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**BODY IMAGE AND LEISURE AMONG OLDER WOMEN**

A Dissertation in  
Leisure Studies

by

Toni Liechty

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The dissertation of Toni Liechty was reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Careen M. Yarnal  
Assistant Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management  
Dissertation Adviser  
Chair of Committee

Deborah L. Kerstetter  
Associate Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

Andrew J. Mowen  
Associate Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

Patricia B. Koch  
Professor of Biobehavioral Health

John Dattilo  
Department Head, Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

\*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

Body image is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing an individual's attitudes, evaluations, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body. For American women, body image plays an integral role in everyday life, including leisure. For younger women and girls, poor body image is related to lower levels of participation and decreased enjoyment in leisure activities.

Understanding of the association between body image and leisure, however, is extremely limited and researchers have not yet addressed older women. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation was to explore the role of body image in the leisure of older women. This dissertation is comprised of two article manuscripts.

Adopting a life course perspective the first manuscript focuses on older women's perceptions of body image. Findings focus on the events and life factors that shape body image, trajectories of body image across the life course, and adaptive strategies for maintaining or improving body image. Participants reported that body image was largely shaped by interpersonal interactions and by society as well as by numerous physical changes such as pregnancy and menopause. Participants also depicted various adaptive strategies that allowed them to maintain or improve body image with age including de-prioritizing appearance and focusing on controllable aspects of their appearance.

Older women's experiences of body image in their leisure activities are addressed in the second manuscript. Participants describe body image as both a facilitator and a constraint. Many also described positive feelings about their appearance as facilitating their participation in social or visible leisure activities. Furthermore, participants illustrated that their body image focus has shifted from concerns about appearance toward concerns about health and physical ability. This cognitive change led to shifts in the role of body image in their leisure. Finally, several

participants explained that they would not participate in activities that involved wearing a bathing suit due to concerns about appearance.

Overall, the findings of this dissertation suggest that age or the aging process plays a role in older women's priorities and perceptions of body image. Changing attitudes influence the role of body image in leisure by shifting focus away from appearance toward health and physical ability. This study contributes to the body image literature by focusing on older women, a typically overlooked population, and by investigating the association between older women's body image and leisure, a topic not previously addressed. Additionally, this study extends leisure and aging literature by exploring the role of body image in the everyday leisure lives of older women. By so doing, this study fills conceptual gaps and extends understanding of leisure theory. Further research is needed to understand the process by which cognitive changes occur related to body image and to investigate possibilities for incorporating the adaptive strategies of older women into programs and interventions for younger populations.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, researchers have devoted much attention to exploring issues regarding body image and its effects, particularly on women (Cash, 2004; Tiggemann, 2004). Body image is a broad concept that refers to a person's attitudes toward and evaluations of his or her body including size, shape, and appearance as a whole or of various physical attributes. It is generally accepted that a person's body image, although relatively stable from day to day, can change or develop throughout the life course because of experiences, situations, or sociocultural influences (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Unfortunately, the majority of women in the United States have an overall negative body image, meaning that they have a less than satisfactory self-evaluation of their overall appearance, generally characterized by the desire to be thinner (Cash & Henry, 1995; Grogan, 2006; Rodin, 1993).

The vast majority of existing body image research has focused on adolescent to college-aged women (Clarke, 2002; Hurd, 2000; Tunaley, Walsh, & Nicolson, 1999). Recent literature, however, has suggested that older women are as conscious of their external appearance as younger women (Ferraro et al., 2008; Fey-Yensan, McCormick, & English, 2002; Nichter, 2000). In a longitudinal study, Rodin, Silberstein, and Streigel-Moore (1985) found that the second largest personal issue for older women (after memory loss) was changing body weight, while older men expressed no weight concerns. Furthermore, similar to younger populations, older women are generally dissatisfied with their weight and body shape and are preoccupied with dieting and weight loss (Allaz, Bernstein, Rouget, Archinard, & Morabia, 1998; Clarke, 2002; Tiggemann, 2004). The research that has addressed older women's body image, however, suggests that their attitudes about their bodies and the outcomes of poor body image are different than younger women and girls (Ferraro et al., 2008).

While a great deal of past body image research has focused on eating disorders as the undesirable outcome of poor body image (e.g., Horne, Van Vactor, & Emerson, 1991; Rosen, 1996; Thompson, Coover, Richards, Johnson, & Cattarin, 1995), more recent research is beginning to address some of the less obvious outcomes of poor body image such as anxiety in day-to-day interaction, and constraints to leisure participation (Cash, 2004; Frederick & Shaw, 1995). The impact of body image on everyday activities is influenced by the fact that women's bodies (more so than men's) tend to be considered aesthetic or sexual objects, and women with poor body image tend to place a great deal of significance on the way that their appearance is viewed by others (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001; Wolf, 1991). This concern with creating a particular impression on others, can cause dread of public settings (Goffman, 1967; Scott, 2005), and can inhibit participation in leisure activities that occur in social settings (James, 2000; Rosen, Srebnik, Saltzberg, & Wendt, 1991).

Some researchers have suggested that by causing anxiety about public appearance, body image constitutes a constraint to leisure for women (Grogan, 2006; Henderson, Stalnaker, & Taylor, 1988). For example, James (1998) found that adolescent girls reported feeling self-conscious in public places such as school basketball courts and public swimming pools, and stated that girls would spend more time in these public places if boys were not present. Furthermore, James's (1998; 2000) findings suggested that body image played a major role in participants' feelings of self-consciousness and reduced participation in leisure activities.

Poor body image can also affect the quality of the leisure experience (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006). Frederick and Shaw (1995), for example, found that women who regularly attended aerobics classes experienced body image related constraints in regard to the quality of their leisure experience. Participants experienced reduced enjoyment due to feelings of

competition in terms of appearance. Furthermore, for these women “body image-related concerns were a major motivating factor exerting pressure on subjects to participate in aerobics” (p. 57). Rather than a more typical constraint to participation, Frederick and Shaw argued that body image concerns actually constrained these women by limiting their choices of leisure activities to those that would cause weight loss, rather than to those which would provide the highest quality leisure experience.

Current literature suggests that body image represents a leisure constraint for adolescents (James, 2000) and younger women (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Liechty et al., 2006). To date, however, no research has explored whether body image poses a constraint to leisure for older women; and, if there are constraints for older women, how they are experienced. Researchers in both the body image and leisure fields have largely ignored older women (Clarke, 2002; Ferraro et al., 2008; Gibson, 2006; Yarnal, 2006). Thus, the aim of the current study was to explore the role of body image in the leisure of older women. As there is virtually no research on body image and leisure among older women, a qualitative approach was ideal to facilitate depth and richness in the data and to allow the data to guide the research (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## Literature Review

### *Older Women and Body Image*

While a few researchers have begun to focus on body image for older women (e.g., Banister, 1999; Clarke, 2002; Ferraro et al., 2008), the overall picture is incomplete, with many issues still unclear. Using meta-analysis, Tiggemann (2004) concluded that, in general, women’s overall level of body satisfaction remains relatively stable across the life course. This, however, provides only a fraction of the picture in understanding the body image of older women. Body image is a multi-dimensional construct that is shaped by a myriad of factors, and can be

experienced in numerous ways. For instance, level of overall body dissatisfaction alone cannot definitively predict a specific outcome such as development of an eating disorder. Many important aspects of body image interact to influence the relationship, such as an individual's beliefs about the importance of appearance, socio-cultural buffers (e.g. strong social network, cultural identity), and exposure to certain types of media (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Paquette & Raine, 2004). One such factor that shapes body image, and which has received relatively little attention, is aging.

As women age, many social, environmental, and physical factors change in terms of their impact on body image and their influence on body image related outcomes (Tiggemann, 2004). It is therefore inappropriate to assume that knowledge concerning body image of younger populations is applicable to older women (Peat, Peyerl, & Muehlenkamp, 2008). For example, poor body image is often related to dramatic negative outcomes such as disordered eating, excessive exercise, or appearance anxiety for younger women and girls. Although research has found similar levels of overall body dissatisfaction among older women and younger women, dramatic negative outcomes are much less common among older women (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). Research suggests that one reason for the difference in outcomes among younger and older women is that perceptions about the importance of appearance decrease with age (Ferraro et al., 2008; Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990; Thompson et al., 1998). So, although older women on average may be less satisfied with their appearance (i.e., their actual body shape is further from their ideal), the effects of such dissatisfaction are different from that of younger women because they are less concerned with appearance in general.

Another unique aspect of older women's body image is the high degree of complexity and variation within the population of older women. For instance, Wilcox (1997) found that for women who engaged in exercise, body satisfaction was positively related to age, while for women

who did not engage in exercise, the relationship was negative. Furthermore, research has suggested that as women age there is a divergence in the degree to which identity is based on appearance. For some women, feelings of beauty are inextricably linked to self-identity while others do not relate appearance to their identity and are much less concerned by age-related bodily changes (Whitbourne & Collins, 1998).

Furthermore, the aging process presents a unique challenge to body image, particularly for women who rely heavily on appearance to define their identity (Chrisler & Ghiz, 1993; Ferraro et al., 2008). Society places great value on beauty and generally defines beauty as being young and thin (Wolf, 1991). Kjaersgaard (2005) captures the role of the media in perpetuating such a “beauty culture”:

After a hard day’s work, a middle-aged woman settles down for an evening of prime-time television. Sitcoms and dramas alike sport slim young actors, often wearing sexy outfits...Commercials promise that ‘priceless youth’ is affordable through special cosmetics or workout machines and encourage women to ‘fight aging every step of the way.’ Other ads offer medicines to help older people with aches and pains feel young and alive again. After an evening of television, the woman goes to bed feeling depressed (p. 200).

American society, particularly as presented through the media, endorses the adage that one is only as old as he or she feels, while routinely “airbrushing” (Chrisler & Ghiz, 1993, p. 68) signs of aging from magazine images of older women (Wolf, 1991). “Given the fact that beauty is equated with youthfulness and thinness in our society, older women face unique challenges as they strive to construct and maintain positive evaluations of self” (Hurd, 2000, p.77).

Finally, with age, women encounter unique physical situations such as menopause (Rostosky & Travis, 2000) and declining health (Clarke, 2001), which are likely to impact body image. Menopause represents a physical and emotional change and many women do not have access to information and social support that would help them cope more successfully with physical changes (Koch & Mansfield, 2004). Declining health may also be a concern if accompanied by physical reminders of age such as hearing aids, canes, and surgical scars (Chrisler & Ghiz, 1993). These physical changes may be difficult to embrace because of the socio-cultural emphasis on youth and beauty.

Another reason for lack of clarity in the literature of older women's body image, along with the overall paucity of research regarding older women's body image, is incomplete or inappropriate measurement and instrumentation. Some studies focus on body image generally, some look at body dissatisfaction while others target attitudes about appearance, and still others focus on dieting or weight loss behaviors. While these concepts are closely related and some are even used interchangeably in literature, the differences between these constructs and their corresponding measures may lead to incomparable or misleading results. For example, if an instrument developed to measure the salient aspects of body image for younger women was used to measure body image for older women, the results may not be valid because the instrument is not measuring body image as it is experienced in their lives.

In addition, conceptual and methodological problems are particularly pronounced when studying older women because most instruments, methods, and conceptual perspectives for studying body image were developed based on research with younger women (e.g. Rosen, Srebnik, Saltzberg, & Wendt, 1991; Thompson & Gray, 1995). For example, body image is often narrowed to body dissatisfaction and operationalized as the difference between a woman's ideal

and current body size. This measure may be accurate for younger women because research suggests that body weight and shape are the most salient aspects of body image (Thompson, 2002). For older women, however, to accurately describe body image, researchers must account for a wider range of factors including, but not limited to attitudes about appearance, perceptions of health, and evaluations of skin texture. In short, there is a lack of clarity about what body image means to older women or how it is conceptualized by this population.

Because of current instrumentation and conceptual limitations, older women's body image is best explored by implementing a qualitative approach, which allows the data analysis and subsequent conclusions to be grounded in participants' own words (Holmes, Pelican, & Vanden Heede, 2005). Tunaley et al. (1999) found that using qualitative methods allowed them to give a voice to the participants regarding the "complexity of contradictory meanings" that the body has for older women (p. 741). Furthermore, Pelican et al. (2005) argue that using a qualitative approach allows researchers to interpret the participants' accounts of the meaning of body image within the context of their prior experiences, beliefs, social environment, and other aspects of their lives. Using qualitative methods can allow for better understanding of the body image related issues faced by older women from their perspectives and within the context of their unique circumstances.

### *Body Image and Leisure*

Some researchers have begun to explore the role of body image in leisure (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; James, 1998). For example, body image has been identified as a potential constraint to women's leisure (Henderson, Stalnaker, & Taylor, 1988). According to Jackson (2005), leisure constraints are factors that limit formation of leisure preferences, hinder participation, and reduce enjoyment in leisure. Some examples of common leisure constraints include lack of resources,

lack of companions with whom to recreate, and lack of confidence in one's ability. Leisure constraints fall into three broad categories – structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal, depending on whether the constraint originates with the environment, other people, or within the individual (Crawford and Godbey, 1987).

Researchers have also acknowledged that leisure constraints do not necessarily lead to non-participation (Kay & Jackson, 1991; Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991). Some constraints may result in reduced, adapted, or less enjoyable participation. For example, a hiker who is constrained by fear for personal safety might hike only on highly used trails or may continue to hike preferred, less used trails, but with constant anxiety (and thus diminished enjoyment). At other times, constraints may result in continued or increased participation, when an external factor dictates leisure choices (Frederick & Shaw, 1995). For example, a daughter may dislike social outings, but attend because of parental pressure to participate.

Body image represents a constraint that may affect leisure in nontraditional ways (Frederick & Shaw, 1995). Particularly in activities that are somewhat body-focused such as swimming and aerobics, constraints can be experienced as self-consciousness and lack of enjoyment (James, 2000). For example, James (2000) found that for adolescent girls at public swimming pools, not only was participation reduced due to body image, enjoyment of the experience was also compromised due to feeling the “critical gaze of others” (p. 274). Anxiety about appearance can constrain social leisure activities through habitual body monitoring, in which a woman feels anxiety about how others view her appearance and regularly takes measures to maintain her appearance such as adjusting clothing or applying makeup (Tiggemann, 2004). Body image can further result in constraint by influencing individuals to



participate in specific activities (e.g., running or aerobics) as a means of weight loss rather than enjoyment of the activity (Liechty et al., 2006).

While body image may lead to leisure constraints for some women, others may develop strategies for negotiating constraints. Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey (1993) proposed that participation in leisure (and I would add enjoyment of leisure experiences) is not dependent only on the absence of constraints, but often on negotiation through them. Some people may modify or substitute activities to negotiate constraints. Furthermore, as individuals experience successful negotiation of constraints, they are less likely to perceive the existence of constraints in the future. Hubbard and Mannell (2001) suggested that the negative impact of constraints is offset by the positive effects of negotiation strategies, and Son, Kerstetter, and Mowen (2008), found that age and gender were also influential factors in the constraints negotiation process. These researchers suggest that those who develop strategies for negotiating leisure constraints may experience fewer negative outcomes. It also highlights the importance of understanding factors (such as age and gender) that play a role in the development of negotiation strategies.

In terms of body image-related leisure constraints, almost no research has explored the prevalence of negotiation or specific strategies for negotiation. Although the purpose of the study did not include identifying negotiation strategies, James (2000) found that adolescent girls employed numerous tactics to accommodate their poor body image in order to swim at public pools. For example, many reported wearing clothing over their bathing suits to hide their bodies, relegating their swimming to less visible areas, or modifying their behavior (such as reducing laughter or playfulness) in order not to call attention to themselves. It is interesting to note that for this population, negotiation strategies were behavioral rather than cognitive. In other words, rather than cognitively attempting to accept their own appearance or reduce embarrassment

regarding their bodies, they changed their behavior in order to accommodate their existing feelings or the external situation. Considering that older women have different perceptions as to the importance of appearance (Ferraro et al., 2008; Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990), their strategies for negotiating body image related constraints may be different.

Although no research has looked specifically at the role of body image in the leisure of older women, literature has suggested that they have unique perspectives about the meaning of leisure in their lives and that they face unique leisure constraints (Gibson, Ashton-Schaeffer, Green, & Corbin, 2002; Wearing & Wearing, 1996). For example, Gibson, Ashton-Schaeffer, Green, and Autry (2003/2004), found that older women, rather than defining leisure by types of activities, associated leisure with either spending time with loved ones or finding solitude in individual interests. Some of the unique leisure constraints faced by older women include living on a fixed income, care-giving responsibilities (for grandchildren or elderly parents), deteriorating health, lack of companionship (often after the death of a spouse), and concern for personal safety (Wilhite, Sheldon, & Jekubovich-Fenton, 1994).

Despite the evidence that leisure is attributed different meaning by older women and that they face unique leisure constraints, the existing literature exploring the leisure experiences of this population is extremely limited (McGuire, 2000; Yarnal, 2006). Additionally, research exploring leisure and aging has not yet included body image as a variable. Studying body image-related leisure constraints among older women is particularly valuable for the leisure literature because of their ability to discuss leisure constraint and negotiation experiences at different life stages.

#### *Life Course Perspective*

Researchers in many disciplines (e.g., psychology, gerontology, sociology) have stressed the importance of considering the interaction of historical events and personal life events, and the

effects of such experiences on subsequent outcomes for individuals (Elder, 1994; 2000). In other words, studying participants within the framework of their overall life stories can improve understanding about their behaviors and attitudes (Elder & Johnson, 2003). These stories are shaped by their individual life experiences and the ways in which they perceive and respond to life events (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Context shapes a great deal of self-identity and self-understanding (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Dittman-Kohli, 2005). Grob, Krings, and Bangerter (2001) have suggested that adopting a perspective which incorporates the entire life course can provide valuable insight into the historical context, feelings of generational identity, life markers, and other factors that shape the lives of older adults.

The life course perspective is one of the leading theoretical orientations for understanding patterns of behavior, attitudes, and individual characteristics as they unfold across the life course (Elder, 1995; 2003; Wethington, 2005). According to Bengtson, Burgess, and Parrott (1997), “the life course perspective attempts to bridge the macro- and micro- levels of social-structural analyses by incorporating the effects of history, social structure, and individual meaning into theoretical and analytic models” (p. S80). The life course perspective provides a framework for researchers to study participants as complex individuals and to understand their current psychological or biological status within the context of their sociocultural environment and personal history (Freysinger, 1990; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001).

The life course perspective can be advantageous in aging research for many reasons. First, the approach is applicable across disciplines and highlights the commonalities of seemingly incongruent approaches (such as those used in sociology, psychology, history, etc.) to aging research (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Second, the life course perspective is inherently dynamic; rather than dividing the life course into sections, it focuses on reflecting the life cycle

as a whole, allowing for variation in patterns and characteristics (Dannefer & Sell, 1988).

Finally, because the life course perspective applies both to the study of individuals and the study of groups, it aids researchers in the transition of knowledge about the individual to understanding of the group and vice versa (Wethington, 2005).

In a recent article, Wethington (2005) organized into seven conceptual areas the categories of information that research generally highlights when adopting a life course perspective. The first concept is trajectories, which refers to stable patterns that develop across time. Secondly, she discusses transitions, which are changes in social roles or responsibilities, such as divorce, birth of a child, or a change in career. Third, Wethington describes turning points, which are “events or externalities that shape the process of adaptation or change” (p. 116). Fourth, the life course perspective helps researchers to understand the influence of cultural and contextual influences such as ethnicity or historical contexts (i.e., The Great Depression). The fifth category is timing in lives. This concept refers to the interaction between age or life stage and the timing of an event or transition. Examples might include age at time of marriage or age at the birth of a child. Wethington refers to the sixth category as linked lives, saying that the life course perspective can help researchers to understand the influence of one person (i.e. parents or a spouse) on the development of another. Finally, Wethington asserts that this perspective underscores adaptive strategies or “conscious decisions” (p. 117) that people make to improve their adaptation to change throughout their lives.

Researchers argue that adopting a life course perspective is key to understanding body image (McLaren & Wardle, 2002) as well as to understanding recreation and leisure behavior (Osgood, 1982). According to Freysinger (1990), a life course approach provides an important vehicle for understanding the factors that influence recreation and the ways that recreation

influences “development, lifestyle, and well-being” (p. 48). Finally, a life course perspective was especially applicable in the current study, as it offered a framework for understanding the perception of and changes in body weight and other physical characteristics (Devine, Bove, & Olson, 2000), which often play an important role in body image.

