

## Understanding Resiliency to Appearance Dissatisfaction among Adult Women

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### Abstract

*In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 women between the ages of 22 and 68 years to explore women's assessment of their appearance across age groups. The method utilized was narrative inquiry. The utilization of this method assisted in gathering rich data that was categorized into themes: (i) attitude and beliefs pertaining to appearance, (ii) centrality of appearance in their self-concept (appearance schema), (iii) aging and appearance concerns, (iv) appearance dissatisfaction, and (v) coping strategies engaged in to enhance or maintain appearance.*

**Key words:** resiliency, appearance dissatisfaction, appearance schema, coping strategies

### 1.0 Introduction

Ageing is an inevitable process that is most commonly associated with changes to the physical body. Although the physical body is a visible indicator of aging, yet the visible manifestation of aging varies between individuals because a multitude of factors (individual habits and genetics, physical environment and socio-cultural practices, overall wellbeing across life span, and physical activeness, etc.) affect each body differently. In our current society, we tend to place an emphasis on youth and beauty. The ideals of youth and beauty are pervasively and persuasively communicated in advertising, television, movies, and in all forms of media. The experience of a physically aging body juxtaposed against a society that places emphasis on youth and beauty can provide insight into the body dissatisfaction experience.

The body and its appearance have been considered key to female identity and social experience (Hurd, 2000) and thus until recently, research has concentrated on the influences of the social-cultural appearance standards and expectations on women more than men. These cultural standards of youthfulness and beauty create a challenging environment for women as they navigate through their middle and later years. Previous studies investigating the relationship between age and body dissatisfaction among women have found that although body dissatisfaction tends to remain stable across women's lifespan (Tiggemann 2004; Stevens & Tiggemann, 1998), it is much later in old age that the psychological impact of body dissatisfaction decreases (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). Öberg & Tornstam (1999) conducted a study with 3,000 Swedish men

and women between the ages of 20 and 85 years. Their findings revealed that older women were more content with their bodies than younger women. It is possible that increase in age affects one's resiliency to stress and reduces psychological distress caused by body/ appearance dissatisfaction.

Cash (2002) explains that to understand the body dissatisfaction experience, it is important to know that an individuals' discontentment with a part of his/her body does not necessarily mean they are dissatisfied with their overall body. Because some people might dislike a certain part of their body, yet retain an overall feeling of attractiveness or physical acceptability. There is limited research that is aimed at understand about the meanings women attribute to their body and/ or overall appearance or why women tend to focus less on how they look in later part of their adult life and what assumes greater priority (Hurd, 2000). Most studies investigating body dissatisfaction have examined the causes (such as culture, race, low self-esteem, neurotic personality traits, aging, socio-economic class etc.) of this dissatisfaction, very few have examined the protective factors that make women resilient to body/ appearance dissatisfaction.

For the purpose of this study we included body dissatisfaction as a component of the overall appearance dissatisfaction. The objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To explore women's experience of distress caused by appearance dissatisfaction.
2. To investigate the different coping strategies women utilized in order to reduce the distress caused by this dissatisfaction.
3. To identify the individual differences in the choice of coping strategies among women of different ages based on centrality of appearance to their self-concept (appearance schema).

## 2.0 Method

A qualitative research technique known as 'narrative inquiry' was used to conduct this study. Bell (2002) posits that people make sense of their lives or experiences according to the narratives available to them. The use of narratives in research offers an opportunity to all groups of people (even the marginalized groups) to participate in knowledge construction. Although narratives are shaped by lifelong personal experiences, they are often interpreted in the light of new knowledge. The narrative not only provides the researcher with an opportunity to understand the individual's experiences and beliefs, but most importantly the assumptions people make when trying to make sense of their lives (Bell, 2002). This insight into the assumptions people make is the most crucial aspect of using narratives as a rich source of data because it provides a deeper understanding of other's experience.

**Table 1**

*Interview Schedule*

	Questions posed during interview
1	How important is one's appearance to their overall evaluation as a person?
2	When evaluating the overall person, why do some people place more importance than others on appearance?
3	Do you think the importance an individual gives to his/her own appearance changes as they grow older?
4	Looking back do you notice any changes in the level of importance you placed on appearance criteria while judging your overall self?

5	In order to look good, what are the different activities (dieting, exercise, make up, color of hair, hair style, style of clothes) you have tried?
6	In the future what kinds of activities would you consider using to improve your appearance?
7	Does importance one places on appearance change as individual goes through the transition of being single to being in a marriage /living with a partner, then being a parent, to eventually being a grandparent?

