per se (Tiggemann, 2004). Finally, both qualitative and quantitative research in this area is limited by its focus on young White, able bodied, women of European descent, who are heterosexual and middle-class. As Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2011, p. 504) state, current research in this area has been “deficient in fully uncovering the nuances of diversity and the ways that intersectionality informs older adults’ embodied experience”. They add “there is a strong need to capture both the perceptions and the experiences of the aging body from the perspective of older men and women”. In summary, while the existing research suggests that age-related appearance changes may be salient and give rise to appearance concerns, little is known about how older adults actually experience body image in the context of an appearance orientated society and an ageing body.

The aim of this study therefore was to use a focus group methodology to explore in-depth how ageing, appearance, and sociocultural appearance pressures may influence older adults’ body image (defined here as those aged 65 years and older). An additional aim was to recruit a more diverse population of older adults than has been traditionally sampled in previous research (i.e., a sample that included men and ethnic minority groups). Because there has been limited research with older adults, and the research to date has produced mixed

findings, we selected a qualitative design so that the results would largely be driven by participants' accounts, rather than researchers' assumptions about the nature and scope of body image concerns and sociocultural appearance pressures for older adults (Frisén and Holmqvist, 2010; Liechty, 2012). Focus groups are an ideal tool for conducting exploratory research (Morgan, 1996) as they allow participants to express attitudes and opinions in their own language, thus providing data that is rich, contextual and sensitive to cultural values and trends (Kitzinger, 1994). In addition, some participants may find the social interaction within a group less daunting than a one-to-one interview, and the interaction between participants can encourage a wider range of views to be discussed (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Method

Procedure

Nine community support organisations for older adults, based in the south west of England, were approached to request permission to invite their members to take part in a focus group on body image, ageing and society. Three organisations (Age UK Bristol, LinkAge and Dhek Bhal²) granted permission for the first author to attend their local meetings to recruit older adults for this study. Subsequently, six focus groups were conducted between March and June 2012. Each focus group consisted of 4-6 participants, with four single-sex groups (two groups of males, two groups of females) and two mixed-sex groups. Ethics approval from the University of the West of England was granted for this study. Focus groups were conducted until saturation was reached, a point at which no new themes or information were apparent.

Participants

A total of 28 women and men (16 women, 12 men) aged 66-92 years ($M = 79.38$, SD

² Dhek Bhal is an organization that aims to support South Asian adults living in Bristol, UK, and the surrounding area (Dhek Bhal, 2013). The organization has several support groups targeting older South Asian adults specifically.

= 7.26) took part in the focus group discussions³. Participants identified as White British ($n = 20$; 71%) or South Asian ($n = 8$; 29%). Of the participants who reported their marital status, most identified as 'married' ($n = 13$, 61%), with fewer as 'widowed' ($n = 4$, 19%), 'single' ($n = 2$, 10%), or 'divorced' ($n = 2$, 10%). Of the participants who reported their height and weight, the average BMI was 21.06 ($SD = 11.13$) which is within the 'normal' range for adults of this age group (Vorvick, 2010).

Data collection and analysis

Four focus groups were led by the first author (a White British male in his twenties) with the remaining two were led by the third author (a White British female in her forties). Two female White British research assistants in their twenties observed the focus groups to record notes on speaker order. Each focus group discussion lasted between 50 and 63 minutes. Within each focus group, the discussions were interactive and all participants contributed freely to the discussion (i.e., responding to the moderator, as well as other participants). After participants provided written consent and demographic information, each moderator led the focus group using a semi-structured discussion schedule, derived from a review of the existing literatures on ageing, appearance and body image. Examples of questions in the schedule included "*How important is the way you look to you and/or to other people your age?*" and "*Has the way you feel about your body or your appearance ever affected your health?*". At the conclusion of each focus group discussion, the moderator summarised the main points covered and asked participants to verify that this provided an accurate summary of the discussion and if there was anything else they would like to add or clarify. Immediately after each focus group, the moderator recorded self-reflective field notes on group dynamics and key points that emerged during the discussion. The audiotapes were

³ Two participants Rebecca and Geeta did not wish to report their age.

then transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy against the original audio recording. Finally, summaries of the results were sent to the participants. Participants were also reminded that they were welcome to contact the research team should they have any feedback, which no one opted to do.

