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Shaping perception – Analysing the long-term effects of marketing on females' body image and self-perception in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Body dysmorphia and disordered eating behaviours are, once again, experiencing a concerning rise. According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, 2024), hospital admissions in England for eating disorders surged by 84% between 2015 and 2016 and between 2020 and 2021. This alarming trend has been correlated with increased social media use, particularly among individuals aged 11–24, with young women being disproportionately affected. However, it is important to recognise that societal pressures related to weight and appearance are not exclusive to the digital age. These pressures have long existed, evolving in form and intensity over time.

In contemporary society, we are often told that 'beauty is only skin-deep' and that it is 'in the eye of the beholder'. But what happens when the beholder is, in fact, the media? When the pervasive messages of society encourage individuals to 'love yourself', how can one reconcile this with the fact that the media frequently portrays individuals who resemble us and yet labels them as 'fat'? This contradiction creates a paradox, leaving many individuals struggling to align these conflicting messages about self-worth and body image.

This article aims to explore the experiences of women who grew up during a time when the 'heroin chic' aesthetic was considered the beauty ideal. It seeks to critically assess the long-term impact of media-driven fat-shaming on women's self-perception. Specifically, the article will examine whether these media portrayals have contributed to the development of distorted body image, unhealthy eating behaviours, and broader mental health challenges. By delving into the societal and media factors that shaped the perceptions of women during this era, this research aims to uncover the lasting effects of such beauty standards on the well-being of women and their relationship with food and self-image.

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1.0 Introduction: What is beautiful?

1.1 Personal reflection

'We'll all stay skinny 'cause we just won't eat…' (Nickelback, 2005)

Growing up in the late 1980s and 1990s, I was surrounded by women consumed by dieting and weight loss. My mother, aunts, and cousins endlessly pursued the latest fads, yet none achieved the slimness they sought. As the family's 'skinny girl', I inherited these ideals before I even understood them. Over time, that fixation became personal – I believed thinness equalled happiness. At 14, I was diagnosed with bulimia, an illness that never truly disappears. Despite this, society continues to praise thinness, often unaware that the bodies they admire are shaped by pain rather than health.

I absorbed these values from women who were intelligent and kind yet never satisfied with their appearances. Brun et al. (2021, p. 591) note that 'maternal perpetuation of the thin ideal is often done with the best of intentions', showing how body dysmorphia can pass through generations.

The 'heroin chic' era intensified this pressure. The fashion industry glorified near-emaciated models, while the media mocked women's bodies with headlines like 'Fat Spice Girl' and 'Jumbo Jessica'. Even success was overshadowed by body shaming. As Treasure et al. (1998, p. 14) argued, 'In a society still governed by sexist ideology, the curvaceous female body is associated stereotypically with low intelligence and subordinate status'. I internalised this, believing thinness meant being admired and intelligent.

I also questioned whether my family environment intensified my vulnerability. Pike and Rodin (1991, p. 199) suggest that 'dissatisfaction with family cohesion appears to be a general risk factor associated with disordered eating'. My emotionally distant parents may have unintentionally reinforced my need for control through food. 'Empirical evidence of family relationships in adolescents' eating disorders confirms the relevance of relational aspects in the development and maintenance of the pathology' (Erriu et al., 2020, Abstract). Such patterns – criticism, emotional neglect, or mixed messages about food – often nurture long-term body dissatisfaction.

Cultural definitions of beauty vary widely. In Mauritania, thin women are considered inferior, with rising force-feeding and drug use to achieve obesity (Esposito, 2022). Many African cultures link overweight bodies with wealth and health, as 'it is commonly believed that healthy people should not be skinny, as it symbolizes poverty and ill health' (Simfukwe et al., 2017). Even Western standards have shifted: in 1960s America, Wate On supplements promised to 'help make bustlines, cheeks, arms, legs fill out' (Wade, 2011), showing that curvier figures were once idealised. These contrasts reveal that beauty ideals are socially constructed and ever-changing.

This article examines how personal, familial, and societal forces have intersected to shape my body image and the broader ideals influencing women who came of age in the 1990s and early 2000s. It examines whether I was alone in feeling the pressure marketers and society places on me, or whether there is a generational issue linked to harmful public narratives. These forces created a culture where worth is tied to size, and where even recovery from disordered eating can be complicated by praise for thinness.

