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Body Image and Relationship Satisfaction in Middle-Aged Women

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Body Image and Relationship Satisfaction in Middle-Aged Women

A Thesis Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Julia C. Solem

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in
Clinical Mental Health Counseling

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the connection between positive body image and relationship satisfaction with middle-aged women. Current research (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007) suggests body image and relationship satisfaction has a bidirectional influence. However, much of the current research focuses on a younger demographic, and middle-aged women are often a neglected population. This study seeks to better understand the interpersonal nature of healthy development in body image and relationships in middle-aged women. A phenomenological approach is utilized to observe the lived experiences of middle-aged women in committed relationships with positive body image. Six participants, between the ages of 36-65, were interviewed regarding positive body image and relationship satisfaction. Themes were identified within the three foci: positive body image, relationship satisfaction, and influence. The identified themes for positive body image include critical thinking, spiritual beliefs, positive relationships, function-focused, and acceptance. The identified themes for relationship satisfaction include commitment, supportive communication, enjoyment, and shared beliefs. The identified themes for influence include positive body image influences romantic relationship satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction influences positive body image. Findings suggest that the relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction is indeed cyclical. Most middle-aged women in this study saw the connection between positive body image and relationship satisfaction as integrated.

Keywords: counseling, phenomenology, body image, relationship satisfaction, interpersonal development, middle-aged women

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Body image is multidimensional in that the identified protective factors of a positive body image include physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual components (Gil, 2007; McBride, 2017). As women age, their physical bodies change such as increase in fat mass, decrease in muscle mass, and other health conditions. Many women will have body image issues follow them into adulthood from adolescence, and still, some will have a late onset of body image challenges due to stressors that occur in later life (Pruis & Janowsky, 2010). Previous studies have sought to analyze the connection between body satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, used sexual satisfaction as a mediator for relationship satisfaction, or examined the direct connection between body image and relationship satisfaction. However, the interpersonal development of body image in women is a more recent addition to the body of research (McBride, 2017). Looking at the populations studied, middle-aged women are often overlooked. This research seeks to examine the direct link between body image and romantic relationship satisfaction in middle-aged women.

Statement of the Problem

Research has identified the connection between body satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction, yet most studies are quantitative in nature and neglect the middle-aged female population. This study seeks to observe and describe the lived experiences of middle-aged women. In order to add to the current body of research, this study will use a qualitative approach for studying women with positive body image in committed relationships. This approach will assist professionals in better understanding the connection between body image and relationship satisfaction to help prevent pathology from developing.

Purpose of the Study

Body image and relationship satisfaction have previously been studied with the intention of identifying a connection between body image and relationship satisfaction, however, much of the research has been quantitative in nature and has neglected the middle-aged population. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study will investigate the connections between body satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction in middle-aged women based on individual life experiences.

Research question: How do middle-aged women with positive body image in committed relationships view the connection between relationship satisfaction and body satisfaction?

Definition of Terms

Body Image: An individual's disposition towards their body that includes perceptive, affective, and cognitive components (Peat et al., 2008).

Body Satisfaction: Positive perceptions of one's body, which are commonly associated with satisfaction of weight and/or shape, functionality, and/or embodiment (McBride et al., 2017; Peat et al., 2008).

Body Dissatisfaction: Psychological concern based on negative perceptions of one's body, commonly associated with a dissatisfaction or preoccupation of weight and/or shape (Peat et al., 2008).

Sexual Satisfaction: a multidimensional experience of enjoyment involving biological factors, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs, which may include past experiences, current expectations, and future intentions (Gil, 2007).

Romantic Relationship Satisfaction: a personal perception of the relationship, which may include a secure bond in which both partners can feel vulnerable, are aware of inner thoughts and feelings, are able to voice the desire to belong, and feel sexually satisfied (Johnson, 2008; Gottman, 1999).

Embodiment: a theoretical concept that acknowledges the importance of lived experiences of the body, which includes three components: attunement to inner states, experiential breadth, and relationship with social structures (Piran, 2016).

Physical Fitness: often used as a perceived level of fitness, which may include body mass index, physical weight and/or shape, and physical functionality (Elling, et al., 2016; Penhollow & Young, 2008; van den Brink, 2018).

Interpersonal Development: a developmental process of identity that occurs through relationships in the passing on of values, behaviors, and beliefs that influences how an individual thinks, feels, and acts (McBride, 2017).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Since humans tend to form their beliefs and perceptions through their interactions with others, could body satisfaction and relationship satisfaction be connected? A connection between body satisfaction and relationship satisfaction has been found, and they appear to influence each other. Both positive body image and relationship satisfaction have been identified as protective factors for the other (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Cairo Notari et al., 2017; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; van den Brink & Vollman, 2018), and women especially tend to not compartmentalize various aspects of the self, rather they are integrated beings (McBride, 2017; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; Penhollow et al., 2009; Young et al., 2000).

Though many women struggle with positive body image, there are still women who are satisfied and embodied (McBride et al., 2017). This research seeks to understand what contributes to the outcome of positive body image and romantic relationship satisfaction in middle-aged women. Furthermore, it is to understand the connection in the context of embodiment, identity, and attachment.

Body Satisfaction

Body Image can be defined as a multidimensional perception of the physical self that affects an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Gil, 2007). Body Image may be positive, negative, or neutral and can contribute to satisfaction with the self. To understand how positive body image is taught to young girls, McBride (2017) interviewed women with positive body image along with their mothers. McBride identified patterns within this population that contribute to an increased understanding of what constitutes a positive body image and how the mother's role can be a protective factor. McBride intentionally focuses on women with a positive body image, rather than focusing on negative body image in order to inform clinicians about

preventing pathology (disordered eating, body-shame, etc.) (McBride, 2017; McBride et al., 2017).

Body Image and Embodiment

McBride pulls heavily from the Developmental Theory of Embodiment (DTE). Embodiment may be defined as a lived experience of how an individual engages with their body in the world (Piran, 2016). McBride identifies three domains within the DTE: physical, mental, and social power. In McBride's findings, the mother's role in fostering a daughter who was embodied included: communication with their daughters about their bodies, creation of safety and connection, and an emphasis on nonappearance domains, such as sports or academics. The alternative to embodiment may include an unembodied female who succumbs to disordered eating, body shame, or struggles in social relationships (McBride et al., 2017).

Throughout the interviews, McBride identified common themes among the participants. Regardless of mother's level of embodiment, each embodied daughter engaged in quality relationships; had healthy attachment styles with parents; told the truth about themselves and had freedom of voice; found their self-worth beyond the physical self yet engaged in the physical body; were connected to brain/body emotions; had a healthy spiritual life; critically consumed media and engaged in critical thinking. Many of the patterns that McBride noted in her research were not explicitly connected to the physical body (McBride, 2017); however, it is critical to understand the connection between physical body and body image.

Body Image, Physical Fitness, and Sexual Satisfaction

Exercise has been shown to increase mood and is effective in treating mood disorders (Hearon, B., et al., 2018), so does exercise influence body image? Penhollow and Young (2008)

analyzed how an individual's level of fitness affects body image by using sexual satisfaction as a mediating factor. They found that greater levels of perceived fitness positively correlated with greater levels of sexual satisfaction. Inversely, they stated that greater levels of self-consciousness were negatively correlated with sexual satisfaction. That is, the more self-conscious an individual is, the more often they have problematic sexual encounters or avoid sexual encounters altogether (Penhollow & Young, 2008).

This poses the question: is it the functionality of exercise or a lower percentage of body fat influencing the increase in sexual satisfaction? Milhausen and colleagues (2015) utilized a body composition method to study the effect of excess body fat on sexual functioning and satisfaction. The results of this study found that for both men and women as body fat increased, sexual functioning decreased, thus decreasing sexual satisfaction. Inversely, Kolotkin and colleagues (2008) asserted in their study following individuals participating in a weight loss treatment program that moderate weight loss was significantly associated with an increase in sexual quality of life. The increase in satisfaction was not necessarily an accomplishment of thinness because Kolotkin and colleagues followed moderate weight loss. Rather, it was suggested that simply the act of losing weight separate from a specific weight or body-type goal contributed to sexual improvements (Kolotkin et al., 2008). Perhaps, the mere act of taking care of the body increases self-esteem and body image, thus increasing sexual satisfaction.