Inductive thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). More specifically, the themes were mainly derived from the data, but we acknowledged and attempted to interpret the social context within which participants are embedded. We also drew upon sociocultural theory from the body image literature to interpret the findings. Themes were identified by the first author who immersed himself in the data and systematically coded each transcript line-by-line. During this process, reflective field notes were incorporated into the analysis using N-Vivo software. In collaboration with the second and third author, the transcripts and codes were reviewed repeatedly, with particular attention paid to refining the codes. Codes were then organized into clusters of similar ideas, which were formed into four meta-themes and were agreed by all authors to best summarise the main patterns and key findings of the data.

Results

Four meta-themes were identified during data analysis that summarised how participants discussed their own body image and the appearance of other people of a similar age, related sociocultural appearances pressures and the process of ageing. These themes included 1) Appearance as a communicator of personal identity, capability and social status, 2) Health and physical ability trump appearance, 3) Sociocultural norms and pressures regarding an ageing appearance, and 4) Gender and cultural differences in body image. Each theme is outlined below, with a selection of representative quotes from participants. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Theme 1: Appearance as a communicator of personal identity, capability and social status

Appearance was important to most participants. However, putting effort in to appearance was not simply about attempting to embody cultural appearance ideals of beauty and attractiveness. Instead, participants generally sought to look clean and tidy. For example, they disapproved of “*dirty, scruffy people*” (Robert, 74), and people with “*bad teeth*” (Alfie, 75), and people who were “*grubby*” (Lynn, 73). Having a clean and tidy appearance was akin to having pride, respect and comfort with oneself, and was seen as a sign of respect for others. For some this meant clean hair and skin, for others it meant dressing formally. All participants felt that effort should be put into appearance, although how much differed markedly between participants. For instance, Robert (74) felt people should not be “*too tight to spend...money on what will make you[r] appearance look better*”. Whereas most participants had less strict standards of appearance management and felt that people should “*make the best of what [they’ve] got*” (George, 88).

Participants also described appearance as being a powerful communicator of personal identity, capability and social status to others, as well as to themselves. Investment in appearance was regarded as helpful in showing others you were functioning well socially and mentally.

“I think if a person is housebound for some reason they tend to shut off a bit, whereas if you are out meeting people you are more inclined to be interested in your appearance and how you are” (Ruth, 73)

“And is that healthy to be interested in your appearance?” (First author, 22)

“Absolutely, yes” (Ruth, 73)

Similarly, George (88) noted, “*It’s (appearance) very important. I’ve been a lot of things in life and they’ve been important things and jobs where I’ve had to look neat and tidy*”. In a

similar way, people perceived to have a high social status (including celebrities, managers, and professionals) were regarded as being more invested in their appearance compared to those with lower status jobs.

“You get somebody off the board of [directors] and he goes there to impress their boss and everything, they dye their hair, you know, have their lips [done]...even men or women. So that’s where the differences comes, it’s the status you are in life. If you’re a builder you’re a bit rough and tumbly.” (Robert, 74)

“So you think for Tom Jones, he’s high status, he’s a celebrity, so it’s fine that he dyes his hair? But for a builder it’s different?” (First author; 22)

“He don’t care” (George, 88)

“A builder can still dress up nice when he’s finished but at the same time he’s more down to earth, it’s his way of life innit [isn’t it]?” (Robert, 74).