In summary, the ideals I inherited were not just unrealistic; they were harmful. Reinforced by family, culture, and the media, they defined my sense of value and identity. My story mirrors that of countless women shaped by those same expectations. By tracing where these pressures originate, we can begin to challenge them

and move towards beauty standards rooted in kindness, diversity, and authenticity.

2.0 Aims

The primary aim of this article is to examine whether the media's portrayal of body image and diet culture during the late 1990s and early 2000s has had a lasting impact on women exposed to these representations during their formative years. Previous studies have found that: 'Problematic media messages inherent in existing media portrayals of eating disorders are apparent' (Thompson & Heinberg, 2003, p. 339). However, this investigation must also consider other influential factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural and religious beliefs, and family dynamics, all of which shape how women perceive and relate to their bodies. Together, these variables offer a broader understanding of body image issues, including low confidence, body dysmorphia, and disordered eating behaviours.

2.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to theoretical understandings of the relationship between the media, marketing, and body image, particularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s – a period defined by aggressive promotion of narrow beauty ideals and diet culture. Known as 'Cultivation Theory', this concept describes how: 'The cultural environment in which we live becomes the byproduct of marketing. The historic nexus of state and church is replaced by the new symbiotic relationship of state and television' (Gerbner, 1998, p. 176During this era, advertising and celebrity culture heavily promoted thinness as the ultimate standard of beauty.

By exploring the long-term psychological and behavioural impacts of these portrayals, the study contributes to cultivation and social comparison theories, showing how repeated exposure to idealised imagery shapes self-perception. It also extends the discussion of consumer socialisation, suggesting that women exposed to diet-focused marketing during adolescence may have internalised beauty ideals and consumption patterns tied to identity and self-worth.

Additionally, by integrating factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and family background, this research adopts a more intersectional perspective. It challenges the assumption that media effects are universal, proposing instead that their influence is mediated by social and personal variables shaping how messages are received and internalised.

2.2 Practical contributions

Practically, this study provides insights for media professionals, educators, and policymakers. First, it underscores the need for responsible marketing and inclusive media representation. Given the long-term effects of exposure to restrictive beauty ideals, marketers must be aware of how such imagery impacts women's mental health and consumer behaviour.

Second, the research encourages brands to develop campaigns that represent diverse body types and cultural experiences. As awareness of body positivity grows, inclusive branding can both promote healthier self-perceptions and build authentic consumer relationships.

Mental health professionals and educators can also use these findings to develop media literacy programmes that teach young people to critically assess beauty standards, reducing the internalisation of harmful ideals. Likewise, policymakers and advocacy groups can use this evidence to push for stricter regulations on body and diet portrayals in advertising, ensuring greater transparency and authenticity.

While the focus of this study is on media imagery, it acknowledges that body image is shaped by complex interactions of external and internal influences. Socioeconomic conditions can determine access to health

information or mental health support, while cultural and religious norms may reinforce or challenge dominant beauty standards. Family dynamics – through messages about appearance and levels of emotional support – also affect how women internalise body-related pressures.

Recognising these variables does not diminish the media's role; rather, it enhances understanding by offering a more nuanced, multifactorial framework. Considering these intersecting influences provides a holistic view of body image development and disordered eating. This approach supports more targeted research and interventions addressing body dissatisfaction at its roots.

Ultimately, this study supports the theory that media exposure – particularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s – has had a lasting effect on women's body perceptions. Though the media is not the sole factor, repeated portrayals of narrow beauty ideals during adolescence likely shaped identity and self-worth in enduring ways. By situating this within broader cultural and familial contexts, the research deepens understanding of why so many women continue to struggle with body dissatisfaction. These insights can inform more effective interventions and guide positive change in how the media, marketing, and society approach body image.

3.0 Review of existing literature

In *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media*, Katariina Kyrölä explores how media images shape understandings of bodies and body image, particularly through affect, gender and cultural representation (Kyrölä, 2014).While Kyrölä acknowledges that societal pressures are not the sole determinant of body perception, she highlights the growing academic focus on the media's role in shaping body ideals. 'Media studies and feminist theorizing, discussions on corporeal spectatorship and affect have become more prominent than ever during recent years' (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 4), signalling a deeper awareness of the media's influence on body representation and cultural perception.

During the 1990s, the dominant body ideal in the UK was the 'waif' look – extremely thin, with minimal curves – popularised by models such as Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell, and Christy Turlington. Moss's 'heroin chic' aesthetic epitomised this trend, celebrated in the media yet damaging for many women striving to replicate it. As Morris and Katzman (2003, p. 287) observed: 'Over time the cultural ideal for women's body size and shape has become considerably thinner and leaner.' This trend contributed to rising eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia, as women attempted to attain this unattainable form.