Interviews were conducted with 18 women living in a town in Northwest U.S.A. Participation in these interviews was voluntary and each of these participants was individually interviewed by the same researcher. The time and place of interview was prearranged and jointly identified as convenient and neutral. The interviews lasting between 30 to 60 minutes were held at the University library in a study room. The interviews were audio recorded with a prior permission of the respondent. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and eventually sorted to arrive at common salient themes across all the interviewees' accounts.

This research began with a general set of concerns derived from literature reviewed prior to the interviews, yet the design allowed flexibility for themes to emerge that were not originally anticipated (Patton, 1990). The semi-structured interviews were loosely structured yet in-depth (see Table 1; Interview schedule). As explained by Kuczynski & Daly (2002), the utilization of open-ended questions used for the interviews indicate that the responses received cannot be regarded as exhaustive. In this study the respondents' age ranged between 22 and 68 years and as a result the experiences that they drew upon to provide examples in support of their responses also varied in content. Open-ended questions in the interview suggest general topics but provide individuals with the freedom to respond with answers that are uppermost in their minds rather than following the researcher's agenda (Kuczynski & Daly, 2002). Not every respondent covered a similar range of issues pertaining to assessment of their own appearance and that of others. The interviews focused on capturing the key changes observed across respondents' lives in areas of appearance perception, behavior and feelings of dissatisfaction.

In narrative analysis 'the story or the narrative' is the object of investigation with an objective to understand how the respondents make sense of the events and experiences in their lives (Reissman, 1993). The foremost step in the analysis of the data entailed an inductive approach allowing themes to emerge and concepts to develop from the stories (Polkinghorne, 1995) across all the 15 transcribed interviews. Thematic analysis of the narratives was the most appropriate approach for this study. According to Patton (2002) this approach prevents the researcher from imposing theory or research assumptions. Thus, this approach allowed categories to emerge from the data. First each respondent's interview was examined independently, it was followed by identification of common themes across all interviews and, eventually identifying recurring similarities across the themes.

### **2.1 Participants**

Table 2 shows the demographics of 18 respondents; the women under the age of 50 were recruited [how] from the student population at a northwestern US university. The women above the age of 50 years were recruited from volunteers at the Center for Healthy Aging Research at XXX University. The respondents were all female (N =18) and the majority of respondents described their ethnicity as White/ Caucasian American ( $n =17$ ) with an exception of one respondent whose ethnicity was a combination of White/ Caucasian and Native American. Ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 68 years.

**Table 2***Demographics of Respondents*

<b>Respondent (proxy name)</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>
Tori	White American/ Caucasian	22	Masters
Jamie	White American/ Caucasian	25	Masters
Stella	White American/ Caucasian	25	Masters
Tracie	White & Native American	32	Masters
Gemma	White American/ Caucasian	33	Masters
Anna	White American/ Caucasian	36	Masters
Joan	White American/ Caucasian	44	Masters
Kathy	White American/ Caucasian	52	Bachelors
Casey	White American/ Caucasian	56	Bachelors
Pam	White American/ Caucasian	56	Bachelors
Bonnie	White American/ Caucasian	57	More than Masters
Merissa	White American/ Caucasian	58	Bachelors
Mel	White American/ Caucasian	60	Bachelors
Beth	White American/ Caucasian	62	Bachelors
Liz	White American/ Caucasian	65	Bachelors
Sam	White American/ Caucasian	65	More than Masters
Andy	White American/ Caucasian	68	Bachelors
Laurie	White American/ Caucasian	70	Bachelors

**3.0 Results**

In order to understand the body/ appearance dissatisfaction experience among women, the researchers analyzed the meaning of the narratives. The narratives were analyzed based on (a) understanding of body/ appearance dissatisfaction based on findings from previous research, (b) identification of dominant themes across all interviews, (c) identification of an individual's attitude and belief with regard to their body/ appearance, and (d) extraction of content indicating 'resiliency' to body/ appearance dissatisfaction.

The method resulted in understanding the meaning of each respondent's story and understanding the appearance dissatisfaction experience and the resiliency to this dissatisfaction. The names of the respondents have been changed to maintain their anonymity. The following section presents the primary themes that emerged from the 18 interviews conducted: (i) attitude and beliefs pertaining to appearance, (ii) centrality of appearance in their self-concept (appearance schema), (iii) aging and appearance concerns, (iv) appearance dissatisfaction, and (v) coping strategies engaged in to enhance or maintain their appearance.

**3.1 Attitude and beliefs pertaining to appearance**

The interviews revealed that there are two constructs that determine one's attitude and beliefs regarding appearance: (i) the importance of appearance in one's life and, (ii) importance one places on appearance. Appearance may be important to some individuals only to the extent that it is a part of one's routine, whilst for others it may be central to their self-concept.

