Topic:

Negotiating shame: An exploration of the body experience among young South African women who have attended or are attending University.

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Abstract

Guided by phenomenological and feminist phenomenological perspectives, this research aimed to explore the ways in which young South African women, who were attending or had recently graduated from university, navigated body shame. It interrogated the socially situated 'lived body' and the way it was impacted by restrictive appearance ideals. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted, mostly through the video conferencing website *Zoom.* It became evident that women experienced their bodies in complex ways. There was evidence of conformity to as well as resistance against the "regime of shame". Conformity and resistance often happened simultaneously. Both of these kinds of experiences were viewed as valid and explored in their own right. External messages around women's bodies and how they should look had greatly influenced participants experiences of their own bodies. This included messages from discourses such as postfeminism and the body positivity movement, which informed the ways in which they navigated shame.

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I am very grateful.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Brief introduction to the study

The topic of this research is: Negotiating shame: An exploration of the body experience among young South African women who have attended or are attending university. This is a qualitative study, guided by the framework of phenomenology and feminist phenomenology. It has long been argued that a woman's subjectivity is "shaped by shame" (Dolezal, 2015: 106; Bartky, 1990: 85). Writing in the 1940s, Simone de Beauvoir positions the process of becoming a woman as an "extended lesson in shame", especially through the pathologizing of normal female experiences – such as menstruation (de Beauvoir as cited Dolezal, 2015: 106). Worthy of exploration is the shame women experience in relation to their body and physical appearance. Wolf (2002: 10) notes how, despite significant transformation of the power structure with regards to gender equality, there is a "secret underlife poisoning our freedom, infused with notions of beauty".

This research aims to elucidate how young South African women – who have attended or are attending university – navigate shame related to their appearance. It will explore the ways in which shame may be internalised and experienced as well as the ways women may resist and challenge "the regime of shame". This is especially relevant in a context where messages around women's bodies are increasingly being challenged and critiqued within popular culture. It is important to consider the impact different contradictory messages about women's bodies have on the individual woman's body experience. Though there is South African literature that explores body image and dissatisfaction, this often makes use of close-ended questionnaires that produce measurable, quantifiable data on levels of body dissatisfaction (Caradas *et al*., 2001; Hewat & Arndt; 2009; Mwaba & Roman; 2009; Peltzer & Pengpid, 2012; Pedro *et al*., 2016; Szabo & Allwood, 2006). There is a lack of qualitative research of women's attitudes and experiences around body shame in a South African context. This research thus aims to contribute towards filling this gap.

The primary objective of this dissertation is to *understand how young South African women, who have attended or are attending University, navigate body shame*. The secondary objectives include:

- To investigate young women's experiences of shame and the ways they choose to conform to body ideas.
- To explore how young women may resist shame and reject dominant body ideals.
- To explore the ways certain popular messages – from the body positivity movement and from pervasive postfeminist discourse, for example – inform young women's experience of their bodies.

1.2. Research methods and methodology

This section serves to outline how the research was conducted. It justifies the methodological approach taken and the methods that were employed. The research is framed by a qualitative research design as the research questions are concerned with nature of social phenomena. Qualitative research aims to describe reality as experienced by the participants and it is rich in meaning and detail (Denscombe, 2003: 267). In particular, a phenomenological approach was adopted. Notably, under a phenomenological approach, the main aim "is to understand and as much as possible not to interpret according to some ready developed theory" (Hycner, 1985: 300). There is an emphasis on subjectivity, and it is useful for research that engages with meaning construction, attitudes and beliefs (Denscombe, 2003: 96). Rather than explaining the causes of phenomena, this approach is concerned with describing the first-hand experiences of those involved (Denscombe, 2003: 97). It will allow the researcher to deal with the complexity of body shame as it is experienced in the lives of young women.

A phenomenological approach engenders a focus on the 'lived body' and the way that the body is experienced as both a living organism and a material object (Dolezal, 2015: 19). This research does not seek to uncover an objective, inherent, acultural truth, but is focused rather on the complexities of lived experience (Dolezal, 2015: x). It is not about understanding reality, but understanding 'understanding' itself (Davis, 1991: 7). I sought to elucidate the conversations between women and their 'worlds'.

Phenomenology seeks to examine what the "observed world means to the observed actors" (Davis, 1991: 9). This research focuses on women's attitudes and perceptions as well as how this is informed by their broader social context. It must be noted that the phenomenological perspective can be critiqued for its failure to recognise the impact of material conditions on behaviour. It is oversimplified to suggest that social reality is solely concept dependent. This

research is influenced and enriched by *feminist* phenomenology, which encourages an awareness of how women's bodies are positioned within gendered social structures that inform the body experience (Young, 2005: 26). A feminist phenomenology emphasises the situated subjectivity of the individual, contending that the 'lived body' is inseparable from its context (Young, 2005: 18). This perspective was useful for exploring women's experiences of their bodies, which was evidently simultaneously personal and social. The use of a phenomenological framework will be further explained in the contextual chapter.

The complex phenomena of body shame as well as issues of postfeminist sensibilities may appear difficult to operationalise. These concepts are clarified within the context chapters and interview questions are based on reviewed literature around these issues. The researcher used theoretical knowledge around these issues to interrogate the attitudes of the participants during the process of data analysis.

1.2.1. Participants

The population sample studied was young women aged 19-27. All participants were either in university or had recently left university. Tiggemann (2015: 169) notes how body image is correlated with age. Her review of research on positive body image presents how older women are more likely than younger women to be appreciative of their bodies, for example (Tiggeman, 2015: 169). Eating disorders, which are often linked to body shame, are particularly prevalent among adolescents and young adult women (Rudd & Lennon, 2000: 153). Much of the research presents body dissatisfaction as central in the lives of university going women (Rudd & Lennon, 2000: 160; Augustus-Horvath et al., 2010: 730, Hesse-Biber, 1996: 89).

It is this age group that is most often reflected in media ideals (Augustus-Horvath *et al*., 2010: 107). The university environment, in particular, can be seen as one that "amplifies sociocultural pressures" and worsens feelings of body dissatisfaction (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 89). Hesse-Biber (1996: 90) comments on how this is a relatively closed environment, where imitation and competition between women may thrive. The stress caused by university life also often informs individuals' eating habits, shifting their relationship with their body (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 92).

Contrary to this, university is a period in which the individual is exposed to new ideas and may begin to rethink their self-concepts in more positive ways. Universities are often more

'open', progressive spaces than the societies in which they are embedded. Augustus-Horvath *et al.*'s (2010: 112) research on positive body image notes how many young women had negative feelings towards their bodies in adolescence and experienced much dissatisfaction, but this shifted in young adulthood when they began challenging and analysing media ideals. This age group could thus provide valuable insight into the complex phenomena of body shame, though it must be noted that their views will not necessarily be 'typical' of broader society.

1.2.2. Sampling

Non-probability sampling was used to gain access to participants. Elements of purposive, volunteer and snowball procedures were used. Initially, an appeal was made through the public social media site, Facebook, briefly explaining the research and inviting women from Rhodes University to take part. An open invitation to partake in research tends to attract particular categories of people. Those who volunteered were generally from the Humanities and were interested and aware of issues around body image. I thus decided to message a few women that I knew and purposely selected a diverse group – making sure to include women studying in the natural sciences, for example. I then used snowballing to complete the sample. Snowballing was useful as experiences of body shame are shared among friends. Race, gender and age were the main purposive criteria for selection.

The sample included university students and young women in the working world, who already had a tertiary degree. None of the participants had been out of university for more than one year. The sample consisted of a diverse group of participants, from different parts of the country and of different races, languages, socio-economic backgrounds, sexualities, areas of study and ages (between 19-27). I was able to make generalisations among this group. I interviewed 15 participants, which yielded sufficient data for a meaningful analysis.

1.2.3. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were used for data collection. These mostly took place via *Zoom,* a video-conferencing programme. Three interviews took place face-to-face. Semi-structured interviews are useful for collecting data on attitudes, experiences and interpretations (Denscombe, 2003: 165). This made them suitable for phenomenologically framed research. Interviews are also suitable for more personal, sensitive topics such as that of body shame. There is space for meaningful discussion and points of interest can be elaborated on

(Denscombe, 2003: 164). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for participants to develop their ideas as the interview progressed. During the process, there was a clear list of issues to be addressed, but questions were flexible, allowing participants to freely articulate their experiences and allowing for new lines of enquiry to be followed (Denscombe, 2003: 167). When women were describing their own unique individual experiences of their bodies, new questions naturally arose.

The use of *Zoom* also allowed for interviewing of participants that were geographically dispersed. Due to the current Covid19 crisis, *Zoom* interviews were also deemed a safer method as they prevented putting either the researcher or the participants at risk of contracting the virus. There are challenges associated with this novel form of data collection. One cannot, for example, read a participant's full range of non-verbal cues (Irani, 2019: 5). Technical or internet problems can also the quality of voice and image. The building of rapport may be affected as initial greetings and small talk may be different (Weller, 2017: 623). There may be a sense of distance between participant and researcher. The use of videoconferencing for interviews, however, offers "logistical convenience and practical advantages" (Irani, 2019: 4).

As was expected, the use of *Zoom* allowed for much flexibility with scheduling (Irani, 2019: 4; Gray *et al*., 2020:6). *Zoom* interviews also allow for the participant to be in a space of their choosing, which can lead to greater comfortability (Irani, 2019: 4). They were asked beforehand to make sure they were in an environment where they would not be distracted. As noted by Weller (2017: 623) and Gray *et al*. (2020: 6), physical absence can foster a greater sense of ease as there is reduced pressure, yet there is still visible presence and connection. All participants were able to make use of the Internet and there were no technical difficulties. Three participants, who were based in Johannesburg, preferred to be interviewed face-to-face. Necessary safety precautions were adhered to during the interview – such as maintaining a 2m distance and sanitising. It was easier to build rapport with these participants, but ultimately both the *Zoom* and face-to-face interviews provided valuable insights and the quality of information did not differ.

1.2.4. Data analysis

Qualitative analysis is centred around interpretation and critical thinking. As Bazeley (2013: 4) notes, it is "an extension of the kind of analysis we do in everyday life". The analysis was a circular process, going 'back and forth' in order to gain meaningful insight on the participants

accounts, in line with the research question (Bazeley, 2013: 13). Phenomenological data explication involves 'bracketing' the researcher's own preconceived ideas and knowledge of theoretical concepts (Hycner, 1985: 281; Groenewald, 2004: 50). This is not to suggest that there is the possibility of an objective, detached observer, but I did recognise and engage with my own presuppositions and aimed to focus on the unique world of each participant, approaching the data with openness.

The video interviews were recorded and transcribed. Recordings were re-watched, and the transcripts read over several times. As is appropriate for a phenomenological approach, there was focus on understanding the essence of the body experience in each individual interview and getting a "sense of the whole" (Hycner, 1985: 282). General units of meaning were then outlined before relevant (in relation to the research question) units of meaning were grouped together. The data was thus categorised under themes which were analysed and explained. Concepts were continuously being developed and patterns that continuously re-emerged were paid special attention to (Bazeley, 2013: 167). The data was then discussed with reference to the research questions and reviewed literature around women's bodies and the shame experience. Findings were summarised, and the research objectives addressed.

1.2.5. Limitations and issues of validity and reliability

Consistency and objectivity can be elusive with qualitative interviews. Data from interviews may also be based on "what people say they do rather than what they do" (Denscombe, 2003: 190). Reliability may thus be negatively impacted. Furthermore, although this research is concerned with body shame, specifically within a South African context, it is noted that the results will not be generalisable to the wider South African context, as the sample is specifically from women who have been to or are currently attending university. These women may be based in different parts of the country, but they will all have had access to media and technology. Their experiences were significantly informed by the university environment. The fact that the sample was as diverse as possible helps to provide a broader representation, but as it is qualitative research it was a relatively small sample. As summarised by Hycner (1984: 294), however, "the phenomenological researcher is seeking to illuminate human phenomena and not, in the strictest sense to generalize the findings".

The concept of validity questions the extent to which data reflects 'the truth' (Babbie, 2010: 153). Truth here refers to the truthfulness of respondent's own views and experiences. The use

of interviews is beneficial for validity as direct contact means that "data can be checked for accuracy and relevance as they are collected" (Denscombe, 2003: 189). I was able to hear first-hand about women's experiences and unpack nuances of body shame.

The impact of the researcher's own subjectivity must also be considered (Babbie, 2010: 151). A reflexive stance was taken during data collection and analysis. I critically reflected on my own influence on the research process through rechecking my interpretations consistently. This also involves considering interviewer bias and how preconceived perceptions around gendered body shame may inform the results. A phenomenological approach, however, asserts that ultimately the researcher's "conclusions are descriptions of their own constructions of reality" (Davis, 1991: 11).

1.2.6. Ethical considerations

This research was conducted in line with Rhodes University ethical standards. Issues of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent are important (Babbie, 2010: 67-69). Participation was based on informed consent. Participants were emailed a consent form to complete, which they then emailed back. The identities of the participants have remained anonymous and pseudonyms were used in place of their real names. They were made aware that they were under no obligation to answer questions and that they could withdraw from the study altogether if they found the interview too uncomfortable or if they changed their mind. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed, but that this information will be kept in password protected files. It is notable that body shame can be a sensitive issue and may cause discomfort for participants. Shame, in itself, can be a painful experience and it may be difficult for some participants to discuss past experiences and to address the way that they think and to convey their inner worlds. I therefore paid close attention to the attitude of the participants and watched for any signs of distress. Generally, participants appeared comfortable speaking about their experiences. If they did not appear comfortable and answered shortly, I did not press them for more information. Participants will receive a copy of the final research project.

1.2.7. Brief outline of the research.

The following research will be divided into four chapters. Chapter Two aims to provide a holistic understanding of the context in which women experience their bodies. It will explore literature around appearance ideals and the positioning of women's bodies in society. It will

outline arguments about the experience of body shame as well as the ways that women may resist this. Chapter Three provides an interpretation of the data collected, guided by phenomenological perspectives. It explores the various themes that arose from the interviews, in relation to the reviewed literature, and provides insight on the way participants feel about and interact with their bodies. It answers the research question of how participants navigate body shame and how they interact with powerful societal messages. Chapter Four concludes the paper and summarises the main tenets of this research.

Chapter 2: Contextualising women's bodies

2.1. Introduction

This chapter seeks to contextualise the past and current research on the way women experience their bodies. It aims to provide a holistic account of varying conceptualisations of women's bodies and the ways these impact embodiment. Feminist theorists have long critiqued narrow beauty criteria and societal ideals and have argued that gendered body shame significantly shapes a woman's sense of self. Their arguments will be analysed in the first section of this chapter. This includes feminist critiques of postfeminism, which forms a newer, contemporary part of the regime of shame. Literature around postfeminism's pervasive (and persuasive) rhetoric must be explored in a discussion of body shame. The regime of shame and its impact has been well theorised. However, in exploring how young South African women navigate the body experience, it must also be recognised that there has been a recent societal shift towards accepting and celebrating different kinds of bodies. This is evident, for example, in the very popular online body positivity movement, which seeks to actively deconstruct narrow beauty ideals. These kinds of messages could help women to resist the regime of shame and foster a more positive body experience. The second section of this chapter explores this resistance. Women receive many contradictory messages about their bodies in contemporary society and it is within this context that they are to navigate their body experience.

2.2. Women's bodies and shame

2.2.1. The body

A discussion of body shame among women would need to consider theorising around cultural expressions of the mind body dualism. Western philosophy, as far back as at least the 4th century, has constructed the mind and body as distinct and separate entities. The mind, associated with rationality, creativity and freedom, is connected to the divine and to the soul (Bordo, 1993: 5). The body's "humanness" is undermined and it is portrayed as existing in a lower order, inferior to the true self, which it 'weighs down' (Bordo, 1993: 5; Northrop, 2012: 42; Hesse-Biber, 1996:19). Human existence is thus portrayed as bifurcated (Bordo, 1993: 144). Notably, this Cartesian dualism frames our understanding of masculinity and femininity (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 17). It is inseparable from stereotypes of male as "active,

striving, conscious subject" and women as "passive, vegetative, primitive matter" (Bordo, 1993: 12). Feminists have long commented on the gendering of the mind/body dualism and the positioning of 'woman as body', aligned with the corporeal and with nature (Bordo, 1993: 5; Northrop, 2012: 42).