Arnold (1999, p. 280) noted: 'the closeness we feel to the images that surround us make it difficult to give distance and consider the meanings and identities that such representations contain.' This insight captures how pervasive media imagery blurs the line between reality and idealisation, especially for adolescent girls navigating self-identity. Teenagers, particularly girls, are highly susceptible to these ideals, internalising beauty standards and equating them with worth or success.

Huppatz (2015, p. 85), referencing Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957/1972), expands on this by showing that media imagery functions as a 'metaphoric vehicle of collective desire': 'Mythologies helped shape an understanding of how designed artefacts operate in a mass consumer culture: less as functional objects and more as metaphoric vehicles of collective desire' (Huppatz, 2015, p. 85). Barthes's notion of 'myths' highlights how the media embeds social meanings that shape unconscious desires and identities. These representations are not just reflections of culture; they actively construct it.

The media's influence on teenage girls extends beyond aesthetics to identity formation. Platforms like Instagram perpetuate these pressures by promoting idealised and digitally altered self-images. 'These comparisons are likely to be with somewhat idealised images, in that girls mostly post photographs in which they look good or are doing something "cool" (and can be digitally altered)' (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017, p. 82). Such imagery sustains the cycle of comparison and self-criticism.

Jean Baudrillard's (2000, p. 3) theory of 'hyperreality' provides further insight: 'To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have.' In this framework, media representations become 'more real than reality', shaping perceptions so profoundly that individuals engage with images as truth. The 'too close' relationship described by Arnold (1999, p. 281) reflects Baudrillard's argument – where mediated ideals replace authentic self-perception.

3.1 Linking female essentialism and media influence

The evolution of female essentialism and imperialism from the 1990s to 2024 reveals a complex intersection of gender, media, and global power. 'Biological essentialism rationalizes and legitimizes gender polarization by treating it as inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological natures of women and men… naturalizes gender inequalities' (Bem, 1993, p. 3). Female essentialism – the belief that all women share a fixed nature – has long influenced how femininity is portrayed and policed. Media representations, shaped by such essentialism, reinforce narrow ideals of womanhood that link worth to physical appearance.

As Curry (2024) observes: 'It reinforces this idea that your body is only good, desirable, and beautiful if it's small, and for a lot of people, that contributes to disordered eating, self-hatred, and body dysphoria.' These messages are not isolated: 'research findings consistently demonstrate that people are impacted by the media messages they consume' (Vinney, 2024). The persistence of these portrayals underscores how the media continues to define femininity through restrictive ideals.

In the 1990s, feminist theory increasingly critiqued female essentialism as reductive and exclusionary. Skewes et al. (2018, p. 2) argue that 'theorists and researchers have proposed that essentialist thinking in general serves to justify existing social inequalities'. The media at the time reinforced these essentialist norms, depicting women as thin, youthful, and heteronormatively feminine. The 'waif' aesthetic and the proliferation of 'thinspiration' websites exemplified this dynamic. 'The term "thinspiration" is used within the pro-anorexia (pro-ana) community to classify images of slenderness that represent aspects of anorexic experience and/or idealise extreme to emaciated slender bodies' (Burke, 2012, p. 37).

MacDowell (2017, p. 201) captured the immersive nature of these influences: 'Today's girls are simultaneously inhabited by, immersed in, dependent upon, and often indifferent to the media messages with which they are bombarded and acculturated by every day.' This bombardment normalised a singular, Western-centric ideal of womanhood – thin, white, and compliant. Sypeck et al. (2004, p. 346) documented this shift: 'Both the increasingly thin images and the striking increase in full-body portrayals suggest an increase in the value placed by American society on a thin ideal for women, a change that is concurrent with the increase in disturbed eating patterns.'

Ferreday (2013, **p. 791**) reinforces the need to study not only how the media constructs images but also how audiences interpret them: 'The question of the ways in which media images affect the spectator, or not, is an

important one for feminist media studies.'The media, therefore, functions as an active participant in shaping identity and behaviour. Feminist media theory must address both the creation of content and the internalisation process that occurs in viewers.