Many participants reported that others, particularly family members, influenced the degree to which they maintained investment in their own appearance. More specifically, this influence was perceived as a motivator to maintain an ‘acceptable’ appearance: “[family members] keep you on your toes” (Sylvia, 77) and “[daughters] keep you up to scratch” (Albert, 88). Being without this influence was detrimental, as Ruth (73) commented with reference to single people, “they’ve got nobody to tell them [when they look bad]”. The importance attached to other people as regulators of participants’ appearance further demonstrated how appearance was perceived a conveyor of respectability and social status.

Theme 2: Health and physical ability trump appearance

Being healthy and physically able was described by most participants as very important – more so than appearance. The majority had experienced health problems and had tried to deal with these in a positive and optimistic manner. One respondent, Irene (71), remarked “but I don’t try to let it affect me”, when referring to a chronic pain condition.

However, others reported frustration and distress about their declining physical ability, believing that this equated to a loss in independence, well-being, and identity. As Christine (82) commented upon her recent hearing loss, *“It’s not me. I feel like I am not the [Christine] I used to be”*. The importance of maintaining physical ability rather than appearance was also evident in participants’ references to health, rather than looks, being a motivation for dieting, exercising or giving up smoking. As Imran (74) noted: *“I do short exercises or light exercises to keep fit, that’s more important than building muscles”*.

Participants accepted that a decline in health was expected with age. However, while some were fearful that this impacted on identity and ability, others considered it to be natural and not something that worried them. Some participants felt that appearance and physical ability were intertwined with well-being; *“looking good [is] feeling good”* (Gurta, 66). However, as participants experienced health problems, it became clear that more importance was placed on physical ability than appearance, even if they may have wanted to prioritise appearance. For instance Fred (82) noted that he would have worn clothes that were fashionable when he was younger, regardless of how uncomfortable they were, whereas nowadays he had to make choices, albeit reluctantly, based on comfort alone. Similarly, Geeta (age not reported) noted: *“When you’re older, no matter how much you want to wear the high heels, you can’t, because your body won’t let you”*. Thus, appearance became a *“bonus”* (Lynn, 73) rather than a priority, as for many participants deteriorating physical abilities and health simply *“[took] over”* (Amir, 73).

Theme 3: Sociocultural norms and pressures regarding an ageing appearance

Discourse around ageing and sociocultural appearance norms, ideals and pressures indicated that these older adults felt conflicting pressures to resist ageing while also needing to appear to be ageing gracefully. As Gurta (66) explained:

“When we are young we dress in such a way that we want to look glamorous and

many other things, you know? But when we're older we kind of change slightly, we tend to think that now we must give up all the things that we used to do when we were younger, because we were capable then and we would challenge. We would wear these things. We would do these things. We would challenge. Whereas when you're older you think 'ah' it's time to have a change and to conform a little bit because we're older."

Participants argued that one should “*age naturally*” (Bahir, 74), “*grow old gracefully*” (Irene, 71), “*try and look as your age should look*” (Christine, 82) and not “*try to recover [their youthful appearances which is something] they have lost*” (Robert, 74). They also reported pressures from the media and others to look appropriate for their age. As Robert (74) explained about 76 year old singer Tom Jones:

“People don't really want him to dye his hair black...Because he gets this impression he can bring back the years again, [people like him] want to go back to their youth. So when they dye their hair they're trying to recover something they've lost.”

Furthermore, participants indicated that they felt others would react negatively to older people wearing younger people's clothes, finding it funny and “*not nice...shocking*” (Gurta, 66). Sociocultural pressures to look age-appropriate were sometimes inhibitory as one participant reported: “*And it's stopped me from doing things that I would have liked to have done. Like learn to swim, I tell people it's because it's afraid of the water, it's just that's not true, it's just I don't like to see what I look like in a swimming costume*” (Sylvia, 77).

However, the expressed desires and perceived sociocultural pressures to age ‘*naturally*’ and ‘*gracefully*’ were held in tension with the perception that older people should not accept all age-related changes to their appearance or “*let themselves go*” (Karen, 92). On the contrary, people who did not take pride in their appearance by wearing “*frumpy*” (Lynn, 73) clothes, or having grey hair were described as “*age[ing] before they are old*” (Lynn, 73),

and as people who “*can't be bothered*” (Karen, 92). Again, this sentiment reflected the idea that appearance was a sign of capability.

