**The body image experiences of women working within the aesthetic industry: A thematic analysis of online survey and interview responses**

**Abstract**

Background: Body dissatisfaction can have negative health and well-being implications. Aims: Women working within the aesthetic industry have been identified as vulnerable for body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, however research exploring this population is scarce. This research aimed to investigate the area further.

Methods: Online surveys and interviews were used to explore the body image experiences of 41 women working in the aesthetic industry.

Findings: Thematic analysis highlighted three themes: a feeling that looking ‘good’ was necessitated by their profession, ubiquitous and inevitable nature of appearance comparisons, and an appearance satisfaction dichotomy with some reporting feeling satisfied and others dissatisfied.

Conclusion: The body image experiences of women working in the aesthetic industry are mixed and can be complex. The implications of these findings and directions for future research are discussed.

**Key words:** Qualitative, Aesthetic, Body Image, Interviews, Surveys

**Key points:**

This exploratory study drew upon qualitative online surveys and semi-structured interviews to explore the body image experiences of women working within the aesthetic industry.

All participants spoke about how working within the aesthetic industry necessitated them looking a certain way in terms of their physical appearance.

The study showed that some women working in the aesthetic industry reported feeling satisfied with their appearance, others reported feeling very dissatisfied.

Whilst it is not clear if this disatisfaction is directly linked to working in this industry, findings indicate that some women working in the aesthetic industry are vulnerable to additional pressures and comparisons.

**Reflective questions:**

How do you feel about your own body image?

Do you feel that your own feelings about your body have an impact on how you communicate with patients/clients?

What could you do in your workplace to help your colleagues maintain a positive body image?

**Introduction**

Body image can be defined as “a person’s perceptions, feelings and thoughts about his or her own body” (Grogan, 2008, p. 3). Body dissatisfaction, which can be defined as “a person’s negative thoughts and feelings about his or her own body” (Grogan, 2008, p. 4) is common, particularly in Western populations, with high levels consistently reported (e.g. Tiggemann, 2004; Frederick et al., 2016). This is of concern because as well as the negative psychological impact, body dissatisfaction can have an impact on our physical health through contributing to people engaging in behaviours which pose a risk to their health (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2012) including sunbed tanning (Stapleton et al., 2017), cosmetic surgery (Walker et al., 2019), disordered eating (Stice, 2002), and negatively impacting on breastfeeding intention, initiation and duration (Morley-Hewitt and Owen, 2019).

Research has suggested that women working within the aesthetic industry may be an 'at risk' group for body dissatisfaction and symptoms of disordered eating, given the emphasis the profession places on appearance. Wong (2003) revealed how Taiwanese beauticians were more dissatisfied with their weight and more likely to practice weight-loss strategies compared to non-beauticians. As Wong (2003) points out, this is of concern given the association of these practices and beliefs with disordered eating. Lukacs-Marton and Szabo (2012) similarly indicated those working within the aesthetic industry could be at an increased risk of developing eating disorders. Weight-reducing methods of dieting, exercise, the use of appetite suppressants and diuretics were significantly more prevalent amongst beauticians from Transylvania compared to a control group, as well as the prevalence of clinical and subclinical eating disorders. Women working within the aesthetic industry therefore may be vulnerable to engaging in behaviours which pose a risk to their health.

Although research indicates that those working within the aesthetic industry may be vulnerable in terms of body dissatisfaction and health risk behaviours such as disordered eating, investigation within this specific population has been scarce, with no research, to the authors’ knowledge, exploring the experiences of those working within the industry in the United Kingdom (UK). Given an increasing preoccupation with appearance, especially in Western cultures, and the potentially negative health consequences of body dissatisfaction (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2012), it is vital to explore the body image experiences of those who may represent a vulnerable group. Qualitative research is needed to explore people’s body image experiences in their own words (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2006). The current study sought to address the gaps in the literature by qualitatively exploring the body image experiences of those working within the aesthetic industry in the UK. A combination of online surveys and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data.

**Method**

***Participants***

41 participants took part in the study (38 survey responses and 3 interviews); all were female with an age range of 18 to 60 years (M = 34) . All self-identfied as working in the aesthetic industry; 28 were self-employed and 13 worked in a salon setting. Participants were recruited online, with the online link for the survey being posted on social media alongside an explanation of the research aim and criteria for participation; participants were required to be aged at least 18 years and working in the aesthetic industry at the time of taking part in the research. Salons were also contacted via email; they were sent the online link which was accompanied by a short text description introducing the research. Participants were asked to contact the researchers if they preferred to take part in an interview.

***Surveys***

Online surveys are increasingly advocated as an excellent way of collecting qualitative insight given their ability to generate rich, detailed and varied data (Terry and Braun, 2017). Because of their anonymous nature, Terry and Braun (2017) suggest online surveys are useful for collecting data on sensitive topics. As talking about appearance has been identified as a potentially sensitive topic for some (Grogan and Richards, 2002), we considered online qualitative surveys particularly appropriate for this study.