3.2 The social impact of marketing

The relationship between feminist media studies and social impact marketing reveals how marketing can either reinforce stereotypes or promote social progress. The Unstereotype Alliance Secretariat at UN Women and Saïd Business School found that 'brands that adopt more inclusive advertising practices, specifically those that include more positive gender portrayals, do indeed perform better commercially' (Stephen et al 2024, p. 15). 'Empirically proves inclusive advertising – content which authentically and positively portrays a full range of people and is devoid of stereotypes – has a positive impact on business profit, sales and brand value' (UN Women, 2024).

Social impact marketing aims to challenge harmful narratives and promote inclusivity through media representation. Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign exemplifies this approach, recognising that: 'Unrealistic portrayals of beauty, including those portrayals that exist in the media, urge girls and women to aspire to a false perfection' (Morel, 2009, p. 10). By positioning itself against narrow beauty ideals, Dove 'drew upon the urgent relevance of beauty and the evolving beauty backlash as the central cause for its campaign' (Morel, 2009, p. 6). This marked a shift towards inclusivity and authenticity in commercial representation.

Such initiatives show that the media can both reflect and reform social values. By countering female essentialism and broadening portrayals of gender, campaigns like Dove's help reframe cultural norms and encourage healthier self-perceptions. Nevertheless, commercial efforts cannot fully offset decades of damaging representation.

Meta-analyses continue to reveal a strong connection between media exposure and disordered eating. 'Media exposure was the most influential in provoking the eating disorder and the internalization of thin-ideal' (Huang et al., 2020, p. 437). Similarly, 'the social media environment exerts significant pressure on women to conform to narrow beauty standards, leading to increased body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and heightened levels of anxiety' (Tian, 2023, p. 51). These findings suggest that while the aesthetic of thinness may evolve, the underlying pressures persist.

3.3 Summary

The literature consistently demonstrates that body image is not an isolated concern but a product of intersecting cultural, psychological, and media forces. From Kyrölä's and Greene's analyses of embodied identity to the 'waif' ideal of the 1990s, the media has continually reinforced narrow and exclusionary beauty standards. Theorists such as Barthes and Baudrillard reveal how deeply these images penetrate daily consciousness, becoming indistinguishable from reality.

While social impact marketing and feminist media critique offer potential for positive change, studies continue to show that exposure to idealised imagery correlates strongly with body dissatisfaction and the internalisation of unrealistic ideals. The media, therefore, remains both a mirror and a maker of identity – its influence enduring, pervasive, and deeply tied to women's sense of worth.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative interpretivist research design – 'The interpretivist paradigm is a research approach in sociology that focuses on understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals within their social context' (Nickerson, 2024) – to explore whether media portrayals of women in the 1990s and early 2000s impacted women who were developmentally vulnerable at the time, and whether those who express negative connotations towards these portrayals still harbour unresolved feelings.

The design is rooted in interpretivism, which prioritises understanding lived experience and recognises that reality is socially constructed through personal and cultural lenses. Unlike positivist research, which seeks objective, measurable data, interpretivism explores meaning and experience within context. 'Interpretivist approaches to research differ from positivist ones in their emphasis on qualitative data and focus on context' (Nickerson, 2024). Whereas: 'Studies aligned with positivism generally focus on identifying explanatory associations or causal relationships through quantitative approaches' (Park et al., 2020, p. 690), interpretivist research emphasises context-rich qualitative enquiry to uncover subjective experiences.

An online focus group, which 'involves the gathering of a group of people who are asked about their attitudes toward a concept, product, or idea' (Leung & Savithiri, 2009, p. 218), was selected as the primary data collection method, supported by thematic analysis, defined as 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This combination allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, enabling dynamic group interaction alongside thematic analysis.

Qualitative research is ideal for exploring sensitive social issues like body image, as it provides flexibility and depth. Unlike quantitative studies, which focus on generalisability, qualitative methods uncover the richness and complexity of personal experiences, revealing how individuals interpret and make sense of their world.

4.2 Data collection – photo elicitation

Photo elicitation is a qualitative method that uses images to prompt reflection and discussion, drawing out insights that may not emerge through words alone. Rooted in visual anthropology and sociology, it operates on the premise that 'images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than words' (Harper, 2002, p. 13).

Theoretical and Methodological Foundations: This technique aligns with constructivist and phenomenological traditions, viewing knowledge as co-constructed between researcher and participant. Two main forms exist:

1. Researcher-driven, where the researcher provides images.

2. Participant-driven (auto-photography), where participants select or create images meaningful to them – this latter approach was adopted here.