The impact of the mind/body dualism (and the hierarchies that it perpetuates) is relevant for understanding how women's bodies are perceived and experienced (Northrop, 2012: 42). Bordo (1993:146) refers to the experiences of women with anorexia, such as Ellen West, a woman from the 1800s, whose case is now famous. West's statement "when I fail to exercise as often as I prefer … I have let my body 'win' another day from my mind" reflects how the mind/body dualism manifests itself within women's experiences of their bodies (Bordo, 1993: 147). The body is experienced as something 'alien' that is supposed to be controlled, its (often normal) desires overcome (Bordo, 1993: 145). The body in itself is a source of shame and a characteristic such as slenderness comes to represent the mind's victory over the body (Bordo, 1993: 147).

Dualistic thought also undermines the cultural space the body occupies. One can argue for a reformulation of the way we conceive of the body, which involves critiquing "gendered essentialism and the idea that the body is pre-culturally given" (Northrop, 2012: 42). The body lies in the gap between nature and culture. It can be seen as a malleable, contested, "political object" rather than a static entity (Northrop, 2012: 42). This research thus begins from the recognition that "our relationships with our bodies are rarely benign" (Northrop, 2012: 43). The body is inherently cultural. This is further evidenced in the way that the different forms that the female body takes over different periods reflects cultural preoccupations and obsessions (Bartky, 1990: 66). The image of the ideal feminine body is not universal and it shifts according to time and culture (Bartky, 1990: 66; Wolf, 2002: 12). Though it may be experienced as "devastatingly painful and deeply personal", body shame is forged within a particular socio-political context and can provide valuable insights into how social life is embodied (Dolezal, 2015: xv; Northrop, 2012: 110). The woman's body (the microcosm) elucidates the social body (the macrocosm) (Bordo, 1993: 186).

Cultural rules throughout history, that aimed to regulate and control women's behaviour, are rooted in dualistic thinking (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 19). The manipulation of the women's body in medicine and fashion, for example has been a central mode for maintaining power

relations over the past century (Bordo, 1993: 143). Women's bodies can thus be seen as cultural artifacts and are physical manifestations of society's powerplay (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 30; Bordo 2003: 188). The body shame women experience is about power (Edut, 2003: xxii). The shame women are socialised into and the subsequent manipulation of their bodies can be seen as another form of patriarchal control. Craig (2006: 162), suggests that the dissatisfaction women feel about their bodies is a very 'personal' manifestation of gender inequality. Body shame has particular relevance in a society where women feel constantly reduced to and valued for their bodies. It can be argued that patriarchal social relations position women as "objects of decorative worth" and they are socialised into 'being a body'. (Bartky, 1990: 71; Craig, 2006: 162; Hesse-Biber, 1997: 5). Women do not just have bodies – they *are* bodies (Bordo, 1993: 143). A consequence of this objectification is that a woman "lives her body as seen by another", acutely aware of how she is 'looked at' (Bartky, 1990: 101, Dolezal, 2015: 112).

2.2.2. <u>The shame experience.</u>

The 'other' is fundamental within the experience of shame. For Sartre, shame necessitates an audience and is connected to the anxiety caused by being 'seen' and being judged (Bartky, 1990: 85; Dolezal, 2015: 5). Shame occurs in the presence of the other, through acknowledging oneself through the other's consciousness and thus becoming the 'Other's object' (Bartky, 1990: 85, Dolezal, 2015: 33). Sartre employs the term 'the Look' to explain this sense of being seen. The other's look becomes integrated into one's own faculties, so that even when one is alone one is 'seen' – by the internalised other (Dolezal, 2015: 39). Shame thus also involves *self*-evaluation. There is the understanding that "I *am*, in some important sense, as I am seen to be" (Bartky, 1990: 86). Shame "erodes self-experience", but inseparable from happenings in the social (Northrop, 2012: 110). It shapes one's personal experience of the public world (Northrop, 2012: 112).

When it comes to 'the Look', not all bodies have equal power in giving and receiving it. Some bodies are thus more likely to experience shame (Dolezal, 2015: 54). Shame is undoubtedly organised by gender (TED, 2012; Bartky, 1990: 19). A woman is always accompanied by an image of herself and her self is thus 'split in two' – becoming simultaneously the surveyor and the surveyed (Berger, 1972: 46). Berger notes how a woman must always watch herself and is "accompanied by an image of herself" (Berger, 1972: 46). This links to the "unremitting evaluation" felt by many of the women in Northrop's (2012: 112), study on cosmetic surgery.

The role of shame in shaping the embodied lives of women requires further exploration (Northrop, 2012: 87).

Bartky draws attention to the "generalised condition of dishonour" granted to women in a sexist society (Bulhan, 1985 as cited Bartky, 1990: 85). This is not to suggest men do not experience shame, but that women are more shame-prone and that it has different meaning in relation to their social location (Bartky, 1990: 84; Manion, 2003: 23). In exploring shame and gender, Bartky (1990: 85), refers to shame not as a specific kind of feeling or emotion, but as a "pervasive affective attunement to the social environment". Manion (2003: 23-25) identifies various studies within psychology that confirm that, due to gender role socialisation, women are more likely to organise their sense of self around feelings of shame. This can be seen as being linked to the fact that women are socialised into defining themselves in terms of relationship and dependence – in terms of the other (Manion, 2003: 24, Huon & Monro, 2005: 86). Furthermore, for women, shame is more likely to emerge from two concerns: the maintenance of interpersonal relationships and physical attractiveness (Manion, 2003: 25). When exploring women's experiences of their bodies one must remain cognizant of "the permeability of the boundary between the self and a significant other" (Northrop, 2012: 154).

Shame often remains unacknowledged. Shame itself becomes shameful (Dolezal, 2015: x). Our unwillingness to confront shame in daily life prevents us from understanding the ways it informs cultural prescriptions (Northrop, 2012: 111). Brown illustrates how if you were to 'put shame in a petri dish', it would require "three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence and judgement" (TED, 2012). This research aims to expose the personal experience of body shame for what it is – a complex social phenomenon, constructed within a network of unequal power relations, that powerfully informs the subjectivity of women.

Body shame is a relatively new concept and can be defined as shame that arises from some aspect of the body or bodily management (Northrop, 2012: 113; Dolezal, 2015: 7). This is a particularly formidable kind of shame (Dolezal, 2015: 6). Dolezal notes how "the body is the seat of personhood" and is immediately visible to the outside world (2015: 6). Body shame arises when the subject feels their body to be inadequate. This is a central characteristic of shame – the belief that the self is in some way deficient or flawed. It involves "the apprehension of oneself as a lesser creature" (Northrop, 2012: 110; Bartky; 1990: 87). There is a discrepancy between a person's reality and their ideal (Northrop, 2012: 112; Bessenoff & Snow, 2006: 728).

This is connected to the way in which shame is constructed within the structure of normative ideals (Dolezal, 2015: 54). Dolezal (2015: 54) draws attention to binary norms about what is acceptable and unacceptable and how these inform shame. Brene Brown (TED, 2012) argues that shame is for women a "web of unattainable, competing, conflicting expectations about who we're meant to be" (TED, 2012). Body shame then is the failure to conform to normative ideals of how a woman should look. In an image and appearance-obsessed society, body shame is ubiquitous and plays a significant role in the construction of women's identities (Dolezal, 2015: xiv; Northrop, 2012: 122).

2.2.3 Elusive feminine ideals

Representations of beauty produce norms for women, which they continuously measure themselves against (Craig, 2006:164). Powerful cultural forces, such as mass media, construct and normalise the 'ideal body' (Burnette *et al*., 2017: 114; Huon & Monro, 2005: 85). The family and peers too carry and transmit wider cultural values around women's bodies (Northrop, 2012: 64 & 136). Girls learn when they are very young that there is a specific kind of body deemed acceptable and attractive. Women are expected to strive towards achieving the 'ideal body' in order to guarantee inclusion and visibility in social spaces (Dolezal, 2015: 108; Northrop, 2012: 143).

Weight, in particular, is one of the most significant causes for body shame among women as it "has become a primary definer of women's worth and identity" (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 5). Many feminist scholars have explored the ways in which feminine achievement comes to rest on thinness and the effects this has on women's experiences of their bodies (Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 415). Craig (2006: 164) draws attention to the burning of girdles at the 1968 Miss America protest, as an act of resistance against beauty standards, but argues that these girdles have been replaced with fitness regimes in contemporary society.

It has been widely accepted that western neoliberal mainstream culture has normalised the young, slim, toned body, with smooth, soft, shaven skin and symmetrical features (Bartky 1990: 73; Bordo,1993: 140; Caldeira & de Ridder, 2017: 323; Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 416; Munro & Huon, 2005: 85; Dolezal, 2015: 109). Notably, women often recognise that these ideals are unattainable and that media constructions, for example, are not representative of real people (Northrop, 2012: 135). These ideals still engender shame, however. Failing to appropriate these (very narrow) characteristics is what results in the

belief of the 'self as deficient and flawed'. This ideal is ubiquitous, despite the fact that most real bodies do not match up to it (Dolezal, 2015: 109). Minor differences on ordinary bodies are labelled 'defects' (Dolezal, 2015: 108). Though there are distinctions based on factors like ethnicity, fashion and subculture, the ideal "embodies the pervasive norms that underscore all of these variations" (Dolezal, 2015: 109). Significantly, the ideal body must also not be evidently queer or disabled and it must be white (Dolezal, 2015: 109). Beauty is thus also *racially defined* (Craig, 2006: 168; Phoenix, 2014: 109; Robinson-Moore, 2008: 67; BBC Three, 2018). Dominant body standards place women of colour "outside of the beauty category" (Craig, 2006:168).

2.2.3.1. Race and the ideal

Much popular theorising of beauty standards – and the resultant shame women experience – has neglected the issue of race (Craig, 2006: 161; Phoenix, 2014: 109). As briefly touched on above, the issue of 'beauty' is inseparable from race. Furthermore, beauty claims have been pivotal within anti-racist resistance. African nationalist movements for example positioned the appreciation of black women's beauty as central to racial pride, as Marcus Garvey implored, "take down the pictures of white women from your walls. Elevate your own women to that place of honor" (Garvey, 1968 as cited Craig, 2006: 161). The phrase "black is beautiful", employed by civil rights and Black power activists in the 1960's, confronts the Eurocentricity and political nature of beauty ideals (Craig, 2006: 161)

Dominant beauty standards maintain not just gender inequality, but racial inequality (Craig, 2006: 163). Robinson-Moore's (2008) research highlights the negative ways that Eurocentric beauty paradigms impact black women's identities. She draws attention to the central question of "to whose cultural construct does one conform" (Robinson-Moore, 2008: 67). Participants in her study emphasised the need for a redefinition of beauty that is not based on European standards. The study also drew attention to how not all black women experience Eurocentric beauty standards the same way (Robinson-Moore, 2008: 81). Those with lighter skin recalled positive messages around their attractiveness whilst those with darker skin had more negative experiences (Robinson-Moore, 2008: 81).

This emphasises the issue of colourism, which refers to the preferential treatment of people of colour with lighter skin (Robinson-Moore, 2008: 73; Phoenix, 2014: 98; BBC Three: 2018). Black women with lighter skin experience significant benefits and privileges within

education, career and relationships (Phoenix, 2014: 98). Popular culture is saturated with messages around the preferability of light skin. Furthermore, multinational corporations exploit ideologies that preference whiteness- evident, for example, in the incredibly profitable skin lightening industry (Phoenix, 2014: 100). Hegemonic, white feminine ideas also manifest in the prescriptions around hair (Robinson-Moor, 2008: 73). Scholars often address norms requiring black women to straighten or perm their hair (Craig, 2006: 169). This further reflects the way in which bodies embody power relations. As Edut (2003: xxii) notes, "scratch away the surface of "I'm so fat" and "I hate my hair," and you'll find a sister treading water in a melting pot simmering with every "ism" imaginable". An exploration of body shame would need to remain cognizant of how Beauty standards and body ideals are imbued with the ideology of 'white is right'.

There is much cross-cultural comparative research on body image in South Africa, which highlights similarities and/or differences in levels of body dissatisfaction among cultures and races (Caradas *et al*., 2001; Hewat & Arndt; 2009; Szabo & Allwood, 2006). Culture is often seen as providing a kind of buffer against the internalisation of western ideals related to ideal body. There is research that suggests that black South African women have a different conception of ideal beauty and are more comfortable with a larger body size (Caradas *et al*., 2001: 118; Mwaba & Roman; 2009: 908). Other studies, however, show high levels of body dissatisfaction among black women and girls in South Africa (Szabo & Allwood, 2006; Hewat & Arndt; 2009; Pedro *et al*., 2016: 11). This research will remain aware of how body shame is intricately linked to issues of race and culture. Close attention will be paid to whether the experiences of participants of colour reflect the racialisation of beauty standards – whether, for example, they have felt pressure to lighten their skin or wear their hair a certain way.

2.2.3.2. The *reality* of unreal ideals

It must be noted that body shame is not just a matter of problematic internalisations (Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 416). Elusive body ideals have very real consequences in the social world and impact how women are perceived and treated (Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 416; Northrop, 2012: 112). South African businessman Donovan Tooth's recent viral (now infamous) fat-shaming video provides us with an extreme version of the social sanctions women face based on appearance. Commenting on pictures of women, he confidently informs his social media audience: "If you by any way think that a curvy, overweight woman is normal

and it's sexy and it's healthy – get fucked" (Wicks, 2020). A simple scroll through Instagram will confirm that online spaces are rife with men's derogatory comments on women's bodies.

Appearance, more for women than for men, also significantly affects success (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 29). Research has documented how women experience 'penalties' in employment, education, healthcare and relationships if they exceed the ideal body weight, for example (Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 416). Many overweight or older women experience feelings of "social redundancy" because of how they are treated in social settings (Northrop, 2012: 107). Achieving the ideal results in cultural capital (Dolezal, 2015: 109). The concrete consequences of body ideals are reflected in the experiences of many women. Julie Chen, CBS talk show host, for example, explained that she had had eyelid surgery at age twenty-five after being refused representation by an agent and after being told her Asian eyes "made her look bored" (Phoenix, 2014: 100). With reference to colourism, there is research that suggests significant socioeconomic advantages for women with lighter skin (Phoenix, 2014: 98; Robinson-Moor, 2008: 66). Furthermore, body shame puts women's psychological well-being at risk and may lead to eating disorders and other self-destructive behaviours (Blair Burnette *et al*., 2017: 114; Bessenoff & Snow, 2006: 727).

This research rests on the presupposition that feminine ideals have a powerful impact on women's experiences of their bodies. Bartky (1990: 76) notes how, even if there are no formal sanctions, the failure to conform to dominant ideals has significant effects on one's sense of self. She draws attention to comments from overweight women in literature on body size, such as: "I feel so terrible about the way I look that I cut off connection with my body. I operate from the neck up. I do not look in mirrors" (Bartky, 1990: 76). The depth of this experience of shame indicates the impact of the body ideals that have been internalised. Clemitshaw & Donaghue (2012:417) note that it is through "the cultural nexus of thinness, femininity, success, health and happiness that the ideal exerts its disciplinary power".

The normalisation of a certain form of the female body can be seen as an incredibly persistent and flexible mode of social control (Bordo, 1993: 166). The elusive feminine ideal and the appearance obsession it engenders undermines transformation of power structures (Bordo, 1993: 167). In the face of these powerful ideals, women are unable to simply 'be', despite greater social power and legal recognition. Wolf (2002: 11) comments on how the ideal of "the gaunt, youthful model supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful

womanhood". Significantly, this normative body dissatisfaction engenders an obsession with external regulation and modification. This will be further explored in Section 2.2.4. below.