As individuals age, the focus on health and functioning becomes more apparent. The shift from appearance to function increases in importance relative to body image (Elling, et al., 2016; Laumann, et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2015). Elling and colleagues (2016) suggested that body image concerns may be replaced by body function concerns. They found that the general trend for aging women, was an improvement in body image concerns. While body function shifts into

focus more, some women still seem to be preoccupied with body image. Elling and colleagues (2016) found that women who were less satisfied with their body walked more each day suggesting that body image concern may still be a large motivator for physical activity later in life. While there are a variety of factors that contribute to body image, these findings support the idea that physical fitness, which could be the perceived level of fitness, lower weight, or physical functionality increase the likelihood of positive body image and sexual satisfaction.

Interpersonal Dimension of Body Image

Ambwani and Strauss (2007) review literature that illustrate the interpersonal dimension of women's satisfaction with their body. They utilized qualitative and quantitative methods and found both body image and relationship satisfaction to influence each other. A connection between body image and relationship satisfaction has been studied on multiple occasions (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; DeVille, et al., 2015; Cairo Notari et al., 2017; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; van den Brink & Vollman, 2018). However, there have been different approaches that have elicited different understandings of the connection. Some have found that body image is an influential predictor of relationship satisfaction. Yet others have found that the inverse is true; the security of a satisfying romantic relationship acts as a protective factor for body image, and that both positive and negative perceived evaluation from a partner influences women's body image (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007). The connection between body image and relationship satisfaction seems to be cyclical in that they influence each other. Perhaps, women are interpersonal and integrated beings thus further explaining the cyclical influence.

Identity Formation

McBride's (2017) research pointed her to uncovering the role of mothers in the development of daughter's body image. Throughout her interviews with mothers and daughters, she found that the daughter developed identity through relationship with her mother. Her mother passed on values, behaviors, and beliefs that influenced how the daughter thinks, feels, and acts in her body. McBride claims that motherly love is a protective factor for the hurt that we encounter in the world. Love and parental relationships are the foundation for women, whether that is a positive or negative experience, to form identity. It is the security that allows girls to take emotional risks and to create healthy attachment styles with their parents. These attachment styles often follow individuals into adulthood and romantic relationships (Johnson, 2017; McBride, 2017).

McBride's research (2017) supports the claim that identity formation for women happens in relationships throughout their lifetime. There are factors that happen within the bounds of a relationship and those that happen within the individual that contribute to the multidimensionality of body image. The factors that are largely reliant on relationships are quality of relationships, healthy attachment styles, and understanding of self-worth. The factors that an individual can largely control are physical fitness, physical functionality, BMI (Body Mass Index), spiritual life, brain/body emotions, critical thinking, and embodiment. However, even these individual factors rely on relationships to learn positive habits (McBride, 2017).

Attachment in Romantic Relationships

The effects of an adult not receiving support in a romantic relationship can be just as detrimental as in a parent-child relationship. Dr. Sue Johnson, the developer of Emotionally

Focused Couples Therapy, looks at couples therapy through the lens of a humanistic perspective and attachment science. Dr. Sue Johnson claims that the basic need of humans is attachment, or the ability to rely on others (Johnson, 2017). A romantic relationship satisfies the same needs that a parent does for a child: protection, nurture, and reassurance (Johnson, 2008).

Similarly, Dr. John Gottman, who is well-known for his 40 years of ground-breaking research on couples therapy, marital stability, and divorce prediction, does not ask couples to rely on communication skills, but rather focuses on a couple's ability to emotionally connect and support each other, or attachment styles as Dr. Sue Johnson refers to this skill. For example, in his book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (1999), Gottman discusses the critical skills and characteristics of satisfying relationships. One major skill that Gottman highlights are repair attempts, or any behavior or statement that deescalates a situation, silly or otherwise. Gottman refers to this skill as a "secret weapon" for emotionally intelligent couples. Repair attempts provide security and reassurance. A relationship that utilizes repair attempts leans into attachment needs (Gottman, 1999; Johnson, 2008).

Recognizing attachment needs in a relationship allows individuals to create a secure bond in which they can feel vulnerable, aware of inner thoughts and feelings, and voice the desire to belong. A couple that does not have a strong foundation of attachment may fall into two categories: demand or withdraw. This is a pattern that has surfaced throughout marriage research. Partner one demands, partner two withdraws. Avoiding intimacy while a partner is demanding creates a situation where the demands further perpetuate the withdrawal (Gottman, 1999; Johnson, 2008; Pole et al., 2004). In this situation, a woman who is withdrawing and perceiving negative evaluation from the demands contributes to more withdrawal in order to

avoid intimacy (Pole et al., 2004). This cycle is a good marker for a relationship that has lost secure attachment (Johnson, 2008).

While studying self-objectification and anxious-avoidant behaviors, DeVille and colleagues (2015) found that insecure attachment in women predicted body dissatisfaction. They concluded that women with secure attachment have greater interpersonal support and less self-objectification (DeVille et al., 2015). Through healthy relationships, an individual is able to take emotional risks, learn embodied behavior, and receive reassurance, thus contributing to positive identity formation (Gottman, 1999; Johnson, 2008; McBride, 2017; Pole et al., 2004).

Body Image and Relationship Satisfaction

To further analyze the connection between body image and relationship satisfaction in women, the following sections will have a singular focus. To begin, body image as a predictor of relationship satisfaction will be examined, followed by a discussion on relationship satisfaction as a protective factor for body image.

Body Image as a Predictor of Relationship Satisfaction

Body image can be an influential predictor of relationship satisfaction. Ambwani and Strauss (2007) found that body image influences a romantic relationship both positively and negatively. 15.6 % of women reported body image positively shaped the relationship and an additional 15.6% reported body insecurities negatively shaped the relationship. 9.1% of women claimed that their negative body image led to avoidant behaviors in relationships (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007). These findings suggest that body image, positive or negative, is potentially a predictor of relationship satisfaction for some individuals.

Penhollow and colleagues (2009) stated that sexual self-confidence was the strongest predictor of participation in sex, where sex is a mediating factor for relationship satisfaction. Additionally, a high self-esteem was positively correlated with overall sexual activity, intimate relationships, and good health in women ages fifty and over (Johnson, 1998). Inversely, Horvath and colleagues (2020) found that the more body image dissatisfaction a woman experienced, the more sexual satisfaction was diminished in the relationship. These findings echo Penhollow and Young's (2008) findings that the more self-conscious an individual is, the more problematic sexual encounters (or avoidance of sexual encounters) they are likely to experience.

van den Brink and Vollman (2018) used sexual satisfaction as a mediating factor for analyzing body image and relationship satisfaction. They concluded that positive body image was associated with greater sexual satisfaction, and increased sexual satisfaction was positively associated with perceived relationship quality from both partners (van den Brink & Vollman, 2018). Utilizing Murray and colleagues' Risk Regulation Model (2006), Meltzer and McNulty (2010) further describe the link between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. Simply put, this is explained as one's willingness to take emotional risks in the relationship. For example, a wife that has high self-esteem, feels secure in the relationship, and trusts that her husband will stay committed to her is more likely to disclose personal thoughts in the relationship. The willingness and ability to take more emotional risks leads to a higher perceived relationship satisfaction in the long-term. Meltzer and McNulty's (2010) research found that the wives' perceived sexual attractiveness was the largest contributing component to global self-esteem and thus influenced how much emotional risk she was willing to take (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010).

Considering the role that the husband's perception of attractiveness plays in the development of the wives' body image, Meltzer and McNulty (2010) also found that the wives'

perceived sexual attractiveness was positively correlated with sexual frequency, which influences sexual satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction is positively correlated with marital satisfaction (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010). Furthermore, Markey and colleagues (2004) examined the role of husbands regarding the wives' body satisfaction. Overall, wives had a greater degree of body dissatisfaction than their husbands, and the wives' perceptions of husbands' dissatisfaction was greater than their actual reported dissatisfaction. Ultimately, the more a wife believes her husband is attracted to her, the more positive body image she possesses, and the greater relationship satisfaction (Markey et al., 2004).