### **3.1.1 The importance of appearance in one's life**

The importance one places on appearance can be such that it remains salient in one's cognition and is used as a measure to assess self and others' worthiness, abilities and even attributed to a person's traits. As pointed out by Anna (aged 36), "Even if I am exhausted, I will do up myself to look awake and look like I have my act together. It helps me...helps me focus for the day." Similar opinion was presented by Tori (aged 22), "For me personally, it gives me confidence if my weight's right or my hair's right or whatever it is. I feel like I'd be more open to do social things, it affects my daily mood and stuff like that."

The interviews revealed that as women age, the importance that one gives to appearance may undergoes change. For example, Joan (aged 44) explained that she engaged in appearance modifying or enhancing activities as a result of habit, although as a mom of a young impressionable daughter she now questions it. Joan explains:

My mom was raised in such a way that it was unthinkable to go out without make up, the whole face, foundation and everything and she still does that. I am not quiet so much but it is still deeply ingrained in me and I have been questioning that recently, especially now that my daughter is looking at make-up.

Beth (aged 62) provides insight into alternate reason for the importance given to appearance. She provides the example of her daughter who in order to overcome feelings of inadequacies focusses on keeping up with appearance as a way to communicate her position:

My daughter she looks wonderful but still worries about her appearance. She feels that...2 of her brothers are doctors and one has a Ph.D. ...she only attended 1 year of college. She has a very successful business...that is a skill she has and I have always tried to tell her this '*it doesn't mean you are not as smart as they are*' but I think in her mind she has to keep up appearances to satisfy herself. That is the way she has coped...her brothers will comment, 'she had her eyes done, she had a tummy tuck' but what I tell them is, '*it might not be important to you but it is to her*'.

### **3.1.2 Importance one places on appearance**

Respondents were asked '*to what extent does an individual's appearance contribute to the overall assessment of a person*' and twelve respondents said it would contribute marginally others said they would try not to. For some individuals their life experience teaches them that appearance is not a reliable measure to judge others and this is expressed by Stella (aged 25), "I have actually found that a lot of my first impressions are way off [unreliable]...throughout my life. I form an impression of person and later find out the complete opposite. A lot of those impressions were based on appearance". Similar response was articulated by Jamie (aged 25) who did not use appearance as a criterion to evaluate others, "Because I know it [appearance] is being noticed more than usual, I try not to judge [based on] it or notice it". Older women also expressed a similar viewpoint. For instance Marissa (aged 58 years) explains:

In your 50s and 60s, I think that you have experienced what makes a difference in a person and usually it is not appearance, where you have seen the exceptions to the rule and you have seen it happen enough times to realize that just because somebody looks a certain way... what you thought may not necessarily be correct...

Kathy (aged 52) and (Liz (aged 65) provides an alternate view; according to them the importance placed on appearance is dependent on an individual's social role and the life stage. For example Liz (aged 65) posits:

In college I guess you try to attract guys and you took a little more care. Once I had kids I didn't have time (laughs) to worry about it. I think it's sort of ebb and flow with what is going on in your life. Like when I

got divorced 15-16 years ago, of course then if you wanted to go back into the dating scene you have to pay more attention...Now I just lost 30 pounds and that is more for health reasons. I don't have any health problems but [in order] to avoid them.

Kathy (aged 52) recollects the changes in her life and the impact it had on her attitude and behavior towards appearance:

So when if I go back all the way back to college...I kind of saw myself as a sexual object so probably was much more concerned about looking sexual and sensual. And when I started working at the XXX company, it's a very corporate world and you wanted to be taken seriously and then I kinda went into this phase...I call it my LL bean phase...you know I tried to just dress like more modestly...khakis and camp shirts and that kind of thing. Before I had kids I wore contact lenses and probably ed a lot with my hair and getting my bangs just right. And then you have kids and you have barely enough time to sleep and so I remember I started wearing glasses and it was easier and it was just one less thing to do ..and there were several things like that where you kind of just let things go...like you know I don't worry about making my bangs look straight anymore cause my hair is curly and I just decided 'to heckwith that'... so yeah so a lot of stuff went out of the window when I had kids...plus you realize that your focus changes from being on yourself on somebody else.

### **3.1.3 Culture and location**

We found that some respondents attributed their attitudes towards appearance enhancing activities to the culture in which a person may have grown up or geographical location (for example, Southern states versus West Coast states in U.S.). This is demonstrated by Gemma (aged 33), "I don't see that so much here but in the south where I am from people judge on how you are dressed." Similar sentiments are conveyed in Joan's (aged 44) response:

I think looking around the campus, there are a good number of the young women who don't put on make-up at all and I think it could be a regional thing because in Washington [state] where I lived before everyone wore make-up but here women don't. I notice here a lot of older women don't wear make-up or as much make up and they look great. I don't know if it's the lifestyle thing. I wish I can embrace that myself. My mother-in-law and my mom were both from southern states and they all wore make-up everyday.