2.2.4. Achieving the ideal body

Women are taught to manipulate and shape their bodies in order to better conform to body ideals and alleviate shame. A Foucauldian perspective on the body is useful here. Foucault, examining the subjugation and domination of bodies in institutions such as the prison, the army, the factory and the school, provides valuable insight into "how the body has been historically disciplined" (Bartky, 1990: 63; Bordo, 2003: 182; Dolezal, 2015: 59). Predefined norms are "the starting point" in disciplining bodies (Jansen & Wehrle, 2018: 43). Foucault examines the construction of 'docile bodies' within the disciplinary society, where there is a "minute and relentless surveillance" of bodies (Bartky, 1990: 64). This is intricately connected to Sartre's concept of 'the Look'. Bodies are made permanently visible. What is notable here is the internalisation of this surveillance. There is a heightened self-consciousness in the hyper-visible subject, whether it be a prisoner or a schoolboy, and the subject thus begins to discipline *themselves* (Bartky, 1990: 65). Foucault draws attention to the self-regulation and self-surveillance of the body subject, which guarantees a particular form of behaviour. A set of norms, created by an external authority, are internalised and integrated into one's own viewpoint (Dolezal, 2015: 60).

Theorists such as Sandra Bartky (1990: 65) emphasise the importance of this conceptualisation in understanding gender, particularly body shame and the way that women experience their bodies. Bartky (1990: 73) positions femininity as "a spectacle" and draws attention to the various disciplinary practices women subject themselves to. Dieting, fitness and cosmetics become normalising processes (Jansen & Wehrle, 2018: 44). The list of techniques, practices and products employed is endless: skin serums, creams and masks, Botox, eyebrow pencils, concealer, lipstick, exercise, diet, starvation, tweezing, waxing, tanning creams and skin-lightening creams, to name a few (Bartky, 1990: 70; Jansen & Wehrle, 2018: 44). It can be said that the main mode of discipline in contemporary society relates to body size (Brook, 2014: 70).

The woman's body is constructed as inherently inadequate in its natural state - it should have jogged further or eaten less (Bartky; 1990: 72). Through normalising disciplines of beauty women are constantly reminded of the lack and 'never-enoughness' of the female body. The

mind/body dualism is relevant here again because disciplinary practices position, to a certain degree, the body as enemy. Diet literature, for example emphasises the need to control the body and "be vigilant against 'sneaky' attempts of the fat to return" (Brook, 2014: 77).

Significantly, the pursuit of the feminine ideal becomes positioned as a personal desire (Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 416). Women internalise hegemonic beauty standards and personal preferences thus become entangled with wider cultural values (Bartky, 1990: 77; Bessenoff & Snow, 2006; Northrop, 2012: 135). Beauty standards and normative habits "become part and parcel of her bodily being" (Jansen & Wehrle, 2018: 44). Whereas practices like foot binding in ancient China and corseting in the West under early capitalism reflect external control over women's bodies, control has now become 'internal' (Bordo, 2003: 198; Hesse-Biber, 1997: 23). Furthermore, women are presented as entirely responsible for choosing to employ such disciplinary practices, as Bordo (2003: 189) notes "waists strait-laced to 14 inches, or our breasts surgically stuffed with plastic, we 'do it to ourselves'". The normalisation of an ideal in contemporary society is undermined because women govern themselves "with great ambition and (pretended) pleasure" (Jansen & Wehrle, 2018: 45). There is thus a high premium on individual control and responsibility.

2.2.5. Problematising postfeminism

Jansen and Wehrle (2018: 45) argue that within a neoliberal context, the reality of the normalising processes discussed above are rejected and the idea of a freely choosing subject is emphasised. Feminist scholarship has long critiqued 'the regime of shame' and destructive effects of restrictive beauty categories. The narrative of post-feminism, which originates in Western popular culture and media, rejects this critique through a focus on the agency and subjectivity of women (Banet-Weiser & Portwood Stacer, 2006: 260; Lazar, 2011: 38). Beauty practices are depicted as an extension of women's right to freedom and as a matter of individual pleasure (Lazar, 2011: 38). Using many examples, Lazar explores postfeminist rhetoric within advert statements such as: "FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHT TO OWN THE PERFECT BODY" (Lazar, 2011: 41). Postfeminism aims to emphasise women's "freedom to beautiful" (Lazar, 2011: 39). It affirms ideas around success and achievement coming from appearance and emphasises the pleasure that will result from a transformed body (Banet-Weiser & Portwood Stacer, 2006: 265 & 268). This ideology is embodied in the archetype of the 'kick-ass', working-out modern women (who can get a boob job, if she *wants* to – "you

go girl!") (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 21). Postfeminist discourse thus complicates the ways in which women navigate shame.

Under postfeminism, the body is positioned as an unfinished project to be worked on (Dolezal, 2015: 108). Postfeminism endorses an obsession with self-management and improvement (Dolezal, 2015: 108; Tasker & Negra, 2007: 21). The body comes to be represented as 'cultural plastic', that can be (and should be) endlessly manipulated (Brook, 2014: 78). Neoliberal consumer culture constructs the body as a site for transformation and reproduces the concept of the body as the main source of value and identity (Dolezal, 2015: 108). This is particularly true for the female body. Industry benefits enormously from women's shame (Bordo, 2003: 196; Hesse-Biber, 1997: 32; Dolezal, 2015: 108; Northrop, 2012: 38). Rudd and Lennon's (2000) research on university aged women confirmed the underlying belief that the body is malleable. Many participants also presented feminine ideal as attainable – with time and effort (Rudd and Lennon 2000: 160). The management of women's bodies is inseparable from consumer capitalism (Brook, 2014: 70). Large amounts of money are channelled into weight-loss, fitness, fashion and cosmetics (Bordo, 2003: 196; Hesse-Biber, 1996: 32; Dolezal, 2015: 108). The lifeblood of the cosmetic surgery industry is 'the ideal' and the very existence of the industry rests on "women scrutinizing their appearance and agreeing that it needs amending towards that ideal" (Northrop, 2012: 191). Post-feminism, in alliance with consumer culture, is decidedly middle class and it positions consumption as a mode of empowerment (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 2). Underneath its rhetoric of choice and empowerment is the imperative to consume (Lazar, 2011:45).

2.2.5.1. The issue of choice

Post-feminism's language of 'choice' is significant. The term was popularised in pro-choice abortion debates in the 1970s and 1980s, but under post-feminism, 'consumer choice' comes to replace and represent feminism in popular culture (Lazar, 2011: 43; Bordo, 2003: 196). Personally, I have felt uncomfortable when, in discussion with friends, beauty practices like cosmetic surgery are reimagined as feminist empowerment. It can be argued that we reconstruct ourselves according to images chosen for us, summarised by Bordo's rhetorical question: "Does anyone in this culture have her nose shaped to look more African or Jewish?" (2003: 197). Under post-feminism, the significance of oppressive power relations in performances of gender is undermined (Banet-Weiser & Portwood Stacer, 2006: 262). This kind of narrative

makes it difficult to construct a discourse centred around struggle and structural inequality (Banet-Weiser & Portwood Stacer, 2006: 269).

The emphasis on personal choice obscures "the lived experiences of bodies marked by economic, 'racial' and other differences" (Brook, 2014: 78). The 'choice' discourse of postfeminist presents itself as egalitarian and empowering. This is deceptive when society is imbued with dominant – largely white – ideals with regards to what is normal and what is beautiful, which very much inform (or dictate) choices (Brook, 2014: 79). Summarising Anne Balsamo's argument, Brook speaks of how new beauty technologies, within cosmetic surgery for example, are rooted within problematic gender and racial structures (Brook, 2014: 80). She touches on the massive increase of eyelid surgery among women of Asian origin, for example and the ways in which the literature of cosmetic surgery appears to deny its cultural biases yet simultaneously perpetuates them (Brook, 2014: 81). Knowledge around the biases of beauty and issues such as colourism, discussed in Section 3, elucidates the constraints on women's agency (Phoenix, 2014: 100). One can question whether we can really adopt practices of body management 'for ourselves' when our sense of self is inseparable from the heterosexual economy within in which we reside (Brook, 2014: 69). Craig (2006: 164) draws attention to the complexity of the gap "between analyses of beauty as a component of a structure of oppression and analyses of beauty as an instrument of female agency". Engaging with this complexity is necessary in order to understand the way that women navigate shame in contemporary society.

One must obviously be wary here of undermining the agency of women. There is the danger of presenting women as "cultural dopes" (Brook, 2014: 83). Beauty practices and, in specific, cosmetic surgery, can for women be a form of assertion rather than submission and way to actively construct a new self (Brook, 2014: 84). Transformation of this kind can be a valid exertion of free will. Debra Gimlin's statement touches on the issue of agency:

> "I find it implausible that the millions of women who engage in body work blindly submit to such control or choose to make their bodies physical manifestations of their own subordination" (Gimlin, 2002 as cited Craig, 2006: 164)

Kathy Davis warns of 'beauty myth' which simultaneously pressures women to conform to certain ideals and labels those who do as narcissists (Brook, 2014: 84). Brook discusses Davis' qualitative research on cosmetic surgery, which suggests that, for many women, these kinds of changes of the body and appearance could be the "best thing to do in their particular

situation" (Brook, 2014: 84). Tasker & Negra (2007: 21), suggest that we cannot engage with the discourse of postfeminism only as a means to critique and reject it. Its rhetoric is certainly persuasive and the consumers of this rhetoric are not 'cultural dopes'. It cannot automatically be reduced to an oppressive ideology as it is far more complex – "postfeminism popularizes (as much as it caricatures) a feminism it simultaneously evokes and rejects" (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 21).

Furthermore, given the very real consequences and privileges that accompany body appearances in contemporary society, the 'consumption' that postfeminism encourages cannot be completely ruled out as a valid form of 'taking things into one's own hands'. Still, the frightening homogenisation of women's bodies – particularly through cosmetic surgery – being reimagined as a form of individual empowerment is unsettling. Thus, important questions are posed around the negotiation of body shame, particularly with regards to agency. As Brook (2014: 82) notes, to what extent does a beauty practice such as surgery provide "a way for us to be agents of our own destinies and how far does it disempower us?". This research will consider how women's attitudes towards their bodies and towards beauty practices may reflect the postfeminist sensibilities that have been problematised, but will also take women's explanations seriously, paying attention to their individual narratives without labelling them 'cultural dopes'.

2.2.5.2. Postfeminism in the non-western world

The ways that these pervasive neoliberal ideas interact with how women negotiate shame must be accounted for. There is a lack of research on this kind of thinking within a South African context. Butler (2013: 48) suggests that whilst the literature of postfeminism generally excludes women of colour, "there is no shortage of women of colour … appropriating the language of postfeminism". Simidele Dosekun (2015: 961) draws on Butler's argument and notes how postfeminist narratives are presented as only really existing within Western, developed societies. Postfeminism in the non-western world is constructed as a less glamourous 'tamer' replication that manifests via consumer culture (Dosekun, 2015: 963). Dosekun (2015: 965) critiques this and argues that postfeminism is very easily and powerfully transnationalised. Butler (2013: 45) notes that it is a flexible discourse that "can travel through complex social terrains, deftly adapting to cultural, economic, and political shifts while maintaining its core characteristics". It will not necessarily have static,

predetermined meanings in the different contexts in which is emerges, however (Dosekun, 2015: 966).

Dosekun's (2015) research on young women in Lagos explores the complex manifestations of postfeminism. In an interview she notes how her participants insisted that they aimed to achieve what she terms "spectacular feminine beauty" for *themselves*, for the "oomph" it gives, as one participant phrased it (Deller, 2020: para 4). They also revealed, however, that they felt pressured by many expectations placed on them. Notably, they had emphasised the former postfeminist message, deeming it more preferable, which is indicative of "the kind of subjectivity being performed" (Deller, 2020: para 4). Her research also confirms the importance of class. Achieving "spectacular femininity" is a very expensive process (Doeskun, 2015: 971). The participants see themselves as *already* empowered, but do not view local poorer women this way.

Engaging with postfeminist narratives and ideas is crucial in seeking to truly understand the complexity of body shame. In exploring the ways participants experience their bodies, this research will be cognizant of whether they reflect postfeminist sensibilities. For example, there will be a focus on whether they frame beauty practices as a mode of feminist empowerment or a defeat by the patriarchy, to state the extremes. A participant may engage in various beauty practices and feel deeply ashamed if she fails to, yet also state that she does this 'for herself' and use the language of choice. In this sense she may have internalised a postfeminist narrative that actually protects the regime of body shame. This research aims to explore whether, in contemporary South Africa, university women's experiences are informed by the narrative of postfeminism – which affirms the importance of looking a certain way, but frames this as a form of freedom.

2.3. Resisting shame and celebrating differences

2.3.1 Positive attitudes

Body image is complex and multidimensional, involving many different aspects of experience (Wood-Barcalow *et al*., 2010: 106; Tiggemann, 2015: 168). In order to understand the ways that women navigate shame, it is necessary to explore positive body image. Women who reject the regime of shame may have a more positive experience of their bodies. This is likely to positively impact physical and psychological well-being (Wood-Barcalow *et al*., 2010: 125).

Although much scholarship explores body dissatisfaction and shame, there has been a more recent focus in research on positive body image and the kinds of interventions that can reduce body shame among women (Wood-Barcalow *et al*., 2010; Blair Burnette *et al*., 2017; Tiggemann, 2015). Positive body image can be seen as an appreciation and acceptance of the body, that manifests in beliefs and behaviour (McHugh, 2014: 318).

Several studies explore positive body image among adolescent girls (Blair Burnette *et al*., 2017; Pope *et al.*, 2014; Mchugh *et al.*, 2014; Tiggemann *et al.*, 2000). Tiggemann *et al.*'s (2000: 657) study revealed that girls "may not be as dissatisfied with their bodies as previously assumed". Participants showed high levels of awareness of the sociocultural pressures around appearance and recognised that losing weight does necessarily make one happier, for example (Tiggemann *et al,* 2000: 657). Pope *et al.*'s (2014: 314) study of body image among adolescent African American girls also found participants to be quite satisfied with their bodies, which they had compassion towards. There is thus evidence of young girls rejecting elements the regime of shame.

Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's (2015: 118) research on positive body image among young women aims to contribute around theorising around healthier body experiences and not just positioning it as just the absence of negative features. It was revealed that body positivity is not a unidimensional construct that can be easily measured (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015: 122). They explore several characteristics associated with a body positive attitude. Body positive women expressed an appreciation and love for their body – including its features and functionality (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015: 122). These women tend to engage in practices such as exercise as a form of self-care. They exercise for health and enjoyment, rather than trying to conform to a certain body standard (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015: 123) They were also able to broadly conceptualise beauty, asserting that people can be beautiful in a variety of different ways. Notably, body positivity can be seen as being intricately linked to acceptance by others. If women perceive their bodies as acceptable, they are less concerned with changing their bodies (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015: 126; Wood-Barcalow *et al*., 2010: 110). Unconditional support and acceptance from family members, friends and partners played a significant role.

Body positive women can also be seen as displaying a resistance towards internalising unrealistic media ideals and an avoidance of people who are overly obsessed with weight and

appearance. They exhibit a 'filtering' tendency, whereby they interpret "incoming information in a body-protective manner" (Wood-Barcalow *et al*., 2010: 112). Evidently, those who are body positive are able to prevent, to a certain extent, the ideals they encounter from impacting their body experience. Blair Burnette *et al*.'s (2017: 121) research on social media and body image in early adolescent girls touched on the positive influence of strategies implemented by the girls' school which involved, for example, media literacy and a fostering of appreciation for differences. These kinds of strategies could help girls and women to establish protective filters (Wood-Barcalow *et al*., 2010: 113). This research will pay attention to the ways that participants may reject body ideals and express an appreciation for their bodies.