Similarly, Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson (1995) found that both men and women fail to accurately assess their own actual body size comparatively to their perceived ideal body. This failure contributes to the discrepancies between the actual rating and perception of their partner's rating as an ideal body (Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995). Markey and colleagues (2004) stated that it was not possible to discern if the wives were projecting their own feelings about their bodies onto their husbands and this perceived dissatisfaction was contributing to the wives' dissatisfaction. Rather, they speculated that women have in many ways formed their opinions about an ideal body and are less able to hear when husbands communicate positive messages about their body. Conversely, men may not communicate their satisfaction with their wives' bodies (Markey, et al., 2004). The synthesis of this research illustrates the complexity and interpersonal development of women's body image in relationships. The perception women have of their own bodies as well as their perception of their husband's feelings about their bodies in many ways influences the relationship both positively and negatively.

Relationship Satisfaction as a Protective Factor for Body Image

While body image may influence a relationship, relationships have been found to influence body image as well. A healthy relationship can contribute to a person's body image since it can provide positive messages, reassurance, and can connect body image perceptions to realistic expectations (Pole, et al., 2004; Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995).

Of the female participants in the research conducted by Ambwani and Strauss (2007), 61% reported that a romantic relationship contributed to an increase in self-esteem and/or body image, thus reinforcing the idea that the romantic relationship is a protective factor for the majority of women. Some women, 16.9% stated that not being in a relationship had contributed to a decrease in body image, and 18.2% claimed that the role of partner behaviors, both positive and negative influenced body image (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007). These statistics support the idea that a romantic relationship is where women often find their value, thus supporting the idea that a romantic relationship acts as a protective factor for positive body image.

Cairo Notari and colleagues (2017) studied women's body image after breast cancer and the effect of a satisfying romantic relationship during the post-surgical period and throughout the following year, a challenging time for body image. Women who reported greater relationship satisfaction, also reported less body image disturbance. Married women who reported the same level of satisfaction as unmarried, partnered women described even less body image disturbance, thus alluding to the increase of security in a married relationship (Cairo Notari et al., 2017). However, married or partnered, the women who were satisfied in their romantic relationship had less body image disturbance than women who were not satisfied in a romantic relationship.

Even among older populations when a shift in focus occurs from body image to body function, relationships can act as a protective factor for self-esteem. Penhollow and colleagues (2009) found that among active individuals in a retirement community, a healthy sex life decreased both physical and mental health issues while increasing life satisfaction. Johnson (1998) asserted that not being in a relationship was associated with lower self-esteem. Despite aging and health issues, women who were in relationships stated that they were healthy, active, interested, and satisfied (Johnson, 1998).

Conclusion

Through exploring physical, mental, emotional, sexual, spiritual, and relational factors, the multidimensionality of body image and relationship satisfaction is illustrated. There is certainly a connection between body satisfaction and relationship satisfaction but understanding the direction in which it moves may differ between individuals and situations. It reflects a cyclical process, rather than one-directional. However, the current body of research suggests that women often form their identity through relationships, and so relationship satisfaction may be a greater protective factor for body image than body image is a predictor of relationship satisfaction (Ambwani, S., & Strauss, J., 2007; McBride, 2017; Meltzer, M., & McNulty, J., 2010; Pole, M., et al., 2004). Women in committed relationships may attribute their relationship satisfaction and body satisfaction to a variety of factors but analyzing the interpersonal development of body image in women is the critical component moving forward. Utilizing this approach illustrates a more holistic picture of the individual and the relationship.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

To better understand the lived experiences of middle-aged women's body image and relationship satisfaction, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a phenomenological approach. The interviews were centered around the following list of questions:

1. What does positive body image mean to you?
2. What would you attribute to your positive body image?
3. What does (romantic) relationship satisfaction mean to you?
4. What would you attribute to your (romantic) relationship satisfaction?
5. Has your body image impacted your romantic relationship?
6. Has your romantic relationship impacted your body image?

These questions were formulated to elicit responses regarding each interviewee's lived experience with body image and romantic relationship satisfaction. Open questions assist in bracketing any former preconceptions and will instigate further conversation. The purpose of this study is to investigate the connections between body satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in middle-aged women based on individual life experiences.

Human Subject Approval - Institutional Review Board (IRB)

The study contained minimal risk, and measures were taken in order to ensure the least amount of discomfort for participants during the process. Informed consent was obtained by all participants, and they had the right to withdraw at any time. Prior to the interview, participants were fully informed of the intent, nature, and duration of the interview. Confidentiality was maintained at all times, and no concerns arose that required mandated reporting. Following the interviews, each participant was assigned a unique identification number to ensure anonymity.

All video and/or audio recordings are deleted following completion of the study. After participation, interviewees immediately received a debriefing followed by a summary of the findings within six months of the interview.

Design and Data Analysis

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach, which is to embrace a phenomenon as if it is the first time. Moustakas (1994) identified two concepts that are interconnected with a phenomenological approach; they are intentionality and intuition. Intentionality is the way in which one orients their mind or their consciousness. Intuition, on the other hand, is where knowledge of the human experience begins. Intentionality and intuition merge together to both inform the interviewer of their worldview, but also as a way of understanding the interviewee. They are gentle reminders to the interviewer to approach the research with fresh eyes. This is expounded on even further with the process of *Epoche* (Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche, a Greek word, means to refrain from judgement and is the initial step in a phenomenological approach. The typical understanding and knowledge an individual holds are set aside to view the phenomena with naïve eyes. This approach allows the interviewer to be open to new perceptions, observations, and intuitions. Utilizing a phenomenological approach will allow for an increase in awareness, understanding, and knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). To better understand the lived experiences of middle-aged females with positive body image, transcripts of the interview were created, themed, and coded.

Saldaña (2016) defines a code as a word or phrase that captures the essence, summary, or intent in qualitative inquiry. In this study, the data was collected through interviews. Once the

interviews were transcribed, each transcript was analyzed and as patterns emerged across the transcripts, themes were identified. The process of identifying themes was conducted three times to ensure accuracy. These themes or codes are often thought of as the “critical link” between the data and capturing the essence of meaning (Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness

A multitude of measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Four strategies were identified to ensure trustworthiness in this qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following section identifies the practical measures taken within each strategy to establish a trustworthy study (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

A qualitative approach measures credibility by asking “how congruent are the findings with reality?” This is practically determined by measures such as participants' willingness to participate and/or withdraw, peer debriefing, thick description, member checking, and reflective commentary. Honesty is determined by the participants' willingness to participate and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Peer Debriefing utilizes colleagues and peers within the field to confirm and challenge the accuracy of the findings. A committee review, peers, and professional colleagues were engaged throughout the process of the study to assist in bracketing of personal beliefs, consultation throughout the writing process, and confirmation of accurate findings. Thick description was applied by use of quotations to ensure the depth and detail of the findings. Member checking ensures that the findings are in fact congruent with the intention of the participant’s lived experience. Member checking includes discussions with the participants during the interview, in which the investigator utilized skills such as summary, reflection, and

restating to confirm intention. Finally, when analyzing the data, the researcher utilized a field journal to engage in reflective commentary, better understand the data, and to ensure proper bracketing of beliefs (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

The transferability of a study determines whether the results could be transferred to another population or circumstance. This is ensured through the transparency of the rationale, design, procedure, implementation, data analysis, and limitations of the study (Shenton, 2004). To understand the full scope of the study, it is vital to identify the limitations. The limitations of this study include limited number of participants, limited geographical area, shared cultural values, and utilization of self-identification methods rather than assessments to verify positive body image and relationship satisfaction. The investigator has clearly outlined the rationale, design, and procedure of this study for the use of transferability to another population or circumstance. Additionally, the investigator discusses implementation and details the process of data analysis in the following sections.

Dependability

A study is determined dependable if it could be replicated with the same context, method, and participants and comparable results are found (Shenton, 2004). The investigator was intentionally transparent with the rationale, design, procedure, implementation, and data analysis of the study as detailed previously. With the outline of this study clearly stated, there is potential for replication with comparable results.