Marissa (aged 58) discusses the difference in her and her mother's approach towards appearance and relates it to the influence of the place (geographical location and/ or culture) on their attitude and approach to appearance:

I went to college at Colorado...appearance isn't important to me as in be in style sort of thing. My mother...she lived in the east coast ...She puts on makeup, foundation when she goes out and she is 84 and she has very very deep wrinkles... she used to smoke, she smoked for 30 some years...nothing is gonna make her look any better (laughs) but in her mind that's what you do and she wears a hat and she has a pin somewhere, a necklace and jewelry.

### **3.1.4 Influence of historic period and life events**

A historic period that one has lived through can have a lasting impact on the individual and similarly living through an extraordinary event in one's life could leave lasting impression on an individual. Kathy (aged 52) explains the period effect in her narrative, "I think to some degree I had a lot of my attitude forged in the 60s and early 70s where I was raised in the whole era of natural and...we fought real hard for the right to be ourselves and to be proud of it and not be ashamed." She adds further, "I guess because I am a child of the 60s, I am not into all the things that people do to artificially look a certain way. I am more into looking at

them and getting a sense of who they are on the inside.” On the other hand, Marissa provided an illustration to explain her mother’s appearance related concerns that developed as a response to her experience during the great depression of 1930s:

My mother grew up during the great depression in 1929-1930. She was about 6 years or so, and her parents were immigrants. During the depression it was ‘you immigrants are taking all the jobs from the real Americans’ [narrating the social sentiment at that time], especially because there were very few jobs to be had, so for her [mother] it is very very important to be an American and because she was the first generation to be born in this country, it was very very important for her to look the part. For some people appearance is important because if you are dressed nicely, you are in the middle class and doing well and that is very important to her.

Life events and/or experiences can impact one’s priorities. Tracie (aged 32) had faced severe hardships in life (childhood stage) as she recalled, “I lost my mom when I very young and then I lost touch with my dad. I grew up with my grandparents. With the things that had happened...appearance was least of my problems.”

### **3.1.5 Social expectation**

Interviews also revealed that four respondents developed their attitude towards appearance as a reaction to socially prevalent (stereotypical) expectations that were mediated by either parents or peers. Bonnie (aged 57) reflected back on their childhood and revealed that their behavior stemmed from a reaction to social pressures related to appearance. Bonnie (aged 57) narrated, “When I was younger, I was really insecure about my appearance...I would say that my mother was insecure about her appearance and kind of instilled it in the three of us [respondent and her sisters]. She was critical if she thought we weighed too much and I sort of rebelled and went the opposite way. There was something about that, which really irritated me and so I went the other way.” Andy (aged 68) recalls similar pressure from her mother when she was young, “When I was thirteen or fourteen, my mother who weighed around a 130 pounds was terrified when I hit a 150 or a 160, but when I look back at those pictures I looked fine. I have very dense bones and I am size 14. At my minimal weight I will still be size 14...my mother put so much pressure on my weight.” There were respondents who continued to be pressured by their mothers until much later in their lives (in their 50s and 60s). For example Marissa (aged 58 years) recalls:

“My mother...I took her shopping for birthday presents yesterday and she wants me to get new clothes and she was trying not stay that I look scruffy ... appearance isn’t important to me...as in style sort of thing ...my mother told me that I needed to go shopping because I needed better clothes than I owned and that she would provide money if I did not have it.

Beth (aged 62) recollect a similar incident that occurred recently, “I hadn’t seen my mother for 18 months...my mother walked into the house and she looked right at me and she said ‘*did you mean for your hair to be that color?*’ and I said ‘*yes I did*’...and she said, ‘*I see that none of the eating plan [diets] have been working*’. And she kept saying things about my appearance.”

Most respondents in our study discussed the influence of either their mother or daughter(s) or sister(s) while explaining their approach to appearance enhancement or importance of appearance. Although, we found that respondents whose mothers placed a great deal of emphasis on appearance did not necessarily do the same themselves; instead some respondents rebelled and chose to give appearance less importance. Women also mentioned that as they grew older their familial social support underwent change which influenced their

appearance behavior. For instance, few women experienced that as their daughters grew older they gave advice on matters concerning selection of clothing. As reported by Liz (aged 65) and Kathy (aged 52), their daughters advised them on clothing. Kathy illustrated the mother-daughter relationship in the following response:

My older daughter is now my fashion consultant (smiles). She's going to be 21 and I don't like to go and buy clothes without her because I will buy something and she will say 'mom!' [in disagreement]. So I now get my advice of what to wear from my daughter and that's fun because if it weren't for her I would probably be wearing very matronly clothes. She has told me 'mom you have got a good figure, don't hide it.'