### Research Purpose and Questions

The scant research focusing on older women’s body image, and the lack of research focusing on its relationship with leisure leaves many questions unanswered. Given the unique body image attitudes of older women and the limited understanding of the role of body image in their lives, it is important to study this population separate from other age groups. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the role of body image in older women’s leisure using a life course perspective. For the purpose of this study, older women delimited to those between the ages of 60 and 70 to target those who are post-menopausal, but less likely than their older counterparts to be experiencing debilitating declines in health (Baltes, & Smith, 2003; Bedford & Johnson, 2006). Based on gaps within the current literature, several research questions guided data collection. The guiding research questions were separated into two main areas: body image and body image and leisure participation.

#### *Body Image*

1. How do older women perceive their current body image?
2. How do older women feel about the importance of appearance in general?
3. What life events, experiences, and factors have shaped older women’s body image?
4. Do older women perceive that their body image has changed over their lives? If yes, how?

### *Body Image and Leisure*

1. What role, if any, does body image play in the leisure of older women?
2. If body image does play a role in older women's leisure, what aspects of the leisure activity are associated with body image (e.g. public spaces, teasing)?
3. If body image does play a role in older women's leisure, what aspects of body image are related to their leisure choices (e.g., concern for appearance, body functioning)?
4. What role, if any, has body image played in their leisure throughout their lives or at different life stages?

### *Research Design and Methods*

#### *Qualitative Methods*

A qualitative approach was best suited for addressing the research questions of this study because it allowed for inductive development of understanding and theory rather than reasoning deductively from a priori assumptions (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). The goal of this study was to build understanding grounded in the “voices” of the participants (Banister, 1999). For example, past research has suggested that body image represents a leisure constraint for younger women, but this finding has not been extrapolated to an older population of women. Rather than to deductively test whether or not body image poses a similar leisure constraint among a new population, qualitative methods allowed for development of a more complex picture of the participants' experiences without being limited by an assumption that may or may not be accurate (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Setting aside assumptions and preconceived notions can be particularly important in aging research (Gubrium & Sankar, 1994). To that end, I conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with older women because they elicited biographical narrative of the participants'

perceptions of their experiences and the meanings they associate with those experiences (Warren & Karner, 2005). Narrative also helped to provide a life course context within which to interpret the data (Grob, Krings, & Bangerter, 2001).

### *Sample*

I attempted to recruit participants through distributing fliers at local retirement communities and the local community senior center and through snowball sampling. The fliers were largely unproductive as only one participant (Shayna, 60) responded to a flier. I recruited the bulk of the participants through snowball sampling, a technique in which current participants recruit additional participants and through third parties known to both myself and the participant (Clarke, 2002; Freeman, Palmer, & Baker, 2006). At the end of each interview, I asked the participant if she knew of other women in the community within the delimited age range who would be willing to participate in the study. This request led to several participants being recruited through snowball sampling. For example, Marta (62) was recruited through a third party. Marta, in turn recruited Linda (60), who recruited Rosalyn (60), who recruited Kristy (61). Isabelle (61) was also recruited by a third party. Isabelle recruited Paula (61), who then recruited Angela (69). Body image researchers have recommended snowball sampling because it provides a connection with participants (i.e., the referring individual) to more quickly build rapport and because it improves access to potential interviewees within the target population (Banister, 1999; Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Griffin, 2007).

I delimited the sample to women aged 60 to 70 to reduce the likelihood of confounding factors such as menopause (a confounding factor in younger categories) or overwhelming health concerns (a confounding factor in older categories) (Baltes, & Smith, 2003; Bedford & Johnson, 2006). Participants' ages ranged from 60 to 69, with a mean of 62.4. Participants in the sample

were all Caucasian, and 10 of the 13 were born in the U.S. Seven reported being currently married (one for the second time), five were currently divorced (one for the second time), and one was living with a female domestic partner. Participants' education levels were diverse: three participants reported high school as their highest level of education; two had finished high school and additional vocational training; two had undergraduate degrees; and two had an undergraduate degree plus some graduate work; one participant had a master's degree; and three had doctoral degrees. Participants also reported a range of income brackets, ranging from \$20,000-\$30,000 to more than \$100,000, with a median of \$50,000-\$60,000. Eight were retired; four were employed full time, and one was employed part time.

#### *Preliminary Data Gathering*

Prior to initiation of data collection, I discussed the research topics and potential interview questions with a convenience sample of older women (n=6) to gather preliminary data for improving the question structure, wording, and sequencing. Participants in the sample critiqued the questions for clarity and language. For example, all women indicated that during initial questioning, the word "appearance" was preferable to the word "body" because it seemed less threatening or intimidating, and less leading in terms of what aspects of body image they considered to be important. Participants explained that with age they felt increasingly concerned with hands, skin, hair, and other features that they felt the word "body" didn't adequately encompass. The women did feel, however, that use of the word "body" was acceptable in follow up questions, particularly if they initiated conversation of body functioning or other aspects of body image beyond weight. Similarly, participants expressed slightly different interpretations of the term body image and agreed that a discussion of the definition of this term was useful to



ensure that participants were “all on the same page” and to facilitate discussion of a broad range of body image issues.

Additionally, participants suggested that questions regarding leisure felt neutral and should be asked prior to questions related to body image to initiate conversation. It is interesting to note, however, that after an initial discussion of the interview questions and introductory discussion, all the women talked openly about body image-related issues and their feelings about appearance with little encouragement. I also critiqued interview questions in terms of their ability to elicit rich data about the desired topics. I modified question wording and sequencing throughout this data gathering process until I achieved an optimal interview protocol as determined by myself, fellow researchers, and the sample of older women.

#### *Data Collection*

I collected data through individual in-depth interviews with 13 participants followed by two focus groups in order to explore in-depth the experiences of body image and leisure for older women (Banister, 1999; Gibson et al., 2003/2004; Straus & Corbin, 1998). Five of the participants were unable to attend the scheduled focus groups. Two women explained that they would feel “too shy” or uncomfortable in such a setting, one had conflicting caretaking responsibilities for an elderly mother, and two were unable to attend due to work-related time constraints. In order to allow these participants the opportunity to respond to the focus group questions and to agree or disagree with the responses of the others, I conducted a follow up telephone interview with each of them.

*Phase one.* I collected the first round of data through 13 individual interviews. The interview protocol followed the principles of the biographical-narrative method, which attempts to elicit stories about participants’ lives as well as their interpretation of the meaning of such

stories (Rosenthal, 1993; 2003). The four principles of this method include: using only open-ended questions, focusing on eliciting stories, avoiding asking the question “why” and structuring follow-up questions using the sequencing and language of the respondents (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). The developers of this method also stress the importance of attentively listening in order to facilitate the emergence of narrative, without inserting interpretations, judgments, or biases (Schutze, 1992).

Eliciting narrative allowed the participant to approach topics that she felt were important, to use the language that she felt most comfortable with, and to express thoughts and feelings through choice of language (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Furthermore, designing questions to elicit narrative was particularly important in understanding both leisure and body image and how they are shaped by life events (Paquette & Raine, 2004; Pelican et al., 2005; Wilhite et al., 1994). For this particular study, as participants related stories and experiences, they also communicated feelings as to the importance of appearance and their definition of body image through the topics they chose to dwell on. Furthermore, in the telling of a story, the narrator takes responsibility for making the relevance of the story clear (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). Therefore, by conveying biographical narrative, each participant was able to emphasize the meaning she assigned the story, thus reducing the potential for interpretation error.

Following the format and process of researchers who utilized the biographical-narrative method (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; Rosenthal, 2003; Wengraf, 2001), as well as researchers who have successfully elicited rich narrative regarding body image (Pelican et al., 2005) and older women’s leisure (Gibson et al., 2002; Wilhite et al., 1994), I used the topical and theoretical subjects of the current study to develop an interview protocol. Each interview began with neutral discussion to “break the ice” and to obtain background information about each

participant. Then questions addressed the topics of the study's guiding research questions. Probing questions followed each of the main questions based on the participant's response (see Appendix 1 for full interview protocol).

Individual interviews took place at the participant's home, office, or in a meeting room on the university campus at the preference of the participant. At the conclusion of each interview, I invited the participant to attend a follow up focus group. All agreed except one participant who expressed concern that she would feel uncomfortable discussing body image in a group setting. I transcribed and open coded throughout the data collection process using the constant comparison method to better inform additional interviews and the focus group questions (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 1993; Patton, 2002). I recruited participants and conducted interviews until after 10 interviews, no new responses emerged. I conducted three additional interviews to ensure theoretical saturation (Henderson, 2006; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

*Phase two.* At the conclusion of the individual interviews, we conducted two focus groups on campus with lunch and, in some cases, transportation provided. Each focus group consisted of four participants. The size of the focus groups was determined based on the recommendations of Ritchie and Lewis (2003), who suggest keeping numbers smaller when participants are likely to have a lot to contribute, and when depth of input from each participant is a high priority. Furthermore, considering the sensitivity of the issue being discussed, participants often speak more openly in a smaller group (Patton, 2002). Focus groups allowed the participants to discuss topics having had time to reflect on the initial interview with the addition of social interaction to initiate advanced discussion. The process of conducting individual interviews followed by focus groups provided rich description as well as more accurately interpretable data.

The focus group questions were based on the analysis of the interview data and addressed topics that needed additional clarification and topics that had emerged from the interviews (see Appendix 2 for full focus group protocol). For example, in the individual interviews when asked about influences that had shaped body image, several participants briefly mentioned society at large, but did not expand on how, why, or the type of influence. Therefore, in the focus groups, I specifically asked participants to discuss the role of society in their body image. Another interesting topic that I had not considered prior to the interviews was the role of clothing. During the interviews, however, many participants mentioned the important and changing role of clothing in their body image. Therefore, during the focus groups, I asked participants to discuss the influence of clothing in body image.

The follow up focus groups allowed for discussion and sharing of stories which elicited more depth from the participants and allowed those who had not previously commented on a particular perspective to agree or disagree (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). It was common for a participant in the focus groups to express a contrasting opinion or experience, which suggests that group pressure did not inhibit the truthfulness of responses. Furthermore, the focus groups allowed researchers to ask clarifying questions based on the analysis of the individual interviews and to check for accuracy of interpretation of the interview data (Clarke & Griffin, 2007). Two researchers were present at each focus group, allowing for one to moderate and the other to take notes (Henderson, 2006; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Both researchers were female as recommended by Pelican et al. (2005). Furthermore, the researchers represented different age groups. This provided strength to the process as participants seemed to regard the researcher closer to their age as someone in their cohort with whom they could relate and talk openly. To me, the younger researcher, however, they described some experiences more explicitly to explain

details that they recognized someone in a different age cohort might not understand. The researchers met after each focus group to debrief regarding the discussion, potential interpretations, and possible connections to theory.

### *Ethical Concerns*

Throughout the course of this study, I made every effort to protect the interests of participants and to comply with the requirements of The Pennsylvania State University Office of Research Protections. I obtained approval from The Pennsylvania State University Internal Review Board prior to beginning the study (see Appendix 3 for acceptance letter). Prior to collection of data, I informed participants that their cooperation was strictly voluntary and that they were free to end their participation at any time. I also asked each participant to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix 4) before the interview and again before the focus group. I gave each participant a copy of the informed consent form for her records. I preserved confidentiality of the data by keeping all transcripts on a password protected computer and through the use of pseudonyms in all published materials.

### *Data Analysis*

I recorded interviews and focus groups using digital recorders and transcribed the resulting data verbatim. I organized the data using the qualitative analysis software NVivo<sup>®</sup> version 7.0. Because I collected data in three forms (individual interviews, focus groups, and telephone follow up interviews), I analyzed the data sequentially to determine if the different sources of data could be combined (Banister, 1999; Maxwell, 1993). I open coded the individual interview transcripts initially, and then coded the focus group and follow up telephone interview transcripts using the same codes (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Because open coding of the second set of

transcripts only added one new code and did not change the nature of the open codes, the different forms of data were grouped into one database (Morgan, 1997; Pelican et al., 2005).

I coded all transcripts in a constant comparison method to improve credibility of the study through a systematic analysis of the data (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Holton, 2004). Based on the constant comparison process, I followed four steps (Henderson, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first step was to reduce the data using line-by-line open coding to reveal the themes that emerged from the data. The second step was to use axial coding to look for possible relationships between open codes and thereby create concepts and categories. The third step was to define and refine the categories or themes, to look for disconfirming evidence, and to find diversity in the data. The final step was to select examples from the data to display how the themes were generated. Throughout the data collection and analysis process I used memoeing to generate ideas about possible new codes, relationships between codes, disconfirming evidence, and the properties of and diversity within different codes (Freeman, Palmer, & Baker, 2006; Henderson, 2006).

### *Trustworthiness*

I established trustworthiness and rigor in data collection by meeting the criteria of transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility (Henderson, 2006). I addressed transferability, or external validity through theoretical sampling, by eliciting thick description, and by developing a systematic narrative of the findings utilizing both emic (participant's perspective) and etic (researcher's perspective) statements (Freeman, Palmer, & Baker, 2006; Maxwell, 1993). I achieved dependability, or reliability, by triangulation of methods (through using both in-depth interviews and focus groups), by taking notes throughout data collection process, and by recording memos during data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). In order to address confirmability, it

is important to acknowledge potential bias created by the personal perspective of the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As a researcher I “position” myself as a 28 year old, white, American, female.

Despite awareness of researchers’ pre-existing positions, no researcher can be entirely objective (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Therefore to improve confirmability of this study, I engaged in debriefing with other researchers throughout the data collection and analysis to benefit from multiple perspectives (Henderson, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, during data analysis, I searched the data to identify disconfirming evidence. Finally, I established credibility, or internal validity, by use of the constant comparison method, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and member checking (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Henderson, 2006). I conducted member checks during the focus groups and by sending each participant a preliminary version of each manuscript and asking for verification that she was being accurately represented (Freeman et al., 2006).

### *Limitations*

As with all research, the proposed study has inherent limitations. This sample was limited by the demographics of the population including gender, age, ethnicity, income, education, and geographic place of residence. Many demographic variables play an important role in both body image and leisure. While limiting these variables had benefits for the study, doing so limits understanding of the complexity they add to the phenomenon. This limitation is acceptable, however, because the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize, but to provide a foundational research for building theory. A further limitation to the study is the fact that it involves recall data. I acknowledge that such recall data is indicative of the participant’s current memories of life experiences and may not necessarily be accurate representations of past events.

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**APPENDIX A: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself
  - a. Prompts: career, family, interests
2. What kinds of things do you like to do in your free time?
  - a. Prompts: things you do at home, involvement with groups/organizations, places you go to recreate
3. Can you tell me about the free time/leisure activities you've participated in throughout your life?
  - a. Prompts: What kinds of activities were you involved in as a child/adolescent/adult? Have your leisure choices been different at different times in your life?
4. Now we're going to transition to a slightly different topic. When you hear the term "body image" what comes to your mind?
  - a. Prompts: Do you think of appearance, how your body functions, etc? Discuss the fact that the term "body image" encompasses all attitudes and evaluations of the body.
5. What body parts or aspects of appearance do you think most influence body image for women?
  - a. Prompts: What things are of most import to you? What things do you think about the most (positively or negatively)? Has this changed throughout your life?
6. How important do you think that appearance is in your life?
  - a. Prompts: Do you ever feel that you would be happier if you looked different? Were there any times in your life that you felt differently about your body image than you do now?
7. How would you describe your current body image?
  - a. Prompts: Were there any times in your life that you felt differently than you do now?
8. Please take a little bit of time to think about some of the experiences you've had that have influenced your body image. These might be during childhood or as an adult – the things that shaped your body image, whether positively or negatively. I'd like you to select at least one of these experiences and tell me about it in detail.
  - a. Prompts: Can you tell me about any (other) times in your life that you feel influenced the way you feel about your appearance or your body? Do you feel that these experiences affect the way you feel now? If so, how?
9. We talked a little bit before about the leisure activities that you are involved in during your free time and the things that you have participated in at different times in your life. Do you think that your body image plays any role in the activities you choose to participate in during your free time? If yes, how?

- a. Prompt: Are there any activities that you choose not to participate in or participate in less because of concern about your appearance or your body? What aspects of your body image affected your leisure choices (e.g., appearance, functioning)? What about the leisure activity(ies) made body image a concern?
10. Can you tell me about the role, if any, that your body image has played in the leisure activities you've chosen throughout your life?
- a. Prompt: Were there times when your choices were affected differently than they are now?
11. Do you think that your body image plays any role in how much you enjoy the leisure activities you participate in? If yes, how?
- a. Prompt: Are there any activities that you participate in that you would enjoy more if you did not have concerns about your body? What aspects of your body image affected your leisure experiences (e.g., appearance, functioning)? What about the leisure activity(ies) made body image a concern?
12. Can you tell me about the role, if any, that your body image has played in your enjoyment of the leisure activities you've participated in throughout your life?
- a. Prompt: Were there times when your choices were affected differently than they are now?
13. Please again, take some time to think about some of the leisure activities that you have participated in throughout your life and the experiences that you feel may have shaped your leisure choices. These experiences may have taken place at any time in your life. I'd like you to select at least one of these experiences and tell me about it in detail.
- a. Prompt: What events may have shaped how you experienced those activities (in terms of enjoyment)? How do you feel about your appearance or your body image during your leisure activities? Were there times when your experiences were different?
14. Do you have any other comments about any of the things we've talked about?

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status \_\_\_\_\_

Education \_\_\_\_\_

Income bracket \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you very much for your time and opinions!

**APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

## FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Thank everyone for coming; remind them that the goal of the study is to understand body image and leisure; stress that everyone's thoughts are important and that we want to hear each person's thoughts about each topic. They should feel free to agree or disagree with anything that might come up. Introductions: *Will each of you take about 2 minutes to introduce yourself to the group? Please tell us about the things you like to do in your free time.*

\*\*\* From now on, please feel free to jump in and share your opinion at any time \*\*\*

15. Introduction to body image: take out the page with the body image figures and try it out, explain how it is used to measure body image. *What do you think of this instrument? What kinds of things does this bring to mind?*
16. Influence of others on body image: *In each of the interviews, we talked about the things that shape body image. One thing that came up a lot was the influence of family members (parents, siblings, and children). What role do you think your family members played in shaping your body image? Is the influence different from that of others (non-family)?*
17. Influence of society on body image: *Another thing that a lot of you mentioned was the influence of society. What role do you think society plays in shaping your body image?*
18. Clothing: *Several of you mentioned clothing and fashion in connection with body image. What role do you think clothing plays in your body image?*
  - a. *What is it about clothing that influences the way you feel? Is the role of clothing different than that of make up or hair styling*
19. Changing body image at this life stage: *Some of you have indicated that your body image or the way you think about your body has changed in your 50s and 60s. Is this true? If yes, how?*
  - a. *Are teenagers different than you were at that age or have you changed over the years? Can you think of key stages in your life that influenced your body image?*

- b. *Some of you have said that you are happy with who you are or care more about health now than when you were younger. Does this play a role in your change in body image?*
20. *Changing leisure at this life stage: Some of you have also indicated that your leisure habits have changed in your 50s and 60s. Is this true? If so, how?*
- a. *If yes, what factors do you think have influenced changes? Did you (are you now) prepare in advance for retirement?*
21. *Role of body image in leisure: During the interviews, some of you said that body image affected your decision to participate in activities. For example, because you don't want to wear a bathing suit, you chose not to swim. Others said that a positive body image gives you the freedom to enjoy leisure activities. Can you think of a time when you felt that body image played a role in your leisure? As you think of these times, please select one to share with the group.*
- a. *What kind of role does body image generally plays in your leisure today?*
22. *Role of leisure in body image: Some of you indicated that your leisure activities played a role in your body image. For example, participating in sports made you feel better or worse about your athletic ability; or spending your leisure time shopping or learning about fashion made you feel better or worse about your appearance in social settings. Do you feel that your leisure activities play any role in your body image? If yes, how?*
23. *Wrapping up question: Re-emphasize the purpose of the study, Considering all the things that we have discussed today, would you turn over your sheet of paper and write a couple of sentences that you feel summarize the role your body image plays in your leisure today?*
24. *Do you have any other comments about any of the things we've talked about? Or anything you think we have missed?*

Thank you very much for sharing your time and opinions!!!