Confirmability

The findings of this study include the lived experience and the ideas of the participants. To ensure that the findings are accurate, the investigator utilized peer debriefing, thick description, member checking, and bracketing of personal beliefs and hypotheses to share findings that reflect the true lived experiences of the participants (Shenton, 2004). To ensure that the findings are in fact congruent with the intention of the participant's lived experience, the investigator used a measure called member checking, which included summary, reflection, and restating to confirm intention with participants during the interview. The investigator utilized thick description by presenting findings in quotation-form to reduce researcher interpretation.

Participants

Six participants ages 35-65 were interviewed for this study. Participants all reside in the United States. Women with positive body image were recruited through personal and professional connections. A religious community organization contributed to enlisting participants, which may account for the fact that four out of six participants identified with the Christian faith. Participants were recruited via phone call, email, or text message. Five participants were Caucasian, and one participant was half Caucasian, half Hispanic. All six women were in heterosexual relationships. Five out of six participants were married. One participant was in a serious partnership and living together. All participants self-identified as women with positive body image and in satisfying relationships. Participant's rights were explained in detail; written and verbal consent was obtained.

Bracketing

Body dissatisfaction in middle-aged women is often thought of as a normal part of development due to aging and other related factors. However, there is a population of middle-aged women who claim to have a positive body image. The author hypothesizes that relationship satisfaction is a protective factor for body satisfaction. The author believes that women form their identity largely through relationships with parental figures, and then later on in their romantic relationships. The author believes that women who are in healthy, satisfying relationships will have an increased sense of positive body image.

Any biases were bracketed during the interview by asking open-ended questions to elicit generalized and honest responses. Furthermore, many of the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness in the study also reinforce bracketing of the investigator's biases. The investigator utilized reflective commentary in the form of a research journal, peer scrutiny, committee review, thick description, and member checking. These measures create a sense of accountability for the investigator and ensure that previously held biases were not incorporated into the research.

Procedure

Approval from the Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM) Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought and received. Upon IRB approval (Appendix A), interviewees were recruited via email, text, or phone call and screened for eligibility. Interviews were scheduled to accommodate a participant's schedule and comfort level regarding social interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted either in person or on Zoom. Before initiating the interview process, participants were presented with an informed consent form (Appendix B)

in which their rights and the premise of the study were explained. Upon receiving written and verbal consent, the interviewer collected the demographics (Appendix C) of each participant.

The interviewer structured each interview with a focus on the six primary questions regarding body image and relationship satisfaction. Interviews were intended to elicit responses regarding a phenomenological understanding of positive body image and relationship satisfaction. With informed consent, interviews were video and/or audio recorded using password-protected applications. Following the interview process, each interviewee was provided with a debriefing form (Appendix D), which included a summary of the study, contact information, and mental health resources. Each interview took an average of 60 minutes.

Utilizing the audio recordings, transcripts were created for each interview. Each participant was assigned a unique identification number and pseudonym to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Transcripts were then coded and analyzed to further understand the connection between body image and relationship satisfaction in middle-aged women and identify overarching patterns across the responses. The coding process was completed three times with each participant's transcript by identifying quotes and assigning a code word that captured the essence of their meaning (Saldaña, 2016). The codes were then compared across the participants' transcripts to identify shared experiences that resulted in the found themes. A theme was created based on the codes that were identified and appeared in a minimum of four participants' interviews. Upon completion of the study, all recordings are deleted.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Participant Profiles

To provide context and depth to the overall findings, participant profiles have been included. Pseudonyms have been assigned to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The participant profiles assist in understanding the lived experiences through a phenomenological approach. All participants self-identified positive body image and romantic relationship satisfaction. Additionally, all women are in heterosexual relationships and reside in the United States.

Carissa

Carissa is a 35-year-old Caucasian woman. She has been partnered and living together with her boyfriend for 3 years. Carissa works in the mental health field.

Joan

Joan is a 65-year-old Caucasian woman. She has been married for 35 years. Joan identifies as a Christian. She retired from the mental health field. Joan has suffered from chronic illness throughout her life.

Brandi

Brandi is a 40-year-old Caucasian woman. She has been married for 15 years. Brandi identifies as a Spiritual Humanist. Brandi works in the medical field.

Alison

Alison is a 39-year-old Caucasian woman. She has been married for 19 years. Alison identifies as a Christian. Alison works in the medical field. Alison is diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis.

Vicky

Vicky is a 59-year-old Caucasian woman. She has been married for 37 years. Vicky identifies as a Christian. Vicky is a retired teacher. Vicky has been diagnosed with multiple chronic illnesses.

Sue

Sue is a 62-year-old Caucasian-Hispanic woman. She has been married for 38 years. Sue identifies as a Christian. Sue worked in the home and homeschooled her children. Sue has suffered from chronic illness.

Findings

Based on the interviews conducted with each participant, the interviewer identified themes within the 3 foci, positive body image, relationship satisfaction, and direction of influence. The themes identified by the interview for body image include critical thinking, spiritual beliefs, positive relationships, function-focused, and acceptance. The themes identified within relationship satisfaction are commitment, supportive communication, enjoyment, and shared beliefs. The interviewer will discuss both themes within the category of influence: body image as an influence on relationship satisfaction and relationship satisfaction as an influence on body image.

Body Image Themes

Each participant was asked two questions regarding positive body image. They were asked to reflect on their life experience to answer the following questions:

- What does positive body image mean to you?
- What would you attribute to your positive body image?

The themes found for positive body image were collected from these answers. While each woman has a different life experience, five themes were found across transcripts from these questions. The five themes will be discussed in this section.

Theme 1: Critical Thinking

All six participants reflected on their experiences and ways of engaging in the world that involve critical thinking; counter-cultural thoughts, perspectives, and actions; independence; confidence; and agency. As the participants reflected on their life experiences, stories throughout their lifetimes came up and a theme emerged. These women engage in critical thinking in all areas of their life and that process appears to influence the way they view their body.

Joan reflects on her ability to think critically from a young age. Throughout her lifetime, Joan reports suffering from illness that required her to think critically about self-care. She asserts:

I had been rather sickly all my life, had tons of colds, lots of pneumonia and whatever. Fourth grade health class. I learned hair is the first line of defense against disease getting into your body. That stuck with me. I thought why would I shave hair on my legs? I'm not doing that. I didn't.

While Joan lived in a culture and in a family that expected her to shave her legs, Joan was able to focus on function and independent thought. She was not susceptible to the world's messaging. She states:

I think I dealt with the world's telling me what I'm supposed to look like, what I'm supposed to be because I'm a female, and I have fought it my whole life. Not in a not in a bad way, but in what I see as you know I don't have to do that. You get to choose.

She never took the world's messaging about female expectations as fact. She always engaged in critical thinking and decided for herself. Joan discussed many stories where she was able to observe actions and outcomes, and then decide based on observation. She describes:

I seem to have been good at seeing what's going on around me in the world and in making choices based on the evidence of what happens if I make that choice.

Even post-birth, she engaged in this type of thinking. Joan details:

I remember seeing some articles on, you know, how do you get your pre-baby body back? You go through this and that and do these exercises and go to this fitness class and out of that. Nah, you know what? This is real life. You have a baby. This happens to your body. Okay. No, I'm not going to live the half of the rest of my life trying to fight that I've got some baby fat on my belly. It'll go away.

Amid a body transition time, Joan is still able to access critical thinking and decide for herself what decisions she is going to make. The world does not decide for her. Similar to Joan, Brandi discusses her experience post-birth:

I had a birth that I wanted. I had children on my terms with my partner I kept like my body and mind intact having children. And I think that can really set a lot of women off course where it's hard to reconnect with your identity, with your sexual identity, with your physicality, with your career goals, and dreams of who you are outside of these things.

Brandi had agency with her birthing decisions and was able to critically engage with different facets of her identity without being consumed by the world's expectations. She, too, was an

independent thinker. Alison more simply is able to differentiate herself from other peers. She asserts:

I think the average woman in my age demographics is more concerned with her wrinkles and her gray hair, and I'm more concerned with can I do what I need to do today?

While Alison's MS may contribute to the focus on function, she is able to critically think about how she relates to society and other women.