### **3.2 Appearance Schema**

Appearance schematic individuals are more psychologically invested in their appearance as a standard of self-evaluation and self-worth and thus tend to encode, process and react to an array of appearance related stimuli (Cash & Labarge, 1996; Cash, Melnyk, & Hrabosky, 2004; Cash, Santos, & Williams, 2005). Similarly, there are individuals to whom 'attention to appearance' never really holds any importance. As revealed by Bonnie (aged 57):

I think in terms of my clothing selections, not much has changed. I have had the same basics, I don't follow the trends. I like cotton clothing and things that are comfortable...comfort is very important to me. The only thing that has changed is that I weigh more, I am heavier now and I think I never tried to be slender to attract somebody. I followed my own mind and I was not necessarily looking for a partner for lot of my single life. I was quiet content, so I could say that not much has changed. In fact, I probably own some of the same clothes that I would have worn if they hadn't worn out.

Demonstrating low appearance schema, Andy (aged 68) stated, "Maybe, I am much more a people's person...oriented towards people, their behavior and, their actions than seeing what they look like. I guess it's the things I am doing are more interesting...and what people have to say is more interesting than what they are looking like." From these narratives it could be gathered that women like Bonnie and Andy seem to demonstrate resiliency to the socio-cultural norms or standards pertaining to appearance. Thus it is viable to assume that not all women measure themselves or others against the prevalent appearance norms and standards.

Appearance schema is also likely to undergo change as individuals grow older. Prior studies (Pliner, Chaiken & Flett, 1990; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001) have found that the importance of physical appearance diminishes with age and this is articulated by Liz (aged 65), "I think when you get older, it is just not as important. It is not as important as your family, your friends and your health and that type of thing, your priority changes." A similar change is demonstrated in Laurie's (aged 70) narrative, "I hated taking swimming in college because my shoulder bones stuck out and my ribs stuck out and I just looked dreadful in a swim suit... and that one influence me for a long time ...I wasn't just as comfortable in my skin during college as I am now... and now I recognize that it really doesn't matter... I have a swim suit...I took my family to Hawaii a couple of years ago for a vacation and I could hardly stay out of water ...I loved to snorkel...I don't look good in a swim suit but who cares? I had a ball!" It can be argued that as one ages they may develop a more secure sense of 'self' that is based on other criteria of evaluations besides appearances, such as career, familial relationships, social recognition, and others. Sam (aged 65) conveys this in her response, "when you gain confidence as an adult you are less concerned about what other people may think of you and trust your own judgment as to how you look and be happy with how you look".

### **3.3 Aging and appearance concerns**

Bonnie (aged 57) expressed relief that older women are not measured against the same appearance standards as the younger women, “belonging to older age group is liberating because society’s expectations of women fall to the younger women, whether the expectation are of being beautiful or being very accomplished.” Not all women perceive their aging bodies through the same lens. In addition to the normative age-related changes affecting the physical body, the older adults may face or anticipate an array of stereotypes which may pose challenge to their sense of self (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003) and, make it necessary for them to engage in activities that mask the visible effects / indicators of aging. As conveyed by Mel (aged 60):

I am in my 60s and at least 15 years older than the whole group of people I work with...and I think they look at me as a younger person than they would look at me if I had grey hair...I am not ready to have it look that way...I think I have to quit work before I decided to do that [let the hair be grey] because I think the younger generation might reject me ...people are surprised when I tell them my age...which makes me feel good but if I let my hair grow grey then I would be 62 in their mind...

Casey (aged 56) addresses a very interesting aspect of keeping up with appearances to avoid negative ageist gaze and stereotyping. She touches upon the idea that clothing could provide a clue to one’s age that keeping up with changing fashions and/or styles are important in order to avoiding looking old or older than one actually is:

I think it [attitude towards appearance] does change. You are more conscious or probably more careful about it but [you] also do not want to look like you are caught in an older stage [or time period]. I see women [of] my age who look older and a part of it is the style [of clothes] that they wear, the way they hold themselves and the way they dress. I would prefer to keep up with the times, not that I want to look youthful but I want to look my best for me...because as I grow older I don’t want to appear like I am caught in an era.

Thus, it appears from the responses of these women that there is individual variability in perception and response to aging.

#### **3.3.1 Importance of health over appearance**

We also observed that the salience of health over appearance in one’s daily life may influence appearance schematicity. Individuals who placed importance on maintaining or improving their health (irrespective of their age) seemed to demonstrate lower appearance schematicity. For example, Anna (aged 36) who was diabetic noted:

I take my dogs for a walk for 45 minutes most days. I stretch on the floor and go for kick boxing class at school about two times a week...it is overall health. My own personal motivation is to keep my diabetes under control, my blood sugar in range. So I have to pay attention to the complicated dynamic and I have to calculate snack and stress and hormones. I want to be in shape because I feel proud of who I am. Exercise also helps with good posture and it is a good pain reliever from my back pains. I have had enough injuries to know that if I keep working out my body will feel better.