**APPENDIX C: IRB ACCEPTANCE LETTER**

## IRB ACCEPTANCE LETTER

Hi Toni,

The Office for Research Protections (ORP) has reviewed the above-referenced study and determined it to be exempt from IRB review. You may begin your research. This study qualifies under the following category(ies):

**Category 2:** Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observations of public behavior unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human participants can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the participants; **and** (ii) any disclosure of the human participants' responses outside the research could reasonably place the participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the participants' financial standing, employability, or reputation. [45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)]

### **PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING:**

- Include your IRB number in any correspondence to the ORP.
- The principal investigator is responsible for determining and adhering to additional requirements established by any outside sponsors/funding sources.

### **Record Keeping**

- The principal investigator is expected to maintain the original signed informed consent forms, if applicable, along with the research records for at least three (3) years after termination of the study.
- This will be the only correspondence you will receive from our office regarding this modification determination.
- **MAINTAIN A COPY OF THIS EMAIL FOR YOUR RECORDS.**

### **Consent Document(s)**

- The exempt consent form(s) will no longer be stamped with the approval/expiration dates.
- The most recent consent form(s) that you sent in for review is the one that you are expected to use.

### **Follow-Up**

- The Office for Research Protections will contact you in three (3) years to inquire if this study will be on-going.

- If the study is completed within the three year period, the principal investigator may complete and submit a **Project Close-Out Report**.  
(<http://www.research.psu.edu/orp/areas/humans/applications/closeout.rtf>)

### **Revisions/Modifications**

- Any changes or modifications to the study must be submitted to the Office for Research Protections on the *Modification Request Form - Exemption* available on our website:
  - <http://www.research.psu.edu/orp/areas/humans/applications/modrequest.rtf>
- **Modifications will not be accepted unless the Modification Request Form is included with the submission.**

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Andrea

Andrea R. Seisler, MBE  
Compliance Coordinator  
Office for Research Protections  
The Pennsylvania State University  
201 Kern Graduate Building  
University Park, PA16802  
Telephone: 814-865-1775  
Fax: 814-863-8699  
<http://www.research.psu.edu/orp/>

**APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORMS**

## INFORMED CONSENT FORMS



Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research  
The Pennsylvania State University

**Title of Project:** Body Image and Leisure among Older Women

**Principal Investigator:** Toni Liechty, M.S.  
814 Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
(814) 867-1766; [txl223@psu.edu](mailto:txl223@psu.edu)

**Advisor:** Careen Yarnal, Ph.D.  
812 Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
(814) 867-1751; [cmy122@psu.edu](mailto:cmy122@psu.edu)

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to explore the issues of body image and leisure in the lives of older women.
2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to answer in your own words approximately 15 questions relating to 8 topics related to your experiences with body image and leisure activities. The interview will be audio recorded.
3. **Duration:** It will take about 45 to 60 minutes to answer the questions.
4. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The recordings will be stored and secured at 814 Ford Building in a password-protected file in a locked office, which is accessible only by the primary investigator. The recordings will be retained for three years after the completion of the study and then destroyed. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.
5. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Toni Liechty the principle investigator at (814) 876-1766 or [txl223@psu.edu](mailto:txl223@psu.edu).
6. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **give** my permission to be **AUDIO** taped.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **do not give** my permission to be **AUDIO** taped.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **give** my permission for portions of this interview to be directly quoted in publications/presentations.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **do not give** my permission for portions of this interview to be directly quoted in publications/presentations.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research  
The Pennsylvania State University

**Title of Project:** Body Image and Leisure among Older Women

**Principal Investigator:** Toni Liechty, M.S.  
814 Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
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**Advisor:** Careen Yarnal, Ph.D.  
812 Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
(814) 867-1751; [cmy122@psu.edu](mailto:cmy122@psu.edu)

7. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to explore the issues of body image and leisure in the lives of older women.
8. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to discuss approximately 8 questions relating to your experiences with body image and leisure activities in a group of four to six women. The focus group discussion will be audio recorded.
9. **Duration:** It will take about one to two hours to discuss your responses to the questions.
10. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The recordings will be stored and secured at 814 Ford Building in a password-protected file in a locked office, which is accessible only by the primary investigator. The recordings will be retained for three years after the completion of the study and then destroyed. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. If you speak about the contents of the focus group outside the group, it is expected that you will not tell others what individual participants said.
11. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Toni Liechty the principle investigator at (814) 876-1766 or [txl223@psu.edu](mailto:txl223@psu.edu).
12. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **give** my permission to be **AUDIO** taped.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **do not give** my permission to be **AUDIO** taped.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **give** my permission for portions of this interview to be directly quoted in publications/presentations.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **do not give** my permission for portions of this interview to be directly quoted in publications/presentations.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## ORIENTATION TO CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 is written as an independent manuscript. This manuscript is intended for submission to the peer-reviewed journal *Ageing and Society* and is therefore formatted to the specifications of the journal. The role of Chapter 2 in the dissertation is to address the following research questions:

1. How do older women perceive their current body image?
2. How do older women feel about the importance of appearance?
3. How do they perceive their body image has changed over their lives?
4. What life events, experiences, and factors have shaped their body image?

## CHAPTER 2: OLDER WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE: A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

### Older women's body image: A life course perspective

TONI LIECHTY\* and CAREEN YARNAL\*

\* Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, The Pennsylvania State University

#### **Abstract**

Body image research has traditionally focused on younger women and girls, ignoring women in later life. Recent literature, however, has called for more research into the body image of older women, specifically from a life course perspective. A life course perspective addresses the complexity of body image by identifying personal and/or environmental factors that shape body image and the trajectories of body image across the life course. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore older women's body image using a life course perspective. We conducted individual interviews and follow up focus groups with 13 women aged 60 to 69. The findings highlighted the influence of interpersonal relationships and the larger society on participants' body image. In addition, the findings extended understanding about body image across the life course by demonstrating that as women age they develop adaptive strategies for improving their body image or reducing negative outcomes. These strategies include de-prioritizing appearance in favour of health or internal characteristics, and focusing on aspects of appearance that can be controlled. Finally, while many of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with one or more aspects of their bodies, the findings highlight the improvement of body image attitudes and the complexity of body image as a construct.

**KEY WORDS – body image, older women, life course perspective, qualitative methods**

Running head: Older women's body image

## **Introduction**

Body image is a complex, multidimensional construct that plays an important role in the lives of women (Cash 2004). Body image research, however, has traditionally focused on body dissatisfaction, only one aspect of body image (Grogan 2008). Thompson (2002) argues that this limited conceptualization of body image is a result of the disproportionate amount of research conducted with adolescent and college-aged populations. For younger women and girls, body dissatisfaction, generally related to body weight and size, is often the most salient component of body image. Whitbourne and Skultety (2002) suggest, however, that for older women functional issues such as health and physical ability are generally the most salient components of body image. Recent literature has therefore called for the study of older women in order to broaden the conceptualization of body image and to highlight a more comprehensive range of factors that influence body image (Hurd 2000; Ferraro et al. 2008; Peat Peyerl and Muehlenkamp 2008).

To understand the complexity of body image as experienced by ageing women, a useful tool for framing research is the life course perspective (McLaren and Wardle 2002). Adopting a life course perspective can improve understanding of body image by considering the influence of personal life events, historical changes, and the individual's perception and response to such experiences (Elder 2003; Staudinger and Bluck 2001). While the life course perspective has been suggested as a valuable approach to understanding body image (Thompson 2002), research adopting it is scarce in the current literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the body image of older women by adopting a life course perspective. We utilized a qualitative approach to allow the perceptions, experiences, and life stories of the participants to emerge in their own words.

## **Literature review**

Conceptually, the term body image “encompasses any affective, cognitive, and perceptual beliefs individuals hold about their bodies” (McLaren and Wardle 2002: 177). Although body image is by definition a multidimensional and value-free construct, the bulk of research has focused on a sub-construct called body dissatisfaction, which refers to a person's level of dissatisfaction with his or her current weight, shape, and general appearance (Grogan 2008). The tendency of researchers to focus on

dissatisfaction happens in part because body image research emerged as a sub-field of eating disorder research and has generally been aimed at understanding adolescent girls (Thompson 2002). In the adolescent female population, satisfaction with body weight was often the most salient component of body image, meaning it is most predictive of dramatic negative outcomes such as disordered eating, excessive exercise and abuse of diet pills (Peat et al. 2008).

Because of the focus on body dissatisfaction among younger populations, there is little understanding of the factors that contribute to body image for older women, the role of the ageing process in body image, and the fluctuation in or continuity of body image across the life course. For example, recent studies have produced mixed results regarding overall body satisfaction. Mangweth-Matzek et al. (2006) suggested that body satisfaction declines with age, Webster and Tiggemann (2003) claimed it is invariant with age, and Feingold and Mazzella (1998) found improvement with age. Tiggemann and Lynch (2001: 243) argue that body image research among older women is needed to “clarify the processes involved in the changes in body image that occur with age.”

### *Body image and ageing*

As women age, they experience social, environmental and physical changes that play a role in the way they perceive their bodies (Tiggemann 2004). Further, older women experience body image issues differently than younger women (Whitbourne and Skultety 2002). Specifically, appearance is a less important priority and older women are less likely to experience negative body image-related outcomes (Peat et al. 2008; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett 1990; Tiggemann 2004). For example, in a cross-sectional study of women aged 20 to 65, Webster and Tiggemann (2003) found that with age, body dissatisfaction was less predictive of low self esteem and argued that reduced prioritization of physical appearance serves as a protective buffer against negative outcomes such as poor self esteem and disordered eating for older women.

Literature also suggests that not only do body image perceptions change with age, but that the ageing process itself represents an important influence of body image (Chrisler and Ghiz 1993). Western society places great value on beauty and generally equates beauty with youth and thinness (Ferraro et al.

2008; Wolf 2002). Additionally, women in western cultures are often judged by appearance more so than by other characteristics (Croese 2002). Societal emphasis on youth and beauty, therefore, presents an increasing danger to women's body image as they progress through the natural ageing process (Ferraro et al. 2008). Furthermore, with age women encounter unique physical situations such as menopause (Rostosky and Travis 2000) and declining health (Clarke 2002), which are likely to impact body image.

Although a few researchers have begun to study the body image for older women (e.g., Banister 1999; Tunaley, Walsh, & Nicolson, 1999; Webster and Tiggemann 2003), the overall picture is still incomplete, with many aspects unclear (Peat et al. 2008). Ferraro et al. (2008: 379) found that "the endorsement of a thinner body image by many of the older adult female participants appeared to persist into late adulthood." Their findings, however, supported the notion that body image is a complex phenomenon for older women and raised some important questions that are yet unanswered. For example, they found that, when compared with normal-weight older women, overweight older women selected a larger figure as ideal. The authors proposed that one interpretation of the finding is that "some older women accept their overweight status as a satisfactory lifestyle" (380), but that more research is needed to verify this claim and/or to understand how some women came to such acceptance. Furthermore, Ferraro, et al. found marked differences between overweight and normal weight women on a number of behavioural measures and therefore suggested that for older women body image concerns may stem from awareness of weight-related health issues rather than distortion of self perceptions commonly found in younger women. In short, additional research is needed to clarify changes in body image as women age (Tiggemann 2004).

#### *Life course perspective*

To understand body image for older women, it is important to consider how body image has developed over the life course and how it is situated in the context of their overall life stories (Clarke and Griffin 2007; Grogan 2008). McLaren and Wardle (2002) argue that development of body image can best be studied by utilizing a life course perspective; it can highlight body image influences (e.g., obesity, peer-teasing) and their interaction with life events (e.g., puberty, pregnancy). Furthermore, according to Thompson (2002), because the study of body image emerged as a sub-field of eating disorder research,

there has been a tendency to study younger women and girls and to focus only on issues salient to these age groups (i.e., dissatisfaction with body weight and shape). Thompson argues that the next step to advancing body image research is to adopt a life course perspective. Utilizing a life course perspective will help to identify influences and outcomes of body image at different life stages and will also facilitate understanding of the fluctuations or stability of body image across the life course.

The life course perspective was developed as a conceptual orientation for understanding patterns of behaviour, attitudes, and individual characteristics as they unfold across the life course (Elder 1995; 2003; Moen 2001). According to Bengtson, Burgess, and Parrott (1997: S80), “the life course perspective attempts to bridge the macro- and micro- levels of social-structural analyses by incorporating the effects of history, social structure, and individual meaning into theoretical and analytic models.” This perspective provides a framework for studying participants as complex individuals and for understanding their current psychological or biological status within the context of their sociocultural environment and personal history (Staudinger and Bluck 2001). According to Hatch (2000: 28), “The strength of the life course perspective lies in the explicit recognition of multiple interlocking dimensions of human experience. The perspective locates individuals and groups in time and space, discouraging simple – and simplistic – comparisons and conclusions.”

In a meta-analysis, Wethington (2005) outlined seven concepts that are highlighted through a life course perspective. The first is trajectories, which refer to patterns that develop or remain stable across time, such as persistent body consciousness. The second concept is transitions, which are changes in social roles or responsibilities (e.g., birth of a child). Third are turning points. Wethington explains that they are “decision points about future paths and commitments in which (in retrospect) an individual perceived life as having taken a fateful turn that defined all of life that came after it” (116) (e.g., an educational decision that impacts a person’s career path). Fourth, is the influence of cultural and contextual influences such as ethnicity or historical contexts (i.e., The Great Depression). The fifth concept is timing in lives, which refers to the interaction between age or life stage and the timing of an event such as age at time of marriage. The sixth concept is labelled as linked lives. Using the life course

perspective can help researchers to understand the influence of one person (e.g., parents or a spouse) on the development of another. Finally, Wethington asserts that a life course perspective underscores adaptive strategies or “conscious decisions” (117) that people make to improve their adaptation to change.

The life course perspective is of particular value to body image research as it allows researchers to study the development and progression of body image across a person’s life and the interaction among different factors within a person’s life which shape body image. The perspective highlights factors associated with development at various life stages such as parental evaluations and peer teasing during childhood or spouse evaluations and pregnancy during early adulthood (Thompson 2002). While McLaren and Wardle (2002) have suggested that the life course perspective is the key to advancing the understanding of body image, research adopting this perspective is scarce. The purpose of the study, therefore, was to explore the body image of older women by using a life course perspective. The specific research questions addressed were as follows:

1. How do older women perceive their body image?
2. How do older women feel about the importance of appearance?
3. How do older women perceive their body image has changed or remained consistent over the course of their lives?
4. What life events, experiences, and factors have shaped their body image?

### **Research design and methods**

Qualitative methods were used to allow inductive development of understanding rather than reasoning deductively from pre-existing assumptions (Patton 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1998). To understand the experience of body image, Pelican et al. (2005: 61) suggest that qualitative methods are most appropriate because they allow researchers to link “the person with his or her lived situation, which includes understanding that person’s meanings in his or her own terms.” Furthermore, qualitative data is useful in understanding the “complexity of contradictory meanings” (Tunaley et al. 1999: 741) that body image has for older women because it allows researchers to give them a voice. In-depth individual interviews and focus groups were used to elicit narrative accounts of participants’ experiences and the meanings they

associated with those experiences (Warren and Karner 2005). Furthermore, the sequence of interviews followed by focus groups was valuable in clarifying themes that emerged from the data and to verify interpretation (Bannister 1999).

### *Sample*

We recruited 13 participants using snowball sampling, which involves the recruitment of additional participants through the contacts of existing participants or a third party (Clarke, 2002). Snowball sampling improved access to potential interviewees within the population and provided a connection with participants (i.e., the referring individual) to more quickly build rapport (Clarke and Griffin, 2007). We delimited the sample to women aged of 60 to 70 to reduce the likelihood of confounding factors such as menopause (for those in younger categories) or overwhelming health concerns (for those in older categories) (Baltes and Smith 2003; Bedford and Johnson 2006). At the conclusion of each interview, each participant was asked for personal information regarding characteristics that may influence body image including: age, education, annual income, marital status, and height and weight (to calculate body mass index, BMI).

All participants resided in a mid-sized community and had lived in the United States for more than 30 years, although three were born in Europe (Abigail, 66 and Kristy, 61) or the Middle East (Rosalynn, 60). Participants' ages ranged from 60 to 69, with a mean of 62.4. Seven were married (two for the second time), five currently divorced (one for the second time), and one lived with a female domestic partner. Education levels varied: five participants reported high school as their highest level of education, four had undergraduate degrees, one participant had a master's degree and three had doctoral degrees. The participants also represented a variety of income brackets ranging from \$20,000-\$30,000 to more than \$100,000, with a median of \$50,000-\$60,000. Eight participants were retired; four were employed full time, and one employed part time. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect her identity.

### *Data collection*

We collected data through individual interviews and follow up focus groups. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and the focus groups were two hours each. Each participant gave informed



consent as approved by the institutional review board. We employed a semi-structured approach to the individual interviews to address the study's research questions and probing questions to elicit clarification or further explanation (Charmaz 2006). Individual interviews took place at the participant's home, office, or in a meeting room on the university campus. We digitally recorded all interviews and transcribed each verbatim. We analyzed interviews throughout the data collection process to identify the point at which no new thematic responses were being collected, suggesting that theoretical saturation had been reached (Patton, 2002). We recruited participants and conducted interviews until after 10, no new responses emerged. We conducted three additional interviews to ensure saturation and then concluded this phase of data collection (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). At the conclusion of each interview, participants were invited to attend a follow up focus group.

Focus groups were held at a university setting at times arranged to accommodate participants' schedules. We analyzed the interview data prior to the focus groups to facilitate the design of the focus group questions. We constructed the focus group questions to address topics from the existing data that needed clarification or expansion (Banister 1999). For example, in the individual interviews, the majority of participants discussed the influence of family members on body image. The participants were, therefore, invited to discuss this topic during the focus groups. Each focus group consisted of four participants. We kept the size of the focus groups small to allow for depth of input from each participant and to improve comfort in talking about a sensitive topic (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Some participants were unable or unwilling to attend the follow up focus groups (n=5). Two women (Abigail, 66, and Callie, 61) explained that they would feel uncomfortable or "shy" discussing body image in a group setting; one (Nina, 64) could not attend due to caretaking responsibilities for an ill mother; and two due to work-related time constraints (Linda, 60, and Angela, 69). In order to allow these participants to respond to the focus group questions and to agree or disagree with the responses of the others, we conducted a follow up telephone interview, which lasted from twenty to forty-five minutes, with each.

Because focus groups took place after the individual interviews, participants were able to discuss topics they had reflected on. Focus groups also facilitated social interaction (i.e., group discussion,

sharing of stories), which Banister (1999) suggested is important in advancing discussion. The focus groups and follow up telephone interviews with the women who could not attend the focus groups facilitated validation of the initial analysis because the questions were designed to verify and expand on identified themes and to clarify unanticipated findings or inconsistencies (Clarke and Griffin 2007). They also allowed those who had not previously mentioned a particular perspective to agree or disagree with their fellow participants. It was common for a focus group participant to express a contrasting opinion or experience to others in the group, which suggested that group pressure did not inhibit the truthfulness of responses. Both authors were present at each focus group, allowing for one to moderate and the other to take notes, which increased efficiency of data collection and provided multiple perspectives from which to interpret the data (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Furthermore, we met after each focus group to debrief and compare notes, possible themes and impressions. Finally, both researchers are female (i.e., the same sex as participants), which Pelican et al. (2005) argued is necessary to provide a comfortable setting for discussing body image.

#### *Data analysis*

The life course perspective guided the data collection in that participants were asked to describe the factors or experiences that had shaped their body image and how it had changed or remained consistent across their lives. The data analysis, however, did not follow any pre-determined framework or coding structure. All data was coded line-by-line to allow categories and themes to emerge from the words of the participants (Charmaz 2006). We coded the transcripts using a constant comparison method, meaning that newly collected data was continuously compared with earlier data to improve credibility of the study and to guide on-going data collection (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Constant comparison was valuable because of its ability to generate themes through “systematic and explicit coding and analytic procedures” (Glaser and Holton 2004: 15).

In order to determine whether we could combine the three types of data, we analyzed each set of data sequentially (Banister 1999; Morgan, 1997). The individual interview transcripts were open coded to create a basic coding framework. The focus group transcripts and the telephone interviews were then coded

using the same set of open codes. Because open coding of the focus group and telephone interview transcripts added only one new code and did not change the natural grouping of the open codes, the different forms of data were grouped into one database (Pelican et al. 2005).

