**A qualitative exploration of pre-wedding body image concerns in UK brides**

**Abstract**

This study is the first study in the UK to explore pre-wedding body image concerns and experiences. 134 participants took part in either an online survey or a semi-structured interview. The overarching theme developed after reflexive thematic analysis of the data captured the body image expectations and pressures experienced in the run up to a wedding. These pressures and expectations came from a variety of sources but particularly as a result of perceived and/or experienced judgement from others, including those attending the wedding, and the wedding industry itself. Many brides intended to lose weight in preparation for the day, and not meeting weight-loss targets had significant implications in terms of feelings and emotions, as well as behaviorally. Findings have important implications for professionals who work in the aesthetic industry and come into contact with individuals who present with weight and/or other appearance related concerns.

**Key words:** Appearance, Pressures, Weight-loss, Wedding, Brides, Health

**Key points:**

Brides face a number of pressures and expectations regarding their appearance in the run up to their wedding.

This pressure comes from a variety of sources, including those attending the wedding, and the wedding industry itself.

Many brides intended to lose weight in preparation for the day, and not meeting weight-loss targets had significant implications in terms of feelings and emotions, as well as behaviorally. Findings have implications for professionals working in the aesthetic industry, in terms of supporting patients with their body image concerns.

**Reflective questions:**

► How do you feel about your own body image?

► Can you think of any times when the way you’ve spoken to a patient who is getting married, might have impacted their body image?

► What could you do in your workplace to help your patients who are getting married feel less pressurised about their body image?

**Introduction**

According to the Office of National Statistics, there were 278,599 weddings in the UK (including 6,728 same-sex marriages) in 2019. Weddings present a very positive but often stressful life event, with body image being identified as a particularly stressful factor (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008). Body dissatisfaction is common, particularly in Western society (Tiggemann, 2011), with statistics from a 2019 survey (Mental Health Foundation, 2019) indicating one in five adults had felt shame in relation to their body image in the previous year. Body dissatisfaction can have wide reaching negative implications, including low self-esteem and depression (Paxton et al., 2017) as well as being an identified risk factor for disordered eating (Stice & Shaw, 2007) as well as being related to various other health-risk behaviours such as smoking (King et al., 2005) and sunbed tanning (Prior et al., 2014).

In relation to body image experiences in the context of weddings, there has been a limited amount of research, particularly in the UK. Research that has been conducted outside the UK has found appearance to be a very important factor for brides, with losing weight being a particular concern of, and intention for, brides in relation to their wedding preparations (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Neighbors & Sohal, 2008; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2014).

Similar engagement or intention to engage in weight management behaviours in relation to weddings have been identified in men. Klos and Sobal (2013), for example, researched wedding weight ideals and behaviours amongst engaged men and found that there was a discrepancy between their current weight and their reported ‘ideal’ wedding weight, although research by Neighbors and Sobal (2008) found expectations not to be particularly unrealistic. Research indicates that both men and women are aware of and indeed feel pressures from culturally bound appearance norms, particularly in relation to body size and shape, research has indicated that appearance concerns in relation to weddings are generally more important for women than men (Neighbors & Sobal, 2008). Appearance concerns in relation to weddings have also been linked to appearance-modifying behaviours such as dieting and tanning (Neighbors & Sobal, 2008; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2009). It is therefore of real importance for people working in the aesthetic industry to have an understanding of brides’ feelings around their bodies to enable them to fully support clients who are getting married.

To our knowledge, there is no published research exploring body images experiences in relation to weddings within a UK context. This study qualitatively explored the pre-wedding body image experiences of brides, using surveys and interviews.

**Materials and methods**

*Participants and design*

There were 134 participants in total, all of whom identified as female, and were either engaged and getting married, or had got married within the last three years. The majority (n=128) of participants identified their ethnicity as White British, with four identifying as White Chinese, and two identifying as mixed heritage. Participants ranged in age from 21-25 (n=18) to over 50 (n=3), with the majority of participants being aged 26-35 (n=78), and the remainder being 35-50 (n=35).