Another respondent Gemma (aged 33) who is a cancer survivor had a similar response, “I am walking, doing yoga, I am starting to run. It is more like ‘yes, I need to exercise’. It is more about being at a healthier weight but it is also a de-stressing thing for me. It is overall health not primarily weight.”

Strategies to improve one’s health were the dominant factor among women of all the age groups interviewed in this study. Liz (aged 65) reports, “I went to weight watchers and joined a gym and hopefully this time the

weight stays off. I go to gym and do some weight, stretching and cardio. I think it is may be a little more on the health side.” Another respondent, Bonnie (aged 57) who wasn’t interested in engaging in physical activities said, “I bike not for recreation but to run errands or go to work. I walk on a tread mill not to loose weight. I don’t care much about how much I weigh, I care about how I feel and that I am healthy. I have the belief that being slender does not automatically guarantee good health. I think that it is more important what we eat and what our mental state is and that sort of thing. I do walk because it makes me feel better, I know it is good for me but I don’t go to a gym.”

### **3. 4 Appearance Dissatisfaction**

Consistent with Tiggemann’s (2004) findings, the interviews revealed that thirteen women reportedly experienced discontentment with some aspect of their appearance. Similar to Webster & Tiggemann’s (2003) findings, the dissatisfaction with body is comparable among the younger and older women. Body weight concerns could be traced in many narratives, although interestingly loss of color (paleness) was mentioned by two of the older respondents (above 60 years). Liz (aged 65) discussed her feelings of appearance dissatisfaction:

I think weight is probably one of the main things. When I was heavier I looked into the mirror and nothing looked good...when I tried clothes on, I wore baggier clothes that didn’t fit well. And as I got older, some colors didn’t look as good on me, especially with my hair going gray.

Concurring with Striegel-Moore and Franko’s (2002) results, these interviews also demonstrated that appearance dissatisfaction tends to remain relatively stable across one’s life, although the psychological impact of the dissatisfaction seems to decrease as women age. For instance as narrated by Casey (aged 56):

Growing up I always thought of myself as being plump. My step mother is extremely tiny and she is Japanese American she is like size zero...petite and when she was pregnant she wasn’t even 100 pounds...and my grandmother on my father’s side was also very tiny. She is not even five feet tall...just tiny and I think she wears a size zero or two and these are tiny women by anybody’s standard. There were comments about me being the large one in the family and I wasn’t large by a stretch but I felt like I was kinda the mousey so that image has taken me a long time to work through. [Presently] I am fine the way I am...I am more curvy than they are and have more meat on my bones but I am not heavy which is what I always thought for my own body image. It has taken me a lot of years to get to the point where I can say it’s not a problem.

It was also interesting to find that appearance was not important to some individuals during their younger years but they became conscious of their appearance as the signs of physical aging become obvious. For example, Pam (aged 56) expressed that accepting the changes in her appearance as she got older has been distressing:

“I would have rejected the notion that I would care so much about the wrinkles around my face, my eyes, and my neck if you had talked to me 10 years ago It was really distressing on a certain level to realize I look old. Suddenly, I cared that I look old and I don’t like that feeling. It definitely has changed. I really didn’t care about how I looked until I hit 45. it is an awareness that even though mentally I don’t feel like an old person, I know that physically I look older and there is a disconnect between your inner self and outer self and that is really difficult to process on a daily basis...you know you are walking along and feeling good about yourself and then you catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror and it is not pleasant”.

Pam (aged 56) also points out that although appearance concerns may continue as one grows older, they may have occasions to observe and appreciate the physical body’s functional ability than on the basis of its

appearance. She articulates her appreciation for the physical body as she has grown older, “You can intellectualize...yes my body is going to change, my belly is going to grow, I am going to get stretch marks, my ankles are going to swell...you can say those things to yourself but once you start experiencing them it is like...” “whose body is this?” “how did this happen?”...and it is very surreal...at least it was for me...but I never felt more alive...and after I gave birth, my body just changed like that [clicking her fingers]...aren’t our bodies amazing things?...how powerful our physical bodies are!”