In terms of the combined database, based on the constant comparison process we followed four basic steps (Charmaz 2006; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The first step was to condense the data using line-by-line open coding to reveal the themes that emerged from the data. The second step was to use axial coding to look for relationships between open codes and to create conceptual categories. The third step was to define and refine the categories, and to find diversity in the data. Finally, examples were selected from the data to portray how the themes were generated. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, notes and memos were written to generate ideas about possible new codes, relationships between codes, disconfirming evidence, and the properties of and diversity within different codes (Glaser and Holton 2004; Warren & Karner, 2005). The data collection process also involved constant debriefing among both researchers to consider conceptual categorizations, theoretical connections, and alternative interpretations.

#### *Data verification*

We established trustworthiness and rigor in data collection by meeting the criteria of transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility (Glaser and Holton 2004). We addressed transferability, or external validity, through purposive sampling, by eliciting thick description, and by developing a systematic narrative of the findings utilizing both emic (as seen by the participant) and etic (as seen by the researcher) statements (Charmaz 2006; Maxwell 1993). We achieved dependability, or reliability, by triangulation of methods, through note-taking during data collection, and by recording memos during data analysis (Patton 2002). We addressed confirmability of this study by debriefing with other researchers throughout the data collection and analysis to benefit from multiple perspectives (Glaser and Holton 2004). Furthermore, during data analysis we sought out and identified disconfirming evidence to invite alternative explanations (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Finally, we established credibility, or internal validity, by use of the constant comparison method, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and member checking (Glaser and Holton 2004). We conducted member checks during the focus groups and by sending each

participant a preliminary version of the manuscript and asking for verification that she was being accurately represented. We acknowledge that as recall data, the results are indicative of the participant's perspective of her life experiences and may not necessarily be accurate representations of past events.

## **Results**

Participants described body image as a complex concept, discussing numerous aspects of appearance, physical ability, and attitudes toward their bodies. Participants also discussed a variety of factors or experiences that shaped their body image and how it developed over the course of their lives (see Table 1). Allowing women to share their stories, four major themes emerged: a) current perceptions of body image; b) key life events that shaped body image; c) factors that have influenced body image over the life course; and d) beliefs about the trajectory of body image across the life course.

### *Current body image perceptions*

Most of the women perceived body image as encompassing more than satisfaction with weight or appearance, but rather as a combination factors. The participants' definitions frequently encompassed a desire for thinness, but also incorporated a complex set of components, attitudes, and outcomes. They illustrated the importance of cognitive processes in their evaluations and attitudes toward their bodies and described how body image had changed or remained consistent across the life course.

*Definitions of body image.* When asked what the term body image first brought to mind, many of the women said that they thought of their opinions about their body or appearance. Most mentioned issues of appearance and weight related evaluations. Rachel (62) replied, "I think of how satisfied you are with your body weight, type, and size." Several mentioned the importance of how they feel they are perceived by others. Kara (64) commented, "I think more of how I look and how other people perceive me." Some, however, even in their initial reaction articulated the multidimensionality of body image. Nina (64) stated, "I think [body image] means the shape, the condition you're in, you know, physically, mentally, appearance-wise...I think body image [is connected] with, you know, mental, with physical health. It's all those things."

Throughout the data collection process, it became apparent that the women viewed body image as a complex concept. Kara (64) observed, “I think a lot of the time with body image, we think of our appearance, but you know it’s really more than that. It really is more than just your actual appearance.” Some discussed the importance of their physical health or physical ability as a component to body image. For instance, Isabelle (61) remarked, “I think if you...feel healthy and you are healthy, you’re going to feel better about yourself, even your body image”

Some participants highlighted awareness of the perception of others separate from their own evaluation of themselves, citing circumstances in which the perceptions of others were different from their self-perceptions. Marta (62) related, “I stopped [colouring my hair] and...the immediate reaction of my close friends about my age was, ‘you look older.’ And I thought, well it’s still the same me, still the same face. It’s really your image of me that’s changed.” Marta (62) portrayed that although she recognized differing perceptions of others, she felt comfortable with her body. For some of the others, however, the perceptions of others were difficult to ignore, although it was an identified goal. For example, Kara (64) commented, “it must be important to us in a way, how people perceive us...even though we think it doesn’t matter, but there must be something in us that it does bother us.” Isabelle (61) expanded on this point by saying,

I keep thinking I’m going to be that thin person one day, but in reality I know I’m not going to be. I’m ok with myself, but it seems like other people aren’t ok with myself. (pause) I think I am trying to be what they want me to be rather than me just being myself...if you can get to where you accept yourself as you are, without comment from anybody else, it’s true happiness for a woman... And I think it’s hard to be who you want to be because of all the influences around you.

*Current body image.* Most of the women expressed dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their bodies including “tummies,” sagging skin, large chests, reduced muscle tone, and greying or thinning hair. For example, Paula (61) commented on more than one thing she would prefer to change saying, “I feel very buxomly and I dislike it...I wish my arms were thinner...That’s one thing I would change...I wish my belly was a little bit flatter and...my skin now is starting to look my age.”

Interestingly, however, some participants' expressed little desire for change. For instance, Abigail (66) explained, "I don't have the feeling I should change, that I want another picture of myself...I understand that age brings some changes to the looks and forms of your body, but I accept it and it doesn't make me dislike my body." Furthermore, even those acknowledging desires for change described themselves as "content with," "satisfied with," or "positive" toward their current bodies. For example, Rachel (62) said, "So, yes, I still get on the scale everyday and check...But I'm pretty satisfied with who I am and what my body image is right now." Similarly, Angela (69) commented "Yes, I worry more about my weight more now than I did before, but for the most part...I'm content with my body. I'm content with the way I look, feel and so forth."

The dual existence of desire for change and overall contentment seemed partly due to the consideration of age in the participants' self-evaluations. For example, Isabelle (61) said, "I would like to be that thinner person and I guess and I work at it, but then I think, 'well what the heck, I'm 60 years old, who gives a shit?!' (laughs)." Furthermore, although they recognized physical attributes that they did not consider ideal, they accepted that such is a common feeling for women and have grown to accept their bodies in an "imperfect" state. Kara (64) explained this sentiment by saying,

I think that in my younger years [being overweight] did affect me, but I don't really think so now. This is me. This is who I am and there's nothing I can do to change it...I think you always find fault with yourself, but you just have to learn to accept this is who you are and be happy with what you have.

A common phrase that seemed to portray this attitude was "this is who I am." This phrase was used by many of the participants who expressed that they accepted their bodies as only one aspect of who they are such as Nina (64) who said, "[my body] is what it is. I'm ok with it." Shayna (60) similarly said, "I don't know if I'm satisfied or dissatisfied. I think it's just – this is who I am."

Another reason for the dual existence of desire for change and overall contentment was that many women felt good about other aspects of themselves which moderated concern with their physical bodies. Rachel (62) portrayed this concept saying, "I kind of go like this (laughs and fluffs hair) in the mirror and I'm satisfied with who I am...I'm satisfied with the person I am...There's more to me than how I look."

Similarly, Shayna (60) said that she accepts being overweight because she is “a good person on the inside.” Linda (60) suggested that for her, perceived physical flaws could co-exist with a “positive and accepting” body image because she did not perceive appearance as a vital part of her identity. “Whatever flaws are there are there, and it’s not really who I am.”

Similarly, some participants seemed to feel positive despite perceived flaws by focusing their attention on preferred aspects of appearance or those they felt they could control. Rosalyn (60) explained that she considered her face “very average,” but chose to focus on her body “from the neck down” because she considers it her “asset” while saying, “my face I cannot change, it is what it is.” Marta (62) presented a similar notion related to control by saying, “I have more control over my facial and hair appearance than I do over my body...how I style my hair and...do my makeup...So I think my face and hair has more impact on how I feel about myself.”

Some of the women expressed a disconnect between their feelings toward their bodies and their actual appearance. Kristy (61) commented, “I always see myself fatter than what [my husband] thinks I am.” Interestingly, aside from Kristy, none of the women described viewing herself as larger or less attractive than her actual size. In fact, several women perceived that they view themselves as slimmer, younger, or more attractive than their actual selves. For example, Isabelle (61) said, “I don’t feel as heavy as I am...everybody tells me, you know, you need to lose weight, but I... just don’t feel as heavy as I am.” Furthermore, several participants perceived that having a more positive self-perception than actual appearance served a positive function. Marta (62) commented,

I have a very inverted body image. I always think of myself as young, thin, blonde, and very attractive, and that’s how I spent the first part of my life...I think this image that I have of myself allows me to do a lot of the things that I do. I love public speaking. I love to represent [the local historical society]...and I just feel like a natural doing that because I just have this different image of myself than what is reality in the mirror.

Most of the participants expressed acceptance of their bodies and of the ageing process. Kristy, (61) however, contradicted this pattern. In response to Shayna (60), Rachel (62), and Rosalyn (60) expressing acceptance of their ageing bodies, she commented,

You all seem so healthy! (laughs)...I'm trying to adjust to [ageing]...but I still really want to not give in to getting old or gaining weight...I wish I could just be accepting age gracefully, but something inside of me just will not go away... I want to fight to stay fit and to stay young. So that's different for me.

The participants accepted the physical signs of ageing to varying degrees, but Kristy (61) and others who reported struggling to accept their bodies and the ageing process generally expressed desire to be more accepting of themselves and their bodies.

#### *Key life events*

Many participants identified life events or periods that shaped their body image in both positive and negative ways. These events were related to a physiological change, a cognitive shift, or a change in their macro-environment.

*Physical changes.* Many of the pivotal life events described by participants related to physical change such as pregnancy, menopause, weight fluctuations, or illness. Interestingly, some participants described similar life events but attached different meanings to the event. Several women identified pregnancy as an event that shaped body image. Rosalyn (60) explained that she had always felt accepting of “natural” bodily changes and viewed pregnancy as an experience which reinforced this value. She stated, “I never thought I looked awful or anything. I looked like a pregnant woman should look. It wasn't like my body image changed. My body changed because I was pregnant and that was normal for a pregnant woman.” In contrast, Rachel (62) cited pregnancy as a negative experience saying, “I felt like a frog (laughs). I didn't think it was cute at all!” During the focus group, which gave her an opportunity to further describe her experience, she explained that the period was difficult because she felt “a lot of pressure” to “get back to [her] former size.”

Many of the women identified menopause as a key period which shaped their body image. In her individual interview, Kristy (61) explained,

There's the fact that your skin dries out and you start to get wrinkles and... hot flashes (laughs)...but it's even a little deeper, it's the fact that you're no longer, not that you're no longer a woman, but there's something missing now. You're just an old lady (laughs)... you've made a transition from being a fertile woman to being an old woman who's not fertile anymore (laughs).



Later, in the focus group, after explaining the high value she places on participating in physical activity, she explained that she viewed menopause as “a real downer,” because she saw it as permanent. She commented, “I don’t have the ability I used to have...the endurance or the strength...I think maybe menopause is more of a major thing for me because I can’t reverse any of the things...now I’m stuck with it (laughs).” Marta (62), who described rarely feeling body image concerns throughout her life, agreed that during menopause her body image declined. Marta, however, described her body image decline in the past tense and her current body image as very positive, while Kristy described the concern as ongoing.

Some women described periods of weight gain, which were perceived almost exclusively as negative experiences and periods of weight loss almost exclusively as positive experiences. Paula (61) related, “I lost about 26 pounds two years ago and felt really much better about myself, about the way I looked and felt, (pause) especially the way I looked. I felt more confident about myself, not hiding quite as much.” In contrast, however, Rachel (62) described an experience of becoming “emaciated almost” due to illness and feeling good about a period of weight gain because she associated it with health.

*Cognitive changes.* Many women described their body image as shaped by shifting attitudes towards appearance or their bodies. Cognitive changes were linked with body image improvement and represented a reshaping of the importance of appearance. Cognitive shifts were due to education, changes in family roles or, as Shayna (60) expressed, a change in self-perception.

I grew up chubby and...spent a lot of my childhood thinking, ‘oh gee I’m the biggest one in the class...And for some reason I grew out of it...I realized there was a lot more to me than being fat...Once I started looking at myself as a person and not just a big person, just as a person who can do things and who can like people, and who could be liked, I think that’s what made the difference for me. (pause) Because then all of a sudden I was a person.

Some participants described their cognitive shift as a result of formal education. Linda (60) illustrated her experience in college during the 1960s saying, “The women’s movement was just getting started and...that was pretty critical in my realizing how manipulated we all are about...what’s desirable in terms of appearance...I did have a shifting consciousness...there was a dramatic shift.” Although through a different process, Marta (62) described a cognitive shift related to body image as a result of

education. For Marta, the process of education was influential less for the information being learned than for her life stage at the time.

In my younger years, I was always looking to the future... When I got to [age] 50, I was lucky enough to be able to retire and become a student... Through that process for me I thought, 'this is who I am. This is what I want to do. This is who I am.' In terms of my body image, I come from a family of thin people... and my sisters especially will talk to me about my weight. And now I say, 'just accept me as I am. I have and I want you to do that too'... it's just a different feeling.

Paula (61) explained that she sought professional counselling after a divorce and by doing so gained confidence, which improved her body image. She said, "I used to worry about what other people thought when they looked at me... I don't so much anymore because it just doesn't matter and I can't change it. I need to feel good about myself, believe in myself."

*Macro-level changes.* Although less frequent, some participants identified key events in the development of their body image as being on a societal or community level. Callie (61) described a change in the media portrayal of beauty as a key life period that positively affected her body image.

When I was in grade school, junior high and into high school... I was tall and skinny, and that was not what was popular. And I used to get teased... And then somehow, I guess after Twiggy... in the late 60's, then tall and thin was good... I could be a little more comfortable in my skin... I felt very self conscious about being tall the first thirty years. I don't feel self conscious about being tall anymore.

Callie described how change in the macro-environment influenced her to feel more comfortable with her appearance. On the other hand, Nina (64) depicted a lack of concern for appearance during childhood that was negatively impacted by moving from a rural to an urban environment. For her, the change in environment influenced her awareness of appearance, increasing her feelings of self consciousness because she wore clothes sewn by her mother, which did not fit the "dress code" in the new city. Nina commented that being "different" increased her awareness of appearance and "the body image thing... became very important."

*Body image influences*

Participants described a number of factors and experiences that shaped body image over the course of their lives. Although some factors were more salient at specific life stages (i.e., peer teasing in childhood), most factors seemed to persist throughout the life course. Influences were identified as coming from interpersonal interactions or from the macro-environmental level.

*Interpersonal Interaction.* Every participant identified interpersonal influences on their body image, whether positive or negative. Many related experiences involving family members such as parents, adult children, or a husband. Both Paula (61) and Isabelle (61) mentioned the positive influence of interactions with adult daughters on their self-perceptions and acceptance of their own bodies. When discussing interactions with other family members (e.g., mothers, husbands), however, participants described both positive and negative influences.

The most commonly discussed relationship was with a spouse. Nina (64) illustrated a negative spousal influence by relating the following experience,

I think being married to my ex-husband shaped [my body image]...he was on this thing about me being heavy. I can remember the day that I brought my first son home from the hospital...his gift to me was a box of AYDS...its diet candy...He gave me that and told me to lose the weight. So, I think that that sort of brainwashes you.

Paula (61) echoed the potentially negative influence of the spousal relationship, saying, "My second husband said...if I got to a certain point then he would speak to me about it. And that was always in my head, I think, watching then what I ate." Some women, however, cited their husbands' acceptance as positive body image influences. Kara (64) commented, "I've been married for 44 years and I have a wonderful marriage...I think that makes a big difference."

Many women depicted the influence of their family of origin, commonly from mothers, but also from fathers, siblings, and other relatives. Angela (69) stressed the importance of family of origin in shaping body image saying, "I came from a family where everyone was thin. That was impressed on me at an early age. I have been aware of my weight all my life." Linda (60), however, described a different reaction to her father who was extremely concerned with dieting and maintaining his physical appearance.

She remarked that by watching her father, she “always realized that [she] didn’t want to have those issues.” She commented, “It never made me crazy about what I would eat or anything like that, but I think it was just kind of an awareness of, I don’t want to be focused on that.”

Several participants commented on the role of their mothers, whether positive or negative. Callie (61), described her mother as someone who “dieted all her life and was unhappy with her body all her life,” and as negatively shaping her body image.

I remember being in early adolescence and coming home from school and walking up the stairs and my mother had her little bridge club in the living room and one of the women said, ‘Oh, [Callie]’s so lovely, she’s so tall’ and my mother said, ‘yes, it’s a shame she’s so tall.’ (pause) My mother was very embarrassed by how tall I was and that had a profound impact on me...there was a part of me that I felt like a real (pause) I was cursed.

Many participants, however, described their mothers as positively shaping their body image by providing healthy role models. Marta (62) commented, “I never felt bad about my body and I think a lot of that had to do with my mom because she always felt good about her body.” Abigail (66) specifically described her mother’s example as helping her adjust to age-related physical changes.

I was more or less always slim...I never had a belly...And of course it changed. And I remember my mother aged and...she was always slim too, and then I thought, ‘Hey, she has a belly’... And now I’m there, and I say, ‘ok, I saw that before.’ (laughs) It’s a process. So I see in my body that there is something changed, but...I accept it. I saw this in my mother...and realize I’m following, I’m getting this age. But it’s not that I’m opposed to this. It’s just...now I understand what I saw before.

Peer interactions were mentioned throughout the life course. Interestingly, they were generally perceived as a negative influence in childhood and a positive influence in adulthood. Kara (64) typically described childhood peer teasing by saying, “I was always overweight as a child, and you know, kids can be so cruel...in elementary school, especially, that was a hard time for me because I was always one of the bigger kids in school.” Kristy described being influenced by young adulthood peers who brought weight concerns to her attention.

When I was in nursing school...I never weighed myself. I guess I wasn’t that conscious of my weight. At one point I remember one of the students saying, ‘boy, you’re really getting chubby’ (laughs). Really! It just really just dawned

on me, 'wow you know maybe he's right' and I think I started noticing my weight more... so I started weighing myself (laughs).

Some women mentioned the role of female friends in adulthood and the importance of their acceptance. Isabelle (61) said that with her close group of female friends she did not feel judged by her appearance. She commented, "With girlfriends there is that unconditional love. We all accept our girlfriends and...you don't feel threatened or anything...You can just be who you want to be." The participants agreed that close female friendships were valued social groups in which they felt accepted and comfortable with their bodies. Callie (61), however, explained that although she felt comfortable with her group of friends, she was uncomfortable around some women because of her tall, thin body. She remarked, "sometimes I have...older women, women my age or even some [younger] who might be struggling with a lot of weight, and they look at me like they're angry, like this (narrows eyes and mouth)...It makes me very uncomfortable."

*Macro-level influences.* The participants also perceived macro-level influences as shaping body image throughout their lives. Nina (64) commented, "I think society and environment are involved [in shaping body image]. When society pushes things our focus goes there." Similarly, Callie (61) expressed, "I have this notion that women are in a tough spot because we have so increasingly as a society stressed beauty and body and anti-ageing and that kind of thing and I think that women are...probably always making comparisons."

Participants perceived that society shapes body image by dictating what body type is ideal and through social penalties for being overweight. Angela (69) noted, "I think society looks down on heavy people and admires thin people." Callie (61) even discussed her awareness of internalizing such messages saying, "I think I am influenced [by society] to the extent that I see thinner bodies as more attractive than heavier bodies." Isabelle (61) described the impact of such judgment based on appearance, saying "I think more women know they're a good person, but society tells us, you should look this way or...that way...there's all these things screaming at you, saying...we should be different, and it's hard to accept yourself in this society."

For Abigail (66), however, the macro-environment in which she grew up influenced her to feel accepting of her body. She described her childhood in Germany in a supportive environment where “body shape was no subject of discussion” and “a healthy body was the goal” and that although she left that environment at the age of 30, she was able to “carry inside” her positive body image and attitudes of acceptance.