Participants were recruited online with a link to the study’s information sheet being posted onto various social media platforms and the sample subsequently snowballing with reshares and retweets. The online link was also posted onto a UK-based wedding Facebook group. To give participants flexibility, they had the choice of answering questions in a survey format or a semi-structured interview (online or over the telephone); the majority (132) responded via survey and two took part in an interview.

*Procedure and ethics*

The survey consisted of a short initial demographic section followed by a series of closed and open-ended questions designed to investigate participants pre-wedding body image experiences. Questions were designed to explore the importance participants placed on their appearance in relation to the wedding and the reasoning behind this, engagement with appearance-modifying behaviours, and whether they experienced any particular concerns and/or pressure in relation to their appearance prior to the wedding. Questions were informed by previous literature, including the work of Prichard and Tiggemann (2008, 2009, 2011). Participants were instructed to write as much or as little as they wanted in the response boxes.

Participants who were subsequently interviewed were asked to elaborate upon their survey responses in order to delve deeper into and provide some extra context in relation to their survey responses. Data was collected for approximately six months. Given the potential sensitivity of the topic, anyone who had currently or previously had an eating and/or appearance related disorder were asked to not take part. Debrief sheets containing contact details for relevant mental health support resources were provided to all participants.

*The research team*

The research team consisted of three people (three Caucasian women). The two members of the team who collected and analyzed the data have expertise in body image research.

**Results**

The qualitative data from the surveys and interviews was transcribed and analysed using the reflexive thematic analysis guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2021). Two main themes were identified capturing the pre-wedding body image experiences of the participants: 1) Pressures and expectations and 2) impact of the pressures and expectations. Pressures and expectations came from a variety of sources which will be discussed under sub-headings.

***Pressures and expectations***

This overarching theme captures the expectations and pressures participants experienced in terms of looking a certain way on the wedding day. This included expectations and pressures from family and friends but also from the appearance norms and assumptions that were clearly felt and reinforced by the wedding industry. Many participants felt the need to adhere to these norms through fear of judgement; the views of others on their appearance were important for some participants in terms of how they felt about themselves. Some participants talked about placing pressure upon themselves although it was clear how these self-imposed pressures were likely exacerbated and perpetuated by external sources.

*Wanting to meet the expectations of others*

Participants spoke of expectations for the bride to look a certain way and an acknowledgement that others may make judgements in relation to this: *Everybody expects the bride to look beautiful.* *I think other people judge you by your appearance, and if you know other people think you look nice, you have more confidence.* The word “everybody” indicating the perceived universal and ingrained nature of this expectation. Several of the participants indicated the importance of the perceptions of others by describing how it could impact upon how they felt both on the day, for example, *“…if you know other people think you look nice then you have more confidence”* as well as retrospectively after the wedding:

*I* *didn’t want to feel ashamed of my appearance. I knew there would be a lot of attention and comments on it.* *Didn’t want to feel like* *I’d let people down...there were lots of questions about my appearance and dresses* *mainly from other women. It felt like how I looked was part of the ‘decoration’ in the same way the table settings and order of service was.*

Here, it seemed that the participant did not want regrets in terms of their appearance, feeling significant pressure to not “let people down”. Describing how they looked as akin with the ‘dressing’ of the wedding venue, highlights the level of appearance scrutiny felt and their wedding needing to have a certain visual appeal, which included the appearance of the bride. It also indicates a feeling of the bride looking a certain way being expected and as an integral part of the overall ‘look’ of and experience others had of the wedding. Some participants described how pressure came from seeing the weddings of others: *“...pressure from other friends and friends of friends whose weddings had passed, and they looked amazing.”*

*The wedding industry*

Many of the participants described how external pressures and expectations led them to focus on their weight and shape specifically. 67% reported an ideal weight that they wanted to reach for the wedding day, yet of those participants whose wedding had already taken place, only 27% reached their target. The implications that this had both in the run up to as well as after the wedding were highlighted: “*I was distressed when I realised I wouldn’t achieve this weight. I then felt fine approaching the day itself. However, I felt embarrassed after seeing photos of me and regretted getting married at my weight.”* Feelings of regret, distress and embarrassment clearly indicate the potential negative impact that having weight loss goals can have. Another participant similarly described feelings of distress and embarrassment: *“I had to buy 3 wedding dresses due to having my wedding cancelled and rearranged 3 times due to covid and my weight increased considerably with each cancellation despite my efforts to lose weight! I felt embarrassed and completely devastated!”* The extent of the feeling is highlighted by the indication of the devastation being something all-encompassing i.e., “completely.”