Supporting Tiggemann’s (2004) findings, this study revealed that all women, across all age groups, experienced dissatisfaction with some aspect of appearance. We found evidence in the narratives that suggested that increase in age and may be associated with increase in acceptance of the body. For instance, Gemma (aged 33) mentions, “I have had weight issues because since I was little I was chubby...and I remember like in seventh grade everyday eating pickle to lose weight... it sticks with you through high school and as you get to college it is still that way...I still have weight issues but not as severe as in junior high. As you get older you get comfortable with yourself, you still think about it but it is more of ‘what I want of me’ versus ‘what someone is thinking about me’. I think as you get older you become more comfortable in your skin. Maybe because you have been so long with it, you have to be (laughs).” A similar response is provided by Stella (aged 25) “there is always going to be someone who is skinnier than you and there is always someone bigger than you. You have to work with what you have.”

Thus, based on the narratives, the present study demonstrates the age does not necessarily determine the resilience, although interaction between age and experience may explain the individual’s resiliency to dissatisfaction. In the transcribed interviews we observed that they were a lot more insecurities that younger women touched upon whereas, the older women came across less anxious about their appearance.

### **3.5 Coping strategies to overcome dissatisfaction**

Body image literature reveals that individuals engage in strategies ranging from cognitive to behavioral actions or reactions that help in accommodating or adjusting to these distressing factors resulting from body dissatisfaction (Cash, 2002). Cash, Santos and Williams (2005) narrowed three categories of coping strategies pertaining to body image: avoidance, appearance fixing, and positive rational coping. Avoidance coping strategy entails attempt to evade threats to one’s body image thoughts and feelings; appearance fixing coping strategy concerns entail efforts to change one’s appearance by concealing or correcting a physical feature perceived as flawed; and positive rational coping strategy involves mental and behavioral activities that emphasize the use of positive self-care or rational self-talk and acceptance of one’s experiences.

Analysis of the eighteen interviews conducted for this study reveals that the coping strategies used commonly by women to overcome appearance dissatisfaction were: (a) appearance fixing strategies and; (b) positive rational acceptance strategies. In the case of twelve interviewees, it was a combination of both coping strategies that helped maintain respondents’ self image. A common appearance fixing method utilized to enhance one’s appearance was thorough make-up. As suggested by this response of Pam (aged 56) who used make-up to overcome the paleness of aging skin:

I wear more makeup now than I wore in many many many years. I definitely color my hair because I would be pretty much totally grey if I didn’t...Make up is when your [skin] color gets washed out, the need for color is more. I think that when there is some brightness to your face it makes me feel better...you can hardly make out [the make-up] but for me it is a lot because I never did [applied this much make-up]. I say

*'I have to put on my work face'*...because of my position and the people I meet I just feel that it is important to present a good face. I don't wear any makeup during the weekend...I have toyed with the idea of tanning because I am so pale. I think you probably look healthier when you have color.

Opinions expressed by Anna (aged 36) reveal that although appearance fixing may initiate the involvement in physical activities, yet it may not be the only driving force:

My weak body image place has always been my belly. I do sit ups and I try to both accept what it is, besides saying to myself that it's good to have a healthy little belly because I am a woman and we have layers of fat ... its fine [self assurance]. I also dress in a way that emphasizes other parts. Then again, I try to work out mainly to clear my head more so than to get a flat belly. It (appearance fixing) is beginning goal, but then I end up feeling more energized and healthier, so the end result is better.

In another interview, we found that the respondent Bonnie (aged 57) presented her views on the new technology of body enhancement. Bonnie demonstrated the use of rationalization (also known as positive rational coping). The respondent expressed that in her mind she would go through constant dialogues with her own self trying to dissuade herself from opting for any of the intrusive measures. The respondent reported:

I don't understand why people are so driven to look younger than they are. The funny thing is I am at an age now where I have some wrinkles. Although, I don't mind my gray hair but I look at my wrinkles and think *'oh I don't like the wrinkles'*. So then I remind myself, how I always admired women who were just natural for their age. I have a dialogue in my head and I can see the temptation now but at the same time, I have admired people who felt comfortable in their own skin and allowed themselves to age, and then I doubt I would have plastic surgery.

Once again, it was interesting to find that seven women reported some use of non-intrusive strategies that could assist in improving their appearance. For example, Casey (aged 56) mentioned, "You know I earned all these lines on my face and I just think there is something about being your age and accepting that with some amount of grace and making the most of what I have. That being said, I do get my hair done and what I get is what they call a weave." However, we also found utilization of cognitive rationalization as a strategy to overcome dissatisfaction among women. Demonstrating the use of rationalization as a coping strategy, Jamie (aged 25) said, "I can't go fix it, I am who I am. I just have to focus on what I can control about myself and what I can't". Similarly Marissa (aged 58) mentioned, "I would need a whole face and body transplant to look very nice...[thus] I expend my energy on different things, part of it is because even if I were to expend a lot of energy [on appearance] I would never be a beautiful person and I don't necessarily think that the way you dress or look necessarily tells you much about the person." Although, it is more likely that women use a combination of coping strategies to overcome their dissatisfactions. As observed from Beth (aged 62) response:

I would like to be thinner, but if not I am ok with the way things are. If I carry this weight and still feel good and play with my grandchildren then that is okay. I am vain enough to say I color my hair because it is completely gray...when I quit work, I might quit doing that ...it is something to look forward to... not having to color my hair anymore

#### **4.0 Discussion and conclusion**

Physical changes are a part of the natural process of aging that could be perceived as either a positive indicator of maturity and wisdom or negatively as a loss of youthfulness and betrayal by the physical self. Individuals who accept the aging process and consider it as a part and parcel of their growing self (where

their inner sense of self accommodates their outer self) are likely to make positive associations with aging. Whereas, individuals who perceive that the aging body must be controlled in order to avoid stereotype and/or discrimination are likely to have a discrepancy between inner sense of self and the outer self. These individuals are likely to engage in cognitive negotiation to overcome this discrepancy.

Concurring with previous research (Paxton & Phythian, 1999; Tiggemann, 2004), the qualitative findings from this sample indicated that most women across different ages experienced appearance dissatisfaction. This study shows that although appearance dissatisfaction maybe ubiquitous, not all women are distressed by this dissatisfaction because not all women hold appearance as a central criterion of evaluating themselves and some women accept the feelings of appearance dissatisfaction as being widely prevalent and non-threatening to their sense of self. The results of the present study support Webster and Tiggemann (2003)'s findings. According to Webster & Tiggemann body dissatisfaction and body importance did not differ among the younger, middle aged and older women. The authors suggested that the cognitive strategies (such as lowering of expectations and cognitive reappraisal of the situation thereby reducing the importance of the body and/ or appearance) of older women protect their self concept and self esteem from the influence of body dissatisfaction.

The analysis of the narratives suggests that dissatisfaction with one's appearance and resiliency to this dissatisfaction could be influenced by one's experiences in life because increase in life experiences affects one's psychological ability to resolve distress more effectively. This clarifies Striegel-Moore and Franko's (2002) findings that psychological impact of appearance related dissatisfaction decreases as women age. Based on the assumption that aging results in increase in life experiences, it is likely that older individuals measure themselves on different parameters than younger individuals. The narratives in this study suggest that when one has meaningful life experiences or has survived challenging life events, it results in developing a sense of self that is based on other parameters besides appearance.

This study makes an attempt to address the need to understand how older women evaluate their aging bodies and negotiate the changes in their appearance, although more research is needed in this area. Furthermore when interpreting the results of this study, it is important to consider the limitations of this research. First, this study is largely limited to educated White American/ Caucasian women. Secondly, as the data from this study suggests it is possible that perceptions of appearance and other appearance enhancing/ modifying behaviors of respondents may reflect the prevalent culture in the Northwest of U.S. (where the respondents were residing at the time of interview) and result in potential threat to the representativeness (Kvalem et al., 2006). Also the respondents in this study volunteered to participate after knowing the topic of interview which could have probably resulted in selection bias. Besides, when recollecting past experiences the participants are likely to interpret past experiences in light of the present (Ross & Buehler, 2003).

For future research we recommend utilizing a heterogeneous population that would assist in observing if these findings could be generalized to a larger population across the U.S. Research (Watson & Hubbard, 1996) on coping reveals that coping styles themselves can be assessed as dispositional tendencies and coping strategies could be associated with specific traits. According to the traits perspective, traits (such as personality and self-esteem) are not behavior but summary statements describing the probability and latency of response in terms of different sensitivities to situations and differential response biases (Revelle, 1995). The use of quantitative measure to study the effect of appearance schema, individual traits such as self-

esteem and personality on appearance dissatisfaction experience could shed light on the antecedents that determine resiliency to body dissatisfaction.

With the increasing numbers of baby boomers that are graying, we hope that researchers will shift their focus from loss and decline associated with aging (late adulthood) and adopt a more balanced approach in which wisdom and growth are emphasized. Rather than following ageist views such as dissatisfaction with the aging physical self, studies should pursue ideas that credit the people over the age of 60 with psychological resiliency and efficacy to not only survive, but thrive in the later years of life.

## 5.0 References

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**Table 3**

*Themes Identified*

	<b>Primary Themes</b>	<b>Secondary Themes</b>
1	Attitude and beliefs pertaining to appearance	(i) The importance of appearance in one's life
		(ii) Importance one places on appearance
		(iii) Culture and location
		(iv) Influence of historic period and life events
		(v) Social expectation
2	Appearance schematicity (centrality of appearance to one's self-concept)	
3	Aging and appearance concerns	) Importance of health over appearance
4	Appearance dissatisfaction	
5	Coping strategies to overcome dissatisfaction	