Participants also discussed the pervasive influence of the media. Linda (60) identified television portrayals of beauty as influential to body image saying, “I think the biggest thing is...wanting to be thin and look like the stereotypical attractive people you see on TV. I think...advertising and the media definitely influence a lot.” Participants generally perceived, however, that the media is more influential for women now than when they were younger. Rachel (62) commented, “I think young women now have much more messages...to tell them that they’re not thin and have beautiful hair and all that...when we were younger there wasn’t the same kinds of television and there weren’t computers and the web.” Interestingly, several women discussed the media as having a positive or no impact on body image. Abigail (66) commented, “When I grew up, Twiggy in England was very in. We laughed about her thinness. In my surroundings models were not seen as real examples.” Similarly, Marta (62) explained, “when I was a teenager, I was...pretty tall and thin and Twiggy was popular and that look of the sixties...and I fit right in with it. So I really didn’t think about my body.”

#### *Body image across the life course*

Participants were asked to explain whether they believed their body image had changed or remained constant across the life course and how or why they perceived such a path. As in other aspects of the study, the participants portrayed variety and complexity in descriptions of body image across the life course, specifically highlighting the interaction between self-evaluations and attitudes toward appearance.

*Perceptions of body image.* Participants suggested that an important factor in self-evaluations was their evolving perceptions of body image in general, including what factors comprised body image and the importance they placed on appearance. Many participants perceived that their body image was influenced by health and ability more so now than earlier in their lives. Linda (60) explained, “especially I think for

active people...body image...goes from being external to being like ‘oh I’ve got pain in this joint or this wound that I didn’t have before’ or ‘I’m not as mobile as I used to be.’” Angela (69) described her increased focus on health in relation to behaviour by expressing that she still wants to exercise and stay slim as she always did, but now to improve health rather than appearance. She commented, “I’m content with the way I look, feel and so forth. I’m just thankful that I’m hopefully healthy and stay that way. [Appearance] isn’t that important, because without your health, you don’t have anything else.”

Many of the women described behaviours undertaken in their youth to improve appearance such as sunbathing with “baby oil and iodine” that they would not do now because of increased value for health. Kristy (61) commented, “I think about when I was younger, I smoked, I sat in the sun...Now I have a more healthy attitude, I think as far as what I do, because I realize I have to take care of my health.” Rosalyn (60) echoed this attitude in regard to dieting.

We diet at times or we try to lose weight, but we’re aware of nutrition. I mean, we say, ok, I have to get enough protein; I have to get vitamins, etc. The health issue is there. It’s not like, I’m going to [lose 10 pounds] no matter what and I’m not going to eat anything. We consider all of those things and we take the longer road.

Some participants mentioned that with age, they placed less importance on appearance in general. Shayna (60) explained that when she was younger she thought that “prettiness and looking feminine...was pretty important.” She went on to say, however, “now that I’m older I look more at the wisdom, the inside more than the outside...The outside seems like more superficial type of stuff to me.” Similarly, Linda (60) commented, “This is going to sound like a cliché, but wisdom comes with age...I think in our culture [appearance] is really important, but, you know, on a more spiritual level...it’s what’s inside not outside.”

*Body image trajectories.* In summarizing their body image trajectories, the participants displayed a variety of experiences from consistently positive to noticeable decline, but the most common perceptions were some level of improvement. Some described drastic change, and others slight improvement, generally as a result of a cognitive shift regarding their perceptions of appearance or their own bodies.

The women related a variety of body image experiences in their younger years. These experiences commonly centred on concerns with weight, height and breasts (some wishing for larger,

others for smaller). Paula (61) remarked, ‘I felt very fat in high school at a hundred and ten pounds.’ Shayna (60) described her weight as an “obstacle” for her as a child saying, “I went to catholic school and everybody else’s uniforms were this big (indicates small). Mine was this big (indicates large)...People...even if they didn’t want to set you apart, you were set apart.” In contrast, Rachel (62) expressed concern with being small,

I was a late mature (sic)...I remember being really uncomfortable in Junior High School in gym class and that kind of stuff ...wanting to be more developed and not being so and feeling really self conscious about my body...I’m 4 feet 10 and a half and I always wanted to be taller. I wanted to have long legs.

Some of the women perceived these body image issues to be persistent or influential of their current body image, while others like Shayna (60) suggested that they had “gotten past” them. Linda (60) explained that “in adolescence and especially young adulthood” she felt “very conscious” of her hips, but that she no longer felt concerned about them. Others like Kara (64) explained that such concerns continued into their later years, although to a lesser degree, saying that her “size has always been a factor in [her] life,” but that “it bothered [her] more when [she] was younger” because her height was more pronounced in comparison to peers. Similarly, Callie (61) explained that although she now has a “very positive” body image and feels comfortable with her tall, thin body, she is still influenced by body image concerns she developed as an adolescent.

[People comment]...‘she has such a nice body’ and ‘do you believe she’s in her sixties and she looks like that?’ and that kind of thing. So, I’m aware of that and I’m kind of uncomfortable with that... I think that this adolescence image that you have of your body is the one that sticks.

Some participants described body image fluctuations throughout the life course while others described one general trajectory. For instance, Kara (64) expressed that her “body image has changed a lot over the years” based on weight fluctuations. In contrast, Rosalyn (60) said that she feels she “has a good figure” and has “felt good about [her] body since childhood.”

One aspect of body image development across the life course that participants stressed was the changes not only in their physical bodies, but in their cognitive processes. Those who described having



overcome body image concerns generally did not do so by changing their bodies, but through cognitive change or adaptation. Rachel (62) explained that her body image improved through a process of cognitive adjustment, explaining it as a continual process of adaptation linked to age.

You look at yourself in the mirror and you kind of adjust to who you are as you mature... you kind of adjust to who you are in here (points to chest)... You say, 'ok, so I'm not where I was, but, I'm ok where I am.' I think you adjust your expectations.

Linda (60) similarly explained that such cognitive adjustments improved body image not through changing her self-evaluation, but her general outlook saying, "[My body image] has gotten better in terms of just being at peace with the body...not like thinking... 'oh I think I look good' or something, that's just not important. It's more of just acceptance...It's just not an issue really."

## **Discussion**

The women in this study supported the contention put forward by Ferraro et al. (2008) that body image concerns continue for women as they age. The results, however, also underline the complexity of body image for older women and fluctuations of body image across the life course. While research has suggested that body dissatisfaction remains relatively stable over the lifespan (Tiggemann 2004), the participants in this study related numerous examples of change throughout their lives. The use of qualitative methodology highlighted life course fluctuation in body image by allowing participants to describe experiences at different life stages rather than depicting cross-sectional comparisons. For example, many of the participants described fluctuations in body image across the life course that did not coincide (e.g., Paula (61) and Rosalyn (60) described body image improvement during pregnancy while Kristy (60) and Rachel (62) described body image decline during pregnancy). If body image measurements were taken of women during pregnancy and compared to other life stages, the averages might show no significant difference leading researchers to conclude that no fluctuations occurred. The current method also facilitated a broad conceptualization of body image, thus allowing participants to express fluctuations in aspects of body image beyond body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, many of the women described processes by which they improved body image or reduced negative outcomes over the

life course. The current findings improve understanding of the role of ageing in body image, validate the strengths of adopting a life course perspective, and highlight the complexity of body image as a construct.

#### *Ageing and body image*

The findings shed light on the role of ageing in body image. In general, these results support the proposition that as women age they place less value on appearance and this change serves as a buffer against negative outcomes such as low self-esteem (Peat et al. 2008; Webster and Tiggemann 2003). Furthermore, the findings offer further explanation of how this process occurs. Almost all of the participants mentioned aspects of their bodies they would like to change while simultaneously claiming general contentment with their bodies. This dichotomy was clarified as the women described cognitive shifts in their attitude toward appearance and the value of their bodies. These shifts took different forms for different participants. Many learned to accept their perceived flaws by taking into consideration the natural changes that occur with age. Others segmented appearance as only one aspect of their identity and chose to focus on other aspects such as health or internal characteristics. Similarly, when considering appearance, some chose to focus mainly on those aspects of appearance which they perceived they could control. These cognitive shifts led to improved body image in the form of acceptance of their current bodies. These results suggest that through cognitive strategies which help them adapt to their ageing bodies, women can moderate the effects of body dissatisfaction, thus reducing negative outcomes.

By highlighting cognitive changes, reactions to physical change, changed motivations for body image related behaviours, and increased awareness of body image issues, the findings challenge current assumptions about body image development with age. Researchers have commonly explored body image development during childhood or adolescent (Levine and Smolak 2002; Smolak 2002), but rarely acknowledge the possibility (or probability) that aspects of an individual's body image continue to develop throughout adulthood (Whitbourne and Skultety 2002). For most of the participants in this study, although life events from childhood and adolescence influenced body image across the life course, some aspects of body image, particularly attitudes and values, fluctuated and developed into later years. These findings highlight the importance of considering body image from a life course perspective.

*Life course perspective*

The life course perspective proved to be a valuable framework for highlighting participants' perceptions of the experience of body image over the course of their lives (Thompson 2002). Adopting this framework prompted women to discuss key body image and factors (e.g., thinness, health, ability) as well as biological, environmental, and life history influences on body image (Staudinger and Bluck 2001). Furthermore, the findings supported Wethington's (2005) categorization of the conceptual areas identified by employing a life course perspective. It was clear that certain life events, which could be considered body transitions or turning points influenced body image by changing attitudes or self perceptions, or through re-enforcing existing attitudes. These were often sparked by physical (e.g., pregnancy or menopause) or attitudinal changes (e.g., shifts in self-perception or awareness of media messages).

One of the most salient life course concepts highlighted in the results was that of linked lives (Wethington 2005). It was clear that interpersonal relationships played a major role in the development of body image concerns and attitudes toward appearance. The most commonly mentioned and most adamantly stressed relationship was that with a spouse. Interestingly, of those participants who identified their husband as a positive influence, all were still currently married (n=5). Of those who cited a spouse as a negative influence (n=5), all but one were currently divorced. Certainly, no causal relationships can be assumed, but it was clear from the results of this study that a spouse represents a vital influence on participants' body image development. Furthermore, even at their current ages, some participants perceived lasting influences from their families of origin on body image.

Cultural and contextual factors, also connected to the life course perspective, were clearly highlighted by these results (Wethington 2005). It was evident that for some participants that the culture in which they grew up created a basis for future attitudes toward appearance and their own bodies. Furthermore, participants mentioned the influence of historical events and contexts such as changes in fashion, or societal views of women's roles. Another cultural influence that was emphasized by participants was that of the media. This finding supports literature which suggests the media is a strong purveyor of the thin ideal and influences body image (Harper and Tiggemann 2008). Although less

frequently emphasized, timing of life events (Wethington 2005) was highlighted clearly by Mary who discussed the change in her body image that came about by attending college later in life.

Trajectories were also clearly portrayed by those who explained stable patterns of body image concerns, attitudes, or feelings. The women discussed body image fluctuations they experienced throughout their lives and highlighted the continuous development of body image even through adulthood, something rarely discussed in the body image literature (Tiggemann 2004). For example, Rachel (62) described several fluctuations in body image throughout adulthood due to weight fluctuations related to illness and medication. She explained that in her later years these experiences have caused her to “appreciate being healthy more” and “finally feel happy with who [she] is including [her] body.” The current findings, however, suggest that rather than conceptualizing trajectories only as occurring in one direction over time, it is important to also consider the fluctuations and nuances that occur with life stages or life events.

Finally, for the women in this study adaptive strategies were clearly employed to help them maintain or even improve body image in response to their changing bodies. Some of the adaptive strategies included changes to physical appearance such as clothes, makeup, hair colour, or weight loss. Frequently, however, adaptive strategies were internal or cognitive. Some women changed their priorities to de-emphasize appearance by focusing on health and ability or internal qualities. Others chose to disconnect themselves from the judgments or perceptions of others and accept their current state such as Kara’s suggestion to “accept who you are and be happy with what you have.” Others’ adaptive strategies involved fostering supportive relationships such as accepting girlfriends who do not pass judgment based on appearance. The results support Hatch’s (2000) contention that adopting a life course perspective can help researchers to avoid drawing “simple – and simplistic – comparisons and conclusions” about a complex social-psychological phenomenon (p. 28).

#### *Body image: A complex construct*

A valuable contribution of this study to the body image literature is the finding that older women have complex notions about body image (Whitbourne and Skultety 2002). Body image researchers frequently

focus on dissatisfaction with body weight and shape. Weight and age-related changes in appearance were of very real concern to the participants, however body image was comprised of more than simply satisfaction with body weight or appearance, it also included evaluations of health and ability, beliefs about the importance of appearance, and feelings about their overall lives.

Dissatisfaction with weight is often substituted as a measure of body image because it is easily operationalized with questionnaires or silhouette drawing scales in which participants select current and ideal sizes (e.g., Thompson and Gray 1995; Tiggemann and Lynch 2001). The current findings, however, suggest that for research with older women, body image is conceptually too complex to assess in this way. Many body image instruments developed for younger populations might not accurately reflect the body image of older women. For example, the findings suggest that for some older women, although they recognize themselves as being overweight, they have developed a level of acceptance with their overweight status (Ferraro et al., 2008). Their responses as to the discrepancy between desired and actual weight, therefore, might not be a valid factor to compare across age groups because it does not accurately capture participants' attitudes toward the discrepancy. Furthermore, participants in this study who reported working toward weight loss emphasized that their motivation was concern for health rather than body image distortion as may be found in younger samples (Ferraro et al.). Using instruments that were developed for younger populations may not reflect the prioritized components of body image for older women, thus reducing the accuracy of comparison.

Finally, the current study provides some clarity in terms of the current state of mixed findings about the relationship between age and body image. For participants in this study, the general trend of body image was improvement, not of their evaluation of body size, but of their attitudes toward appearance and experiences of body image in their everyday lives. The changes were generally a result of cognitive adjustments and life course events not adequately captured by existing instruments.

#### *Conclusions and directions for future research*

The findings of this study have implications for both research and practice. An important step for researchers is to acknowledge and incorporate some of the complex body image factors highlighted into

future research questions and instrumentation. As the current study was limited by the use of recall data, future research should employ longitudinal methods to understand body image across the life course. This study highlights the importance of research into diverse populations including older adults. The current findings suggested that older women's experiences of body image are different from younger women. Future research should also explore men across the life course to understand the influential factors and components of body image for men. Furthermore, personal characteristics of the current sample such as culture, marital status, and education seemed to influence body image for the current sample. Further research is needed to clarify the role of these factors for women and men.

The current findings also highlighted some interesting diversity in the body image of older women. Some women felt that their body image was extremely positive to the point of experiencing an "inverted body image," while others felt a great deal of concern about their appearance. The majority of the sample felt along a continuum between these extremes. Future research into those women who experienced consistent or increasingly positive body image could improve understanding of ways that older women improve or maintain positive body image, which could in turn be used to facilitate the process for other women. Finally, the findings of this study can be valuable for body image interventions for women of all ages. Many of the women adaptive body image strategies described by participants could be taught and facilitated for women at younger ages.

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*Address for correspondence:*

Toni Liechty, Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management, The Pennsylvania State University, 814 Ford Building, University Park, PA 16802, U.S.A.

E-mail: txl223@psu.edu

*Table 1 –Participants’ Body Image Perceptions*

Name	Age	BMI	Body Image Summary
Kara	64	38.7	Described body image fluctuations. Said body image “was never good because of being tall and overweight,” but is now something she doesn’t “think much about” because she wants to accept herself as she is.
Nina	64	28	Felt comfortable as a child, but experienced decline when moving from a rural to urban setting. Mentioned body image decline due to influence of ex-husband. Says that now body image is “not much of a concern” because she has “too many other things to think about.”
Marta	62	36	Claimed she has an “inverted body image” because she sees herself as she was when she was younger. Described a positive body image across the life course with a temporary decline during menopause.
Abigail	66	22.5	Said she has never had any body image concerns. Described growing up in Germany in a very accepting environment. Explained that as she has gotten older, she has been accepting of age-related changes.
Isabelle	61	29.7	Said she does not “feel as heavy as” she is, but would like to be thinner. Described overall improvement in body image since her youth, but said she still wants to be more accepting of herself.
Paula	61	27.4	Said she feels good about some parts of her body, but is very conscious of her appearance, because she would like to attract a husband. Described concerns during teen years, and some fluctuations based on weight.
Linda	60	24	Described an improvement in body image over her life because of education and cognitive changes. Said she feels good about her body because of health, normal weight and because appearance is not as important to her anymore.
Angela	69	26	Said she now values health and physical activity more than appearance, but still values thinness because it is important in her family. Described recent body image decline because of weight gain due to age and medication.
Rosalyn	60	22.7	Said she has always felt good about her appearance because she has “had a good figure since childhood.” Because of recent physical limitations, she now values physical ability more highly than when she was younger.
Kristy	61	20.9	Explained that she has always been praised for being pretty and highly values being thin and physically active. Said she wants to “fight ageing” to stay thin and active. Described decline in body image due to age-related changes.
Shayna	60	34.1	Said she has always been overweight, but decided that her “inside is more important than [her] outside.” Said she has “gotten past” worrying about appearance. Described improvement in body image since childhood.
Callie	61	17.9	Said she has always been extremely thin and tall, which was difficult as an adolescent. Discussed the importance of media change. Explained that her body image has improved with age, but some adolescent concerns have persisted.
Rachel	62	26.7	Described weight and body image fluctuations, but said she now feels “happy with [her] body” and that she “appreciate[s herself] more.” Described improvement in body image across the life course.

### ORIENTATION TO CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 is written as an independent manuscript. This manuscript is intended for submission to the peer-reviewed journal *Leisure Sciences* and is therefore formatted accordingly.

The role of Chapter 3 in this dissertation is to address the following research questions:

#### *Body Image and Leisure Participation*

1. What role, if any, does body image play in the leisure choices of older women?
2. If body image does play a role in older women's leisure choices, what aspects of the leisure activity are associated with body image?
3. If body image does play a role in older women's leisure choices, what aspects of body image are related to their leisure choices?
4. What role, if any, has body image played in their leisure choices throughout their lives?

### **CHAPTER 3: THE ROLE OF BODY IMAGE IN OLDER WOMEN'S LEISURE**

#### **Abstract**

Research has suggested that body image poses a constraint to women's leisure because of concern about appearance. Body image-related constraints have been found to reduce participation in leisure activities. Research exploring the association between body image and leisure is extremely limited and has focused on younger women and girls. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of body image in older women's leisure. We conducted individual interviews and follow up focus groups with 13 women aged 60 to 69. Contrary to the appearance-related constraints reported by younger populations, many older participants distinguished between aesthetic and functional aspects of body image, explaining that physical ability and health concerns play a bigger role in leisure now than when they were younger. Furthermore, many participants perceived that having a positive body image facilitated participation in social, public, or physical leisure activities. We discuss implications for theory and practical applications.

## Introduction

Body image is a multi-dimensional construct that refers to a person's attitudes toward and evaluations of his or her body (Cash, 2004). Most body image literature has focused on younger women and girls; only a small fraction has looked at older women (Clarke, 2002). The literature that exists, however, suggests that body image is experienced and processed differently by older women than younger women (Ferraro et al., 2008; Peat, Peyerl, & Muehlenkamp, 2008). Due to changes across the life course, researchers have called for increased research into body image among older women and its role in their lives (Hurd, 2000; Whitbourne & Skultety, 2002).

Similarly, the relative absence of research on older women's leisure has met with calls for additional studies (Gibson, 2006). Existing research suggests that leisure plays an important role in the everyday lives of older women (Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007; Son, Kerstetter, Yarnal, & Baker, 2007; Wilhite, Sheldon, & Jekubovich-Fenton 1994), that leisure desires and patterns change as women age (Anderton, Fitzgerald, & Laidler, 1995), and that older women face unique leisure constraints (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997; Wearing, 1995). However, very little is known about the role of the aging process in women's leisure (McGuire, 2000).

Aging plays a role in both leisure and body image for women (Cronan & Scott, 2008; Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006), yet no research has addressed the interaction of these concepts for older women. Research with younger women has shown that poor body image presents a constraint to what leisure activities she chooses to participate in, how often she participates, and her enjoyment of the leisure experience (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; James, 2000). While leisure researchers have identified body image as a leisure constraint, few have addressed: a) the intricacies of the relationship between body image and leisure such as how individuals negotiate poor body image; b) how positive body image impacts leisure; or c) how body image

affects leisure for older women. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore what role, if any, body image plays in older women's leisure.