Participant-driven photo elicitation enhances reflexivity and participant agency, allowing individuals to shape discussion through imagery that reflects their lived experiences.

Research Process and Application: The process typically involves:

1. Selection or creation of images – Participants curate images relevant to the topic.

2. Discussion – Images guide conversation within the focus group.

3. Analysis – Visual and textual data are thematically analysed to reveal layered meanings.

Photo elicitation has been successfully used in education, public health, and social research to capture emotional and symbolic dimensions of experience.

Strengths and Limitations:
Its primary strength lies in accessing emotional and implicit knowledge. Images reduce verbal barriers, helping participants articulate complex feelings. However, challenges include interpretive ambiguity, ethical concerns around privacy and consent, and the analytical complexity of integrating visual and textual data.

Ethical Considerations:
Ethical integrity is paramount. Participants must provide informed consent, fully understand how images will be used, and retain control over which ones are shared. Confidentiality is maintained throughout, ensuring participant comfort and autonomy.

4.3 Focus groups

Focus groups were chosen for their ability to generate rich, collective data through interaction and discussion. They encourage participants to exchange perspectives, leading to deeper insights than one-on-one interviews. 'Researchers can hugely benefit from the group context since it provides insight into social relations, and the information obtained reflects the social and overlapping nature of knowledge better than a summation of individual narratives through interviews and surveys' (Ochieng et al., 2018, p. 21).

The group format is particularly useful for exploring shared cultural understandings – essential when investigating the social influence of the media and collective experiences of body image.

4.4 Participant selection

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, selecting individuals who met specific criteria relevant to the research aims: participants were AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth) and born between 1986 and 1992, ensuring they were adolescents during the late 1990s and early 2000s. This non-random method ensured relevance and depth of insight.

A single focus group of six participants was conducted, balancing diversity with manageability. The group was hosted in a private, closed Facebook group, providing participants with flexibility to engage at their own pace. This asynchronous format encouraged thoughtful responses and reduced the social pressure often present in live discussions.

4.5 Moderator role and focus group structure

The focus group was moderated by the researcher (Helen Kingston), who guided the discussion and ensured balanced participation. Two open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, reflective responses without imposing constraints, were asked of the group.

The moderator encouraged all participants to contribute, managed dominant voices, and ensured respectful and inclusive dialogue throughout the process.

4.6 Thematic analysis

Data from the focus group were analysed using thematic analysis, a structured yet flexible method for identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework guided the analysis:
Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data – The researcher read and reread responses to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives.
Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes – Meaningful text segments were coded inductively.
Phase 3: Searching for Themes – Codes were grouped into potential themes reflecting recurring ideas.
Phase 4: Reviewing Themes – Themes were refined, ensuring coherence and consistency.
Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes – Each theme was clearly defined, and concise names were created to encapsulate its essence. These definitions provided clarity and ensured accessibility for readers.
Phase 6: Writing the Report – The findings were compiled into a comprehensive report detailing each theme, supported by direct participant quotations. The analysis was then linked to research questions and existing literature.

4.7 Rationale for methodology

The combination of focus groups and thematic analysis offers several advantages:

> Thematic analysis… is a qualitative research method commonly used with interview and focus group data to understand people's experiences, ideas and perceptions about a given topic. Thematic analysis is a good starting point for those new to qualitative research and is relevant to many questions in the perioperative context (Jowsey et al., 2021, p. 472).

Focus groups allow participants to engage with one another, producing deeper insights and surfacing shared cultural meanings. Thematic analysis complements this by offering a clear, flexible framework for identifying explicit and implicit patterns in qualitative data without requiring adherence to a fixed theoretical model. This adaptability supports the emergence of unanticipated insights while maintaining analytical rigour.

4.8 Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

- Rich, Detailed Data: Focus groups capture emotions and perceptions in depth, providing insights that quantitative data cannot.
- Social Interaction and Group Dynamics: Interaction stimulates new ideas and highlights collective norms.
- Flexibility: Thematic analysis adapts to varied data types, supporting nuanced exploration of complex topics.
- Participant-Centred Approach: Participants drive conversation, producing authentic, meaningful data in their own words.

Weaknesses

- Limited Generalisability: Findings from small samples are not representative of wider

populations.

- Group Dynamics: Dominant participants can influence others, leading to conformity or inhibited discussion.

- Subjectivity in Analysis: Researcher interpretation introduces potential bias, despite reflexive efforts.