2.3.2. Body positivity - the movement

The body positive movement reflects a form of resistance against normative beauty standards (Afful & Ricciardelli; 2015: 454; Caldeira & de Ridder, 2017: 326; Sastre, 2014: 929). This 'movement', which is actually more like a "loose set of philosophies", draws heavily from the Fat Acceptance movement and operates mostly online, through websites and social media platforms (Sastre, 2014: 930; Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 417) There has, for example, been the rise of what has been coined "the fatosphere", a network of fat acceptance blogs, which provide alternatives to dominant ideals about thinness (Afful & Ricciardelli; 2015: 457; Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 417). It involves the repositioning of body 'defects' in positive terms. There is the notion under the body positive movement, for example, that fat is a kind of diversity (Afful & Ricciardelli; 2015: 454). Though much of the movement is focused on body weight, it involves a celebration of all kinds of characteristics that have been excluded from dominant beauty paradigms,

It must be noted that there has also been a wider shift in mainstream culture towards challenging restrictive beauty criteria, evidenced for example in the 'makeover' that 57-year-old toy, Barbie received in 2016 – with the introduction of three new body types and various ethnicities (Dockterman, 2016). As head of branding, Evelyn Mazacco explains "Our goal was to really celebrate all types of beauty" (Dockterman, 2016). Apart from attempts at normalising different kinds of bodies, it can be argued that there is also less tolerance for the shaming of women's bodies in society. One can refer back to the Donathon Tooth saga, for example. Shortly after he posted his videos, over one thousand people joined a *Facebook* group called "Donovan Tooth (Panda Clothing) must fall" (Wicks, 2020: para. 2). His derogatory comments were met with online outrage, resulting in the clothing brand he

worked for distancing themselves from him and he was forced to offer an apology (Wicks, 2020: para. 1)

Body positive projects promote self-love and acceptance of *all* bodies, providing alternatives to dominant ideals (Afful & Ricciardelli; 2015: 454; Caldeira & de Ridder, 2017: 325; Sastre, 2014: 930). They expose the dangers and the deception of normative ideals (Sastre, 2014: 930). Online body positivity pages provide a space for women to voice their feelings and experiences of shame and exclusion and aim to help foster a healthier body image. These digital spaces create sense of community where individuals can "exert their right to exist" (Zavatarro, 2020: 6). This discourse directly confronts the myths about women's bodies and aims to disrupt "the regime of shame" (Caldeira and de Ridder, 2017: 326). Although many body positivity projects feature participants who are mostly heterosexual white women, the movement itself is often intersectional, emphasising the importance of celebrating black and queer bodies (Zavatarro, 2020: 935).

This current research accounts for discourses of resistance and seeks to understand the ways this confronts body shame in the personal lives of women. It considers whether participants' responses reflect body positive attitudes. The way their feelings towards their bodies and other women's bodies evaluated in relation to ideas around resistance and inclusivity. The body positivity movement itself will also be discussed. It is anticipated that the particular group of participants will be aware of body positive discourse as they are likely to have access to technology and social media.

2.3.2.1 <u>Failing to meaningfully rethink the body.</u>

Despite the attempts to disrupt beauty norms, the body positive movement has been critiqued for still adhering to sexist frameworks where beauty and sexiness are essential characteristics of femininity (Caldeira & de Ridder, 2017: 328). In many body positivity projects, bodily display is equated with empowerment. Furthermore, the movement has been exploited by marketing campaigns, driven by the imperatives of profit, which often ultimately promote hegemonic beauty ideals (Luck, 2016: 1). There is a noticeable post-feminist influence in body positive discourse. In many ways, it "echoes the very body histories it appears to combat" and fails to radically rethink the ways bodies are allowed to be performed (Sastre, 2014: 935). Sastre (2014: 941) argues for the need for a radical shift in how we engage with and perceive bodies – not just a widening of the categories that are allowed to be beautiful.

Dara Murray explores the body positivity/ industry intersection in her critique of 'The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty' (2013). Through this campaign, Dove presents itself as a social agent and 'real women'. They announced that they would diversify the kind of beauty being portrayed and feature 'real' women (Murray, 2013: 84). Murray (2013: 98) notes how the campaign employed the myth of 'real beauty' which is a paradox that seemingly critiques beauty standards, but also encourages conformity to them. It argues for women to strive to be part of a positive ideology and also insists that women buy beauty products. The campaign is saturated with postfeminist ideas about agency and choice and places the responsibility of change on the individual (Murray, 2013: 98). Murray (2013: 97) asserts that whilst the focus on women as consumers with agency may be appealing to some feminists, it is important to aim to enact social change "that revolutionizes social structures, not to support corporate strategies that seek audiences "brand attachment".

2.3.2.2 Ambivalent bodies

Eva Wiseman (2020: para.7) also touches on the aforementioned focus on individual responsibility under the body positivity discourse. In a lifestyle article critiquing body positivity, she poignantly points out that body shame "goes much deeper than a Dove ad can explain". There are rational reasons for the disgust women feel towards their bodies and though there has been a shift towards celebrating all bodies, the true structural sources of this bitter-body-relationship remains unchallenged (Wiseman, 2020: para. 6). Although it is important to create more inclusive beauty categories and to affirm all bodies of being beautiful, it is "fundamental to offer them a world where they are safe, valued and free from oppression" (Edut, 2003: xxiv). Wiseman (2020: para. 6) notes the difficulty and complexity of actually beginning to feel better about one's body. Women may feel a kind of double shame – shame caused by not conforming to powerful, pervasive ideals and shame caused by wanting to conform in the first place. Wiseman (2020: para 9) advocates for a 'proud ambivalence' towards our bodies – a neutrality and a shift towards being a peace with one's body, without the pressure to *love* it. The concept of neutrality arose in Mchugh *et al.*'s (2014: 324) exploration of body positivity among adolescent aboriginal girls, where most of the participants appeared neutral towards their bodies. Mchugh *et al.* (2014: 324) suggest that perhaps many view their bodies as "good enough" and that it would be beneficial to expand the literature around "body acceptability", which could help account for the ambivalence girls and women may feel towards their bodies.

One must thus question the extent to which body positive social media pages and websites actually provide new ways of thinking about the self and the body (Sastre, 2014: 930). Edut (2003: vi) emphasises the confusion women face in a complex context imbued with contrasting messages around women's bodies. Her statement, "I want to be fit, energetic and healthy. But I also want to be a body outlaw who coolly rejects the beauty standard and marches to her own chunky, funky beat", reflects this (Edut, 2003: vi). She also notes how, on an intellectual level, many women realise how unrealistic beauty standards and ideals are, yet emotionally are in denial (Edut, 2003: vi). Many women may have a contradictory experience of their bodies. This can be summed up by a quote from a participant in Clemitshaw and Donaghue's (2012: 422) study: "I'm totally smart and feminist and yet I want to be a waif". Women may experience significant body shame and feelings of inadequacy, despite outwardly rejecting restrictive ideals. Research may thus be further complicated by the fact that participants may not be willing to admit or explore the true ambivalence towards their bodies if they choose to outwardly express body positive rhetoric.

2.4. Conclusion

This research begins from an acknowledgment that the woman's body is evidently a contested terrain. It is anticipated that the ways in which women in the study navigate shame and experience their bodies will thus be complicated. It must be acknowledged that participants may consciously and actively reject beauty ideals, yet may still feel compelled to conform and still experience shame. Shame takes place within the structure of normative ideals and is often a result of the self being made to feel deficient or inadequate. There are powerful prescriptions around how women should look and failing to conform to these may result in shame. This is especially relevant in society where women are socialised into "being a body" and are more attuned to the gaze of the other. The way that women navigate their body experiences may also be further complicated by postfeminist messages, which emphasise the agency and subjectivity of women, whilst undermining the significance of normative structures. The messages of the body positivity movement are also popular however and, although it may fail to adequately rethink women's bodies, it could empower women in their rejection of shame. This chapter has thus far provided the context for understanding how women may experience body shame and how they may resist it.

Chapter 3: Phenomenological frameworks

3.1. Introduction

This section describes the motivation behind using phenomenological and feminist phenomenological perspectives to explore women's experiences of their bodies. Phenomenology provides an appropriate framework for understanding women's experiences of their bodies. It can be seen as emphasising agency and subjectivity and is thus useful for understanding how women experience their bodies as individuals and the ways in which they are able to make reflexive decisions. (Denscombe, 2003: 96). Feminist phenomenology, in particular, also emphasises the impact of gender relations on the lived body.

3.2. The lived body and embodied experience

Phenomenology as a philosophy also tends to exhibit a "particular interest in the basics of social existence". It is focused on the nature of "being in the world" and aims to explore individual's "life worlds" (Denscombe, 2003: 97). This involves in-depth investigation of ordinary facets of existence in an ordinary world (Groenewald, 2004: 43). Theory is constructed from first-hand experience of phenomena, which aligns with the focus of this research (Dolezal, 2015: x, Groenewald, 2004: 44). Under a phenomenological approach it is especially necessary to prevent the researcher's preconceptions from undermining the actual descriptions of the participant (Philips-Pula *et al*., 2011: 70). One must engage with the participant's experiences and beliefs exactly as they are stated before interpreting them.

Instead of trying to discover ahistorical objective truths, phenomenology seeks to address to question of "what are we in our actuality", to which the answer is: lived bodies (Foucault, 1988 as cited Dolezal, 2015: x). The lived body is the central category for this theoretical approach (Young, 2005: 15). This research does not engage with the body as something to observe, but aims to describe women's experiences as "something lived and felt in the flesh" (Young, 2005: 7). Edmond Husserl, foremost champion of phenomenology, provides a distinction between the body as a material object (Körper) and as a living organism (Leib. Körper) (Dolezal, 2015: 19; Stawarska, 2018: 13). He does not however, present these as separate entities. Rather, it is a matter of the lived body being simultaneously experienced as

a material object (Dolezal, 2015: 19). Phenomenology recognises that the body is something we are and something we have (Dolezal, 2015: 19; Jansen & Wehrl, 2018: 37). Our embodiment is distinguished by this internal differentiation (Jansen & Wehrl, 2018: 37). Bodily experience is "necessarily a double-sided affair" (Dolezal, 2015: 19).

The physical body is not an 'appendage' to the true self (Dolezal, 2015: 20). Rather, it is "the ground for, and site of, meaningful existence" (Dolezal, 2015: 21). It is in this sense that the self *is* corporeal (Lennon, 2010: 4). Phenomenology can help provide insight in the ways the material features of our bodies play a significant role in our sense of self (Lennon, 2010: 14). Though traditional phenomenological perspectives are rooted in Cartesian thinking, they challenge dualisms and position body and mind as intricately connected (Dolezal, 2015: 17; Stawarska, 2018: 16). Consciousness is not detached from body. A phenomenological approach could be helpful in understanding the ways women experience the gendered mind/body dualism and negotiate shame through practices such as cosmetic surgery. Davis, taking a more sympathetic stance towards these medical procedures, suggests they can be a way for the embodied self to recreate and seek to become "a subject with a body rather than just a body" (Davis, 1995 as cited Brook, 2014: 84).

Phenomenology is concerned with exploring and describing 'embodied experience' (Dolezal, 2015: 17). It was Merleau-Ponty who took the "revolutionary step" of conceptualising consciousness as embodied (Young, 2005: 7). Embodiment is about the dialogue between the individual and their world (Groenewald, 2004: 43). They are simultaneously connected to the outer world and with one's self (Davis, 1991: 4). The individual's experience of the world comes from their "being in the world" and this is what consciousness comprises. We thus have to navigate external and internal perspectives of the body (Jansen & Wehrl, 2018: 38). This perspective also helps elucidate the influence of external norms on one's experience (Jansen & Wehrl, 2018: 45). Embodied experienced is profoundly impacted by normalising processes because external norms are "allowed to infiltrate the 'economy' of our innermost needs and desires" (Jansen & Wehrl, 2018:47). As Dolezal (2015: 17) comments, understanding the complex nature of embodiment is central in "articulating the multi-faceted nature of body shame".

Phenomenological perspectives have also helped elucidate the ways in which our embodied identities depend on *others* (Lennon, 2010: 17). The negotiation of these identities is an

intersubjective process. This provides a valuable approach for understanding body shame. A phenomenological account of shame would be reliant on notions of the gaze. As has been previously noted, shame is inseparable from the gaze of the other (Fuchs, 2003: 227, Bartky, 1990: 85, Dolezal, 2015: 33). Fuchs draws attention to the 'corporealization' that shame brings -we feel and appear 'a thing' (Fuchs, 2003: 227). This corresponds to the characteristics of the shame experience itself, such as reddening of the face or a desire to hide the body. The acute awareness that comes with 'being seen' often involves involuntary physical reactions (Dolezal, 2015: 43). Most forms of shame involve the body in some way, even if the shame has nothing to do with the body and thus, shame is itself a bodily experience, not just a cognitive response. (Dolezal, 2015: 11). Fuchs (2003: 228) argues that the "phenomenological structure of shame means that the lived-body has taken up and internalized its being seen". The body is part of the individual yet also part of the world (Dolezal, 2015: 32). It is material, visible and exposed (Jansen & Wehrl, 2018: 37). Shame is simultaneously embodied and social and phenomenology, with its focus on embodied and intersubjective relations, can provide valuable insight on how to interpret the topic (Dolezal, 2015: x).

3.3. The socially situated lived body

The relationship between phenomenology and feminist perspectives is complex, with "considerable scepticism" about the usefulness of phenomenology – which is often critiqued as promoting essentialising and universalising ideas – for feminist imperatives (Fisher, 2000: 21). Traditional phenomenology fails to address issues of gender and sexual difference and experience is positioned as non-gendered (Fisher, 2000: 20). It can be argued that the lived body expresses "social and spatial privileges", which some bodies have more of (Jansen & Wehrl, 2018: 42). Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* is largely seen as forming the initial foundation of feminist phenomenology (Stawarska, 2018: 13). Her familiar phrase "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" is decisively phenomenological (de Beauvoir, as cited Fisher, 2000: 1; Stawarska; 2018: 22). Feminist theorists, such as Bartky and Young, place the lived experience of the body at the centre of analysis (Lennon, 2010: 14).

Everyday experiences of embodiment constitute a woman (Lennon, 2010: 14). Women are however situated differently within the network of the social (Bartky, 1990: 83). Young

argues that there is a "distinct mode of being in the world that is female" (Fisher, 2000: 36). Using a phenomenological framework, she is able to explore embodiment and the bodily experience of women. She explores how women experience their bodies as objects "to be looked at and acted upon", for example (Young, 1980 as cited Lennon, 2010: 24). This way of being in the world, these experiences of embodiment, powerfully inform women's sense of identity (Lennon, 2010: 24). As Jansen and Wehrl (2018: 42) note, "the less a woman can just *be a body* the more she *has a body*". This is a phenomenological concern. Feminist phenomenologists also draw attention to what has been termed the "ethics of embodiment", which involves looking at bodily norms and the ways in which certain bodies and "modes of comportment" are valued over others (Lennon, 2010: 18). The body experience is inseparable from discourses which normalise certain kinds of bodies (Lennon, 2010: 18)

Phenomenology is concerned with the essence of experience. It can be argued, however, that there is no "pure" embodied experience prior to ideology and science" (Young, 2005: 7). Power and ideologies condition experience (Young, 2005: 9). Feminist phenomenological perspectives draw attention to how experience is a contested category (Stawarska, 2018: 19). Experience cannot be viewed as an apolitical, ahistorical phenomenon and Stawarska (2018: 19) argues that we cannot necessarily take experience at 'face value'. For example, a woman may experience body shame as what she feels is a direct result of her own failings and personal inadequacy. Similarly, a woman may feel empowered and confident when she loses weight or has rhinoplasty surgery. These experiences, however, are taking place within a specific socio-political and historical context. Women's experiences are often responses to deeper structures and social relations (Stawarska, 2018: 19). However, recognising this structured nature of experience does not mean that experience itself should simply be reduced to an epiphenomenon. It is not merely a 'by-product' and is a "site of critical reflection, resistance, and revolt" (Stawarska, 2018: 20).

Alcoff (2000: 47) argues that bodies should not be thought of as an abstract concept, but contextualised within their own unique histories and individual inscriptions. Furthermore, theory should not exist, distinct from the body "in some free -floating, immaterial discursive realm" – it is itself, embodied (Alcoff, 2000: 47). This research gains insight through the concept of the 'lived body', the body as experienced by the individual, but – feminist phenomenologists recommend – it also perceives the lived body as inseparable from and dependent on the gendered social structures within which it is situated (Young, 2005: 26).

The lived body is profoundly impacted by cultural meanings (Young, 2005: 7). Thus, structures of meaning and normative practices must be included in a phenomenological perspective alongside embodiment in order for it to be meaningful for the issue of body shame (Stawarska, 2018: 18). Stawarska posits that it is with the recognition of the 'situated subjectivity' of the individual that phenomenology can become feminist phenomenology (2018: 25).