### Literature Review

Researchers have identified body image as a potential leisure constraint for women (Henderson, Stalnaker, & Taylor, 1988; Liechty, et al., 2006), yet few have explored how women experience this constraint in their everyday lives. Furthermore, current research has only addressed body image as a leisure constraint among younger women and girls (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; James, 2000) despite evidence that both body image (Ferraro, et al., 2008) and leisure participation (Cutler & Hendricks, 1990) change with age. Thus, we examined literature from several disciplines to provide a guiding framework for this study and to enhance our theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The conceptual areas explored included: a) body image and aging; b) body image as a leisure constraint; and c) older women's leisure.

#### *Body Image and Aging*

According to Cash (2004), a person's body image integrally affects his or her life experiences. Body image refers to a person's attitudes, evaluations, feelings, and perceptions about his or her body (Grogan, 2008). While researchers often operationalize body image as a measure of a person's satisfaction with body weight and shape, recent research has highlighted the fact that body image is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing all aspects of the body (i.e., facial features, athletic ability, and physical health) (Thompson, 2002). McLaren and Wardle (2002) posit that acknowledging multiple dimensions is vital to understanding body image because the body changes continuously across the lifespan and during different life stages prioritization of various body image components shifts. For example, issues of health and

physical competence play an increasing role in body image as women age (Whitbourne & Skultety, 2002).

Research that has addressed older women's body image supports the tenet that the aging process plays an important role in women's body image priorities and in women's overall experiences of body image (Clarke, 2002; McLaren & Wardle, 2002). Hurd (2000) explains that because societal ideals of beauty promote the importance of youthfulness and thinness, older women face unique challenges as they attempt to construct and maintain positive self-evaluations. For example, physical signs of aging such as changing skin texture, graying hair, and weight gain are largely undesirable by cultural standards, which can negatively impact women's body image (Tiggemann, 2004).

Considering the age-related pressures or factors affecting body image for women, the reality of their body image experiences is extremely complex and perhaps, as Webster and Tiggemann (2003) suggest, counter-intuitive. Rather than body image getting increasingly worse with age, research has found that women of all ages express similar levels of satisfaction with their bodies (Tiggemann, 2004). Some researchers hypothesize that women maintain body satisfaction because with age because older women feel a stronger distinction between the utility and the appearance of their bodies and place more importance on function than they did at younger ages (Clarke, 2002; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003; Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990; Reboussin et al., 2000). Empirical evidence is needed, however, to substantiate this hypothesis (Ferraro et al., 2008).

Shifting attitudes toward the body may explain recent findings that the dramatic negative outcomes of poor body image such as eating disorders, excessive exercise, or abuse of diet pills are less frequent with age (Peat et al., 2008). If older women feel less concern about their



appearance despite dissatisfaction with their bodies, it is logical that body dissatisfaction would have fewer negative outcomes. Additionally, researchers have found that less dramatic, everyday negative outcomes of poor body image such as habitual body monitoring (i.e., regularly inspecting one's outward appearance) and appearance-related anxiety decrease with age (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). These findings have implications for older women's everyday leisure lives. For example, if older women feel less appearance-related anxiety in social situations, they might be more likely to participate in and find satisfaction with group leisure activities.

Despite evidence that body image priorities, attitudes, and outcomes change with age (Ferraro, et al., 2008; Tiggemann, 2004), body image has mainly been studied among younger women and girls (Clarke, 2002; Peat et al., 2008). Limited research has addressed older women's body image and its function in their everyday lives. Furthermore, research examining the role of body image in older women's leisure is absent from the literature.

#### *Body Image as a Leisure Constraint*

Although the literature is limited, some researchers have suggested that body image plays an important role in women's leisure (e.g. Cronan & Scott, 2008; Liechty et al., 2006). Research has found poor body image to hinder both levels of participation in leisure and the quality of the leisure experience for younger women and girls (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Henderson, Stalnaker, & Taylor, 1988; James, 2000).

Leisure constraints refer to factors that limit formation of leisure preferences, hinder participation, or reduce enjoyment and satisfaction with leisure activities (Jackson, 2005). Examples of common leisure constraints include lack of time or financial resources, lack of companions with whom to recreate, and lack of confidence in one's ability. Leisure constraints

might result in non-participation as well as reduced, adapted, or less enjoyable participation (Kay & Jackson, 1991; Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991). In some cases, constraints even lead to increased participation, when an external factor (e.g., family or culture) dictates leisure choices (Jackson, 2005).

Research has suggested that body image may constrain leisure through reduced or adapted participation, less enjoyable participation, or even increased participation (Liechty et al., 2006). Particularly in activities that are somewhat body-focused, such as swimming and aerobics, women experience constraints as self-consciousness and lack of enjoyment (Frederick & Shaw, 1995). James (2000) found that for adolescent girls at public swimming pools, not only was participation reduced due to body image, but also enjoyment of the experience was compromised due to feeling the “critical gaze of others” (p. 274). Body image can further result in constraint by influencing individuals to participate in specific activities as a means of weight loss rather than enjoyment (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Liechty et al., 2006).

While body image may lead to leisure constraints for some women, others may develop strategies for dealing with the effects of body image on their leisure activities. Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey (1993) proposed that leisure participation and satisfaction do not depend simply on the absence of constraints because many people employ cognitive or behavioral strategies to negotiate leisure constraints. For example, James (2000) found that some adolescent girls employed tactics to accommodate their poor body image in order to swim at public pools. Many reported wearing clothing over their bathing suits to hide their bodies, relegating their swimming to less visible areas, or modifying their behavior (such as reducing laughter or playfulness) in order not to call attention to themselves. It is interesting to note that for this population, negotiation strategies were behavioral rather than cognitive. In other words, rather

than attempting to accept their bodies, the young women changed their behavior in order to accommodate their existing body consciousness.

Although research suggests that body image plays an important role in women's leisure (Cronan & Scott, 2008; Liechty et al., 2006), the current literature is limited and has not addressed older women. Considering the evidence that older women have different perceptions about the importance of appearance (Ferraro et al., 2008; Pliner et al., 1990), it is possible that older women experience different body image-related constraints and utilize different negotiation strategies. Furthermore, given the important role that body image plays in the everyday human experience (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002), examining the role of body image in older women's leisure will help to clarify experiences of leisure in their everyday lives.

#### *Older Women's Leisure*

Research documents that leisure is a valued aspect of everyday life for older women (Gibson & Ashton, 2004; Russell, 2007). In a study of older female widows, for example, Wilhite, Sheldon, and Jekubovich-Fenton (1994) found that "leisure comprised a large part of their immediate experience, occurred primarily in everyday activities, and contained both utilitarian and aesthetic attributes" (p. 64). Research also suggests that older women have unique perspectives about the meaning of leisure in their lives (Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer, Green, & Corbin, 2002; Wearing, 1995). For instance, rather than defining leisure as a list of activities, many older women view leisure as an experience such as spending time with loved ones, finding solitude in individual interests, or feeling freedom to choose whether or not to participate in an activity (Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer, Green, and Autry, 2003/2004; Wilhite et al., 1994).

Furthermore, researchers suggest that leisure has many potential benefits for older women and plays an important role in their quality of life (Siegenthaler & Vaughn, 1998). For

example, participation in leisure can be beneficial for physical health, cognitive functioning, making a healthy transition to retirement, and overall life satisfaction for older women (Carpenter & Patterson, 2004; Hartman-Stein & Potkanowicz, 2003; Riddick & Stewart, 1994; Son et al., 2007). Leisure also provides a valuable setting for developing social support and social networks (Piercy & Cheek, 2004); play and self-expression (Yarnal, Chick, & Kerstetter, 2008); participation in physical activity (Conn, 1998); and coping with negative life events (Hutchinson, Yarnal, Stafford-Son, & Kerstetter, 2008). For some older women leisure activities provide an opportunity for activism, empowerment, and resistance of social stereotypes about older women (Green, 1998; Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007). Finally, for other older women leisure is a vehicle for building community and gaining a sense of belonging to a group (Heuser, 2005).

Notwithstanding the value that older women place on leisure and its potential benefits, constraints such as care-giving responsibilities for grandchildren or elderly parents, lack of time, and living on a fixed income limit older women's ability to participate in leisure (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997; Anderton, et al., 1995; McGuire, Norman, & O'Leary, 2004). In a study of non-users of public parks, Scott & Jackson (1996) found that older women were uniquely constrained by lack of companionship, poor health, and concern for personal safety. Furthermore, research suggests that for many older women the body itself can present a constraint to leisure, specifically to physically active leisure, through physical decline such as joint problems, fatigue, or disability (Conn, 1998; Henderson & Ainsworth, 2002).

Despite evidence that leisure has unique meaning in the lives of older women and that they experience unique benefits and constraints, leisure researchers tend to overlook this population (Gibson, 2006; Wilhite et al., 1994; Son et al., 2007). Limited research has explored older women's leisure constraints and the experiences of leisure in their everyday lives (McGuire,

2000). Furthermore, because body image plays a role in older women's everyday lives, exploring the role of body image in leisure will shed light on their everyday leisure, which Shaw (1994) argues is vital to understanding the complexity of women's leisure.

To date, no research has looked specifically at the association between body image and leisure among older women. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore the role of body image in older women's leisure. To realize this purpose, we identified four main research questions: 1) What role, if any, does body image play in the leisure of older women? 2) If body image plays a role in older women's leisure, what aspects of the leisure activity are associated with body image? 3) If body image plays a role in older women's leisure, what aspects of body image are related to their leisure participation or experience? 4) What role, if any, has body image played in their leisure throughout their lives?

#### Methods

We collected the data for this study through individual interviews and focus groups with 13 women aged 60 and 69. We approached data collection this way for several reasons. First, qualitative methods allowed for depth and complexity to emerge in the data (Tunaley, 1999; Warren & Karner, 2005). Second, qualitative methods were ideal for addressing the research questions because currently little is known about the role of body image in the leisure of older women (Creswell, 1998). Third, qualitative methods allowed participants to address issues they perceived as relevant rather than being limited to perspectives deemed relevant by researchers (Pelican, et al., 2005). Finally, qualitative methods facilitated an inductive approach to the research, with findings grounded in the "voices" of the participants rather than preconceived assumptions (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### *Sample*

The sample was delimited to women aged 60 to 70 ( $M = 62.4$ ). We chose this age group to reduce the influence of menopause (more common in women younger than this group) and to diminish possible effects of deteriorating health (more common in women older than this group) (Baltes & Smith, 2003; Bedford & Johnson, 2006). We identified and recruited participants through snowball sampling, meaning existing participants identified additional participants (Freeman, Palmer, & Baker, 2006). Snowball sampling is useful in qualitative research because it increases access to the population of interest and facilitates the development of rapport with new participants due to common connections with the existing participant (Clarke, 2002; Patton, 2002).

At the conclusion of each interview, we asked participants several questions to identify characteristics that may influence body image or leisure including age, education, employment status, marital status, income, and height and weight (to determine body mass index, BMI). All participants were Caucasian and 10 of the 13 were born in the United States. Two participants (Kristy, 61 and Abigail, 66) were born in Europe and one (Rosalyn, 60) in the Middle East. Participants reported variation in other demographic characteristics (see Table 1). We assigned each participant a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

### *Procedures*

We collected data in two phases. Phase one consisted of individual interviews and phase two consisted of follow up focus groups. With a few participants who could not attend a focus group, we conducted follow up telephone calls. The individual interviews provided a private setting in which participants could freely discuss personal experiences and establish a relationship with the researcher (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The focus groups allowed the

participants to discuss topics in a social context. According to Roster (2007), “[o]ne of the key advantages of focus groups is that they can create a supportive social environment that encourages participants to express their feelings and piggy-back off others’ ideas, especially when topics of concern are social in nature” (p. 448). Multiple interactions with the participants in different settings facilitated prolonged engagement as well as triangulation of data collection methods which improved the rigor and overall richness of the data (Henderson, 2006). Furthermore, the use of focus groups and follow up telephone interviews provided a means of member checking because the researchers were able to verify initial interpretations and clarify inconsistencies or unanticipated findings (Banister, 1999; Clarke & Griffin, 2007)

*Phase one.* Each participant completed a semi-structured interview that lasted from one to two hours in her home or office. We initiated the interview by asking the participant to describe herself and the things she liked to do in her free time. In order to reduce potential confusion related to differing interpretations of the term “body image,” we introduced the topic we by asking the participant, “When you hear the term body image, what comes to your mind?” This helped to facilitate a discussion about the definition of the term “body image,” which in turn created a common understanding across participants. After this discussion, we used the term “body image” to allow each participant to focus on the aspects of body image that she perceived to be most relevant. Subsequent questions focused on participants’ experiences and perceptions of the role of body image in their leisure, along with probing questions to clarify and expand on their responses. For example, we asked participants, “*Do you think that your body image plays any role in the activities you choose to participate in during your free time? If yes, how?*”

At the conclusion of each interview we invited the participant to attend a focus group to discuss body image and leisure with other participants. Each woman expressed interest except

one who said she would “probably feel too shy” to discuss body image in a group setting. The individual interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and open coded throughout the data collection process. We recruited and interviewed participants until after 10 participants we determined that “gathering fresh data no longer spark[ed] new theoretical insights, nor reveal[ed] new properties of...core theoretical categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113). At this point we conducted three more interviews to ensure theoretical saturation. We used the open coding of the interview transcripts to identify topics that needed clarification or expansion and thereby create a protocol for the focus groups.

*Phase two.* We scheduled two focus groups of four participants to accommodate their availability. We kept focus groups small to facilitate discussion about a potentially sensitive topic and to allow each participant the opportunity to speak in depth about her experiences (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

We used the results of the individual interviews to create a moderator’s guide for the focus groups. Focus group questions included those designed for confirmation of researcher interpretation. For example, “*During the interviews, some of you indicated that the role of body image in your leisure has changed across your life. How do you feel about this idea?*” Other focus group questions were designed to expand on topics introduced by some of the participants during the interviews and allow other participants to agree or disagree. For example, “*During the interviews, some of you said that your leisure actually plays a role in your body image. Would the rest of you agree or disagree with this statement?*” Finally, focus group questions were designed to provide insight into participants’ experiences and to invite a socially comfortable dialogue among participants. For example, “*Can you think of a time when you felt that body*



*image played a role in your leisure? As you think of these times, please select one to share with the group.”*

According to Pelican et al. (2005) researchers conducting interviews or focus groups addressing body image topics should be the same sex as the participants to facilitate open discussion. Both female researchers were present at each focus group to provide one moderator and one note-taker (Henderson, 2006). The participants openly discussed a range of body image topics and were comfortable expressing opinions or experiences that differed from others in the group. The researchers debriefed after each focus group to discuss impressions, possible themes, discrepancies, and connections to theory (Morgan, 1997).

Five participants were unable to participate in the focus groups due to work-related time constraints, care-giving responsibilities, or feeling “too shy.” Each of these participants completed a 30 to 45 minute follow-up telephone interview in which she responded to each of the focus group questions as well as the responses of the other participants. Each telephone interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Telephone interviews allowed those who did not attend a focus group to respond to the comments of those who attended.

### *Data Analysis*

We analyzed the data using the constant comparison method to generate themes through “systematic and explicit coding and analytic procedures” (Glaser and Holton, 2004, p. 15). Because we collected data in two phases, the transcripts were analyzed sequentially to determine if the data could be combined (Banister, 1999; Morgan, 1997). We open coded the individual interviews first to create a basic coding framework and then coded the focus group and telephone interview transcripts using the same framework. Because the subsequent coding only added one

code and did not change the nature of the original codes, we combined all transcripts into one database (Pelican et al., 2005).

After all the transcripts were open coded, we organized the codes into concepts and categories using axial coding to identify relationships between open codes (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Henderson, 2006). Throughout the analysis process, memoeing and debriefing with other researchers helped to generate codes, discover properties about codes, and identify relationships between codes (Freeman, Palmer, & Baker, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each category or concept was then refined and delimited by exploring the diversity in the data, searching for disconfirming evidence, and comparing the categories back to the original transcripts (Charmaz, 2006; Henderson, 2006). Finally, we conducted member checks a) during the focus groups and b) by sending each participant a preliminary version of each manuscript and asking for verification that she was being accurately represented (Henderson, 2006).

### Results

The data provided a picture of the complex role of body image in older women's leisure, which included both negative and positive experiences. Some participants described body image concerns that led to modification or reduction of certain leisure activities. More commonly, however, participants described increased participation in leisure activities for reasons related to body image. Furthermore, most of the participants described body image as both a constraint and a facilitator of leisure.

The participants described a wide variety of body image experiences. Some described their body image as consistently positive throughout their lives, while other described their body image as declining due to age-related changes. The rest of the participants fell on a continuum between these two perspectives. Interestingly, while two participants described their body image

as being worse now than when they were younger, the rest of the sample described it as better. Many explained that even though with age, their bodies had become further from their ideal, they were “generally content” and that their body image was improving because they felt more accepting of their bodies and less concerned with appearance. For example, Kara (64) said that her “body image was never good because of being tall and overweight,” that that it didn’t “bother [her] so much anymore” because she is “happy with who [she is].” Furthermore, several participants explained that their body image had improved with age because the value they placed on appearance shifted toward valuing health.

#### *Body Image and Reduced or Modified Leisure Participation*

One way that body image influenced leisure was through reduced or modified participation (n=10). A common theme among participants was that if aspects of their bodies made them self-conscious during an activity, they had ceased to participate in the activity or had eliminated the aspect that made them uncomfortable. This reduction was generally relegated to swimming, dancing, or other physical activities. For example, although Kara (64) identified “water activities like swimming or just floating in the water” as some of her preferred leisure options, but chose to swim less frequently “because of being in a bathing suit and the whole body image thing.” Shayna (60) similarly discussed reduced participation in physical activity due to body image,

Knowing that I was always larger, all my life, I know there’s a lot of things I gave up...like dancing, I didn’t go to dances a lot. I guess public swimming, swimming on the beach in a bathing suit, you know, more active things, like being on a women’s softball team...I think that was body image related. I would be like, ‘oh gee, I can’t do this.’ Or like a lot of balance and coordination things like skiing...or it’s like when you go out to a gym, and they’re all really skinny. They’re all on their bikes and they all weigh a hundred pounds and you think, ‘oh gee, where do I fit in?’

Furthermore, all of the participants distinguished between the influence of appearance-related aspects of their body image and the influence of ability-related aspects of body image.

*Appearance-based.* Participants described a variety of levels of comfort with their appearance from feeling “no concern whatsoever” (Abigail, 66) to having “always had a poor perception of how I look” (Kara, 64). A pattern that emerged from the data was that those who felt uncomfortable with their appearance often noted limitations to their leisure choices based on such concerns. For example, Angela (69) who described feeling worse about her appearance now than ever before because of recent weight gain, said, “I *do not* wear a bathing suit anymore. I not only have an old body, but old skin! Even if I was very skinny, I would not wear a bathing suit. That is about the only thing I don’t participate in anymore.”

Similarly, several other women commented that their levels of participation in swimming were impacted by body image due to concern about wearing a bathing suit. In response to others mentioning this topic during the focus groups, Nina (64) commented, “I agree. I don’t want to wear a bathing suit, so I don’t swim...I really hadn’t thought about that before.” Interestingly, swimming, sunbathing, or doing other activities in a bathing suit was the only area that the participants perceived they participated in less due to concerns about appearance. While some described past experiences of appearance-related constraint to other activities such as dancing, they perceived those constraints to be relegated to the past.

Furthermore, reduced participation in activities requiring a bathing suit was often described as “situational” (Isabelle, 61), meaning their level of constraint was dependent on the “people present in that setting” (Rachel, 62). In the individual interviews, Kara (64) explained that whether or not she is concerned about her appearance “depends on the environment.”

Kara (64): I’ll go to the beach. I have no problem with that, but if...somebody that I worked with, if they had a pool and they invited a group of people over

from work to go swimming, I would not put my bathing suit on...if they were real close friends, I wouldn't have a problem with it, but if...they were more my husband's friends than our friends together, there again, in that situation, I probably would not put a bathing suit on...because some people are smaller and some of the wives are smaller and I always thought they looked so much better...But to go to the beach where people don't know me, I don't have a problem with that.

Isabelle (61): I would concur with that, although last year I went with my grandchildren in Virginia to a water park. You were in your swimming suit all day long. I said, "ok, I can do this." (laughs) I put the old swimsuit on and I walked around there like everybody else and I thought, you know, there are other people here who are much bigger than I am and they're doing it just as confident as anything, so I can too.