The survey was created using the software Qualtrics and divided into two sections. Alongside demographic information, section one asked participants for information about their work in the industry (for example whether they were self-employed or worked for a larger company/organisation). Section two consisted of four main questions asking participants: how they felt about their appearance, whether they compared themselves to others in terms of appearance, whether they experienced any appearance-related pressure, and how working in the aesthetic industry made them feel about their appearance.

***Interviews***

The reason for the combination of the different methods was pragmatic in order to give participants choice and to maximise recruitment. Two participated in a telephone interview and one face-to face. The same questions were adopted for use in the interviews. All interviews were recorded via a digital audio-recorder.

***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical approval was obtained by [annonymised until publication]. All participants were provided with an information sheet and required to provide their written informed consent prior to participating. Consent was obtained for using quotes from participant responses and the contact details of a support organisation were provided as we acknowledge that talking about and reflecting upon appearance could be a potentially sensitive topic.

***Data Analysis***

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and collated with the survey responses, to form our overall dataset. The data was then analysed using the thematic analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). We chose thematic analysis as we were interested in identifying and reporting common patterns in body image experiences rather than identifying patterns at a more idiographic level. An inductive approach was adopted and led by the first author. Following data familiarisation, line-by-line, semantic coding was carried out and codes reflected the explicit, surface level of the data (for example, ‘accepting of appearance’ and ‘an advert for your work’). Similar codes were then clustered using a colour-coding system to form overarching patterns that captured the body image experiences of the women. Both authors then spent time reviewing and refining the themes; checking their coherence and ensuring they were the best ‘fit’ for the dataset.

**Results**

Three themes captured the body image experiences of the women who took part in this study: 1)Looking ‘good’ as a necessity for working in the aesthetic industry 2) The ubiquitous and inevitable nature of appearance comparisonsand 3) A dichotomy in terms of appearance satisfaction. Themes are presented under sub-headings, with illustrative quotes accompanied by pseudonyms and other contextual information in parentheses.

**Looking ‘good’ as a necessity for working in the aesthetic** **industry**

All participants spoke about how working within the aesthetic industry necessitated them looking a certain way in terms of their physical appearance. The main reason for this was described as a ‘need’ to promote their business/company/treatments to clients; they could only do this by looking a certain way in order to ‘advertise’ and promote what they offer: “…you need to look good for clients to come in so they want to have those things done” (Katie, 25, telephone interview).

Looking ‘good’ was defined by many as the need to look presentable at work: “I think when I’m in work I like to wear makeup and make sure my hair and nails look neat. I think if you don’t look presentable, people won’t book with you” (Sofia, 43, survey). Looking presentable was described as important in order to “preach what I teach” (Maxine, 42, survey) and because it “conveys the right message” to clients (Luciana, 51, survey).

Looking presentable was frequently described as being necessary to reflect the professionalism of themselves and the business they worked for:

“I’ve got to be presentable, you have to have good skin, you’re not going to get somebody booking a facial unless your skin is in great shape, if you’re not groomed you know that’s not going to be, it’s not actually going to be a professional image” (Alice, age 57, telephone interview)

Whilst some talked about feeling “pressurised to have make-up on” (Ella, 40, survey), many talked about looking presentable more in the sense of appearing “professional, clean and tidy” (Aisha, 59, survey). Looking presentatable and professional was considered essential for gaining the trust and respect of clients, as well as meeting their expectations: “You're on show. People look at you like an advert for your own work. You wouldn't trust a doctor who was very very unhealthy” (Jade, age 25, survey).

**The ubiquitous and inevitable nature of appearance comparisons**

Many of the participants talked about the ubiquitous nature of appearance comparisons, with some describing them as inevitable. When asked, for example, whether she ever compared herself to other people, Freya replied: “Yes all the time but I think that’s perfectly natural” (36, survey). For some, these comparisons were positive: “it usually makes me feel good because I take good care of myself” (Varsha, 55, survey), whereas for most the comparisons led to feelings of negativity, for example: “Always. Everyone all the time. Makes me feel self-conscious and inadequate” (Jade). Appearance comparisons with friends, celebrities, work colleagues and even clients were described:“Colleagues yes, if they look great, I think why I don’t look that good?! Clients when they come in looking glamorous. Friends on nights out always think they look better than me” (Isla, age 25, survey). The inevitability of these negative appearance comparisons was mainly attributed to the growing influence and accessibility of social media. Instagram, in particular, was described as especially influential: ”… last year before I went on holiday I felt very like down because I didn’t look like these girls on Instagram” (Katie) and “Scrolling through Instagram and seeing girls looking incredible really does get you down” (Isla). Several talked about how such appearance comparisons were unavoidable because of the accessibility of social media; because of this, the importance of reminding themselves about the unrealistic nature of some of these photos was highlighted, for example: “No-one looks like that on holiday” (Katie).