Theme 2: Spiritual Beliefs

Five of the six participants identified spiritual beliefs as contributors to positive body image. Four of the five that identified this as a critical contributor, identified with the Christian faith. They explored ideas of being made in God's image, a sense of purpose and belonging, and a trust in God. Brandi, who identifies as a Spiritual Humanist noted "a trust in the body, but also like a trust in the universe."

For the participants that identified with Christianity, the focus was largely on identity. Sue reflected on the foundation of her faith in her identity. She expressed:

... knowing what and in whom your identity lies can make a big difference, and for me that means, of course, my relationship with the Lord, my Christianity that undergirds everything that I am, everything I believe, and ... in whom I find my identity.

Similarly, Vicky discussed the contentment that accompanies her faith in knowing there was a reason she was created this way. She details:

I think as a believer, knowing that you were created a specific way because that's how God made you and wanted you to be Just knowing that God created you for a certain

reason the way you are, and when you see things from that perspective, there's no mystique in who you are and how you are made ...

For Vicky, her faith influences her body image by increasing acceptance and contentment. Joan has also found her identity and purpose in her faith. She asserts:

I want to continue to see my body image based on who ... God made me to be. And am I fulfilling the plans that he has had for me ...?

Joan also emphasizes a counter-cultural message from her faith that confirms her identity and appearance. She expresses:

Jesus said I made you what you are. You don't have to listen to the world I love you. I love you if you're wearing makeup, or not wearing makeup. I love that you're very blonde I need you What I learned about myself over the years is I love variety along with choices. And so, Jesus gave me all that long before the world ever hit me. That is what has sustained me.

Joan is able to engage in her faith and her critical thinking to resist messages from the world. Her faith has “sustained” her because she is able to accept herself as an intentional creation.

Theme 3: Positive Relationships

Five of the six participants identified positive relationships (parental, familial, peer, and romantic) as contributing to positive body image. Many of the participants reflected on early life experiences when identity formation was beginning. The parental messaging and modeling were instrumental for many of these participants. Additionally, peer relationships contributed to an increased confidence and a greater positive sense of self and belonging. The influence of

romantic relationships will be discussed in depth in the following section, Influence, Romantic Relationship Satisfaction as a protective factor for Body Image.

Vicky reflected on positive messaging from adults throughout her childhood as well as peer relationships that contributed to building positive body image. She states:

I think as a little girl, I was always told how cute I was. You know, so I think early on, I developed that positive self-image. And it wasn't like in high school, I got asked out a lot. In college, I got asked a lot more. And I always felt like I was attractive, but I didn't think I was the prettiest person. So, I think just appearance and people telling me at a young age that I was attractive and pretty. And I was semi-popular in high school and college.

Being able to hear positive messages was instrumental to Vicky's sense of self. Additionally, Vicky reflected throughout her interview how peer relationships throughout her lifetime have contributed to her confidence. It is evident through this reflection that peer relationships contributed to her sense of self.

Brandi explored how her parents' messaging was helpful in forming identity from a young age. She reports:

I will always be grateful to my parents [for] being like, there aren't rules. There aren't rules about what size dancers have to be; there isn't. There aren't rules about people who are in track and field That representation was good not only for myself, but I would say even my teammates.

Brandi was able to be embodied and involved with her peers because her parents instilled in her a message of acceptance and ability. She continues to discuss how her mother in particular shaped her body image. Brandi states:

I would say with my mother ... I think I did probably get a lot of that freewheeling attribute from about body itself ... from my mother. Here's how I think it translates. I'm not afraid to go on a solo camping trip, hiking trip, pee in the woods ... any of those things that make people a little weirded out like about their body or public spaces or whatever. None of that has ever really bothered me. And so, I definitely attribute that ... to my childhood.

The messaging and modeling from her mother contributed to her positive body image and translates into independent thoughts and actions in adulthood. Joan discussed how her parents' affirmation of her personality and interests from a young age contribute to her independence, critical thinking, and positive sense of self. She reports:

... there wasn't sexism. Like okay, because you're the girl you have to do housework. It was because I was the girl that was interested in doing the outside work and being around the animals, I got to do that.

This affirmation from her parents was instrumental in her acceptance of herself and her desired roles. Carissa summed it up nicely when she said: "I think family is a huge, huge factor."

Theme 4: Function-Focused

Five of the six participants identified a focus on body function, rather than appearance as contributing to positive body image. Many of the women discussed health, disease, or illness that contributed to the necessity of this focus. Yet, others explored topics of exercise, relationships, and giving birth as ways they have focused on function. Many referred to their body as a "tool" to accomplish tasks, purpose, and to engage in relationships.

Alison understands body image through function. She reflects that MS has contributed to that view, but she also states a maintaining of that perspective throughout her lifetime. She states:

Positive body image to me means understanding what your body's for. So, for me I see it as a gift and a tool, and I use it accordingly. So, I try to take decent care of it.... I have multiple sclerosis. So, I view my body when it's working as the gift that it is.... But to backtrack that though, I've always been a bit of a unicorn, and I've always been pretty self-confident.

Alison refers to her body as a tool. Exercise is one way that she is able to use her body as she expresses here:

I see my body more as a tool. Exercise makes me more steady on my feet. It makes me feel a little bit better.

Exercise contributes to her positive body image because she is able to engage in her body. She expands on this further in other life areas. She declares:

I don't see it [my body] as a trapping for the world to attract people or whatever. I see it as a tool to get my marriage healthy and bring mutual satisfaction and closeness. Because when sex is used right, it's a beautiful thing. And I see it [my body] as a tool to go to work and help provide for my family and make sure my daughter has cracks at higher education.

Alison's view of her body is much more than appearance. It is a functioning tool that she can use to exercise, be in relationships, and work to provide for her family.

As Joan reflects on her life experience, she remembers illness plaguing her childhood. Her illness in many ways contributed to learning function and accommodation. She states:

I was a sickly kid. Okay. Lots of colds, lots of pneumonia But in order to you know, to do what I wanted to ... I would push myself. So, I've had to I think accommodate my body over the years to make it do what I want to do.

This experience of limitations due to illness has led to an increased focus on function and accommodation. Additionally, Joan reflects on how she focuses on function as she shows up in relationships. She expresses:

There is a point at which dressing attractively loses the ability for me to be focusing on others I just like clothes that I feel good in so that I can forget me and focus on ... [you] I don't want to be wearing something tight that. I don't care if I got a nice figure. I'm not trying to show that off. I'm trying to work with [you] to fulfill [your] needs because I might have something [you] need. Okay. Put on something you're comfortable with and in. Yes, it's acceptable in the setting. But get out of yourself, lady. Give what you have.

Joan desires relationships and comfort. She is able to focus on function because that assists her in showing up for others. She is not concerned with appearance because it can distract from her purpose to be in relationships.

Brandi discussed function with a focus on birth. She explored how that experience shaped her positive body image. She discusses:

Through the experience of births, because that was incredibly transformative for me to love somebody. Have sex. We have a baby. I like, you know, like all of the biological

things are unfolding and then this turns into yeah, I mean, I know it's like kind of like duh, but it was fascinating to me, and I actually took that into part of my career. And it really was, I think even my body image and my romantic relationship. I mean, the love that gets baby in is the same love that gets baby out. It's very tied to the oxytocin. The oxytocin is released during orgasm, is the same mechanism that is released when you're contracting, having contractions, and breastfeeding your baby like, oh my gosh. And I think so many times women will get disconnected from, from those things. Where just, they're not, they're so intertwined. So yeah, I think my lovely births with my beautiful babies also informed positive body image.

This focus on function around pregnancy and birth was also reflected in Joan's experience where she asserted:

I'm not so sure that my image my body image was in question that I was concerned about how I looked or how big I was getting, whatever. I was way more focused on not knowing how the labor delivery would go.

Both of these women, in different ways, were able to focus on function-related concerns or joys, rather than appearance during pregnancy and labor.