Kara: Well I've done it at a water park also, but...

Isabelle: But then again nobody knew me (laughs).

Kara: Exactly, yea...that's the thing, being anonymous.

While most of the participants mentioned wearing a bathing suit when asked about the role of body image in leisure, not all agreed that it led to reduced participation. For example, Paula (61) remarked, "I'm self conscious in a bathing suit, just self conscious that someone might be judging me, but...I would still go swimming...because that's one thing I really enjoy." She went on to explain that if she were going to a public pool, she would alleviate some of her self-consciousness by wearing her "expensive suit" because she felt it was more "complimentary." Similarly, Linda (60) commented, "there was a time in my life that I was self conscious in a bathing suit, not so it deterred me, though." Furthermore, Abigail (66) explained that her body image didn't have any effect on her decision to wear a bathing suit because she was accepting of age-related bodily changes.

...when you get older you don't look the same as when you were twenty, but still it doesn't hinder me to go in a bathing suit...this is just a time of changing life...So it doesn't stop me to go swimming with a bathing suit even in a public swimming pool. I don't feel inhibited from that. Even though I don't look like I did when I was twenty and I liked it maybe better then, but I was younger, now I'm older, so it is different.

*Ability-based.* While most of the participants agreed that they do not perceive a great deal of current leisure constraint resulting from concerns about appearance, many discussed reduced participation due to concerns about their physical ability. For some women, this concern related to the fear of embarrassment due to lack of physical ability. Other participants related reduced participation in activities due to reduced prioritization of health and increase prioritization of physical ability.

Several participants described reduced participation due to fear of embarrassment or lack of confidence in their ability. For example, when asked if body image played a role in her leisure, Kara (64) responded,

I think body image does [play a role in my leisure] because I know my limitations as to what activities I can do...I used to do aerobics, I used to do those kinds of things, but...I think the leisure activities that I do now are the things that I feel my body can do...I could not participate in a sport that I would have to run because I cannot run. I love to walk. I can walk fast. I know I can do that, but I know that I cannot participate in any kinds of activities that would be really fast.

Paula (61) described her concern as related to embarrassment about her physical ability. She commented, "I like to ice skate, I like to roller skate, but there's a fear there now of roller skating especially. I fell the last time badly and I was horribly embarrassed." Marta (62) perceived her constraint as related to both lack of confidence and embarrassment. During her focus group, in response to the preceding comment by Paula, she remarked,

Yea, we're talking about our body images, do they limit us or don't they? I think it still does for me (pause). I don't, as much as I might like to, I don't do really strenuous things. Like a walk up a mountain or whatever. I know I'll be exhausted and embarrassed by it.

Some of the participants explained that their fear of embarrassment about their physical ability was related to the level of competition in an activity. Linda (60) said that she had played basketball since her youth, but had recently stopped playing on a team at the local YMCA

because many of the other players were younger than her and she felt she was “out of [her] league.” Kara (64), who reported a general dislike for organized sports, commented, “I wouldn’t want to compete in any activity that was a competition. I don’t have a lot of confidence in myself that I could do well.” Rachel (62) similarly mentioned that she doesn’t “engage in competitive activities” due to “lack of self-confidence” about her body image in terms of “athleticism.” In contrast, two participants (Angela, 69 and Kristy, 61) described themselves as enjoying competition in physical activities. They both agreed, however, that they often did not participate in an activity if the level of competition was not comparable to their own ability level.

The participants generally agreed that, with age, their body image is increasingly focused on health and physical ability rather than appearance. This shift has led to reduced participation for some participants. For example, Kristy (61) explained that she no longer skis because she’s “afraid now” that it will negatively impact her physical ability. She commented about some activities, “I can see that I could be hurt and I would really hate to...be sick at this time in my life or have a serious injury...It’s not worth it to me anymore to do some of these things...” Similarly, Angela (69) explained that after surviving breast cancer she wants to be “healthy and active as long as possible.” Therefore, although she used to sunbathe to improve her appearance, she no longer does so because of her shifting priorities from appearance to health.

Interestingly, most of the participants portrayed acceptance of constraints, saying that they were “natural” or “just part of life.” For example, after describing body image related constraints, Nina (64) said, “Yea, I think it’s there, but it’s really not something I think about. I do the things I enjoy and I enjoy the things I do.” Shayna (60) said that she perceives her body image as “more toward the negative” because she is overweight and has “lots and lots of health problems,” but takes joy in doing “a lot of social and creative” types of activities and feels that

there are “plenty of alternatives” to the physical activities in which she does not participate. She remarked, “...there are a lot of other choices...there’s other things available. You don’t really have to go ice skating when you’re 60 if you don’t want to because you can do something else that’s as much fun.” Many other participants agreed as depicted by the following focus group excerpt.

Kristy (61): ...I’m not as adventuresome (sic) in my activities...now being older, I still enjoy my activities now, but they’re more geared to my age...I just don’t want to do those [adventurous activities]. I mean, I’m happy.

Rosalyn (60): I think that’s normal. Some of the sports, in my mind, they are not even there anymore, which I think is normal, because I mean, you have aged.

Shayna: You are smarter, you have matured.

Rosalyn: But there are other things that are available that we can do...So, yea, we limit ourselves for some things, but we don’t even think about it anymore...Yea, like skydiving, it wouldn’t cross my mind now (laughs)

Kristy: Yea, like if I had a chance to go skiing, I don’t want to go anymore (laughs).

Rosalyn: Yea, I don’t want to do a roller coaster anymore. I mean I *loved* it, but now, I don’t want it...I think that’s normal with aging.

### *Body Image and Increased Participation*

Along with describing acceptance of body image related constraints, most participants perceived that body image also leads to increased participation in certain leisure activities. Many specifically described this “facilitation” as being positively associated with age. Some participants attributed increased participation to increased value on physical ability or health. Others perceived increased participation or enjoyment of activities as facilitated by positive perceptions about their appearance or acceptance of their current appearance.

*Ability-related.* Most of the participants mentioned that with age, the focus of their body image has shifted to include more emphasis on physical health and ability. For instance, Kristy



(61) explained that as she aged, her body image was dictated more by her perceived health and physical ability than by her appearance. She commented, “I don’t remember thinking about health when I was younger...you would just take it for granted...Now if I had to pick between health and looking good, I’d pick health.” This shifting body image focus has, in turn, influenced participation in physically active leisure. For Kara (64) body image included “appearance, how other people see [her], being active, feeling good, all those things” and that her concerns about health and physical ability have prompted increased participation in leisure activities such as biking and walking. “I’m really starting to exercise more on a regular basis...to get healthier...I notice...aches and pains, knee problems, those kind of things, so that’s why I’m trying to get some weight off again so that I start to feel healthier.”

Angela (69) explained that she has increased her participation in physical activity, including joining a women’s fitness group for “muscle tone, bones, flexibility and so forth.” She went on to explain that the motivation for her increased participation centers on the value she places on maintaining her physical health, saying. “I think staying active is a big part of the aging process because the more active you are...the healthier and the less aches and pains you have...[appearance] isn’t that important, because without your health, you don’t have anything.” Similarly, Callie (61) remarked, “I exercise more now, just in the last few years, to stretch and strengthen my muscles.”

Interestingly, some participants explained that their participation in physically active leisure was not only facilitated by their body image, but that they viewed the relationship as circular. For instance, Kristy (61) related,

I’m really happiest when I’m active. I don’t know what comes first, if it’s being active or feeling good about [my body]...but I do think there is some sort of feedback. I want to do things (pause) and because I do things, I feel good about myself, I’m not going to gain weight, I can wear nicer things, that makes me feel good.

Similarly, Linda (60) described body image as being “interwoven” with her participation in physically active leisure. She commented that seeing herself as “an athletic person” and someone who is “relatively in shape and active,” facilitated her participation in leisure because she felt comfortable with her body and because she wanted to “be able to be as active as [she] can.” She perceived that in turn, participation in physically active leisure improved her body image related to weight, muscle tone, and athleticism and that, for her, being active and having a positive body image were “all woven together.” This perspective was common among those participants who expressed interest and enjoyment in sports or other physically active leisure, while those who expressed less interest in such activities generally disagreed with the perspective that leisure influenced their body image. Furthermore, each participant who perceived the relationship between body image and leisure as bi-directional expressed that more participation in leisure led to improved body image and improved body image, in turn, facilitated leisure.

*Appearance-related.* Many of the women explained that their body image related to appearance has always been positive or has improved with age. They described such positive body image as facilitating their participation in physically active leisure. Rosalyn (60) commented that she felt she had a “good figure” and explained that, “because of that you feel free to do whatever you want.” She specifically mentioned that when jogging or playing tennis, she would not feel concerned about the appearance of her body. She went on to explain that her positive body image facilitated her participation in things that she considered “enjoyable and good for you, for health and all around.” She stressed, however, that “it never *pushed* [her] to do physical activity...if [she] didn’t have that type of an interest.” Abigail (66) agreed with Rosalyn saying, “it’s easy for me to do [physical] activities...because I felt good with my body...But I

didn't do it... directed to certain body parts I wanted to change, not for that, but for the whole way of feeling.”

Rachel (62) explained that her improving body image facilitated her participation in tap dancing. She had been doing so since the age of 50 and she felt comfortable doing so because in the class she attends “there are people of all different shapes and sizes.” Furthermore, she explained that the positive setting allowed her to participate, which then facilitated further participation. She said that she is “usually not as self-assured as other people,” but that her successful experiences with tap dancing “positively reinforce” her to “try other new things, kind of like a spiral.” She summarized her perceptions about the role of body image in her leisure by saying, “My body image is reflected by the way I see myself and interact with others, how adventurous I am in engaging in new and varied activities. When I felt less positive about myself I was likely not to try new things and expose my shortfalls.”

Several participants specifically described positive body image as facilitating activities that involved public speaking, social groups, or leadership positions. In regard to public speaking, Callie (61) said, “I think my body image being a positive one allowed me to get up in front of 600 people and not give a thought to my body.” Abigail (66) perceived positive body image as facilitating her enjoyment and participation in leisure that takes place in group or social settings. She commented,

...a positive body image gives you freedom to do all activities you want to do. I personally do whatever I like to do and don't let the appearance of my aging body be a limit...One thing about my body image, I feel not judged from people...I don't shy away from groups of people. I don't fear, ‘oh, they look at me and I don't look good.’ That does not come to my mind. I mean, if I feel like doing this I do it. Even if they are all young people around, I don't mind that because they know I'm older, so I *can* look different. I feel almost free (laughs) on that point; I don't go in competition with that.

Similarly, many of the participants perceived that their positive body image “facilitates” their participation in visible types of recreation. When asked if body image played a role in her leisure choices, Marta (62) responded,

Oh, yea. I like to be up front...I love to introduce stuff. I love to be out in the public and representing people, ideas, things, and so forth, and I’m pretty sure that if I didn’t have a good self-image I would choose the job in the background. So I love to be up there, I love to do presentations...and I’m certain that one aspect of that is how I feel about myself...I have a very inverted body image. I always think of myself as young, thin, blonde, and very attractive...I think my image is reflected in, I’m extremely outgoing... I think this image that I have of myself allows me to do a lot of the things that I do.

Several participants specifically described their increased participation as distinctly different from their previous experiences. Callie (61) said that in her youth, her leisure was negatively impacted by poor body image because she “felt embarrassed in front of people.” She commented, “I didn’t want to walk in front of a crowd...I didn’t want to try out for the school play because I didn’t want to be stared at.” She explained that during her later years her body image improved and that now “body image doesn’t restrict” her. Similarly, Rachel (62) mentioned that she developed later than her peers and that as an adolescent “not feeling comparable to everybody else was a big factor in [her] being more quiet and not trying a lot of things.” As she has gotten older, however, “because of all the things [she has] been through,” she has learned to “appreciate [her] body more,” and has recently become more confident in her leisure activities. Linda (60) described similar changes and said it was simply because she has “gotten over” her body image concerns. She recounted a childhood experience of being enrolled in a dance class. She remarked, “during that summer I went through this very awkward growing stage where I got kind of chubby and...very self conscious trying to [dance]...so I quit...and it was definitely a body image that kept me from doing that.” She explained, however, that she now feels “very accepting” of her body and doesn’t feel “deterred from dancing later in life.”

Participants generally agreed that in regard to appearance, with age they tend to be more accepting of their bodies and that body image increasingly facilitated leisure. Shayna (60) explained that concerns about her body were “not such a big deal anymore” and explained that it was because she was “more mature and less self conscious.” She commented, “I have less hang ups now that I’m older.” Rosalyn (60) articulated the perceptions expressed by many of the participants:

Body image overall was more important when I was younger than when I was older. That would dictate more, I could do this, don’t do that, etc. than definitely after 50. Now it’s like, who cares?...I think with age things get easier for us to accept...we don’t feel we have to look this way or that way. Now we can accept ourselves much better, without much thought. I mean, I’m good with who am and with the way that I look...my body image plays less of a role in my leisure activities now.

#### Discussion

The findings provide clarification of the complex role of body image in older women’s leisure, which is absent from the current literature. The findings demonstrated that body image played a role in the women’s leisure participation, but that it was both positive and negative. Furthermore, the role of body image in leisure participation was not only related to concerns about appearance, but also to evaluations of ability. While research has found that body image influences leisure enjoyment for younger populations, much less evidence for this type of role existed among the current sample. This may be because most participants indicated that if body image concerns reduced the quality of a leisure experience, they simply ceased participation. Finally, participants generally viewed the role of body image in their leisure to have become more positive or less negative across their lives. These findings have important implications for our understanding of the role of body image in leisure and for research into leisure constraints in general.

### *Role of Body Image in Leisure*

The findings support the tenet that body image is a complex construct for older women and that they maintain body image through shifting attitudes (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003; Ferraro et al., 2008). The findings also support McLaren and Wardle's (2002) claim that in order to understand the role of body image in women's lives, researchers must acknowledge the multiple dimensions of body image and the changing prioritization of different aspects of body image at different life stages. Furthermore, the results suggest that as women's body image attitudes shift with age, body image improves and they experience fewer negative outcomes in their leisure lives.

In addition, the findings lend support to Tiggemann and Webster's (2003) suggestion that older women's body image is counter-intuitive; instead of getting progressively worse with age, most participants perceived that their body image had improved with age. Researchers have documented the societal pressure for youth and beauty and the challenges that older women face in relation to body image (Wolf, 1991), which suggest that appearance concern should represent a considerable constraint for older women (Hurd, 2000). The findings of this study, however, demonstrate that this conceptualization of older women's body image is too narrow because it fails to take into consideration individual contexts, priorities, and adaptation.

Participants in this study perceived that the role of body image in their leisure was more complex than being dictated by societal pressures and that, with some exceptions, concern about appearance had fewer negative impacts on leisure than at earlier times in their lives. In fact, many participants described their positive body image as a facilitator of their participation in visible types of leisure. For example, Marta (62) explained that in her later years she had become involved in volunteering and felt that her positive body image facilitated her choice to become a

docent at a local historical cite. Furthermore, the constraints reported were often dependent on their level of comfort with or feeling of anonymity among other people in the leisure setting or related to other individual or interpersonal factors. For example, Rachel (62) explained that she felt comfortable participating in dance classes despite body image concern because of the comfortable and accepting atmosphere created by the other participants. These findings counter some feminist literature that tends to view women's leisure as either dictated by societal oppression or a site of personal resistance to gender stereotypes (Shaw, 1994; Wearing, 1995). Participants in this study did not describe overcoming body image concerns in their leisure through intentional or conscious efforts, but rather as "a process" of "adjustment" that "happens as you mature," (Rachel, 62) which incorporated many different life domains. Research on women's leisure could benefit by adopting a more comprehensive perspective of the factors that shape women's leisure as they with age.

The current findings support Ferraro, et al.'s (2008) hypothesis that as women age their shifting body image priorities from aesthetics to function serve as a buffer against negative outcomes. For example, Linda (60) explained that as an adolescent body image constrained her participation in dance because she felt "chubby." As she aged her body image focus shifted from appearance to ability and in later years although she did not evaluate her appearance as more attractive, her body image did "not deter" her from dancing. Most of the participants agreed that health and physical ability were more important components of body image and that appearance was less important to them as older women (Whitbourne & Skultety, 2002). Reduced concern about appearance allowed the women to participate in and enjoy leisure activities despite dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. Rosalyn (60) portrayed this concept when she said

that as a teenager, she was “conscious of the fact that” her “butt might go up and down” while playing tennis, but that as she got older, she felt less affected by appearance concerns.

Similarly, participants explained that their perceptions or thoughts about health and ability now played a more important role in their leisure than perceptions of appearance. The women reported reduced participation in activities they thought might be detrimental to their health as well as increased participation in activities that might improve their health.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that participants mentioned the body functioning aspect of body image both in relation to perceived ability as well as to potential embarrassment. For example, reduced participation in strenuous physical activities was related to lack of confidence in one’s ability, but also fear of embarrassment. These findings support research which has reported that older women place unique meaning on leisure, have changing leisure patterns, and warrant study as a unique group (Gibson, 2006; Son et al., 2007; Wilhite et al., 1994).

Furthermore, in support of other research with older women (e.g., Heuser, 2005; Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007) participants illustrated that their leisure choices portrayed their changing values and priorities (health and physical ability).

The findings about the influence of body image on leisure were particularly interesting in light of recent research about younger populations. Research has suggested that among younger women and girls, body image constrains leisure due largely to participants’ concerns about their physical appearance (James, 2000; Liechty et al., 2006). In contrast, however, the findings suggest that for older women appearance concerns are less constraining than for younger women and older women are more able to adapt to or cognitively negotiate the constraints they face. Participants perceived that this was due in part to generational differences; they felt that young women and girls have “more pressure to be beautiful now-days” (Rachel, 62). Furthermore, the



participants explained that as they aged, they became “more accepting” or “more appreciative” of their bodies and themselves and had “fewer hang ups” about the appearance of their bodies.

Similarly, research with younger populations has suggested that women experience pressure to participate in activities that will improve their appearance generally through weight loss (Frederick & Shaw, 1995). The older women in this study, however, described these types of constraints much less frequently because they were more accepting of their bodies and because they viewed participation in such activities as focused on health rather than appearance. Hence, aging plays an important role in the relationship between body image and women’s leisure.

#### *Implications for Understanding Leisure Constraints and Negotiation*

While the participants in this study reported reduced participation in certain activities due to body image concerns, their attitudes did not describe actively resisting or negotiating such constraints (Cronan & Scott, 2008; Wearing, 1995). They tended to perceive constraints as “natural” or “just a part of life” and their responses as “adjustment” or “acceptance.” For example, Kristy (60) referenced a leisure constraint when she said that she no longer skis because she fears injury. She explained, however, that she accepts this constraint and doesn’t desire to ski because she values protecting her health more than skiing. For Kristy, adapting to the constraint did not involve negotiating through the barrier in order to participate. Instead, she chose to accept the constraint and negotiated the desire to participate or simply did not view her reduced participation as resulting from constraint, but from choice. Depending on the perspective of the researcher, this situation might have been labeled a constraint or an example of successful cognitive negotiation. Findings such as this support the tenet that motivation must be considered

in tandem with constraints (Alexandris, Tsorbatzoudis, & Grouios, 2002; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001).

Furthermore, Kristy's example suggests that we must broaden our conceptualization of leisure constraints and question whether it is appropriate for a researcher to identify a constraint that a participant does not perceive (Jackson, 2005). By asking Kristy's perspective of the situation, it was clear that she did not perceive her cessation of skiing as a constraint because she participated in many other physical activities and no longer desired to participate. In this case, it may not even be appropriate to assume that a constraint ever existed if she did not perceive one.

It is also important to broaden our conceptualization of constraint negotiation (Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). An underlying assumption of most leisure research is that the ideal outcome of leisure constraints is "negotiation through" them (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993). The findings of this study, however, suggest that in some situations, such negotiation is not necessarily practical or even desirable. For example, Angela (69) explained that she no longer participates in sunbathing because after overcoming cancer, she is much more conscious of the effects of the sun. Her fear of skin cancer may be a beneficial constraint that protects her from potentially harmful outcomes of participating in a leisure activity. Furthermore, many participants perceived such a large variety of available leisure options, that there was no need to negotiate appearance or ability constraints; they simply ceased the affected activities and chose others. Kara (64) who said, "I do what I enjoy, and I enjoy what I do," typified this attitude. Kara and others described ceasing participation in activities in they felt appearance anxiety. Rather than actively negotiation through a constraint, they simply accepted it.