Other participants highlighted their experience of the wedding industry perpetuating appearance ‘norms’, particularly in relation to body shape and size, with bridal shops being perceived as catering primarily for women of a slim figure:

*I despise the bridalwear industry’s expectations that our bodies should be a certain size. I wear high street clothes; if I can buy them there, I should be able to buy the right size bridal gown as easily.*

Bridal shops efforts at inclusivity appear to have the opposite effect, for example:

*As a bride you are bombarded with slim young models, dresses are designed for slim figures and bridal shops exclusively calling themselves ‘curvy bride’ makes you feel out of the ordinary if you need to find your dress there.* For one participant, it was the experience at a bridal shop that led to a decline in how she felt about her appearance: *I generally feel okay about my appearance, although visiting a plus size bridal shop which only had four dresses to fit me was a low.* Weight loss behaviours were actively encouraged by bridal shop employees for one of the participants leading to a perceived sense of being judged for her weight: *I felt the ladies in the dress shop were quite judgmental, saying I needed to eat better and basically lose weight, so I felt very negative towards me.*

As well as in relation to weight and body shape, several participants described a lack of diversity in the wedding industry which extended beyond shape and size, for example: *“I feel old! At 48 and size 18/20, you don’t see many brides like that” and* “*the vast majority of wedding marketing is geared towards young, thin, white couples. That has to change.”* One participant talked about the potential influence the wedding industry had to make women feel a certain way and subsequently worry about how others would perceive how they looked: *“I wear glasses all the time so I’ll be wearing them for my wedding but I’ve never really seen anyone wear glasses so I wondered if people think I shouldn’t wear them!”*

*Pressure on themselves*

Some participants talked about the pressure they placed upon themselves in terms of looking a certain way on their wedding day, for example: “*Pressure was entirely from myself. I was self-conscious about the whiteness of my teeth and my weight, though I managed to lose some weight in the run-up by cutting down on sugar and carbs and doing more running.”* Another participant, although describing her appearance goals as self-imposed, expressed her desire for her finance to think she looked a certain way “stunning” on their wedding day.

*I am confident in my fiancé's love for me just as I am. Any appearance goals I have are for me alone, although obviously I want him to think I look too...and most of all I want my fiancé to think I look stunning.*

Many (n=56) of the participants reported that the wedding photographs and being able to look back at pictures they were happy with were the main reason that they felt pressure in terms of their appearance on the wedding day, for example: “*I wanted to look back on my pictures and feel 100% comfortable with what I saw”* and “*We were spending a lot of money on the photographer and I didn't want pictures that I hated and wouldn't want to display.”*

***Impact of pressures and expectations***

Body image pressures and expectations had a significant impact on and implications for the mental health of several of the participants, as well as the behaviours that they engaged with to try and live up to these pressures.This was in terms of the run up to the wedding both prospectively: *“I’m really worried that preparing my weight for my wedding will re-trigger my anorexia and I don’t think people talk about the unnecessary pressure for brides and grooms to lose weight”* and retrospectively: *“During the run-up, I felt hyper-critical. I would over-analyse and scrutinize, frantically trying to find ways of correcting for the camera and our guests.”* One participant reported having a gastric band fitted in the run up to the wedding, one reported having a tummy tuck, and another reporting considering having a gastric balloon fitted in order to lose weight for their wedding. The impact of body image pressure and expectations from external sources is evident in the following quote with the participant’s emotive language:

*I feel disgusting. I know I'm not "obese" but I'm nearing the threshold and I'm the biggest I've ever been…I feel a lot of pressure from a lot of places to be a beautiful bride, I am an engineer and I'm very Tom boy-ish, so dresses are out of my comfort zone. I'm very nervous about being in the spotlight in a lovely white dress.*

**Discussion**

To our knowledge, this is the first study exploring body image experiences in relation to weddings within a UK context and provides useful and important insight. Our study was exploratory in nature, but it is clear women getting married experience and are subject to significant body image expectations and pressures. Although some talked about self-imposed appearance pressures, the main source was external, mainly from family and friends and the wedding industry. Pressure and expectations had significant impacts mainly in terms of how participants felt about themselves and how they looked but also behaviourally.