A feminist phenomenological perspective is useful for interpreting agency. The concept of the lived body can provide a meaningful understanding of how the individual's subjectivity is formed by the expectations of other and by sociocultural dynamics – in a way that the individual has not chosen (Young, 2005: 18). However, women respond to these 'unchosen facts' in their own ways (Young, 2005: 18). This understanding is thus useful for understanding the way individual women negotiate body shame within a complex context, saturated with contradictory messages about the woman's body. Dolezal (2015: x) notes how "phenomenology proposes an active and creative relation to the world".

Furthermore, an integrated view of the individual – as both object and subject – could provide a meaningful framework for interpreting resistance (Stawarska, 2018: 26). Oppression and resistance are complicated. Oppressive social relations can become internalised and subjects can become complicit in their own oppression, yet they can also reject and resist this oppression (Stawarska, 2018: 26). This can happen simultaneously. Stawarska (2018: 26) draws attention to the "ambiguity between complicity and contestation". This would be useful for understanding the contradictory ways women navigate shame – specifically with regards to postfeminism and body positivity. Body positive attitudes, as has been noted, can be a powerful rejection of body shame and patriarchal ideals yet they can simultaneously reproduce oppressive ideas about what a body should look like. Similarly, postfeminist sensibilities could be a valid form of agency as well as an outright acceptance of oppression. This research will explore resistance and internalisation of the regime of shame, but it will recognise the gradients within women's positions.

3.4. Conclusion

It is evident that phenomenology provides a useful framework for interpreting women's body experiences. Body shame is a normal 'everyday' occurrence, for many women and this

research aims to focus on first-hand individual experience of this phenomena. Phenomenology will help elucidate the conversation between one's body and one's sense of self. Guided by feminist phenomenological perspectives, this research will explore women's sense of 'being in the world', which is greatly impacted by the issue of body shame. It is concerned with journeying towards the essence of experience, but recognises that experience is significantly informed by where in society the lived body is situated. This framework is thus useful because, while emphasises the individual's agency, it allows us to consider how choices may be greatly informed by sociocultural dynamics. Furthermore, it recognises the complexity between conformity and resistance.

Chapter 4: Interpreting Women's body experiences

4.1. Introduction

This chapter seeks to interpret the data collected, contextualising it in terms of the reviewed literature. The purpose of this research is to provide an in-depth exploration of women's body experiences, in relation to appearance. After conducting interviews with fifteen participants, it became evident that the body experience is complex and multidimensional. Embodiment was greatly informed by normalised shame, but women also resisted this shame in a variety of ways. Contemporary postfeminist messages as well as the body positivity movement greatly informed the ways women navigated their body experiences. Following the dominant themes, this analysis will thus be divided into five main sections, namely: 'Experiencing shame', 'The role of the other in the body experience', 'Postfeminism and the body experience', 'Rejecting the regime of shame' and, finally, 'The body positivity movement and the body experience'. These themes are each further divided into several subthemes in order to provide a holistic account of how women navigate shame. Guided by phenomenological and feminist phenomenological perspectives, this analysis centres around the 'essence' of experience, but also explores the way that experience is informed by sociocultural dynamics.

4.2. A note on the complexity of the body experience

Briefly, it must be noted that women's experiences of their bodies were first and foremost complex and multidimensional. This made classifying the body experience difficult. It was not a case of some women fully rejecting the regime of shame and others conforming entirely. Certainly, there were participants that were far more positive about their bodies than others and a few who appeared to completely reject the regime of shame. Overall, however it can be said that women often experience their bodies on all sides of the 'spectrum', simultaneously. They spoke of feeling shame and wanting to conform to ideals, but other times they spoke of rejecting shame and embracing their bodies, both of which will be later explored. These experiences were also dynamic and shifted. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015: 118) distinguish body positivity as distinct from negative body image and argue that dissatisfaction can be present among body positive women. They classify body positive

women according to certain criteria. This kind of perspective, however, may undermine the very real shame experiences 'body positive' women may experience. The current analysis does not seek to make classifications between participants who were mostly ashamed, those who were mostly positive or those who were generally tolerant. Rather, it will explore experiences of shame as well as rejection of shame in all participants and interpret these experiences in their own right. These contradictory experiences illustrate how a woman's body can be a "fraught battleground between two unreconciled 'parts' of herself" (Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 422). This is especially relevant considering the diverse, contrasting messages women receive about their bodies. A feminist phenomenological perspective of the individual was useful in this analysis as it helps elucidate the "ambiguity between complicity and contestation" (Stawarska, 2018: 26). The lived body is profoundly impacted by societal norms and structures, but individuals respond to this in their own ways (Young, 2005: 18).

4. 3. Experiencing shame

As suggested by the reviewed literature, women's body experiences are moulded by the regime of shame. External norms and ideals greatly informed women's sense of being in the world. Most women felt their bodies to be inadequate and aimed to change them.

4.3.1. Imperfect bodies - shame and societal ideals

> "I just look in the mirror and I'm not happy." (Rebekah, 19, white/English)

All participants recognised that there was pressure on women to conform to a certain way of being and looking. When asked how they think women are expected to look answers were similar. Whether they rejected it or desired it, participants easily and quickly described an ideal body and listed its characteristics. Rebekah noted, for example:

> "There's a whole ideal of white women being perceived as more pretty, with a smaller nose ... Skinny. No pimples, clear skin, no wrinkles."

The body that participants described reflected feminist conceptualisations of the feminine patriarchal ideal, as described in the reviewed literature (Bartky 1990: 73; Bordo,1993: 140; Caldeira & de Ridder, 2017: 323; Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 416; Munro & Huon, 2005: 85; Dolezal, 2015: 109). For most participants, this body was first and foremost slim and toned – though not necessarily 'skinny'. Other characteristics that participants mentioned included: long hair, big breasts, small waist, hairless skin, styled eyebrows and straight teeth.

Several participants, both black and white, noted that the societal ideal is a white body. The image of 'the perfect body' powerfully informed women's experiences of the world, even when they did not agree with it.

The body experience is complicated. Women can feel appreciative towards their bodies, whilst still wishing to change aspects. For many participants, however, embodiment appeared to be characterised by a profound sense of 'never-enoughness'. They were often preoccupied with what they deemed to be their flaws and felt that they could not be comfortable until these flaws were fixed or covered. Different bodily aspects caused shame for different women. Kate's (25, white/English) breast size, for example caused her feelings of shame. She noted:

> "I was almost too skinny in high school and never felt like my boobs looked like they should at that age and that insecurity carried through until now. I don't feel pretty unless I'm wearing a padded bra."

It is evident that Kate feels her breasts do not look as they are 'supposed to'. She mentioned how this caused her much insecurity. For Nova (24, white/English), it was her eyebrows that caused her much concern:

> "My eyebrows have always been a big thing for me, because I have very sparse eyebrow hairs. They're also very different shapes."

A Google or YouTube search on the word 'eyebrows' will provide no shortage of articles and videos, directed at women, on how to get your eyebrows 'right'. Nova's statement reflects the way in which minor differences on women's bodies are labelled defects (Dolezal, 2015: 109). Shame takes place within the structure of normative ideals (Dolezal, 2015: 54). Certain body types and characteristics are deemed attractive and acceptable and failure to comply leads to women feeling insecure. Josie (24, white/English) noted how she is just starting to feel "pretty" again, now that she has grown her hair back after deciding to cut it. She commented:

> "In my two or three years being bald, I have literally never felt uglier."

Many participants used this kind of language when discussing their body experiences. The fact that she felt 'ugly' highlights the kinds of feelings women navigate around their bodies. A phenomenological approach is useful here as it recognises how external norms infiltrate one's sense of self, profoundly impacting one's embodiment. Within the framework of narrow beauty criteria, something as simple as breast size, hair length and eyebrows inform women's experiences of the world.

Overall, weight was the most significant factor related to body shame. Many women had a specific weight they hoped to achieve and had at some point experienced powerful feelings of shame related to their weight. Danya (26, Indian/ Malayalee) noted how, when she was younger:

> "I just had a horrible bunch of emotions about my body."

Significantly, although she had always been critical of external ideals, it was only when she lost a lot of weight, much later in university, that she actually began to have a more positive body experience. There were clear examples throughout the study of the intermingling of weight and worth. Chumani (23, Black/Xhosa), whose body goals mostly centred around losing weight, noted how, in high school:

> "I really hated my body. I thought I was disgusting. I thought 'who's going to love me, I don't look beautiful."

She also revealed after the interview that she had recently cried in a changing room, after seeing her body in a bathing suit she was considering buying. The intensity of these feelings highlights the impact of weight on one's sense self. Her experience echoes Northrop's (2012: 11) description of shame as an "intensely personal and private experience where the self feels devalued, unworthy and unlovable". Internalised ideal of thinness caused powerful feelings of shame. As noted in Chapter 2, shame is often the result of a discrepancy between a person's reality and their ideal (Northrop, 2012: 112; Bessenoff & Snow, 2006: 728). There was a sense of discomfort women felt living within the gap between who they are and who they want to be. Nadia (24, Coloured/Afrikaans) spoke of how she wanted to change her body for "comfortability":

> "To be able to wear whatever I want without feeling self-conscious about it."

Her body, as it is, prevents her from wearing what she wishes to. It is a source of discomfort, because it is not slim enough. She later noted:

> "I always say to my sister 'I don't feel like I'm eating *that* much, like what's wrong with me?'"

There was a sense that many participants perceived their bodies as being, in some way 'wrong', especially around issues of weight. Although Josie mostly spoke positively about her body, she was constantly aware of her weight. She spoke of visiting the beach, for example:

> "Especially when I'm with my skinny friends. I also feel little bit uncomfortable. I'm like 'oh, I'm just going to be the one standing out'."

She spoke often of this matter of ‘standing out’ and noted, when speaking about herself and her sister:

> “We have a lot of thinner friends. I would say we’re basically the token chubby girls in many situations … we’re always like ‘the ugly friend’, the friend that people are apprehensive about.”

It is evident here, that she is made to feel devalued because of her body. This is also a phenomenological concern because embodiment is significantly marked by a feeling of ‘standing out’. Josie’s statements also highlight the social sanctions women experience when they fail to conform to ideals as she feels immediately ‘labelled’ within social settings. The current research confirmed ideas around feminine achievement being intricately linked to thinness (Clemitshaw & Donaghue, 2012: 415).

Beauty standards were also evidently racialised. This greatly informed the lived body. Many participants of colour spoke of the way that light skin was seen as preferable. Lutho (23, black/Xhosa) noted:

> “When I was on oratane my skin got darker because it was more sensitive to the sun. I …thought I was at my ugliest then.”

Her body experience here is greatly informed by colourism. She felt at her ugliest when she was furthest away from the Eurocentric ideal of light skin. Chumani, who had often been complimented on her lighter skin noted how:

> “my discomfort with swimming, my discomfort with … not partaking in things that will require me to be in the sun plays a role in me not wanting to be darker.”

It can be said that lighter skinned black women receive more positive messages about their appearance (Robinson-Moore, 2008:81). This was true for Chumani, but the fear of her skin becoming darker prevented her from taking part in everyday activities. It has long been argued that racialised beauty standards also inform how black women perceive their hair, which naturally does not match up to the ideal of long, flowy locks (Craig, 2006: 163). This was evident among several black women in the current study. For example, when discussing race, Anathi (24, black/Xhosa), noted:

> “I’ve never had a weave, but I look at myself and I always want to have like braids or something. I don’t embrace my natural hair.”

It can be argued that hegemonic beauty ideals are indeed tainted by the ideology of ‘white is right’. This was evident in the way that black women experienced their bodies. We must thus

question, as Robinson-Moore (2008: 67), suggests: “to whose social construct does one conform”?

4.3.2. ‘Putting together’ the body

“If I don’t have the correct oils on my face, then it’s an issue. Then I’m like ‘You left the house like this??’” (Inaya, 22, black/ Muslim).

Normative dissatisfaction can be seen as impacting the ways women interact with and manage their bodies. When asked how women are expected to look, Kate answered:

> “Girls should always be pretty. Always put together.”

The idea that women had to be ‘put together’ was evident in the responses of many participants. Inaya explained:

> “I don’t want to look like my struggles… If I’m going through so much that I actually can’t make the effort to put on make-up or dress a certain way, then I just won’t leave my house.”

Again here, ideals around appearance caused restrictions in everyday life. In their natural state women felt inadequate – or were made to feel inadequate. It can be argued this need to be ‘put-together’ is gendered. Danya noted, for example how, when she attended a *Zoom* meeting:

> “All the women were super done up, super pretty and I had just combed my hair, but barely… and I was in a pyjama top and I just, I looked like the guy did.”

Somebody messaged her after the meeting, questioning her appearance. For her this confirmed a divide between how men and women are expected to look. There was evident pressure to ‘put together’ one’s body, in order to better conform to what is expected of women’s bodies.

Participants engaged in various kinds of activities in ‘putting together’ their bodies. Many women frequently took part in practices such as dieting, shaving, waxing, getting their nails and hair done, putting on make-up (especially concealer), body scrubs, face masks, hair-straightening, dying or filling in eyebrows and micro-blading. Although no participants currently used skin lightening products, several black women had encountered this kind of practice in high school. Chumani noted:

> "This product 'gentle magic' was such a trend. It would literally burn. You could feel your skin tingle after you've applied the moisturiser and used the toner and you would get results instantly … you'd get lighter."

This statement highlights the lengths women are willing to go to conform to problematic narrow beauty standards. Significantly, many women did not feel comfortable going in public without covering their perceived flaws, or 'putting together' their bodies. Inaya noted:

> "Once, I went for a pedicure and I hadn't shaved. That was the most I'd apologised to a beautician ever. I was like 'I'm ***so sorry***! This is so disrespectful."

Her legs, in their natural state, were 'disrespectful'. They should have had less hair on them. This reflects feminist writings on how women perceive their bodies as needing to be attended to before they can be deemed acceptable (Bartky, 1990: 73). Other participants had, in young adulthood, adopted a more 'laid-back' approach to appearance management. However, the need to cover perceived flaws was still evident. Nova, for example, had stopped shaving her legs, but because she felt deeply insecure about her eyebrows, she had had them permanently tattooed with microblading:

> "Now, because the microblading has faded, I still wear eyebrow makeup maybe every second day. Today I haven't got on but there's still left over from yesterday so I wouldn't have put it on this morning."

When asked, Kate similarly confirmed she would not go into public without first filling in her eyebrows. Terri (22, Coloured/Afrikaans) felt shame around her skin and noted:

> "Before masks were a thing, I would never leave the house without a little bit of foundation or concealer."

This was evidently about covering up flaws (which her mask was able to do during the Covid19 Pandemic). It was clear that many women felt they could not simply 'exist' within their bodies. The responses of participants also highlight how beauty is something you can (and must) 'do'. It is performative.

As has been noted, Kate's main source of shame was her breasts. She wished to manipulate her body in a more permanent sense:

> "I want a boob job, so that's a goal."

Several participants affirmed that, when they are earning enough, they aim to get cosmetic surgery. Most of these participants aimed to get several procedures, as Chumani noted:

> "I'd get lipo on my stomach. I'd get rid of my stretch marks. I wouldn't do too much to my face, but I have hooded eyelids, so I want to suck the fat out of those eyelids. Just things that like that – where I don't like the fat deposits in some areas."

These participants were mostly concerned with transforming the way fat is situated on their bodies, reiterating the importance of weight. Lutho explained what she hopes to change with cosmetic surgery:

> "Maybe my arms – I'll make those smaller and the backfat is actually very hard to lose, even when you're skinny. I would lose all that backfat and the stomach."

The body here is seen as needing to be manipulated in a variety of ways in order to be deemed attractive. This also hints at the idea of women's bodies being experienced as objects to be optimised (Jansen & Wehrle, 2018: 38). These responses alone reflect powerful feelings of body shame. The reason these participants were willing to spend large sums on money on often invasive surgical procedures was because they felt their bodies did not match up to societal body ideals. Surgery is a more extreme version of 'putting together' the body.

Racist and patriarchal ideals greatly informed the ways in which women lived within their bodies. Weight, for example, significantly impacted women's sense of being in the world. Women felt or were made to feel that their bodies were not acceptable as they were. Participants' body experiences were informed by a sense of inadequacy. This is linked to the fact that they felt that had to manage their bodies in certain ways, based on the kinds of 'flaws' they had before they could be deemed attractive.