Similarly, participants described feeling pressure from the media, including magazines and advertising, to resist the ageing process and that an ageing body was not attractive or acceptable. They described these sociocultural pressures as telling them not to “*give into the age factor*” (Rebecca, age not given), to “*not get wrinkles*” (Geeta, age not given) and not “*go grey*” (Sylvia, 77). They felt that older people are poorly represented in the media, and interpreted this as evidence that: “[TV executives] *don't seem to want them when they have wrinkles*” (Joan, 84). It was evident that these older adults simultaneously felt they were expected to resist age-related changes to their appearance, while looking appropriate for their age group.

Furthermore, participants discussed how looking older could result in being marginalised or perceived as less intellectually capable. As Joan (84) cautioned others that “*if [they] could manage without a walking stick [they should] do so*”. This was because participants felt walking sticks caused people to “*assume you [were] old*” (Lynn, 73) and made you “*miss out on a lot*” (Joyce, 91). Joan (84) and Lynn (73) reported instances when shop assistants addressed queries to their daughters instead of them because they were in wheelchairs and thought the participants were “*not all there*” (Joan, 84). Likewise, Gurta (66) liked to dress smartly and comb her hair to avoid other people “*see[ing her] in a decrepit way*”.

Some participants felt there had been an increase in sociocultural pressures, particularly on men, regarding appearance over the last few decades. As Geeta (age not given) observed, beauty products are now targeted at men: “*they've exhausted themselves on the women!*”. Many felt that younger people today are subject to greater pressures than they were at an equivalent age, quoting evidence of a growth of “*beauty parlours*” (Samir, 76),

“*exercise places*” (Bahir, 74), “[*slim*] *models*” (Lynn, 73) and “*label prestige*” (Robert, 74).

Participants also reported cultural shifts, including an increase in the sexualisation of children and materialism, where consumerism was equated with happiness.

Finally, despite the aforementioned sociocultural pressures to resist ageing and to ‘age appropriately’, many participants denied that they wanted to look younger or were dissatisfied with their ageing appearance. Instead, consistent with the idea of maintaining appearance as a sign of respectability and capability, many women argued that they dyed their hair and used make up to look “*nice*” (Geeta, age not given) and their “*best*” (Joan, 84), or simply out of “*habit*” (Lynn, 73). Only one participant admitted that she wanted to look younger and few expressed dissatisfaction with their appearance as a result of ageing. For example, Imran (74), the only male to report dissatisfaction, did not like the way he looked as he felt he had “*lost [his] appearance, [his] beauty*”. Furthermore, several women reported being dissatisfied with their weight; complaining that it was harder to lose with age. However, these women did not mention the effect of ageing on appearance as specifically distressing. Similarly, other participants described ageing-related changes to their appearance, but did not report concerns. Instead, some reported benefits of looking older, including that others “[gave] *more respect*” (Lynn, 73) and “*more help*” (Karen, 92) to older people, as well as making more “*allowances for [them]*” (Fred, 82).

Theme 4: Gender and cultural differences in body image

Some participants identified gender differences in experiences of body image, with many feeling that women were more invested in their appearance than men were. Participants thought that compared to men, women cared more about “*looking pretty*” (Fred, 82), and being “*slim*” (Alfie, 75). Participants cited socialisation as responsible for these differences: “*because that’s nature, the way they’re brought up*” (Bahir, 74).

Some participants also perceived differences between Western and non-Western cultures in the level of appearance focus. Geeta (age not given), who described her religion as Sikh, remarked that her religion discouraged her from dyeing her hair as one should “*live as God had made you*”. She felt this helped her resist sociocultural pressures that dictated one should not age:

“I think that for you, your religion makes it easy for you” (Rebecca, age not given).