- Time-Consuming: Transcription, coding, and theme development require significant time and effort.

4.9 Conclusion

In summary, combining focus groups with thematic analysis provides a robust framework for exploring how women interpret and internalise past media portrayals. While limitations exist – particularly around generalisability and subjectivity – the depth, flexibility, and participant-driven nature of this approach makes it well-suited for examining the nuanced relationships between the media, memory, and body image. This methodology captures the complexity of lived experience and enables a contextual understanding of how early media exposure may continue to influence women's perceptions today.

5.0 Findings and discussion

To enhance transparency in the analytic process, thematic analysis began with the identification of four recurring codes across participant narratives: fat/thin vocabulary, positive impressions of thinness, negative connotations and associations attached to larger bodies, and self-acceptance/empowerment. These codes emerged from participants' reflections on media representations, celebrity culture, and personal experiences of body image, revealing how language and cultural messages frequently positioned thinness as desirable, healthy, and socially valued, while larger bodies were often associated with stigma, criticism, or perceived failure. Through an iterative process of coding, reviewing, and refining patterns across the dataset, these codes were developed into the broader themes of The Role of the Media in Shaping Body Image, The Impact of Body Shaming, Redefining Health and Beauty, The Shift Towards Inclusivity, and Personal Struggles and Self-Acceptance. Specifically, the codes relating to fat/thin vocabulary and the positive and negative meanings attached to body size informed the themes exploring media influence and body shaming, while the self-acceptance/empowerment code contributed to themes concerning inclusivity, alternative understandings of health and beauty, and participants' personal journeys towards greater body acceptance. Together, these themes reveal the complex relationship between societal perceptions of body image, media influence, and individual experiences, demonstrating how media-driven ideals continue to shape perceptions of beauty, health, and self-worth even as participants increasingly challenge and redefine these dominant narratives.

Due to copyright limitations, the images provided by participants cannot be included in this article. They are as follows:

An image of Kate Winslet as Rose in *Titanic* – Participant A

An image of Kate Moss out and about, in low-rise, blue denim jeans and a cream vest top – Participant B

An image of Renee Zellweger in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, dressed in a black body suit with rabbit ears – Participant C

An image of Jessica Simpson, in blue denim jeans, a black vest top, with a leopard print belt, singing at a concert – Participant D

An image of Britney Spears, wearing a black leather-style strapless bra top, and black knickers, on stage performing – Participant E

5.1 The role of the media in shaping body image

The data highlight the media's powerful influence on perceptions of body image, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Celebrities such as Kate Winslet, Kate Moss, and Britney Spears were frequently positioned as benchmarks of beauty, reinforcing narrow ideals that deeply affected young women's self-perception.

Participant A recalls how Kate Winslet's portrayal in *Titanic* was framed as 'plus-size', shaping her early beliefs about acceptable body types:

> 'I have a very vivid memory of seeing Kate Winslet in *Titanic* and thinking how stunning she was and then everyone banging on about how she was "plus-size". I absolutely believe that led me to think this was not an acceptable way to look' (Participant A, 2025).

Similarly, Participant E describes how media scrutiny of Britney Spears' body contributed to feelings of inadequacy:

> 'When Britney didn't have abs and the press went WILD saying she had "got fat". As someone who was a size 10/12 from like 10 years old it made me hate my more womanly figure' (Participant E, 2025).

These accounts show how persistent messages equating thinness with beauty have lasting emotional and psychological effects. Participant D further reflects on how perceptions have shifted over time, noting that earlier tabloid criticisms now appear 'messed up', underscoring an emerging public awareness of the harm caused by body-shaming media narratives.

5.2 The impact of body shaming

Body shaming emerged as a central and emotionally charged theme. Many participants recalled internalising damaging ideals, particularly during adolescence. Participant C discussed the character Bridget Jones, observing how audiences were 'made to believe Bridget Jones is fat', despite her being an average size. She continues:

> 'And it always made "Fat" a bad word and made [us] believe you should be skinny and if not you weren't beautiful' (Participant C, 2025).

This reflects how body-shaming language reinforces unrealistic expectations and equates size with moral or aesthetic value. Participant E also describes the pressure to 'bounce back' after childbirth:

> 'Headlines and images like that informed my body image up until after I had Rafe at 25. Even then I still strove to "bounce back" and make myself small' (Participant E, 2025).