4.4. The role of 'the other' in the regime of shame

Whether participants mostly rejected the regime of shame or aimed to conform to beauty standards, their experience of their bodies, in the past and present, was intimately linked to others. This reflects the phenomenological position that experience is simultaneously embodied and intersubjective.

4.4.1. Unremitting evaluation

"Oh my word! Everyone's seeing my shiny face." (Nadia)

Most participants were very conscious of how they were being perceived by others. Notably, these responses were often immediate and quite powerful, with many exclamations. It was

clear that the participants acknowledged themselves through the other's consciousness. This was very much linked to the idea of women having to be 'put together'.

> "I feel like I need to make sure my outfit is the way that it was when I left home…often I'll go to the bathroom just to change my appearance quickly. Fix my appearance." (Rebekah).

The word choice of "fix" is significant here. It encapsulates how, when in public, participants did not feel like they could just 'be'. Many revealed how mental space was taken up by certain things – such as how their hair was falling, if their make-up was "melting" or if their double chin was visible. Bartky's (1990: 86), statement that "I *am*, in some important sense, as I am seen to be" aligns with participants feelings. Participants expressed the discomfort of this awareness and many were bothered by it. Nova, noted for example how, when on *Zoom* calls:

> "I often find myself looking at the top right corner, instead of actually engaging with the person who's on the screen… and it's such a self-absorbed, self-obsessed kind of behaviour."

Furthermore, those that were actively rejecting certain standards felt very aware of how others might be noticing this – how their legs were unshaven, for example or how they were not wearing a bra.

Noticeably, for several participants, the issue of being perceived was immediately linked to unwanted male attention as opposed to appearing attractive. They mentioned issues of catcalling and of being objectified. Sine (27, black/Xhosa), for example noted how she has a "big behind" which she always makes sure to cover so as to avoid unsolicited comments from men. Similarly, when speaking about being aware of how people see her, Terri noted that:

> "I am always in fear of being sexualised."

Whether it was the need to appear a certain way or the fear of being objectified, most women in this study expressed how they were overly concerned with how others were perceiving them. There was a heightened sense of awareness, which significantly shaped their experience of the public world. This aligns with theory which discusses how women are to consistently watch themselves and responses mirror the "unremitting evaluation" felt by women in Northrop's (2012: 112), study. It supports a feminist phenomenological account of women's embodiment, which posits that women often experience their bodies as objects to be acted on.

4.4.2. Male attention

> "It's almost like you wait for the guy… to validate or confirm that… 'I'm okay with you. I'm okay with your body.'" (Chumani,)

Male attention, in general, is a significant factor that must be discussed when exploring the role of the other in the body experience. The way that men interacted with participants revealed the expectations men have around women's bodies. Sometimes this was revealed in a *lack* of attention. Josie noted how men stopped approaching her altogether when she shaved her hair, for example. Anathi spoke of how, in high school, boys would gravitate towards her friends as opposed to her and later revealed how they would prefer "the light ones". Other times men were very vocal. Participants revealed how men, who they did not know, were quick to point out imperfections or question them on appearance. Danya drew attention to how a man questioned if she was gay because her hair was short, for example. The way men praised Chumani for her lighter skin also reveals societal expectations:

> "Men, black men specifically, will comment like 'it's like you bathed in milk'… or I don't know they just glorify your light skin. Like 'you don't have a mark on your body'."

Men are important conveyers of messages around how women should look.

For many participants, male attention played an important role in appearance obsession and in the general body experience. The aforementioned lack of male attention Anathi experienced in high school was a significant factor in her feeling shame. Notably, it was only when people started telling her she was beautiful as a young adult that she began to feel more positive about her body. Similarly, Terri noted that she experienced a positive shift in her body experience when she started getting more male affirmation:

> "I was like 'Oh! Clearly I am not as terrible as I think I am'."

It is often argued that a woman's sense of worth is still intricately linked to her ability to attract a man (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 13). This was reflected in the responses of many participants. Saskia spoke of feeling ashamed, for example, if she went out in high school and did not kiss a boy. She would attribute it to not looking as good as the girls who did attract male attention. When discussing the pressure to conform to certain beauty standards, Inaya revealed:

> "You need to leave your house knowing that the way you look is acceptable – and then acceptable for men. If it's not, then what are you even doing? Why are you even leaving the house if you're not palatable and digestible for the other gender?"

Her use of the term 'palatable and digestible' is significant. It reflects the disturbing and well theorised idea that a "woman must make herself 'object and prey' for the man" (Bartky, 1990: 72; Berger, 1972: 46). A woman's subjectivity is informed by her desirability. Tellingly, for Julie (23, White/English), embracing her sexuality allowed her to better embrace her body *because* she was no longer seeking male attention:

> "I was at peace with being attracted to females, then I felt a lot freer about my appearance in that I wasn't trying to attract men anymore and I was okay with that."

This reveals the way in which the pursuit of male attention powerfully shapes women's experiences of their bodies. Responses reflect Bartky's (1990: 72) sentiment that "in contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. There is a definite sense of women 'being for men' (Berger, 1972: 46).

4.4.3. Interpersonal relationships

"my sister told me at her wedding that she wished I was thinner for the pictures" (Saskia)

Participants' experiences of their bodies are a very 'social' thing. They frequently brought up interpersonal encounters, when discussing how they feel about their bodies. They received very clear messages about women's bodies from families, communities and peers. Their body experiences also shifted as relationships shifted.

4.4.3.1. Families and communities

The attitudes and behaviours of participants' families (especially mothers) and communities arose frequently. Sometimes this was more benign, such as Chumani's desire to look good because her mother always takes pride in her own appearance. Other times, family overtly engendered the regime of shame, by policing their daughters' bodies for example. Lutho revealed how her mother used to watch what she ate and that she sent her to ballet classes when she was four because she "started getting a belly". She noted how she knew from a young age that she was fat. This reflects how ideals related to women's bodies are reproduced in the family and how parents, for example, are significant "culture bearers" when it comes to appearance (Northrop, 2012: 136).

Often, members of the community and remote relatives were very vocal about appearance and espoused certain ideals. Danya referred frequently to the "aunties" in her small Indian community. She explained how they use the term 'slimbeauty', as a prescription for how women should look. Furthermore, there was evident colourism in her community. She mentioned how if a marriage is announced, for example, one of the first comments will always be related to the skin tone of the bride, such as:

> "Oh, she's really pretty, it's a shame she's not fairer."

Chumani spoke of the struggle of finding the 'perfect weight' between too big and too small and the comments made by her extended (isiXhosa) family when she had lost weight in her first year of university:

> "What's wrong? Are you sick? What's going on? You should gain weight!"

The issue of culture is complex here. Though evidently in Chumani's case, the Western thin ideal is rejected by family, there are still powerful norms around how a woman should look. The responses of many participants around body ideals at home and in the community reflected how culture is not acting as a buffer against beauty standards, as is often suggested.

Even when these kinds of encounters did not necessarily always impact directly on participants' body experiences, they revealed a societal obsession with women's bodies. Responses exposed the very loud messages women must navigate in their everyday existence, when interacting with family and community. Significantly, moving away from and challenging these voices aided a shift in the body experience. Josie spoke of how she started engaging with her mother's own body shame and noted how:

> "Being older and watching the way she speaks to herself and treats herself. It's been such great insight… using her as an example of what I shouldn't do."

Though the experience of body shame was still present for many, leaving home and school allowed many participants to experience their bodies in a new way and to adopt more positive attitudes. Both Danya and Anathi noted, for example, how they began to dress differently because they were no longer being policed by their mothers and this allowed them to better embrace their bodies. For example, in discussing her body experience, Anathi noted:

> "Another thing that helped was that I moved away from home, so my mom wasn't buying my clothes – which were very conservative."

Several participants felt freer in their bodies when they moved to bigger cities or to university and recognised how their bodies were commented on far more when they returned home to their smaller communities.

Significantly, any suggestions women had for disrupting the regime of shame centred around changing these kinds of messages from families and communities. This was summarised by Julie:

> "I think that if your family is supportive of you, regardless of the things that you eat or the way that you look – I think that really makes a difference."

If women learn when they are very young that their bodies are inadequate, then they could learn when they are very young that they are enough. Chumani noted:

> "It definitely comes with raising daughters differently. I think if I was praised more for the gifts that I have as a person and I was seen for the person that am inside as opposed to what I look like …then that would have made a big impact on the things that I view as important."

Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015: 126) note how frequent body related comments (even if positive) can engender "higher dysfunctional appearance investment". Chumani's insight emphasises the need to shift away from 'body talk' in general, especially with young girls. A meaningful change in the way women experience their bodies requires a change in the way we discuss bodies, especially at home. Lutho commented:

> "I think I wouldn't have known that I was fat at ten years old if somebody hadn't said it to me. Just keep quiet."

It can be argued that when it comes to young girl's bodies, families and communities should 'just keep quiet'.

4.4.3.2. Peers

The dissatisfaction and shame participants experienced at school level was greatly influenced by peers. Most participants spoke about social comparison at this stage and powerful feelings of inadequacy around their bodies. Oftentimes this was not judgement from peers, but a normalised, shared, general dissatisfaction that engendered shame – especially for those who attended single-sex schools. Fellow classmates took part in destructive appearance-related behaviours. For example, Chumani revealed how girls at her school would smell other people's food instead of eating lunch. The impact of this environment on the body experience can be summarised by Lutho's poignant comment:

> "It's like…How can you be that size and hate yourself? That means I gotta hate myself a little more."

Julie commented on how, weight-wise, she has always naturally fitted into the 'ideal'. She attracted a lot of attention for this from peers in high school:

> "I didn't know how to reject it... You're getting affirmed for the way you look… it was almost addictive."

This statement also elucidates the tangible benefits of conforming to societal ideals. Peers evidently played a significant role in perpetuating toxic beauty standards, particularly around weight, which significantly impacted women's experiences of their bodies – especially at school level.

Peers were also a significant factor that arose when participants of colour discussed the privileging of lighter skin. Again, this was mostly at school level. Inaya noted how she became insecure about the different shades of her body when someone asked her in grade three: "Why are your knees so dark?" Sine revealed how she was one of these voices and spoke of how darker girls were teased at school, which she took part in:

> "Back in the day, the first instinct was like 'oh my gosh, you're dark!'. You'd call them blackie or swartie or whatever."

As has been noted, leaving home and school aided participants in rethinking their bodies. This process also involved listening to new, more affirming voices. Whereas peer relationships during school evidently engendered the regime of shame, this shifted significantly. Friendships during and after university largely appeared to impact positively on many women's experiences of their bodies. Wood-Barcalow *et al*.s' (2010: 110) study on positive body image discussed how finding other people who are accepting of their own bodies contributed to a healthier perspective and experience of the body – as did acceptance from other people. The responses of participants from the current study reflect this

Many participants still had peers that exhibited disturbing appearance-related behaviour, but they were also choosing to surround themselves with more affirming voices. This was evident in the nature of the conversations they were having about bodies. There was still sharing of body dissatisfaction, but this was less frequent and conversations were more focused on building each other up. Appearance was also less important in everyday interactions with friends. Sine noted for example:

> "Almost nobody cares… if you look nice we say 'oh my gosh, you look great'… and then go back to the lab and work."

Conversations often included overt criticisms of body ideals. Julie, for example, spoke of how she and her friends often discuss exclusionary practices in society – how shops do not cater for plus sized women, for example. Terri commented:

> "I'm surrounded by a lot of people who feel the same way I do and are like 'I'm trying to love my body the way it is' and, you know 'fuck stereotypes about the way women should look'.'"

This statement embodies the kind of 'questioning' attitude evident in many of the conversations between participants and their current peers. Feeling accepted by peers also encouraged a more positive body experience. Sonya (24, White/Afrikaans) noted that normalising certain conversations had been helping her overcome her eating disorders as well as having a very supportive partner. When discussing how she was now embracing a more positive attitude towards her body, Nova revealed:

> "It's also been through being loved by other people and being told that I'm worthy of love. I've been able to mirror those reminders onto myself."

The lived body was significantly shaped by other people. There was a heightened awareness of being perceived and having to constantly appear a certain way to other people in many of the participants' everyday lives. This 'being for the other' was especially connected to men and male attention, which greatly impacted women's body experience. Furthermore, body shame as well as body acceptance was also greatly informed by various messages women received about their bodies (and women's bodies in general) within interpersonal relationships. This research confirms that the body experience is socially shaped. As Dolezal (2015: 54), suggests, it arises within a framework of normative ideals. It reflects the feminist phenomenological concern with how women are situated within a complex web of social relations and how this informs embodiment.

4.5. Postfeminism and the body experience

It has been argued in the contextual chapter that postfeminist narratives, dominant in western contemporary society, play a significant role in the ways in which women experience their bodies and navigate shame. The ways that women engaged with postfeminist rhetoric was complicated and dynamic.

4.5.1. The Body as a Project

"I'm always trying to make my body better. Always. "(Rebekah)

Postfeminist conceptualisations of the 'body as a project', were evident. This was evidenced in the kind of effort women put into appearance management behaviours, mentioned in Section 1. Interviews highlighted the sense that body was seen permanently as 'improvable'. When discussing plastic surgery, Lutho noted:

"Oh, for sure. I'm buying the body I want."

This statement embodies the contemporary neoliberal positioning of the body as cultural plastic that can be manipulated. 'Plasticity' is characteristic of postfeminist thinking (Brook 78). The fact that Lutho's statement involves 'buying' also highlights the link between consumer capitalism and bodies. Postfeminism positions the body as both a product and a project to be worked on (Dolezal, 2015: 108). Even when participants were generally satisfied with their bodies, there was still a sense of striving towards something, as Danya commented:

"There's that subliminal message to be smaller, to be thinner, to be something-er."

From a phenomenological perspective, women's embodiment, can be seen as being greatly informed by this kind of striving, as Jansen and Wehrl (2018: 42) note, "the less a woman can just *be a body*, the more she *has a body*". The idea of the body as an unfinished project was reflected in the body experiences of many participants. Saskia noted for example:

"I always do need improvements."

Similarly, Nadia commented:

"It's always a work in progress."

Significantly, Nadia also spoke of how, in high school, she was slimmer than she is now, yet still thought she was "big" and concluded that.

"I don't think I'll ever be where I want to be."

This reflects Northrop's understanding that many women feel shame despite recognising that media representations and societal ideals do not represent the norm. Even though Nadia recognised her ideal as unrealistic and probably unattainable, she was still unable to just 'be' in her body. It needed to be 'something-er'.

4.5.2. Transformative ability of appearance management

"When I first got microblading I then didn't wear make-up for six or seven months … because they made me feel a lot more confident even about other features of my skin" (Nova)

Many participants spoke of the power of beauty practices to transform the individual and their experience of the world. Saskia, for example spoke of the effect of breast augmentation on a friend of hers, who had often been teased about her small breasts.

> "She paid for her own boob job and that empowered her."

She later noted how her friend became much more confident:

> "I saw her completely change, like the way she acted as well."

Saskia's comment on her friend's cosmetic surgery reflects the postfeminist reframing of disciplinary practices as a mode of empowerment. Many feminist writers argue that, under postfeminism, the root causes of shame are undermined and ideals remain uncritiqued – in this case the ideal of bigger breasts. However, as noted by Brook (2014: 84), one must not undermine beauty practices as a valid form of self-expression and a way to transform one's self. This is a phenomenological concern as it deals with the recreation of the embodied self. Saskia saw her friend 'completely change'. Saskia's own experience illustrated the ability of beautification to change even everyday interactions:

> "Like when I put on make-up and go to a place and I feel better. I act better. I'm nicer to people and I don't know why. Might be the make-up. Might just be the feeling you get from it."

This sentiment was also reflected in Nova's statement:

> "My demeanour actually changes if I'm out in public and not wearing make-up, compared to if I were… wearing make-up."

Many women's responses revealed how beauty practices are able to change a women's sense of 'being-in-the-world'. It significantly impacts how they feel and act. Chumani commented on the link between the use of make-up and her state of mind:

> "I put on make-up whenever I'm feeling down… I have makeup on right now because I wasn't feeling great, so I was like okay, let me at least look cute."