“It is easier, yeah” (Geeta, age not given)

“Whereas for us, it’s hard, you, you...” (Rebecca, age not given)

“Because you’ve got the choice haven’t you?” (Geeta, age not given).

“Yeah you get these magazines saying you know: ‘oh you shouldn’t go grey until whenever’ you know? And in another magazine they’ll say: ‘go grey with pride’ and they show these ladies with all this beautiful white silver hair, you know? But religion makes it easier, as it takes away the choice” (Rebecca, age not given).

Relatedly, Gurta (66), who identified as Asian, noted how “*Asian countries*” still had “*a respect for covering yourself up*”. Other participants felt that people who lived in developing countries would not worry so much about their appearance as they had more pressing needs such as finding their next meal in comparison to people in developed countries. It should be noted, however, that although some participants identified some cultural differences with regard to appearance reverence, most felt that it was important not to stereotype as “*you can’t really speak for other people can you? You can’t say what other people feel*” (Ellen, 82).

Discussion

As the world’s population ages, it is important to understand how ageing and body image interact. This is particularly important given that ageing may uniquely influence an individual’s body image at different stages throughout their lifetime. In addition, appearance concerns often carry severe health implications including decreased general wellbeing,

disordered eating and depression (Cash, 2002; McKinley, 2006b). The small amount of existing research that has explored body image and ageing in populations above 65 years of age, has tended to produce conflicting findings, and has not included men or participants of non-White ethnicities. The aim of this research was to explore, in depth, appearance, perceived sociocultural appearance pressures, and ageing among a more diverse sample of older adults.

Our findings suggest that appearance is important to older adults and for some is regarded as a conveyor of respect, social status and capability (Theme 1). The perceived importance of looking good to others is consistent with the findings of a previous interview study on Canadian women aged 50 – 70 years old where participants strongly desired to be physically and socially visible (Hurd-Clarke and Griffin, 2008). Together, these findings suggest that older adults conceptualise the role of appearance as part of their identity that relates to social status and capabilities, and it is not simply about communicating beauty and attractiveness. Therefore, future research could benefit from adopting a more comprehensive approach towards measures and definitions of body image than those typically used with younger populations, which tend to focus exclusively on perceptions of attractiveness and cultural ideals of beauty.

Some of the participants in this study perceived physical ability to be more important than appearance, particularly in the face of declining health and abilities associated with older age (Theme 2). Decline in physical ability was perceived to be frequently accompanied by a loss of independence, well-being and identity. These concerns are echoed by previous research, which has found that men's dissatisfaction with reduced physical ability is associated with a compromised sense of traditional masculinity (Drummond, 2010, 2003). However, it should be noted that concerns regarding physical ability were not restricted to the men in this study. Our findings concur with those of Hurd-Clarke (2001, p. 447) whose

interviews with Canadian women aged 61-92 years described how women with reduced physical ability referred to their bodies as “*shells*”, “*casings*” and “*containers*”. Overall, these findings suggest that both physical function and appearance are central to older adults’ experiences of body image and should be considered in any research or intervention that aims to conceptualise, measure, improve, or address older adults’ body image.

Participants reported competing and contradictory sociocultural pressures to look appropriate for their age, while also resisting the effects of ageing on appearance. Conflicting sociocultural pressures around appearance are not limited to any particular age group. For example, in Muise and Desmarais' (2010) interviews with Canadian women, aged 19 to 73 years, the researchers noted a duality in participants’ accounts of resisting pressures to look youthful while concurrently succumbing to these pressures through anti-ageing beauty work. A similar theme was also found in Hurd-Clarke and Griffin (2008) interviews. Taken together, these findings suggest that conflicting sociocultural pressures and norms may be common and difficult to reconcile for people of all ages. Specific to the ageing adult, any desire to age with or without intervention must be balanced against the risk of defying social norms and pressures to look age-appropriate while simultaneously maintaining a youthful appearance.