Vicky shared her experience of breast cancer and the decision of reconstruction surgery. While she focuses on function, there are additional themes of acceptance, aging, and romantic relationship validation. Vicky details:

I opted not to get reconstruction just because I had been through so much with surgery, chemo, and radiation. And, you know, at that point I was getting close to 50 and felt like the vanity wasn't there that I felt I needed to have reconstruction. I was secure enough in

my relationship with [my husband] that I knew that wasn't an issue for him. And I just had heard of women that they have to have things put into stretch out their skin and there's several surgeries involved, and it can be painful, and you can get infections. And I just thought, do I want to put myself through all that more? And I know that, you know, they can do great reconstruction. You can have the nipples tattooed on it can look very real, but. At age 50, I just didn't feel the need for that. So, if you ask me how having both breasts removed affects my self image, I would say absolutely, zero. Because to me my life and doing as much as I can to alleviate cancer returning was worth it to me.

To Vicky, a focus on function over appearance was necessary for her health and life. Vicky is able to maintain a positive body image through cancer treatment because of her focus on function, health, and life, rather than appearance.

Theme 5: Acceptance

Five of the six participants identified acceptance as vital to positive body image. This includes acceptance of function, limitations, and appearance. Some women discussed health, illness, and disease as well as faith in relation to acceptance. Some women expressed this through a level of comfortability with themselves.

As Sue reflected on her experience with illness and age-related changes, she defined positive body image through a lens of acceptance. She asserts:

Positive body image means that you are completely comfortable in your skin. That you feel confident in the way you look, what you've been given, your achievements and limitations with your body, and being able to accept changes as you get older. And or if

illness comes and there are changes having the grace to be able to accept those challenges and changes.

Reflecting on her many years of living with an eating disorder, Sue explains how acceptance presents itself practically in her life:

You get to a point where you say it's good enough. I'm good enough. I'm comfortable. My clothes feel okay. I'm not interested in obesity, but I'm also not going to tyrannize and brutalize my body into submission, like I tried to all those years ago. It's exhausting thinking about it and what a waste of time, and I can't get it back.

Similarly, Carissa reflects on a care about her body that is set in the bounds of acceptance. Neither woman is interested in unhealthiness but are able to be comfortable in their own skin. Carissa declares:

Really, it's just I feel like liking yourself, and you know being okay with the person and the skin that you're in And it's just like you, just you get to a point that I will say I don't care because obviously I do care. I just have to be okay with what I do have.

Carissa has found a place where she can still care about her body, but also accept it. Alison has reached a level of comfortability with her imperfections. She discusses:

I just think I know who and what I am, and I realized that I'm far from perfect. Like I could give you a laundry list of things that I realized are not great, but I've just kinda settled at this point in my life and being okay with them and it is what it is.

Alison's acceptance is summed up when she says, "it is what it is." She is comfortable with who she is despite her "laundry list."

Relationship Satisfaction Themes

Each participant was asked two questions regarding relationship satisfaction in their current romantic relationship. They were asked to reflect on their life experience to answer the following questions:

- What does (romantic) relationship satisfaction mean to you?
- What would you attribute to your (romantic) relationship satisfaction?

The themes found for relationship satisfaction were collected from these answers. While each woman has a different life experience, four themes were found across transcripts from these questions. The four themes will be discussed in this section.

Theme 1: Commitment

Five of the six participants identified commitment as necessary to relationship satisfaction. The participants explored ideas of physical and emotional security, effort, and permanence.

Brandi offers insight into her relationship and how commitment has contributed to satisfaction. She expresses:

So that's attractive to me to build and grow a longer-term relationship, and yeah, I mean like he just really takes care of me. I think that's romantic, and he takes care of me and knows that I don't need taking care of.... I feel so interwoven into who we are together.... There's way much more to do in this world than not know where you stand with the most important person in the world. So just that, yeah, that steadiness and stability is romantic to me.

Brandi reflects on the effort of building and growing a long-term relationship with her husband. Through commitment she feels taken care of, connected, and it provides stability for her. Vicky finds reassurance in the faithfulness of her marriage. She states:

I think just that positive feeling to know ... that we're faithful to each other. We're in this for a lifetime. We share kids and grandkids. Those are the things that are important to both of us.

The commitment to their relationship also reflects their shared values and ultimately satisfaction.

Alison comments on the permanence of marriage. The commitment in her relationship encourages communication and conflict resolution. She details:

There's also a permanence which I think weeds dissatisfaction. So, in both of our worlds, we have, in our minds, we have a covenant marriage, that's it. That's the only way you're getting out.... If you are not getting out, you're going to try a little harder because you're either going to be miserable for the next 50 years, or you're going to be happy. But either way, you're still going to be together in 50 years so, you gotta work it out. So, permanence, I think, is helpful even in the big nasty fights which we don't have a lot of, but we do have them. There's a permanence there that I think just underlays everything.

Through Alison's experience, it is evident that permanence or commitment provides physical and emotional security for conflict and resolution. Sue relates to Alison's experience. She reports:

Just committing and choosing that person again and again and again. Even when it's hard and even when it's tough because there are going to be days when you don't like that other person. There may be times when you feel a great sense of dissatisfaction or

boredom or anger and those things will come in. That's just human nature. We're sinners and so we're going to sin in our marriages and do things that make the other person unhappy.

The commitment is not about happiness, but security. Through these lived experiences, it is illustrated how security in a relationship provides satisfaction in the long-term.

Theme 2: Supportive Communication

Five of the six participants identified supportive communication as a major contributor to positive body image. This is illustrated through their discussion around open and honest communication with their partner, words of affirmation, encouragement, validation, and reassurance.

Carissa emphasizes how important words of affirmation are when she states: “I feel like the quality time and the verbal words of affirmation, those types of things are definitely more important than physical aspects.” Vicky echoed this when she discussed the positive words her husband shares with her. She states:

Him being positive, him saying words like, “you're gonna make it, you'll get through this.” That was romance to me. The positive side. Romance means nothing as far as you know, buying me things I don't need that, but I need his positive support.

Her husband’s positive support through words sustains Vicky and contributes to satisfaction.

Similarly, Sue reflected on communication with her husband as vital. She stated:

And all the things like respect, courtesy, showing gratitude, having fun together, working things out together, going to the other person with a concern, those things. That communication is just key.

Through all necessary components of satisfaction, communication stands out to Sue. Conversely, Joan reflected on supportive communication through dependability, stability, and words of affirmation. She declared:

I knew where he was at. I knew what he was thinking. He was sharing. I mean, he's sending me these cards In all of these cards they're not just fluff and stuff. They're cards saying you respect yourself; you take care of yourself, you know. He's telling me what he likes about me and that is what made me know his image or what he was seeing The relationship wasn't based on how nice I looked every time we got together.

Joan also discussed explicit communication from her husband while they were dating that contributed to trust, respect, and contributed to her positive body image and relationship satisfaction. She asserts:

[My husband's] openness and honesty with me, that really gave me the confidence that [my husband] was being truthful and honest about that he loved my body. He thought I was beautiful. He was respectful. He was very open about what he was looking forward to. And that was so helpful for me so that it built my body image.

Through supportive communication with her husband, Joan was able to trust and find satisfaction in her marriage.

Theme 3: Enjoyment

Five of the six participants identified enjoyment of and with their partner as important to relationship satisfaction. Included in this theme is quality time, growing together, and a genuine appreciation and respect for the personality of their partner.

Carissa defines romance through quality time when she states, “Romance to us is going ice fishing or doing those types of things.” She reflects on the enjoyment of her boyfriend by saying, “We spend like all of our time together.” Alison also identified a desire for quality time due to the enjoyment of her spouse. She expresses:

We're just happiest together. At the end of the day, there's nowhere we'd rather be next to each other sitting on our couch. Like we just like each other. We genuinely like each other. And we're just genuinely content to be together even in the ebbs, we're content. And I think there's a lot of value in contentedness when people chase happiness and they chase all these fleeting things, but there's value in contentedness. And I think we both realize that.

Alison discusses contentedness with her husband. This enjoyment of him and their time together contributes to relationship satisfaction. Vicky also commented on her enjoyment of her husband. She declares:

I like my husband. I like his personality.... I just really like him. I like his positive attitude. He's never negative. He never talks bad about anybody. So yeah, not only did I love him romantically and physically when we got married. But that love changes where now I just respect him so much more.

The enjoyment she experiences with her husband contributes to an increase in respect.