**A dichotomy in terms of appearance satisfaction**

The women appeared to be almost dichotomous in terms of either feeling confident with how they looked: “I feel confident about my look, which is very simple with minimal makeup“ (Ella) or dissatisfied with their appearance: “I am never happy with how I look, part of my personality, I have always been this way” (Collette, 32, survey). For several of those who felt confident and satisfied, this appeared to stem from an acceptance of their appearance: “I am who I am…I feel good about myself” (Maxine, 42, survey). For some, this acceptance had developed with age: “I think that I look good for my age. I’m not perfect but as I have got older, I accept this and recognise that good health & happiness is more important than looks” (Varsha, 55, survey). Here, Varsha reports acceptance despite indicating there being aspects of her appearance that she might like to change.

For those who reported feeling unhappy with their appearance, this was either indicated as a constant feeling of dissatisfaction: “I always want to look better than I do” (Belle, age 35, in-person), or dependent on personal circumstances and situation, such as recently having had a baby: “Not great but that’s more to do with the fact I’m a mother now as my appearance have changed a lot” (Holly, 27, survey).

Some women talked about how they engage in a variety of appearance enhancing practices, for example Jade said “I feel more confident with some fillers and top up Botox”. Despite this, a line was indicated by Katie and some of the other women in terms of what was acceptable for appearance enhancement purposes for themselves: “…the only thing I would never have done is filler” (Katie).

**Discussion**

This exploratory study drew upon qualitative online surveys and semi-structured interviews to explore the body image experiences of women working within the aesthetic industry. The main theme was that the majority of women felt that looking ‘good’ was necessitated by the nature of their work. Whilst many described this as an additional pressure in terms of, for example, making them more conscious of their appearance, a few felt that working in the aesthetic industry had no impact on their body image experiences. One described it as a positive experience. Self-objectification (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), which many of the women in this study described as an inevitable aspect of their work, has been linked to negative health consequences, including low self-esteem (Mercurio and Landry, 2008) and disordered eating (Tiggemann and Williams, 2012). The experience expressed by many of feeling an unavoidable need to maintain a certain appearance, is therefore of concern.

Most talked about the ubiqutious nature of negative appearance comparisons. As well as comparisons to friends, women and celebrities on social media, the participants felt vulnerable to additional comparisons to colleagues and clients. Many talked about these comparisons in an upward manner (whereby women talked about their appearance negatively in comparison to others); research has found upward appearance comparisons are related to greater body image disturbance (Myers et al., 2012). Research which indicates that women who are dissatisfied with their bodies engage in more upward comparisons (Lesley et al., 2007) is also particularly concerning considering several of the women in our study described feeling dissatisfied and unhappy with their appearance.

Participants were mixed in how satisfied they felt with their appearance. The main reason appearing to underpin satisfaction was a self-acceptance in terms of appearance. The potentially negative psychological and physical health implications of body disatisfaction (Grogan, 2006) is of concern for the women reporting feeling unhappy with their appearance, especially given the additional pressure that appears to be inevtiable when working in the aesthetic industry. The appearance satisfaction expressed by some is reassuring given evidence indicating the potentially protective role of a positive body image (Andrew et al., 2015; Becker et al., 2017).

***Strengths and limitations***

This study was the first to qualitatively explore the body image experiences of women working within the aesthetic industry; we recognise however that the insight gained is preliminary and further exploration is needed. Whilst the online survey provided a useful way of exploring experiences, the inability to be able to prompt and encourage participants to expand upon their responses was something we felt limited the depth of the survey data.

***Future Research***

Whilst online surveys were a valuable tool for reaching women of varying ages across the UK, responses to many of the questions were brief and would have benefited from some additional unpacking. Semi-structured interviews, as was the case in this research, would enable further prompting to explore experiences in more depth. Research needs to be conducted to try and counteract some of the additional body image pressure people woking in this industry experience because of their work. For example, working with aesthetic nurses to develop training sessions for employers to disseminate to their employees about body image issues and concerns in the workplace, as well as promoting body positivity, could be useful. The specific finding that appearance satisfaction was underpinned, for some, by an acceptance that developed with age warrants further exploration, especially given research which has indicated the positive impact ageing can have upon women’s body image experiences (Jankowski et al., 2016).

**Conclusion**

The body image experiences of women working in the aesthetic industry are mixed and can be complex. Although some reported feeling satisfied with their appearance, others reported feeling very dissatisfied. Whilst it is not clear if this disatisfaction is directly linked to working in this industry, findings indicate that some women working in the aesthetic industry are vulnerable to additional pressures and comparisons, which could potentially have negative implications for their health. A positive body image could be useful in terms of its protective qualities and future research is needed to explore these ideas further.

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