As further evidence of sociocultural pressures to conform to a youthful appearance, many participants reported concerns around the stereotypes associated with looking older and the perceived capabilities of the older adult (Theme 3). More specifically, participants feared that an ageing appearance would indicate devaluation and decrepitude to others. This fear resulted in some participants engaging in appearance-management behaviours (e.g., dyeing their hair) or not using aids, such as walking sticks or wheelchairs. Richards et al. (2012) also noted that British women (aged between 77 and 96 years) reported feeling invisible, devalued and marginalised by society because of their age, as has other qualitative research

(Drummond, 2003). Societal-level intervention could therefore be beneficial in helping to address stereotypes surrounding ageing and promote acceptance of diversity of appearance at all ages, in order to avoid marginalising and demeaning older adults' bodies and abilities.

It was positive to note, however, that despite an awareness of social and cultural pressures to resist natural ageing, only a few participants reported being dissatisfied with their appearance because of the effects of ageing. Indeed, some participants reported benefits to looking older, such as being treated with respect, and receiving assistance, from other people. Likewise, participants in other research have also noted benefits of ageing, feeling less prone to pressures about appearance (Richards et al., 2012) and developing an optimistic outlook on life (Drummond, 2003). The perceived sociocultural pressure to age naturally expressed by many participants in this study, however, may explain why they reported pressures to resist ageing and yet denied that they, personally, were affected by such pressures. Alternatively, it may be that with age and experience, the participants had become resilient to such pressures, or that they were demonstrating the third person effect, whereby people see themselves as being less affected by media and sociocultural pressures than others (Davison, 1983). More research is needed with a larger sample size to determine the scope and nature of body image concerns among older adults.

Finally, participants perceived some differences in body image relating to gender, ethnicity and cultural membership (Theme 4). For instance, some felt that women were more concerned with their appearance, due to 'nature' or socialization. This perception reflects research which has shown that women tend to report greater body dissatisfaction and sociocultural appearance pressures in comparison to men (Buote et al., 2011; Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). Nonetheless, participants' accounts of body image, ageing and sociocultural pressures were also very similar across genders and cultural groups in particular with regard to the importance and meanings of appearance and physical abilities.

Implications and future research directions

This study highlights the importance of both physical functionality and appearance to older adults, and suggests that sociocultural pressures and negative stereotypes surrounding the acceptability of ageing bodies should be considered in research and practice investigating older adults' well-being and self-concept. Health and social care practitioners should be aware of the potential impact of body image-related issues amongst older adults, and seek ways to provide appropriate support where needed, such as providing a safe space for group discussions or giving appropriate training to those who support and care for older adults on issues of body image, appearance and sociocultural pressures. Furthermore, body image advocacy campaigns and interventions might usefully promote acceptance of the ageing body, in addition to their current focus on championing for more body-size diversity. The results of this study also suggest that older adults' experiences of body image and a changing appearance are indeed likely to be different to those of young and middle-age adults and this should be taken into consideration when designing body image research and interventions.

A noteworthy strength of this study was that we recruited a more culturally diverse sample of participants than is commonly seen in body image research (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko, 2011). Additionally, by adopting a qualitative-research design and an inductive-analytic process, we were able to explore older adults' views in depth, and in a way that minimises the likelihood of researchers' agendas and pre-conceived ideas shaping the nature and breadth of the findings. Nonetheless, due to the qualitative nature of the study, our sample size was small. Additionally, our findings may not generalise to other groups of older adults and they also preclude definitive conclusions about gender and cultural differences. Therefore, although study suggests a number of interesting and potentially important directions for future research, it is clear that future research with larger samples and more

diverse groups of participants is needed to further broaden the scope and quality of body image research with older adults.