Relationship satisfaction is illustrated through enjoyment by these women's lived experiences.

Theme 4: Shared Beliefs

Five of the six participants identified shared beliefs including faith, spiritual beliefs, morals, values, and goals. Many of these five women asserted that a shared belief system is foundational to relationship success and satisfaction.

Brandi identified shared spiritual and moral beliefs with her husband that contribute to relationship satisfaction. She declares:

We would lean more toward Humanism, Spiritual Humanist. And so we're kind of like here now in the present for as long as we are in the present doing as best we can with the tools that we have at the time with each other, with our children, with our family, with our friends, with the society at large, and try to leave a legacy that is, that speaks those values.... I would say where we really key in is nature. So, we love the outdoors, we love swimming, we love biking, cycling. We've done things as a family to that effect.

Triathlon, swimming, biking, running, all seasons, getting outside, enjoying all of those things, and really feeling at peace and part of something larger than ourselves when we're there.

Shared beliefs and morals contribute to the legacy that they intend to leave, and these shared activities that connect them to something larger than themselves contribute to relationship satisfaction.

Sue identified their shared Christian faith as the foundation of their marriage. These shared values are incredibly important. She asserts:

And of course, you know, having that relationship with the Lord... undergirds the whole marriage. It doesn't for everybody, but for us it has.... knowing that we have that foundation in the Lord is key.

Similarly, Joan and her husband also view their shared faith as the foundation of their marriage. They rely on their relationship with Jesus Christ before they turn to each other in conflict and problem-solving. She discusses:

Both [my husband] and I believe marriage is a gift from God. And if there's challenges you know whatever is going on that are challenges. Is it first something each of us needs to look at in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Because that it took us several years to really grasp that. That is, love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and then your neighbor or your spouse as yourself. And if we get the relationship between me and my Lord, the [my husband] and his Lord, if we can get that one right, boy, a lot of the other problems between me and [my husband] fall in line.

Vicky also describes this shared Christian faith in marriage as essential. Their shared faith contributed to their views on marriage and commitment. She states:

We both love the Lord We both knew we wanted to marry Christians, and we both knew when we went into marriage it was forever So, I just think seeing things spiritually the same. And that enters into a lot of other things. How you see things politically, or how you see things as far as what you want to raise your child. You know, it's such a common denominator for so many areas. How you're going to spend your money.

Vicky explores how their spiritual beliefs are the basis for their views in other life spaces. She reflects on how their foundational spiritual beliefs influence other beliefs, values, and goals in their lives.

Influence Themes

Each participant was asked two questions to better understand the connection between positive body image and relationship satisfaction. They were asked to reflect on their life experience to answer the following questions:

- Has your body image impacted your romantic relationship?
- Has your romantic relationship impacted your body image?

The themes found for influence were collected from these answers. Each woman reflected on ways in which their body image influenced the relationship and ways in which their relationship influenced their body image. These findings will be discussed further in this section.

Theme 1: Positive Body Image Influences Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

Out of the six participants, five identified positive body image impacting their relationship through satisfaction or engagement. Participants identified emotional and physical effects due to body image. Participants reflected on their confidence, comfortability, value, and worth.

Vicky explores the connection between body image and relationship satisfaction by remembering how her positive body image as a teenager influenced her self-worth and dating standards that led to her marrying her husband. She states:

As I became a teenager, because I felt okay about myself, I felt like I was worthy to be asked out or worthy of someone that was quality. You know, I didn't set my standards low. So, I think how you feel about yourself, maybe not just in one romantic relationship, but how you feel about yourself and who you date, you end up with ... I just felt like I set my standards high because I felt like I was worthwhile.

Vicky was able to enter into relationships with a positive sense of self which contributed to her ability to engage, maintain self-worth, and set appropriate standards for a romantic relationship. Alison also discusses how self-worth, confidence, and comfortability contribute to a satisfying relationship. Alison states:

I'm not ashamed of [my body], and I don't try and hide it. Men are very, very visual creatures. They just are. So, I think he adores the fact that I'm comfortable in my own skin.... I have never once looked at him, said I look so fat. Like I've never done that, so I think he appreciates that I tried to keep myself healthy, and I think he appreciates that I'm comfortable in my own skin because then it allows him to desire me.... I think the fact that I'm comfortable in my own skin translates into being a little more forward in our relationship... Men want to be desired too, and so I think that's helpful for both of us.

For Alison and her husband, her comfortability and positive body image translate into a satisfying sexual relationship and overall relationship satisfaction. Brandi's experience illustrates the importance of positive body image for engagement in the sexual and emotional aspects of relationships. Brandi reflects on the interconnectedness of life spaces as she expresses:

If I'm just not like engaging in my self-care.... The chips begin to fall. Whether it's with intimacy, whether it's with communication, whether it's with connection, whether it's connection with the kids, or connection with [my husband] or friends or family.

If Brandi is not engaging in a self-care routine that maintains her body image, she is not able to show up intimately and authentically in all her relationships, including her marital relationship.

Theme 2: Romantic Relationship Satisfaction Influences Positive Body Image

All participants identified that their relationship satisfaction impacts their body image. Participants reflected on commitment and emotional security, the reassurance and validation that their partner provides, and the impact their partner's perception has on the view of their own body.

Vicky reflects on how her health and experiences with illness have affected her body image and how her husband provided security and reassurance in those times. She expresses:

I've had so many physical things between cancer and kidneys and stuff that I'd say more, my health has impacted my body image than my romantic relationship He knows all I've been through and what the scars mean Maybe even though, yeah, underneath this, I don't look so great. Being in a secure, romantic relationship, which in some ways is different than a sexual relationship. Yeah, because I feel loved and accepted despite how I looked underneath this. I think it does maybe affect my body image. And, you know, knowing that I decided to have a double mastectomy, knowing that my husband would still love and accept me because of the relationship we had.

The security and reassurance Vicky found in her husband's commitment and support was a protective factor for her body image in these moments of illness, disease, and throughout

surgeries. Because of the security she had in her marital relationship, she was able to maintain a positive body image. Sue also reflects on her experience of her husband's commitment and validation. Sue states:

I think that because he has been so accepting of me, I think that has helped me get to where I am now. It was a long time coming with my own personal view of myself, but that he has shown such a constant love and acceptance I do think that has helped me get where I am today. And I'm grateful for that.

Sue was able to utilize the relationship with her husband, his support and validation to inform her body image. She attributes her positive body image to her husband's support. Brandi reflects on her husband's reassurance and the effect it has on her body image and confidence in many different areas through her life. She discusses:

That kind of reassurance [from my husband] and that quality raises... my confidence at work, or my confidence [as] I strut into the gym or... caring for children.... Like if the relationship's good, other things tend to be good tend to thrive.

The relationship that Brandi has with her husband affects her confidence. If the relationship with her husband is reassuring, her other life areas "tend to thrive." Her husband has a great impact on her body image and confidence. Joan explores the impact of her husband's reassurance and his perception of her body. She asserts:

The fact that [my husband] was so positive, was so complimentary, pointed things out, really helped me learn what is romance. I can't say that I was a very romantic person previously and [my husband] really helped me grow in that area. You know, I don't know that my viewpoint of myself changed so much as what I learned was [my husband]'s

image of my body. And I learned to respond to him romantically based on his words He has built my confidence.... He has complimented me. I attribute it to the relationship that my image of myself has been positively impacted over the marriage and that, you know, I don't know that that would have happened had I not married.

Joan attributes some of her positive body image to her husband's words of reassurance and his perception. She let her husband's perception of her body inform her own body image. She was able to respond to his words and learned through the relationship how to think of herself and how to engage.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the connections between body satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in middle-aged women based on individual life experiences. Through phenomenological interviews three focuses were attended to: positive body image, relationship satisfaction, and influence. Within each focus, themes emerged across the transcripts. The identified themes for positive body image include critical thinking, spiritual beliefs, positive relationships, function-focused, and acceptance. The identified themes for relationship satisfaction include commitment, supportive communication, enjoyment, and shared beliefs. The identified themes for Influence include positive body image influences romantic relationship satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction influences positive body image.