The findings support Samdahl, Hutchinson, and Jacobson's (1999) assertion that perhaps accommodation is a more accurate term for the ways in which individuals overcome some

leisure constraints. Some participants described relatively clear examples of negotiation strategies prompted by a leisure constraint, such as Paula (61) who said that when she goes swimming at a public pool she feels more comfortable wearing her “expensive suit.” Many of the participants, however, described larger life events or long-term cognitive adjustments for dealing with body image struggles that were not prompted by leisure constraints, but nevertheless alleviated them. For example, Nina (64) divorced a husband who negatively influenced her body image. This was not prompted by leisure constraint, but led to reduced consciousness and increased leisure participation. Similarly, Callie (61) described a long process of coming to accept her body due to shifts in her attitudes that were prompted by a number of environmental factors and ultimately led to a “very positive” body image, which she felt “facilitated” her participation in leisure activities. These findings highlight the importance of considering accommodation or negotiation of leisure constraints in other life domains and as occurring across the life course.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of considering constraints within the context of a person’s life (Shaw, 1994). For Shayna, physical constraint led to reduced participation in physical activity, but not in overall leisure. She explained that she participated in a great deal of social and artistic types of leisure and felt satisfied with her leisure life. If we were to study only her participation in physical activity, we would have reported high levels of leisure constraint. By exploring body image-related leisure constraints within her everyday life, however, we were able to compose a more elaborate and complex picture.

The results of this study also highlight the value of studying leisure constraints for “everyday women.” A great deal of research that explores constraints to women’s leisure and older adults’ leisure has addressed highly involved groups in relation to a specific leisure activity

(e.g., Dionigi, 2006; Roster, 2007). These studies provide valuable insight, but are limited in their ability to provide a basis for more generalizable theory. For example, research with women who are heavily involved in specific physical activities has found that these settings provide a vehicle for women to actively resist gender stereotypes and societal barriers (e.g., Cronan & Scott, 2008; Little, 2002). The women in this study, however, did not describe active resistance of societal values, but something more akin to passive acceptance or accommodation. Comparing these differing results raises the question, what is different among these groups that might lead to such different outcomes? Perhaps for the “everyday woman” negotiation of aging or gender stereotypes is not a conscious decision, but a long term process of adjustment and adaptation. Studying the constraints and negotiation that everyday people experience in their everyday lives can improve our understanding of negotiation as a construct, provide a broader foundation for theory, and help to identify the settings or factors which facilitate positive outcomes.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

The findings of this study provided a new perspective on the role of body image in leisure, documenting that the experiences of older women might be different than that of younger women and girls. Further cross sectional and longitudinal research is necessary to verify such a difference and to determine to what extent such a difference is generational or related to age. Furthermore, longitudinal research could establish whether cognitive adjustments (such as shifting body image priorities) lead to increased leisure participation, or if leisure participation facilitates cognitive adjustments by documenting which occurs first. Furthermore, as suggested by the findings of this study, in order to advance models of leisure constraints, more research is needed to understand the constraints that people face in their everyday lives. Finally, as many participants in this study suggested that body image plays less of a constraining role in their

leisure with age, more research is needed to understand the process by which the improvement occurs to provide a basis for interventions with younger populations.

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Table 1.

*Participant Demographic Information*

Name	Age	Marital Status	Education	Annual Income	Work	BMI
Kara	64	Married	HSD	\$50,000 to \$60,000	Retired	38.7
Nina	64	Married	HSD	\$90,000 to \$100,000	Full-time	28
Marta	62	Divorced	BS	\$60,000 to \$70,000	Part-time	36
Abigail	66	Married	BS	Declined to respond	Retired	22.5
Isabelle	61	Married	HSD	\$50,000 to \$60,000	Retired	29.7
Paula	61	Divorced	HSD	\$20,000 to \$30,000	Retired	27.4
Linda	60	Female Domestic Partner	MS	\$70,000 to \$80,000	Full-time	24
Angela	69	Divorced	HSD	\$40,000 to \$50,000	Full-time	26.1
Rosalyn	60	Divorced	PhD	\$40,000 to \$50,000	Retired	22.7
Kristy	61	Married	BS	\$40,000 to \$50,000	Retired	20.9
Shayna	60	Married	BS	More than \$100,000	Retired	34.1
Callie	61	Divorced	PhD	\$50,000 to \$60,000	Full-time	17.9
Rachel	62	Married	PhD	More than \$100,000	Retired	26.7

## CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This purpose of this dissertation was to study the role of body image in older women's leisure. This final chapter will summarize the key findings in regard to each of main research questions; discuss the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual knowledge gained through the course of this study; and propose directions for future research in this area.

### Summary of Key Findings

This study addressed research questions in two main areas: body image; body image and leisure. Following are the summaries of the key findings related to the questions investigated in each area.

#### *Body Image*

The participants in this study discussed their body image in positive ways. Some literature suggests that as women age they face increasing societal pressure toward youth and beauty, while their bodies move further from societal ideals (Hurd, 2000; Wolf, 1991). These conditions indicate that as women age, their body image should become worse. The research that has addressed older women's body image, however, has found that the reality of women's body image does not follow these predictions (Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990; Reboussin et al., 2000; Ferraro et al., 2008). Participants in this study supported the research suggesting that women's body image does not decline with age and provided clarification as to why this happens. While most of the participants identified one or more things they would like to change about their bodies, many expressed acceptance of their bodies overall and with age-related changes in appearance. Both in regard to physical ability and appearance, most women said they were content with their bodies.

This dissertation identified a number of factors that interact to shape a woman's body image across the course of her life. These factors included societal, interpersonal and physiological influences. These factors influence a woman's evaluations of her own body, but also her attitudes and perceptions of appearance. For women in this study, positive body image seemed to be largely a factor of their attitudes regarding the importance of appearance. Most of the women distinguished between the appearance and function of their bodies and explained that with age, they placed increasing value on function. Participants suggested that such shifting attitudes came about through numerous life events and factors. Furthermore, the findings suggested that as women age they develop strategies for adapting to age-related bodily changes which help them to maintain or improve body image such as places more value on internal factors and focusing on aspects of appearance they can control.

#### *Body Image and Leisure Participation*

Participants in this study also discussed the role of body image in their leisure in unexpected ways. Research among younger women and girls has found that concerns about appearance lead to reduced participation in leisure and pressure to participate in leisure activities that will improve appearance (James, 2000; Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006). Women in the current study, however, described appearance-related constraints to participation as much less prevalent in their leisure. Although some participants said that they would not participate in activities that would require a bathing suit, most explained that appearance did not hinder their participation in other activities. Many indicated that having positive body image facilitated their participation in public or social leisure activities. Furthermore, participants addressed a different body image-related concern that constrained their participation, which was lack of confidence or fear of embarrassment related to physical ability. Interestingly, while participants reported



increased leisure participation due to body image, they explained that in younger years the motivation was to improve appearance, but in their later years they increased participation to improve health.

Participants explained that situational factors (generally related to the other people present) influenced their participation in leisure activities. For example, some participants felt that if the people present in the leisure setting were close and supportive friends or strangers, they would experience fewer appearance-related constraints to participation. Some participants who reported that poor self-evaluations of appearance constrained their appearance, expressed that they would be more likely to participate if they were among strangers because they felt anonymous. Overall, however, participants explained that they felt fewer appearance-related body image constraints with age, due to shifting attitudes from valuing appearance to valuing health and physical ability.

The results of this study also differed from existing research in terms of women's experiences as to the role of body image in their leisure quality. Research among younger women and girls has found that concerns about appearance lead to reduced enjoyment in leisure (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; James, 2000). Among participants in this study, however, only one described appearance concerns as impacting her enjoyment of leisure activities. More frequently, participants suggested that feeling anxiety about their appearance in a leisure activity or setting was rare and if it did occur, they simply did not participate. Similarly, participants explained that body image-related constraints to enjoyment had reduced with age. This reduction occurred for some because they ceased participation, but more often because of increasingly accepting body image attitudes.

## Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this dissertation have important implications for both the body image and leisure literature. The findings suggest that because leisure is a meaningful part of older women's everyday lives, studying the role of body image in leisure can help researchers understand older women's experiences of body image. Similarly, because body image is an important part of older women's everyday experiences, considering the relationship between body image and leisure can help researchers understand older women's leisure within the context of their everyday lives. The findings of this dissertation highlight the benefits of adopting a life course perspective when studying older adults. Furthermore, the findings have theoretical implications for the study of leisure constraints. Finally, the results suggest that in studying both body image and leisure, it is necessary for researchers to a) consider the complexity of older women's experiences and influences; b) shed assumptions based on observations of younger populations or specific groups; and c) adopt less restrictive methods and perspectives for studying body image and leisure constraints.

### *Life Course Perspective*

One of the main tenets of the life course perspective is that humans are complex individuals (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Adopting a life course perspective for this dissertation facilitated understanding of the complexity of both body image and leisure for older women. The life course perspective underlined the interaction of factors that shape these constructs across a woman's life. The life course perspective highlighted the complex ways that body image and leisure are experienced and the numerous ways they shape outcomes in women's everyday lives.

These findings suggest that some body image and leisure theory is limited by focusing only on societal factors. When studying women, researchers frequently note societal double

standards, disparities, and other oppressive factors (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Shaw, 1994). Working from such a perspective, researchers may look only for negative outcomes or assume a direct relationship between society and an individual's attitudes or behavior. However, the current findings suggest that the reality of women's lives is too complex to be understood with such limitations. For example, Rachel (62) described awareness of societal pressure for thinness and beauty. She also related experiences of fluctuating health. For Rachel, her experiences with illness influenced her attitudes about the importance of appearance, which in turn served as a buffer against societal pressures, thus resulting in positive body image and increased leisure participation. Without exploring the various facets of her life, the intricacies of this process would not have been apparent.

Adopting a life course perspective also facilitated understanding of long term changes or life events that influence both body image and leisure. For example, several participants described health concerns (e.g., breast cancer, heart problems, arthritis) that they had dealt with or were currently dealing with, which caused them to think differently about body image and more highly value health and physical ability. These events and changes impacted body image and thereby leisure, but may not have been identified without adopting a life course perspective.

### *Leisure Constraints*

The findings have important implications for the study of leisure constraints. The women in this study described not only fewer appearance related constraints in later years, but the process by which appearance-related constraints were reduced. These findings depicted negotiation of leisure constraints that took place over many years and were not conscious efforts, but rather adjustments resulting from everyday life factors. For example, Shayna (60) described negative body image as a child and then a process of coming to accept herself "as a person, not just a big

person.” Along with improvement in body image, she came to accept the activities that she could not participate in (e.g., running, softball) and “appreciate the numerous opportunities” available to her (e.g., swimming, crafts). These findings suggest that it is necessary to consider a broad conceptualization of leisure constraint negotiation. The term negotiation seems to imply an active response to an encountered constraint. The results of this dissertation, however, lend support to Samdahl, Hutchinson, and Jacobson’s (1999) assertion that perhaps accommodation would be a more accurate term for the ways in which individuals overcome leisure constraints. Furthermore, the findings indicate that to understand negotiation of leisure constraints it is necessary to recognize that they may not be an immediate response to a leisure constraint, but rather a long term process of cognitive or behavioral adaptation.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that in order to understand the complexity of leisure constraints, it is important to consider the individual within the context of her everyday life. For example, Isabelle (61) described leisure constraints related to lack of confidence in her physical ability. When asked about her leisure in the context of her recent retirement, however, she said enthusiastically said that she “loves life” and wants to “try everything.” In contrast, however, Paula (61) described constraint due to self-consciousness about her appearance. She further explained that because she was “not married, but...would like to be,” she frequently felt conscious of her appearance in public or social situations. While both of these women exhibited leisure constraints, the impact and relative importance of the constraint within her life context was drastically different. Considering these women’s constraints within the context of their everyday lives was vital to understanding the meaning they attributed to the constraint and to leisure. Understanding the participants’ life contexts was facilitated by utilizing qualitative methods.

### *Methodology*

The methodological approach was ideal for the questions addressed in this study because it facilitated a wide range of perspectives and responses. Qualitative techniques allowed participants to address topics relevant to them. For example, previous literature among younger women and girls has suggested that appearance concerns would pose the most salient body image-related leisure constraint for women. If utilizing a quantitative approach, questions would have likely focused on this dimension of body image. A qualitative approach, however, allowed participants to focus on ability and health related issues, which provided deeper and more accurate understanding of the role of body image in older women's leisure. For example, many participants said that appearance concerns played little role in their leisure, but by allowing them to describe any aspects of body image that influenced leisure, participants were able to express the concerns they felt and meaning they placed on physical ability and physical health.

Furthermore, utilizing a two phase data collection approach improved the richness and trustworthiness of the data in several ways. First, multiple interactions with the participants improved rapport so that they spoke more openly about body image issues. For example, during the individual interview Isabelle (61) seemed to consider each of her answers carefully and often expressed concern that she was not providing the "correct" answers. During the focus groups, however, she seemed much more relaxed and comfortable and expressed her perspectives confidently. Second, the contrasting settings (one-on-one vs. a group setting) provided a setting to discuss more sensitive experiences in a private environment, but also an opportunity to discuss topics sparked by the comments of other participants. For example, Callie (60) was able to describe her experiences in two individual discussions even though she felt "too shy" to participate in a focus group. Contrastingly, during the individual interview Kara (64) frequently

responded “I don’t know” or “I’ve never really thought about that.” During the focus group, however, when hearing the experiences or perspectives of other participants she frequently described similar or contrasting stories or opinions.

The third benefit of the methodological approach was that the second phase provided verification of researcher interpretations and clarification of inconsistencies in the first phases of data. For example, during the individual interviews one participant claimed that for her body image did not just influence leisure, but that for her the relationship was bi-directional. The focus groups and follow up telephone interviews provided an opportunity to ask of the participants if they agreed with this comment. While several simply said that they didn’t, four agreed and expanded on their experiences. Finally, the focus groups provided an unexpectedly constructive experience for participants. Several commented on how much they enjoyed the experience and that they felt they had benefitted from it. For example, in a follow up conversation, Kara (64) commented, “I really enjoyed the focus group because I found out that I’m not alone in my thinking.” Similarly, Rosalyn (60) said that it was a “good experience” for her to “share with other women.”

Finally, the methodological approach contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study. By using multiple forms of data and debriefing with multiple researchers, triangulation improved the rigor of the data and data analysis. Note-taking during the interview and focus groups also improved the data collection, by documenting gestures, facial expressions, levels of emphasis, and other cues not captured through written transcripts. Finally member checks helped to verify that the participants were being accurately represented. I sent each participant a copy of the article manuscripts through mail or email and asked whether she felt that that my interpretations were accurate. Several participants only responded enough to say that it was “fine”

or “looks good.” A few responded with more elaborate discussion to say that they found it comforting to see that other women had similar experiences to their own or interesting that other women had different experiences.

Rosalyn (60) participant called in response to her email. During the individual interview, she had been subdued and expressed depression and frustration about her reduced mobility related to a recently acquired spinal disease. During the focus group, however, she was upbeat, cheerful, engaged with the other participants, and focused on body image related to her “figure.” During her phone call, I asked her why she had behaved differently on the two occasions and she replied, “I have good days and bad days.” She explained that the thoughts she had shared on both occasions were true, but commented that, “in the second environment I was out doing something...with other people, so it brought to my mind different things.” This example demonstrates the value of conducting member checks as well as collecting data in both an individual and group setting.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

While this study provides important understanding regarding the role of body image in leisure, it also highlights several conceptual gaps that require future research. This study highlighted the unique experiences of older women in contrast to younger women. Furthermore, this study addressed body image and aging utilizing a life course perspective in order to better understand the aging process by considering the context of participants’ life stories. This study is limited, however, by the use of recall data. Future longitudinal research is needed to understand the role of life experiences and circumstances in shaping body image and its role in women’s leisure lives. Longitudinal research could show how body image and leisure change at different life stages such as before and after the menopausal transition and also determine the degree to which current findings are related to life stage or cohort differences.

Future research is needed to similarly discern the unique experiences of other demographic groups including gender, culture, education, income, and marital status. For example, Abigail (66) indicated that culture played a role in her body image development, by shaping the low importance she placed on societal ideals of beauty. Future research should explore the different influences of different cultures. Similarly, several participants indicated that marriage or divorce played an important role in both body image and leisure. It is interesting to note that of the five participants who described their husbands as negatively influencing body image, four had divorced those husbands and of the five who described their husbands as a positive influence, all were currently married. Furthermore, all but one of the participants who were currently divorced described it as giving her more “freedom” or independence in her leisure. Some leisure research has addressed older widows (Wilhite, Sheldon, & Jekubovich-Fenton, 1994), however, being divorced might play a different role in older women’s perceptions of being single at their life stage. Future research should explore the role of marital status in the body image and leisure of older women.

Additional research is also needed to verify the current findings with other samples. Participants in the current study were all recruited from a “college town” in which they are surrounded by college-age students. Future research should incorporate women from various geographic locations. Finally, future research into the relationship between body image and leisure for women should utilize a life course or holistic perspective to contextualize these concepts in the participants’ everyday lives. Until a more complete foundation of research is collected, future research should also continue to utilize qualitative methods and benefit from the multiple phase approach. Finally, some participants expressed that leisure play a positive role in their body image. For example, Linda (60) explained that participating in sports and identifying herself as an athletic person was beneficial for her body image. Future research should explore the role of leisure



activities in body image for women of all ages and explore ways that recreation professionals can purposively program or design leisure environments that will improve body image for women.

### *Managerial Implications*

The findings of this dissertation have implications not only for research and theory, but also for application. The participants explained that a great deal of their body image is dependent not on their actual body size or appearance, but on their attitudes and priorities. This finding suggests that as a health, mental health, or recreation professional, body image cannot be assessed from an outside perspective. For example, if slim, attractive women are participants in a recreation program, it is not appropriate for an activity leader to assume that their body image is positive. Steps should be taken to provide “body image friendly” leisure settings and experiences for all women.

Furthermore, the findings suggested that many older women with positive body image maintained or improved their body image through various strategies. Recreation professionals can use this information to provide positive experiences for women. For example, many participants explained that their body image improved as they shifted their focus from appearance to health. Providers of physically active leisure can facilitate this process by marketing programs as beneficial to health rather than appearance, removing mirrors from leisure settings, and encouraging participation of “people of all shapes and sizes” (Rachel, 62). Participants also described supportive social networks such as girlfriends as positively influencing body image. Recreation providers can facilitate this by providing settings and programs that foster positive female friendships.

Finally, it is vital for leisure service providers to understand the constraints that older women face related to physical ability. For example, both Linda (60) and Kristy (61) said that they

stopped participating in certain sports (e.g., volleyball, basketball, racquetball) because they felt they did not have the physical ability to play with “keep up” with the other players and did not have opportunities to play with women their own age. Recreation providers need to be aware of these types of body image concerns and provide opportunities for women to participate in physical activities with appropriate levels of competition and ability.

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## VITA

Toni Liechty

### *Education*

- Ph.D. (2009) The Pennsylvania State University  
Major: Leisure Studies/ Concentration: Bio-behavioral Health
- M.S. (2004) Brigham Young University  
Major: Recreation Management and Youth Leadership
- B.S. (2002) Utah State University  
Major: Parks and Recreation/ Minor: Business Administration

### *Experience*

- 2005-present Graduate Research Assistant  
Department of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Management  
The Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania
- 2004-2005 Program Leader and Ship's Mate  
Florida National High Adventure Sea Base  
Boy Scouts of America  
Summerland Key, Florida
- 2002-2004 Graduate Research Assistant  
Department of Recreation Management and Youth Leadership  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah
- 2000-2002 Athletics Director/ Program Director  
Camp Kingsmont  
West Stockbridge, Massachusetts

### *Selected Publications*

- Liechty, T., Ribeiro, N. F., & Yarnal, C. M. (in press). 'I traveled alone, but never felt alone': An exploration of the benefits of a women's group tour experience. *Tourism Review International*.
- Liechty, T., Freeman, P. A., & Zabriskie, R. B. (2006). Body Image and Beliefs About Appearance: Constraints on the Leisure of College-Age and Middle-Age Women. *Leisure Sciences*, 28(4), 311-330.