Conclusion

This study explored ageing, body image and sociocultural appearance pressures among older adults, who have been largely neglected in previous research. In addition, unlike the majority of past studies in this area, the sample was not limited to White, female participants. Our qualitative research findings suggest that body image and appearance are important to older adults, regardless of generational and cultural differences that may abound. Likewise, complex and contradictory sociocultural norms and pressures surrounding ageing and appearance influence older people. As a result, further research into the experiences and support needs of older adults in relation to psychosocial health, appearance and body image is warranted.

References

- Becker, C.B., Diedrichs, P.C., Jankowski, G., Werchan, C., 2013. I'm not just fat, I'm old: Has the study of body image talk overlooked "old talk?" *The Journal of Eating Disorders* 1, 1 – 12.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, 77–101.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2013. *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage, London.
- Buote, V.M., Wilson, A.E., Strahan, E.J., Gazzola, S.B., Papps, F., 2011. Setting the bar: Divergent sociocultural norms for women's and men's ideal appearance in real-world contexts. *Body Image* 8, 322–334.
- Cash, T.F., 2002. A "negative body image": Evaluating epidemiological evidence., in: Cash, T.F., Pruzinsky, T.E. (Eds.), *Body Image: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice*. Guilford Press, New York, pp. 269–276.
- Davison, P.W., 1983. The Third-Person Effect in Communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47, 1.
- Dhek Bhal, 2013. Dhek Bhal: About us [WWW Document]. Dhek Bhal: Respite breaks, day care, self help and advocacy activities for the South Asian Community in Bristol & South Gloucestershire. URL <http://www.dhekbhal.org.uk/about-us.html> (accessed 6.25.13).
- Drummond, M., 2003. Retired men, retired bodies. *International Journal of Men's Health* 2, 183–199.
- Drummond, M., 2010. Understanding masculinities within the context of men, body image and eating disorders., in: Gough, B., Robertson, S. (Eds.), *Men, Masculinities and*

Health: Critical Perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, Basingstoke, UK, pp. 198–215.

Erber, J.T., 2013. *Aging and Older Adulthood*. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester.

Frisén, A., Holmqvist, K., 2010. What characterizes early adolescents with a positive body image? A qualitative investigation of Swedish girls and boys. *Body Image* 7, 205–212.

Heatherton, T.F., Mahamedi, F., Striepe, M., Field, A.E., Keel, P., 1997. A 10-year longitudinal study of body weight, dieting, and eating disorder symptoms. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 106, 117.

Hogan, S., Warren, L., 2012. Dealing with complexity in research processes and findings: How do older women negotiate and challenge Images of aging? *Journal of Women & Aging* 24, 329–350.

Hurd Clarke, L.H., Korotchenko, A., 2011. Aging and the Body: A Review. *Canadian Journal on Aging* 30, 495–510.

Hurd-Clarke, L., 2001. Older women's bodies and the self: The construction of identity in later life. *Canadian Review of Sociology* 38, 441–461.

Hurd-Clarke, L., Griffin, M., 2008. Visible and invisible ageing: Beauty work as a response to ageism. *Ageing & Society* 28.

Jankowski, G.S., Diedrichs, P.C., Halliwell, E., 2013. Can appearance conversations explain differences between gay and heterosexual men's body dissatisfaction? *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 15, 68–77.

Kaminski, P.L., Hayslip, B., 2006. Gender differences in body esteem among older adults. *Journal of Women and Aging* 18, 19–35.

Kitzinger, J., 1994. The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of health & illness* 16, 103–121.