Consistent with findings from other countries (e.g., Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Neighbors & Sohal, 2008; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2014), weight and body shape were the most prevalent pre-wedding body image concern for participants in this study. The qualitative inquiry shed some light as to the potential reasons behind this, with the wedding industry identified as particularly problematic in perpetuating unrealistic body image expectations and experiences. Wedding media has been found to emphasise the narrative of achieving the ‘perfect bridal look’ (Winch & Webster, 2012); participants in the current study appeared to be acutely aware of and felt considerable pressure as a result of this narrative. The ‘perfect bride’ narrative was felt even within wedding dress shops themselves and negatively impacted on this experience for some of the participants. As such, those working in industries that deal with brides need to be mindful of the potentially harmful impact that their advertising and even the words and behaviour of staff, even unintentional, can have. Related to this, findings indicate that the wedding industry would benefit from greater diversity in their advertising particularly in terms of body shape and size but other appearance differences too. It was highlighted, for example, that the marketing of the wedding industry was focused on the ‘thin-young’ narrative of the ‘perfect bride’. Age does not make women unsusceptible to weight and shape concerns, and disordered eating (Samuels, Maine & Tantillo, 2019).

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Prichard & Tiggermann, 2008), wanting to look ‘good’ in photographs was important for many of the participants in the current study. Echoing the findings of Prichard and Tiggemann (2008), the permanency of wedding photos and their appearance being under constant scrutiny appeared to be a motivating factor. Similar to the suggestion from Prichard and Tiggemann (2008), this and the perceived judgment and scrutiny from others does indicate that women feel objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) both on their wedding day and retrospectively through photographs. The impact on not reaching their weight loss goals was significant for several participants viewed, with feelings of disgust and shame being referred to. Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1989) proposes that a discrepancy when comparing oneself to another can lead to negative consequences including negatively impacting body satisfaction and having implications for appearance-related behaviours (Vartanium, 2012). The negative impact on body satisfaction was clear for several of the participants. People working in the health and aesthetic industries need to be mindful of the significant impact that pre-wedding body image expectations and pressures can have on women when patients present with weight-related and other appearance-related concerns.

Although a fairly large sample and participants were recruited from a variety of platforms, findings should be interpreted in light of potential limitations. The majority identified as white British, therefore experiences may not be representative of brides from other ethnicities and cultures. Additionally, although open to same-sex couples, all couples identified as heterosexual It is important that future research focuses on recruiting more participants who have had same-sex wedding to ensure that findings are transferrable and inclusive of all wedding-related body image experiences.

*Implications for the aesthetics industry*

Many clinics that offer aesthetic treatments carry out treatments on brides, with internet searches showing a large number of clinics directly targeting brides in their advertising, and offering packages or suggestions of treatments for brides-to-be. It is really important to be careful with these advertisements, to ensure that brides do not feel pressurised to look a certain way.

It is important for aesthetic practitioners who are speaking to people who are planning weddings and getting married, help them to make informed decisions about aesthetic treatments, and as aesthetic practitioners, ensuring that clients feel that they are making the choice to get treatments for themselves, rather than anyone else or any outside pressures, for example related to images on what a ‘perfect bride’ should look like.

*Conclusions*

Despite the limitations of the study, the findings present a solid foundation for which further research can be based. Those getting married experience body image pressures from a variety of sources; for example, this study has highlighted the pressure particularly felt from the wedding industry. It is important that people in the aesthetic industry who are working with individuals who present with weight and/or other appearance-related concerns are mindful of these pressures.

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