Here, putting on make-up was a strategy that helped her to feel better mentally. Feminist phenomenological perspectives highlight how an individual's experience is not apolitical and cannot be separated from their context. Thus, we must have an understanding of the sources of women's desires to conform to ideals and the structural reasons as to why conformity may feel empowering. However, it can be argued that we must also respect these practices as a

valid mode of navigating the body experience. This is especially relevant in a heterosexual economy, where a women's worth is inseparable from her body. It is unfair to label women who partake in such practices, which evidently have a unique transformative potential, as 'cultural dopes'. This is further underscored by the fact that participants had a nuanced and complex understanding of agency, which will be further explored.

4.5.3. Complex Understanding of Agency

"I don't know if it can ever be entirely women's decisions because of the society we live in… but I guess it's a step forward, to think about it in an empowering way" (Terri)

Postfeminist rhetoric was evident in the responses of many women. They used terms such as 'doing it for yourself', when talking about conforming to ideals, for example. When questioned as to whether beauty practices can be an empowering activity most participants answered in the positive. Furthermore, very few critiqued practices such as plastic surgery. However, they did not position these activities as solely empowering and were aware of societal pressures. Danya noted how she felt that partaking in beauty practices can be fully and wholly a woman's choice, but then went on to note:

> "But here's the thing, these actions don't take place in a vacuum."

This summarises the perspectives of many participants in the study. They recognised the importance of societal context. A comparison to Dosekun's (2015) study on postfeminism in the non-western world, is relevant here. While the women in Dosekun's study fully embraced postfeminist narratives – believing that partaking in beauty practices was, in the strictest sense, their choice – participants in the current study exhibited a different perception of agency. Chumani, for example, completely rejected the postfeminist rhetoric of choice:

> "I don't think it's our choice. I don't think it's a choice that we have. I think it goes with what men perceive as beautiful at the time …I think I'd be more happy with myself if there wasn't this pressure put on me to look a certain way."

She believed her desire to have plastic surgery was fully informed by the world around her. Although most other participants believed women could be fully in control of their decisions, they did not display a simplistic understanding of agency. Josie noted:

> "I think it's more complex because obviously they are choosing to do that, but I think if we lived in a world where there wasn't such rigid standards of beauty for women, I don't think we would even be thinking about it that much."

Here, Josie is recognising that there are deeper issues that inform choice. Responses varied, but over-all, they highlighted the complexity of the gap between 'beauty as forming part of oppression' and beauty as 'being for you' – as discussed by Craig (2006: 164). Nova questioned:

> "It's just a really fine line between 'are you doing it for you and your own self-confidence or are you doing for other people?"

Inaya similarly recognised:

> "But then it's also like, who decides what's good? Then that's not really us … Are we really doing it because we love the way folic acid feels on our skin and we love the benefits of it, or are we doing it almost on a performative basis. I think that's a really important decision to make."

She recognised that 'it's not really us' making decisions about what is 'good' in terms of appearance. In both her and Nova's statements, however, is the idea that these practices can indeed be 'for oneself' – though the line is fine. Critiques of postfeminism seek to uncover the illusion of 'doing it for yourself', but many responses challenged the idea that beautification cannot be a fully individual desire. Julie commented, for example:

> "Some people love shaving. They really do, and not for anything else other than the feeling of having silky legs on clean linen. which is a really nice feeling."

Similarly, Nadia noted how sometimes the presentation of her body has nothing to do with the other:

> "It makes me feel good. Even if someone tells me 'oh my word you have so much make-up on', I'm like 'I want to have make up on'."

Here, Nadia is emphasising how she often enjoys putting on make-up 'for herself'. The putting together of the body cannot automatically be labelled a conformist chore, though as we have seen in Section 1, it often is. Women's conversations with their bodies are evidently complicated. Overall, women felt that beauty practices could be empowering and could be fully a women's choice, but emphasised that this was a decision that had to be made – taking into account the way in which one's choices may be informed by very powerful external ideals. Phenomenology highlights the individual's active relation to their world (Dolezal: 2015: x). Ironically, participants' perception of agency should inform *our* perception of *their* agency. Although they had evidently encountered, engaged with and, to a certain extent accepted pervasive postfeminist narratives, they did not blindly consume its rhetoric. They actively constructed their own perspectives which included a nuanced perception of agency.

There was certainly evidence of postfeminist rhetoric within a South African context. Women's responses reflected the neoliberal conception of the body as project for example, which impacted how they experienced their bodies. Most felt that beauty practices could be empowering and could be fully a women's decision. They also, however, understood the complexities of choice. Furthermore, we cannot rule out beauty practices as a valid form of transforming one's body experience, nor can we assume that these beauty practices are wholly for the other. This does not serve to justify postfeminist narratives, which engender the regime of shame, but aims to highlight the complicated ways that women navigate these messages about their bodies. Postfeminism is dangerous and its messages should be challenged, but women are not cultural dopes.

4.6. Rejection of the regime of shame

Women sought to reject shame in various ways. The fact that the body experience is multifaceted and oftentimes contradictory must be re-iterated here. Feelings of shame and attempts to conform to beauty standards often existed alongside genuine rejection of the regime of shame. For example, the same Inaya who one day aims to get plastic surgery and who spoke of her hairy legs being "disrespectful" also critiqued ideals and spoke about appreciating her body. Both of these experiences can be seen as truthful and valid in their own right.

4.6.1. Critiquing Ideals

"Anytime someone is like 'oh, it's such a mission to shave', I'm like 'you don't have to!'"

As has been noted in Section 4.4, there were high levels of awareness around the impact of sociocultural pressures on women's choices and participants had a complicated understanding of agency. This is linked to the way they rejected ideals. Northrop's (2012: 135) study revealed that participants had difficulty disentangling personal preferences from wider cultural values. Contrary to this, women in the current study easily pointed out the external influences that informed their ideals. When questioned about their body goals they almost always touched on the significance of other people, the media, models and celebrities. All participants recognised that, as said by Nadia:

> "It's normalised that you're going to have to look 'this way'."

They understood the normalising processes involved in shame. A few participants, specifically those from humanities departments, also had theoretical knowledge around these

issues. They used the term ‘colourism’ or ‘the gaze’ in conversation, for example. Many participants actively critiqued the regime of shame. Danya noted, for example:

> “I’m very aggressively passionate about women not having to feel shame.”

Chumani argued:

> “It shouldn’t just be this one ideal and that’s it, and anyone who falls outside of that is incorrect or is not looked at as desirable or beautiful or sexy.”

Though Chumani still experienced powerful feelings of dissatisfaction, she actively critiqued the fact that certain bodies were normalised. Nova discussed how she had gotten into an argument online (through Instagram) with a local clothing brand that had just launched. This was because she felt they were reproducing narrow beauty standards:

> “I saw that on their first three posts they only had white women and one black woman who was like in the corner, in the shadows … and also all of the women that she had used to model for her brand were similar in body type as well. There were no women who were heavier or flat chested or different in shape … and I feel like that’s such a negative way to portray women in media.”

Nova had initiated conversations with the brand and with her own social media followers around this issue, drawing attention to unrealistic ideals and our need to challenge them. As has been noted under Section 4.3, many women were engaged in critical conversations about these kinds of things with their current peers. Dolezal (2015: x) notes how shame often remains unacknowledged and hidden. This prevents us from understanding its complexities and the ways in which is informed by broader social context. Many women in the current study where, however, bringing body shame ‘it into the light’ and critiquing unrealistic ideals.

4.6.2. Positive attitudes and behaviours

“I believe I’m naturally beautiful” (Anathi)

Women experienced powerful feelings of shame and as has been noted in Section 4, many reflected the conceptualisation of the ‘body as project’. However, many participants also exhibited positive attitudes towards their bodies. Often these conceptualisations existed alongside each other, emphasising again the complexity and contradictory ways women view and experience their bodies. Through their own research, self-reflection and conversations with others, women had developed new ways of thinking, as well as positive behaviours. Danya noted, for example:

> "And I've finally gotten to the point I actually genuinely like the way I look and like the way I present myself, so if someone has a problem with that, honestly they can go fuck themselves."

Josie explained how she had always struggled with her weight, but felt that she had now reached a new space in her body experience:

> "In many ways, I am the chubbiest I've ever been now, but I've never felt more confident."

Saskia also exhibited appreciation towards her body:

> "Now I love my body, definitely. I love looking in the mirror."

Although the current research does not seek to classify between those who are body positive and those who are not, it is evident that these attitudes echo those in Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's (2015) research on body positive women. Women in their study exhibited appreciation and even admiration for their bodies (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's 2015: 122).

As noted by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015: 123), women who experienced positive feelings towards their bodies engaged in exercise for health and enjoyment rather than as a way to shrink their bodies. This kind of attitude was evident in the current study. Women brought up how they now exercised to feel stronger, as Nova summarised:

> "That's the whole purpose of exercise – to feel capable in your body."

When speaking of jogging, Inaya noted

> "I'm enjoying that a lot more than I did in the past. It doesn't feel like something I *have* to do to look a certain way, but more something I want to do."

Sonya had specifically shifted her body goals towards ones that would make her feel strong and capable instead of adopting appearance related goals:

> "Because of my history with eating disorders and with goals in terms of weight. So now I want to be able to run 10ks in one hour and I want to be able to do a handstand."

This is indicative of broader appreciation of one's own body. Participants were able to appreciate the functionality of their bodies and exhibited empathy towards them.

Various activities and behaviours had helped participants to confront feelings of shame around their bodies. Several women mentioned how therapy, for example, had helped extensively with their perceptions of themselves and their bodies. When discussing her shift in feelings towards her body, Josie claimed:

> "I honestly have the most incredible psychologist in the entire world. I love her, she has changed my life."

Initiating conversations about bodies with others had also helped participants to better navigate and understand their body experiences. Many participants had adopted personalised strategies in order to foster a greater appreciation of their bodies. Several women in the current study mentioned how they had begun actively choosing what they exposed themselves to on social media. Nova noted, for example:

> "If someone's posts weren't resonating with me, I would just unfollow them and naturally the posts that don't resonate with are posts from Instagram influencers and from people and stuff like that. So, I just started to filter them out."

This is reminiscent of Wood-Barcalow *et al*.s, (2010: 112), discussion on "filtering tendencies", whereby women interpret body related information from the media in a critical way. This is a behaviour which can impact positively one's perceptions of their body.

Many of the participants' personalised strategies centred around them simply engaging with their bodies and trying to appreciate them. This reflects the attitudes of women in Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's study, who declared that they aimed to respect their bodies and treat them with love (2015: 121). Inaya noted for example:

> "Something that I'm very purposeful about is putting on lotion in front of the mirror, twice a day … almost forcing myself to look at my body and look at its changes and appreciate its changes."

Other women also spoke about this kind of self-reflection, where they would address their own ways of thinking and their internal monologues. Danya noted, for example:

> "If I see something that I think is wrong with myself … I fight very hard against my insecurities to try and see it as right."

Similarly, Josie noted:

> "Every single time I say something mean about myself, just immediately catching myself and just being like 'no, do not speak to yourself like that. You are incredible in so many ways. You are beautiful'."

Josie is interrupting the internalised voice of the other and 'taking control'. These kinds of practices have the potential to greatly impact embodiment and inform the conversation between the individual and their worlds. Julie spoke of how she began engaging with her body in a more holistic way through the strategy of 'body scans'. She explained the process:

> "The idea is just to take time out of your day, lie down just feel into your body. So, you feel into your baby toes and you feel into your ankles, and just the sensations of warmth, or the sensations of fabric against it, or just like actual physical feeling, using your sensory organs."

For Julie, this strategy helped to foster a "feeling belonging and a sense of warmth" within her body. This strategy is thus also a personal form of deconstructing the mind/body divide through experiencing the body as a significant part of the self. These behaviours serve as a kind of disruption of shame in lives of women. It is also evidence of women consciously rejecting ideals, even if when still affected by them.

4.6.3. The effort of active resistance

"it was a whole three years of making peace with my face" (Danya).

Conforming to body ideals through diets, exercising and beauty products is not easy, but notably – neither is actively challenging or resisting them. It requires effort. Clemitshaw and Donaghue (2012: 422) touch on this in their research on fat acceptance and note how it is difficult to maintain a more body positive mindset in the face of wide-spread diet culture. Deeply ingrained beauty standards are "powerful and tremendously hard to shake" even by those who have chosen to actively resist (Clemitshaw & Donaghue 2012: 422). The effort that accompanies resisting shame was evident in many responses in the current study. Julie felt that her body scans significantly helped to foster a greater appreciation for her body. However, this was because she employed this strategy for an hour each day for three months. Women had to 'force' themselves to engage with their bodies differently. Danya found shaving her legs to be tiresome and unnecessary, but also discussed the difficulty of actually stopping this practice. When she did stop, she became hyperaware and anxious that people were noticing:

> "That's such a strange thing to be paranoid about and yet it was the reality that I lived for six months, you know, like, constantly looking around and looking at your legs and you're like, 'who's looking? Who's looking now?'. You're just hyper aware that something is different".

Danya overtly labelled this as an act of resistance, but it took her several months to become comfortable with the change. As she summarises:

> "It takes time to get there. It takes bravery."

The tangible effects of conformity further highlight the bravery it takes to reject beauty standards. As has been touched on throughout this analysis, there are benefits and consequences associated with how one's body looks, evidenced for example by the issue of male attention or judgement from broader communities in Section 4.3. Furthermore, Chumani, who is an aspiring actress noted:

> "When I go in for castings and auditions, everyone is looking at every single minute detail of my body and if this fits and if that doesn't fit."

This underscores the difficulty of resisting, in a society where conforming to ideals is cultural currency. Choosing to not attempt to conform to beauty standards could have consequences for Chumani's career. This helps elucidate why women may occupy the position of "knowing that they are (or would be) better off accepting their fat bodies while at the same time 'feeling' a powerful desire to be thin" (Clemitshaw & Donaghue 2012: 423). Again, women cannot just 'be' as they are – they must conform or they must battle powerful internal and external messages.

Linked to this issue of effort, is the fact that resistance is complex and non-linear. Clemitshaw and Donaghue (2012: 422) comment on how supporters of the fat acceptance movement discuss 'good days' and 'bad days' or go through phases in their experiences. Resistance was portrayed as an ongoing process as opposed to an achieved position. They discuss the instability and dissonance of resistance. This was evident among participants in the current study. When discussing appearance ideals, Sonya commented:

> "It's a process of unlearning. I know that those are harmful."

Even those who could be considered as being the most positive of the participants noted the cyclical nature of resistance. Many women had 'made peace' with their bodies or certain aspects of their bodies, but this truce was not consistent.

Terri revealed, for example:

> "I feel like it fluctuates. It's never gotten back to the toxic space that it used to be when I was younger, but I have gone through phases, especially this year … where I become like hyper fixated on one thing."

Similarly, Nova noted:

> "It's very easy to slip back into old patterns of judgement because they're so deeply ingrained in my perception of myself."

Resistance was something that women had put effort into, but it was also something that shifted. Once again, this highlights the contradictory and dynamic nature of the body experience.

Women navigate their body experiences in complex ways. There was evident resistance against the regime of shame. Participants in this study actively critiqued restrictive ideals. They were aware of body shame and challenged it. Many also exhibited positive attitudes and behaviours, including personalised strategies, which helped foster a more positive body experience. It is clear however, that resistance is difficult and requires effort – especially when there are tangible benefits to conformity. The process of resisting shame is cyclical and shifts.

4.7. Body positivity movement and the body experience

The body positivity movement overtly rejects the regime of shame and aims to allow for women to do the same. This kind of discourse was present in the way that they spoke about rejecting ideals and challenging shame. One must explore the impact body positive movement itself, which manifests mostly online, in a discussion of women's body experiences. Many participants brought up this movement in their discussions before even being queried about it. All participants understood what the body positivity movement was and revealed that they had encountered its messages on social media.

4.7.1. Normalising normal bodies

"it's cool to see other people be cool with what they look like" (Lutho)

Participants had mostly similar ideas around what the body positivity movement represented and identified key elements such as: celebrating all bodies, inclusivity, diversity, self-confidence, self-love and empowerment. The movement is also linked to a broader shift in society. Though still aware of societal pressures, several women felt that different kinds of bodies were now better accepted in every-day life. With regards to colourism, for example Sine noted that dynamics had shifted and darker skin was, in many spaces, now celebrated. After speaking about how she herself had engendered colourism when she was younger, she explained:

"If you're like dark, dark, dark, it's only now that we're like 'yes, melanin popping!'"