- Lewis, D.M., Cachelin, F.M., 2001. Body image, body dissatisfaction, and eating attitudes in midlife and elderly women. *Eating Disorders* 9, 29–39.
- Liechty, T., 2012. “Yes, I worry about my weight ... but for the most part I’m content with my body”: Older women’s body dissatisfaction alongside contentment. *Journal of Women & Aging* 24, 70–88.
- McKinley, N.M., 2006a. Longitudinal gender differences in objectified body consciousness and weight-related attitudes and behaviors: Cultural and developmental contexts in the transition from college. *Sex Roles* 54, 159–173.
- McKinley, N.M., 2006b. The developmental and cultural contexts of objectified body consciousness: A longitudinal analysis of two cohorts of women. *Developmental Psychology* 42, 679–687.
- Midlarsky, E., Nitzburg, G., 2008. Eating disorders in middle-aged women. *The Journal of General Psychology* 135, 393–408.
- Morgan, D.L., 1996. Focus Groups. *Annual Review of Sociology* 22, 129–152.
- Muise, A., Desmarais, S., 2010. Women’s perceptions and use of “anti-aging” products. *Sex Roles* 63, 126–137.
- Öberg, P., Tornstam, L., 1999. Body images among men and women of different ages. *Ageing & Society* 19, 629–644.
- Peat, C.M., Peyerl, N.L., Ferraro, F.R., Butler, M., 2011. Age and body image in Caucasian men. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 12, 195–200.
- Reboussin, B.A., Rejeski, W.J., Martin, K.A., Callahan, K., Dunn, A.L., King, A.C., 2000. Correlates of satisfaction with body function and body appearance in middle- and older aged adults: The activity counseling trial (ACT). *Psychology and Health* 15, 239–254.

- Reel, J.J., SooHoo, S., Franklin Summerhays, J., Gill, D.L., 2008. Age before beauty: An exploration of body image in African-American and Caucasian adult women. *Journal of Gender Studies* 17, 321–330.
- Richards, N., Warren, L., Gott, M., 2012. The challenge of creating “alternative” images of ageing: Lessons from a project with older women. *Journal of Aging Studies* 26, 65–78.
- Rumsey, N., 2008. The psychology of appearance: Why health psychologists should “do looks”. *European Health Psychologist* 10, 46–50.
- Rumsey, N., Harcourt, D., 2005. *The Psychology of Appearance*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Siegel, I., 2010. Does body weight dissatisfaction change with age? A cross-sectional analysis of American women. *The New School Psychology Bulletin* 7, 42–50.
- Tiggemann, M., 2004. Body image across the adult life span: Stability and change. *Body Image* 1, 29–41.
- Tiggemann, M., Lacey, C., 2009. Shopping for clothes: Body satisfaction, appearance investment and functions of clothing female shoppers. *Body Image* 2009, 285–291.
- Tiggemann, M., Martins, Y., Kirkbride, A., 2007. Oh to be lean and muscular: Body image ideals in gay and heterosexual men. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 8, 15–24.
- Tunaley, J.R., Walsh, S., Nicolson, P., 1999. “I’m not bad for my age’: The meaning of body size and eating in the lives of older women. *Ageing and Society* 19, 741–759.
- United Nations, 2013. *World population prospects: The 2012 revision*. New York.
- Vorvick, L.J., 2010. Body Mass Index [WWW Document]. MedlinePlus: Trusted health information for you. URL <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/007196.htm> (accessed 8.28.12).

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the Department of Psychology at The University of the West of England for partially funding this study. This research was also facilitated by a fellowship awarded to the second author from the Vocational Training Charitable Trust. The authors would also like to thank Lucy Ashworth, Rachel Heyes, Lauren Rockliffe and Geeta Patel for their kind assistance with co-ordinating and transcribing the focus group discussions. We are also indebted to the community groups, who were so welcoming and engaging as research participants.

Table 1

Discussion Schedule Questions

1. Is the way you look important to you and/or to people your age?
2. Is this the same for men and women?
3. Has the way you feel about your appearance ever affected your health?
4. Do younger people worry more or less than people your age? If so, why?
5. Do you think the way they 'feel' about their appearance changes?
6. Does being 'out and about' (i.e., in society) affect how we feel about our appearance?
How?
7. Do you think this is the same everywhere in the world?
8. Do you think how your body functions/works (physical functionality) is more important
in making you feel happy than how you look?
9. Is there anything else anybody would like to add?