The persistent cultural message that 'small = good' reveals how deep-seated these ideals remain. Participants' reflections show that body shaming not only affects self-esteem but also perpetuates cycles of guilt and self-criticism that can persist into adulthood.

5.3 Redefining health and beauty

A key shift in participants' reflections concerns the redefinition of health and beauty. Participant A, living with diabetes, shared how her experience of health has evolved:

> 'I spent a lot of my teenage/young adult years not looking after my diabetes and being very skinny because of that, but because I was thin people assumed I was "healthy"… my diabetes is the best it has ever been, and I am actually the healthiest I have ever been, even though I am bigger' (Participant A, 2025).

Her account challenges the long-standing assumption that thinness equates to health. The distinction between external appearance and internal well-being highlights a broader cultural shift towards recognising health as multifaceted.

Similarly, Participant C's reflection that she now views 'fat' as a neutral descriptor rather than an insult indicates a transformation in both personal and societal thinking. These narratives suggest a move towards embracing individuality, rejecting moral judgements attached to body size, and understanding health in more holistic terms.

5.4 The shift towards inclusivity

Participants' narratives collectively illustrate a growing acceptance of body diversity and a rejection of past stigmas. Participant C's statement encapsulates this shift:

> '"Fat" is a descriptive word that you need to own and not have it as an insult… yes, I am fat and my friends and family love me for me' (Participant C, 2025).

This represents a reclaiming of language and identity, reflecting the broader body positivity movement that has emerged in recent years. Participant D also commented on changing public attitudes, recalling a photo of a celebrity once ridiculed by the press:

> 'I remember this photo was brought back up as an example of "look how messed up this is" – we were meant to think she's fat' (Participant D, 2025).

Her reflection highlights the growing recognition that previous standards were both unrealistic and damaging. While inclusivity is increasingly visible in popular culture and advertising, participants acknowledged that deeply ingrained societal norms still exert pressure, illustrating that progress remains partial.

5.5 Personal struggles and self-acceptance

Each participant's narrative contained a personal journey of negotiation between societal expectation and authentic self-image. Participant B reflected on how the media's 'effortlessly cool' aesthetic influenced her sense of self:

> 'I couldn't, and whenever I tried it I just didn't feel like myself. I felt very awkward. And that made me feel sad, that the world loved this certain style, but the style didn't fit me' (Participant B, 2025).

Her later comment reflects growth and acceptance:

> 'Once I stopped trying to achieve the cool look, I became much happier in myself. Because their world is not my world' (Participant B, 2025).

Participant E similarly described her evolving relationship with body image, moving from striving for 'smallness' to rejecting its moral weight. These accounts underscore that self-acceptance often develops through struggle, introspection, and time.

Collectively, the participants' stories illustrate how confronting unrealistic standards can lead to empowerment and authenticity. Yet, they also reveal the enduring emotional residue left by years of cultural conditioning, suggesting that genuine self-acceptance requires unlearning deeply internalised ideals.

5.6 Conclusion: Broader implications for research and practice

The findings underscore how powerfully media representations, social expectations, and internalised ideals shape perceptions of body image. Participants' reflections demonstrate the lingering impact of 1990s–2000s media culture and its ongoing influence on women's relationships with their bodies.

The study highlights both progress and persisting challenges. Increasing representation of diverse body types marks a significant cultural shift, yet the dominance of thinness and the conflation of health with appearance continue to affect self-worth. The themes identified – media influence, body shaming, redefinitions of beauty, and inclusivity – offer valuable insight for policymakers, educators, and health professionals seeking to address body image concerns.

Promoting media literacy and challenging unrealistic portrayals could help mitigate the negative effects of exposure to idealised bodies. Encouraging critical engagement with the media and fostering diverse, authentic representations are key steps towards supporting healthier body perceptions.

Public health initiatives should also move beyond simplistic 'weight equals health' narratives, instead embracing a more holistic approach to well-being that includes emotional, mental, and social health. As participants' stories reveal, true wellness cannot be measured by size alone but by balance, self-care, and acceptance.

5.7 Limitations

While this analysis provides meaningful insight into participants' perceptions, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size limits generalisability, and the self-reported nature of data means that responses may be influenced by selective memory or social desirability bias. Additionally, participants share a similar cultural background and age range, which may not represent broader perspectives.

Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating longitudinal or cross-cultural comparisons to explore how attitudes towards body image evolve across generations or societies. Including more diverse participants would enrich understanding of how intersecting factors – such as race, gender identity, and socioeconomic background – shape experiences of body image and media influence.