Discussion of Findings

Findings in this study are consistent with past findings (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007) of body image and relationship satisfaction in a younger demographic. While physical intimacy and sexual satisfaction were discussed in some interviews, it was not a major theme contributing to relationship satisfaction in these middle-aged participants as some research suggested (Penhollow et al., 2009; van den Brink & Vollman, 2018). Findings in this study are consistent with previous research (Markey et al., 2004; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; Pole, et al., 2004; Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995) on emotional security, reassurance, and partner's perception and role. These themes did present influence in both body image and relationship satisfaction in this study. Findings were consistent with Johnson's research (1998) on older populations. She reported that despite aging and health issues, older women who were in relationships stated that they were interested and satisfied (Johnson, 1998). This suggests that women rely on

interpersonal development, identity formation through relationships, and that the process largely contributes to a middle-aged woman's positive body image and relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, this process of interpersonal development is discussed in Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT). RCT identifies intimate relationships as fundamental to the development of the self. Furthermore, interdependence in relationships contributes to the development of intimacy and a more complex sense of self (Frey, 2013). Lenz (2016) discussed positive sense of self as "optimal development." Through relationships that encourage authenticity, emotional connection, mutual respect, and engagement, an individual builds a healthy functioning and satisfying sense of self (Lenz, 2016). This reflects the lived experiences of the women in this study as they identified healthy interpersonal relationships as largely interconnected with positive body image.

Limitations

The limitations within this study are utilization of self-report measures for positive body image and relationship satisfaction, sample size, and participant demographics. To further enrich the results and increase efficacy, quantitative means to measure body image and satisfaction as well as a larger, more diverse sample size is necessary. The sample was rather unvaried in terms of culture, spiritual beliefs, race, sexual orientation, and geographic location. Specifically, the shared Christian faith of four participants may contribute to the spiritual themes identified. A more diverse sample could enrich the overall data as differences are observed. Additionally, studies that accounted for differences in personality or explored these questions with men might provide further context into positive body image and relationship satisfaction.

Clinical Implications

The findings in this study aim to support professionals in pathology prevention and treatment of middle-aged women with poor self-image and relationship dissatisfaction. This investigator intentionally focused on women with a positive body image to inform clinicians about preventing pathology such as disordered eating or body-shame (McBride et al., 2017). Additionally, this investigator focused on women who were satisfied in their romantic relationship to further understand the critical components of relationship satisfaction. The findings in this study suggest a cyclical connection between body image and relationship satisfaction. This may be due to the integrated nature of women. The findings in this study support an Attachment Theory lens, Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) as potentially effective modalities, but future research should focus on how that translates into treatment with women who are dissatisfied.

Conclusion

This was an exploratory study to observe the lived experiences of middle-aged women with positive body image and romantic relationship satisfaction with the intent to contribute to an increased understanding of a population that lacks significant research. Findings from this study relate to previous findings with younger demographics by Ambwani and Strauss (2007) that body image and relationship satisfaction have bidirectional influence. Each participant was able to identify ways in which body image and relationship satisfaction influenced each other. It was identified that most women saw the connection between positive body image and relationship satisfaction as cyclical or integrated. These women identified as integrated beings in that life spaces are often interconnected, rather than compartmentalized. Body image affects many areas of their life, including their romantic relationship. Their romantic relationship satisfaction

influences their body image, positive sense of self, and how they engage in other relationships and roles. While some positive sense of self may be innate, these findings suggest that identity formation for women occurs largely through relationships, thus supporting the idea of interpersonal development and cementing the connection between positive body image and relationship satisfaction.

While studying women with positive body image and relationship satisfaction can be useful to understand a realistic goal and potential connection, it may also be helpful to better understand middle-aged women with negative body image or relationship dissatisfaction. Future research should focus on identifying a larger number of participants, more diverse demographics, and how the counseling field can better address body image and relationship satisfaction concerns. Since this exploratory study was conducted to identify middle-aged women's lived experiences, further research should be conducted to identify whether there is a causal relationship between body image and relationship satisfaction within this population.

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval**Institutional Review Board**

DATE: November 15, 2021

TO: Taryn Akgul, Principal Investigator
Julia Solem, Co-investigator

FROM: Dr. Robert Nava, Chair Minnesota State University Moorhead

IRB ACTION: APPROVED

PROJECT TITLE: [1836025-1] Body Image and Relationship Satisfaction in Middle-Aged Women

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

APPROVAL DATE: November 15, 2021

EXPIRATION DATE:

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Exempt Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB.

This project has been determined to be a project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Minnesota State University Moorhead's records.

Generated on IRBNet

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Body Image and Relationship Satisfaction in Middle-Aged Women Counseling Department, Minnesota State University Moorhead

Purpose of the study: This study seeks to understand connection between body image and relationship satisfaction in middle-aged women.

What you will do in this study: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to answer several questions related to your perceptions of your body image and relationship satisfaction. A debriefing session will be held immediately following the interview. These interviews will be carried out either via in-person meetings, Zoom, or telephone.

Time required: Approximately 60 minutes

Audio Recordings: Each interview will be audio recorded for the subsequent generation of transcriptions. All recordings will be deleted upon completion of the study.

Risks: The personal nature of this interview may cause discomfort. If discomfort does occur, you have the right to skip questions or withdraw participation from this study.

Benefits: This study is designed to further our knowledge of how body image and relationship satisfaction affect each other in middle-aged women. Findings in this study could provide context for addressing body image and relationship issues within the counseling field.

Confidentiality: The responses in this study are being collected for research purposes only. Records of your responses will be transcribed and secured in a password-protected file and will only be made available to researchers directly involved in this study. Transcriptions are coded anonymously, and you will not be personally identified in any report or publication resulting from this study.

Participation and Withdrawal: Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue your participation at any time without prejudice.

Contact: Please feel free to ask questions now or at any time during the study. If you have any additional questions about the experiment, you can contact Julia Solem at 701-740-5121 or julia.solem@go.mnstate.edu or Taryn Akgul, EdD, MEd, BA at 218-477-2297 or taryn.akgul@mnstate.edu.

Whom to contact about your rights in this experiment: You may contact Lisa Karch, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board at lisa.karch@mnstate.edu or (218) 477-2699.

Agreement: The purpose and nature of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty.

Audio and Video recordings: By signing this form, you agree to be audio and/or video recorded. All recordings will be safely secured to protect your identity and right to confidentiality. These recordings will never be linked to any individual and will be destroyed following the completion of this study.

In signing this agreement, I also affirm that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Upon your request, you will be provided with a copy of the signed consent form.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix C: Demographic Information Form

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your gender? _____
3. What is your race? _____
4. What is your relationship status? _____
5. Are you currently employed? _____
 - a. If yes, what is your occupation? _____

Appendix D: Debriefing Form

Debriefing for Body Image and Relationship Satisfaction in Middle-Aged Women Counseling Department, Minnesota State University Moorhead

Summary of Study:

Some connection has been previously established between body image and relationship satisfaction. Through the use of these interviews, this study will investigate the connections between body satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in middle-aged women based on individual life experiences.

Whom to contact for more information:

Please feel free to ask questions now or at any time during the study. If you have any additional questions about the experiment, you can contact Julia Solem at 701-740-5121 or julia.solem@go.mnstate.edu or Taryn Akgul, EdD, MEd, BA at 218-477-2297 or taryn.ahgul@mnstate.edu.

Whom to contact about your rights in this experiment:

You may contact Lisa Karch, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board at lisa.karch@mnstate.edu or (218) 477-2699.

If you feel that you have experienced adverse consequences from this study:

Adverse consequences are not expected, but if concerns arise as a result of participation in this study, please contact the FirstLink 24-hour help line 2-1-1 or 701-235-7335 (SEEK).

If you are interested in learning more about the connections of body image and relationship satisfaction, you may want to consult:

- Ambwani, S., & Strauss, J. (2007). Love Thyself Before Loving Others? A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Gender Differences in Body Image and Romantic Love. *Sex Roles*, 56(1), 13–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9143-7>
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- van den Brink, V. (2018). Relationships Between Body Image, Sexual Satisfaction, and Relationship Quality in Romantic Couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 32(4), 466–474. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000407>

Thank you for your participation!