Nova stated that the thin ideal is now:

> "being deconstructed more so by modern society."

The online movement encourages this shift and aims to confront the regime of shame and help women foster healthier body images (Caldeira and de Ridder, 2017: 326). In the current study, this had evidently helped many participants to experience their bodies in more positive ways by exposing them to and celebrating different kinds of bodies. Nova noted, for example:

> "A couple of accounts that I follow are natural body hair positive, varying shapes positive, and completely accepting of their bodies, which inspires me to be more accepting of my body. Especially because I've noticed that there are a lot of similarities between the bodies portrayed and my own body."

This is a matter of being represented. Several participants felt this way. Anathi, for example, explained how she never used to like posting on social media, but now posted more frequently because body positivity had helped improve her self-esteem:

> "When I starting seeing that, okay people actually do have stretch marks on their knees, for instance and their arms, that did up my confidence."

She also noted:

> "With social media we saw, actually black can be beautiful. All these Youtubers and you know … they made us believe that actually black is beautiful."

Online body positivity often aims to be intersectional, actively celebrating for example, black bodies (Zavatarro, 2020: 935). In this case, people with a strong social media presence had helped to shift narratives around colourism. This statement, particularly the term 'they made us believe' also highlights the power of external messages, especially from the media. Online spaces are able to challenge the exclusionary nature of beauty categories and allow women to "exert their right to exist" (Zavatarro, 2020: 6). The movement helped improve women's experiences of their bodies through the process of 'normalising normal bodies'. Sonya explained how, although she did not necessarily feel that online body positivity had directly impacted her experience of her body:

> "the whole point of the trend is that it is a constant reinforcement and constant unlearning of previous narratives."

The movement can be seen as supporting women in the process of 'unlearning'. In a society saturated with images and messages around the ideal body, the simple act of exposing women to other self-accepting, diverse women disrupts problematic normalising processes – that subordinate some bodies and glorify others. This is summarised by Kate's statement:

> "It helps you also just be like 'okay well, if everyone else is accepting their flaws, I could too'."

Notable here, however, is the fact that body differences are still perceived as flaws. Often it is more about accepting the ways that one's body does not conform to the ideal rather than challenging the ideal itself. This touches on the way that the movement may fail to adequately reimagine women's bodies. The body positivity movement represents a positive shift in society its attempt at normalising normal bodies aids women in fostering a greater appreciation for their bodies. Though participants mostly agreed with the tenets and aims of body positivity, and many felt that it had impacted their body experience positively, there was also evident critique.

4.7.2. Body positivity as overly simplistic

"I'm not going to say it's had a big impact where I'm like 'no, no I'm happy now'" (Nadia).

The body positivity movement can be seen as overly simplistic in that fails to meaningfully rethink women's bodies. Though seeing other women accepting their flaws was helpful, there were also several participants who felt that it still upheld certain beauty standards. This reflects literature on how the body positivity movement can be seen as still adhering to sexist frameworks (Caldeira & de Ridder, 2017: 328). As Saskia noted:

> "There's that famous model who's albino. That's inclusive. That, to me, is beautiful, but it's still a specific, skinny albino woman."

Josie commented that:

> "Being on Instagram and seeing these fat women be like so proud of their bodies – that definitely was an incredible thing for me … but then also in a lot of ways I feel like these fat bodies are the most perfect fat bodies... so I would still feel quite insecure."

She felt that, although categories around beauty were being broadened, it was still a certain kind of body that was celebrated. Similarly, Lutho noted how she did not feel represented by the movement because most of the women she saw on posts were larger than her and also 'looked better'.

> "Most of them look a little better than me. So it's like, where are the normal body people?"

There is still an emphasis on looking good and looking good in a certain way. Early on in the interview, Danya referenced a quote that encapsulates this critique:

> "I think it was Lizzo who said, 'body positivity is lazy because you don't have to be beautiful to be normal'."

This reflects Caldeira & de Ridder's (2017: 328) statement that body positivity often still positions beauty and sexiness as essential characteristics of femininity. Sastre (2014: 937) argues that, in many ways online body positivity is still "firmly entrenched within a broader regulatory web". Her suggestion, that there needs to be a radical rethinking around the way that women's bodies are performed and perceived, is thus relevant.

It can be argued that the body positivity movement also fails to adequately address the complexity of women's experiences. As Wiseman (2020: para. 6) notes, under body positivity the true structural challenges of women's shame remain unchallenged, despite a shift towards celebrating all bodies. As has been in Chapter 2, there are reasons women feel the way they do about their bodies and resistance is difficult. The power of the body positivity discourse to confront the sources of shame is questionable. Nadia's sentiment highlights, again, the effort that goes into resisting, despite engaging with the messages of body positivity:

> "Just as much as there are a lot of people speaking about body positivity there's still a lot of people saying 'this is a beach body' on Instagram. So, I feel like it will always be an internal fight with yourself"."

Under the body positivity movement, these kinds of contradictions are not explored in their own right and grey areas of experiences are not accounted for. When speaking about the impact of the body positivity discourse on her experience of her body, Chumani noted:

> "It's like 'okay, your body is great, it's good'. But then there's still those thoughts that are like 'ah you could change this and this and that'."

She later confirmed that these conflicting messages resulted in a kind of double pressure:

> "It's like 'do I change? Or am I okay with the way I am?' … there is definitely a double pressure to be okay with things that you're not okay with, and also to conform."

It can be argued that body positivity, which preaches radical self-love and acceptance perhaps expects too much from women, in the face of powerful cultural standards. Body positivity often positions self-acceptance as a destination that must be obtained (Sastre, 2014: 938). We know however, from Section 4.5, that self-acceptance was for participants a complicated and ongoing process. There is the danger of body positivity itself becoming performative. Wiseman (2020: para 9), suggests that we better develop a narrative of "body neutrality". This is especially relevant considering the dynamic and contradictory ways that women in the

current study experience their bodies. Danya's critique of body positivity discourse highlights this issue:

> "For some people it's really hard to perceive their bodies as beautiful, so it's just necessary at the very least to see their bodies as neutral, their body as normal and natural."

Similarly, Teri noted:

> "I do think there's such a thing as toxic positivity. I think sometimes it's a bit of jump to say, 'love your body!'"

This is also linked to Sastre's suggestion that we replace body positivity's focus on 'achieving' self-love with truthful representations of uncertainty and vulnerability (Sastre, 2014: 940). She comments "these bodies simply *are*—in question, in chaos, in the truth of their instability" (Sastre, 2014: 940). The body positivity movement does not portray the body experience as it *is.* It can be argued there is a need for a more complex understanding of women's embodiment that better encapsulates contradictions and respects the grey (or even chaotic) areas of experience.

The body positivity movement creates 'safer' online spaces that celebrate inclusivity. We cannot undermine the value of these spaces of resistance. Its message of self-love has the ability to positively impact women's body experiences and aid in their rejection of shame, specifically through exposing them to other women who celebrate their body differences. The movement is not a panacea for shame, however, and it can be argued that it is overly simplistic. It fails to truly rethink the ways that women's bodies are performed and does not adequately address the complexity of actually rejecting shame. The concept of body neutrality (or perhaps body uncertainty?) could provide a more holistic and honest way for women to navigate and unpack their experiences of their bodies.

4.8. Conclusion

This chapter illustrated the complexity of women's body experiences in relation to appearance. There were evidently feelings of body shame and, in the face of dominant body ideals, many women experienced their bodies as inadequate. Many felt the need to 'put together' their bodies in order for them to be deemed acceptable. Significantly, their experiences of shame were greatly informed by 'the other'. They received powerful messages around how bodies should look from men, families and communities and peers. There was

definite sense of “being for the other”. Shame experiences were also informed by the ubiquitous discourse of postfeminism, which positions the body as project to be attended to, for example. They interacted with these messages in their own ways, however, and did not blindly accept societal ideals. There was a high level of awareness around how sociocultural context had impacted their own experience. This allowed for a kind of resistance against these ideals. Although shame was still present, women critiqued restrictive beauty categories. Many had also adopted positive attitudes and behaviours that helped them to challenge the shame they felt and foster a better appreciation for their bodies. Body positivity aided in their rejection of shame, by exposing them to online spaces of acceptance, but it also failed to adequately address the complexity of women’s experiences.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The aim of this research was to better understand the ways in which young South African women, who have attended or are attending university, navigate body shame. This research followed a qualitative research design and was guided by the framework of phenomenology and feminist phenomenology. This framework encouraged a focus on the experience of the body from the first-hand perspectives of individual women involved in the research. The concept of embodied experience emphasised the conversation between women and their worlds. Feminist phenomenological perspectives, in particular, recognise the way experience is moulded by broader social structures, which this research has explored. Data collection took the form of in-depth interviews with fifteen women, mostly through the video-conferencing site, *Zoom.*

In a society saturated with messages around how women should look, body shame is ubiquitous. This proved true for the particular participants in the current study. Participants easily identified the ideal body, the characteristics of which were in line with feminist definitions. Many participants exhibited a feeling of their bodies not being 'enough' within the face of these powerful prescriptions. This is especially true in a society where women are positioned as "objects of decorative worth" and where they are valued for their bodies. It has been argued, in the contextual section, that women are also more likely to organise their sense of self around the perception of the other. A feminist take on Foucauldian perspectives emphasises how women internalise the gaze of the other which results in a constant self-surveillance of their bodies. Women in the current study experienced this "unremitting evaluation", which informed the way they regulated their bodies. The other played a significant role in their internalisation and interaction with body shame. Male attention significantly impacted their ideas around their bodies, which supports writings on how a women's worth in society is still intricately connected to her ability to secure a partner. Other interpersonal relationships were a major source of messages around how women's bodies should look. Shame was significantly engendered by families and communities as well as peers at school. Women learnt from a young age that their bodies were deficient in their natural state, mostly from the people around them. In order for a significant change in women's experiences it is these kinds of messages, from these kinds of people, that would need to change, specifically in the lives of young girls.

The impact of the discourse of postfeminism within the lives of young South African women was also explored. Postfeminism undermines the root causes of body shame and presents beauty practices as 'fun' and empowering. Participants reflected the shame-creating concept of the body as an unfinished project. They also presented beauty practices as potentially empowering and used the rhetoric of 'doing it for yourself'. They did not undermine the importance of external influences of choice, however and had a nuanced perception of agency. Furthermore, responses reflected the power that appearance management and conformity to ideals have in recreating the self and influencing a woman's sense of being in the world. Though I entered this research recognising my bias against postfeminist narratives, I had not anticipated the complex ways in which women would engage with these narratives.

Although most participants still experienced powerful feelings of body shame, they also, simultaneously, reflected body positive attitudes and actively critiqued the regime of shame. This emphasised the contradictory nature of the body experience. Women sought to challenge body shame in their own lives and even in the lives of others. They appeared to be mostly engaging in positive conversations with their current peers and they were acutely aware of how societal ideals had impacted on their own body experience and internal desires. Literature around positive body experiences explores different kinds of attitudes which emphasise appreciation and love for one's body. Many participants reflected these kinds of feelings towards their bodies. They had developed personalised strategies that helped them foster feelings of self-acceptance and disrupted the inner narrative of shame. Resistance, however, was not easy nor was it a destination that they had reached. This is especially true considering the fact that women's appearance has tangible effects in their lives. Rejecting shame was an ongoing process that required effort. This reflects literature that emphasises the uncertain and contradictory ways women experience their bodies, in relation to appearance, even among those who espouse body positive narratives. The body positivity movement, with its message of radical self-love and acceptance, highlights the oppressive nature of beauty ideals and it aided in women's rejection of shame. In line with reviewed literature, however it does not truly account for the complexity of the body experience or allow for truthful representations of the chaos of the body experience. Rather, it emphasises self-acceptance as an end point one must arrive at. It would be more realistic to develop a narrative of body neutrality.

Body shame is a very real *social* phenomenon that manifests in the individual's experience of the world. It is important to confront shame within popular culture and to enable women to foster a more positive sense of being in the world. The widening of beauty categories is necessary for enabling a more positive body experience, for example. However, to reiterate Edut's (2003: xxiv) point; it is "fundamental to offer them a world where they are safe, valued and free from oppression". Body shame is part of a broader structure of unequal gender relations.

It must be noted that this research explored the experiences of a very particular group of women. The university context had allowed women to question messages they had received during their time at home and school and several participants even had theoretical knowledge, which informed their ideas. Every single participant had encountered the body positivity movement, for example, but this was through social media. The university environment and access to technology were thus important factors. Furthermore, although the sample group included participants who identified as different sexualities, all participants were cis-gender women. It would be beneficial to explore the experiences of different groups of South African women.

There is a lack of qualitative research on body shame among women within a South African context. This research aims to contribute towards filling this gap. Participants' responses provided insight on the complicated ways women navigate shame. Body shame was present as was rejection of shame. This was greatly informed by the messages they received from other people and from discourses such as postfeminism and body positivity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1) Interview Schedule

1) Do you have any goals in terms of appearance – a specific weight you would like to achieve, for example?
2) If so, where do you think these goals come from?
3) Are you satisfied with your body as it is?
4) What kind of appearance management behaviours do you take part in – such as shaving or putting on make-up – and how frequently do you do these things?
5) If you do not do these things, how do you feel? (Do you feel content leaving the house/seeing other people?)
6) Does appearance and the topic of women's bodies/ your own body come up in conversation?
7) If so, what is the nature of these conversations? (Do you compliment weight loss? Do you make negative comments about certain body characteristics? Do you compare yourself to other women in conversation?)
8) Are you consistently aware of how other people are perceiving you? (when you are in public do you think about how other people are seeing you? When you get ready to leave the house what goes through your mind?)
9) Do you believe there to be a kind of pressure on women to a conform to a specific way of looking?
10) If so, how are women expected to look, do you think?
11) Do you think race plays a role in these expectations? For example, do you believe there is a privileging of lighter skin? Have you ever taken part in skin-lightening activities (addressed to women of colour).
12) Do you conceive of beauty practises as a negative activity?
13) Do you feel empowered if you partake in beauty practices – such as putting on make-up.
14) Do you believe that taking part in these practises can be wholly a woman's decision or choice?
15) What are your views on plastic surgery?
16) Are you aware of the concept of body positivity?

17) If so, where did you encounter this concept and what kinds of messages were being portrayed
18) Do you agree with this concept? (Do you believe all kinds of bodies should be accepted as beautiful?)
19) Do you feel that ideas around body positivity have impacted how you think about your body? (Do you feel empowered by certain spaces online for example, that celebrate all kinds of bodies)
20) How would you summarise your relationship with your body?

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Rhodes University
Department of Sociology
AGREEMENT BETWEEN STUDENT RESEARCHER AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANT.

I (participant's name) _____ agree to participate in the research project of Jessica Spyker, which seeks to explore body shame among university-going women.

I understand that:

1. The researcher is a student conducting the research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree at Rhodes University. The researcher may be contacted on 0711266791(cell phone) or g16s1138@ru.ac.za (email). The research project has been approved by the relevant ethics committee(s), and is under the supervision of Professor Michael Drewett in the Sociology Department at Rhodes University, who may be contacted on m.drewett@ru.ac.za

2. The researcher is interested in capturing my experiences around body shame and my thoughts and experiences and behaviour related to this.

3. My participation will involve being a part of a telephonic in-depth interview with the researcher, of around forty-five minutes.

4. I may be asked to answer questions of a sensitive nature, but I can choose not to answer any questions about aspects of my life which I am not willing to disclose.

5. I am invited to voice to the researcher any concerns I have about my participation in the study, or consequences I may experience as a result of my participation, and to have these addressed to my satisfaction.

6. I am free to withdraw from the study at any time – however, I commit myself to full participation unless some unusual circumstances occur, or I have concerns about my participation which I did not originally anticipate.

7. The report on the project may contain information about my personal experiences, attitudes and behaviours, but that the report will be designed in such a way that it will not be possible to be identified by the general reader.

8. The discussion will be recorded and transcribed and may be used for future references.

9. There is no remuneration for my participation in this research.

10. The researcher has fully explained the research aims and given a breakdown of my role in it.

11. I have been informed that my identity will not be revealed to anyone and my real name will not be used in the project.

Signed on (Date):

Participant: _____ Researcher: _____