5.8 Summary

In conclusion, the narratives reveal that while cultural attitudes towards body image have evolved, the echoes of past media ideals continue to influence perceptions today. The participants' reflections chart a journey from conformity to self-acceptance, mirroring broader societal movements towards inclusivity and authenticity. Despite persistent pressures, there is an emerging recognition

that health, beauty, and worth are not defined by size or appearance but by self-understanding and acceptance.

6.0 Conclusion

This research has explored the multifaceted and deeply personal experiences of body image through a thematic analysis of participant narratives, contextualised within contemporary academic discourse on media representation, gender, and identity. The findings demonstrate that body image is not a fixed or purely individual concern but is produced and shaped within complex cultural, social, and ideological frameworks. The five themes identified – the role of the media in shaping body image, the impact of body shaming, redefining health and beauty, the shift towards inclusivity, and personal struggles and self-acceptance – reveal how dominant narratives around the body are internalised, resisted, and redefined by individuals in their everyday lives.

This analysis strongly supports Katariina Kyrölä's (2014) argument that bodies are shaped not only by societal pressures but also through affective experiences of gendered embodiment. Kyrölä's notion of corporeal spectatorship is particularly relevant here, as participants described feeling both emotionally affected and physically judged in response to media images. Their accounts reflect the deeply gendered expectations surrounding appearance, especially in Western media, and highlight how media images function as both mirrors and moulds for body perception.

The work of Sophie Greene (2011) also finds clear resonance in the narratives. Greene's research into clothing, self-objectification, and consumer culture is echoed in participant reflections on fashion and identity. For many, clothing was a site of emotional negotiation, reflecting the tension between internal body image and external presentation. This supports Greene's conclusion that body dissatisfaction is significantly influenced by societal standards and is often expressed through consumer behaviours tied to self-perception.

Jean Baudrillard's (2000) concept of hyperreality offers a powerful framework through which to understand the impact of media representations on body ideals. Participants recalled moments where average or healthy bodies – such as those of Kate Winslet or the fictional character Bridget Jones – were framed as 'fat' or undesirable, revealing how the media constructs a simulated standard of beauty that bears little resemblance to reality. These hyperreal images contribute to the internalisation of unattainable ideals and create emotional dissonance among individuals striving to meet them.

Moreover, this study reflects and extends critiques of female essentialism, as articulated by Bem (1993) and Skewes et al. (2018). The idea that femininity is inherently linked to thinness, emotional passivity, or moral virtue continues to shape body norms and was evident in the narratives of participants who felt pressure to 'bounce back' after childbirth or to conform to gendered expectations of appearance. These findings support the argument that essentialist thinking reinforces social inequalities and naturalises gendered hierarchies in both subtle and overt ways.

Importantly, the findings also affirm Ferreday's (2013) emphasis on the significance of spectatorship and interpretation within feminist media studies. Participants were not merely passive recipients of media messages but engaged in active, reflective processes, at times accepting and at other times resisting dominant narratives. The ability to critically reassess terms like 'fat' or to disentangle health from thinness illustrates a shift towards more autonomous and inclusive understandings of identity and well-being.

In line with Huppatz's (2015) reading of Barthes' *Mythologies*, this research highlights the way media

imagery serves as a carrier of social myth. The participants' awareness of these myths – particularly those surrounding the 'ideal' body – demonstrates a growing cultural literacy and a collective re-evaluation of previously unchallenged norms. This suggests that while hegemonic ideals remain influential, they are increasingly subject to critique and redefinition.

Overall, this study contributes to the wider academic discourse by providing empirical evidence that body image is shaped by the convergence of media influence, cultural messaging, and personal experience. The participants' narratives illustrate both the emotional labour involved in navigating dominant body ideals and the potential for resistance, redefinition, and self-acceptance. While societal standards of beauty remain deeply entrenched, the growing critical awareness and cultural shift towards inclusivity signal a meaningful evolution in how body image is experienced and understood.

Future research could build on this work by exploring how these themes manifest across different intersections of race, class, and sexuality, or by examining the impact of newer media platforms such as TikTok and AI-generated imagery. Additionally, this research underscores the importance of incorporating media literacy, inclusive representation, and critical thinking into both educational and public health frameworks. By recognising the broader cultural forces that shape body image, it is possible to foster environments that promote body autonomy, mental health, and genuine inclusivity.

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