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"I'm actually pretty happy with how I am": a mixed-methods study of young women with positive body image

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Previous research on body image has tended to overlook what contributes to positive body image. The aim of the present study was to explore the perspectives of female undergraduate students with positive body image.

Design: Nineteen young women who were studying at a New Zealand university (mean age 19.61) and self-reported positive body image participated in focus groups discussing body image.

Main outcome measure: Thematic analysis resulted in four themes.

Results: The young women described a positive shift in body image that occurred between adolescence and early adulthood (theme 1). They were critical of messages about the female body within media and made conscious decisions about media they engage with (theme 2). They expressed a functional conceptualisation of their bodies and had strategies for responding to negative thoughts and feelings (theme 3). Religious and cultural identity played a specific role in body positivity for some participants (theme 4).

Conclusion: These findings highlight the developmental nature of positive body image and the role of adopting critical awareness when engaging with media. The findings support and elaborate on previous research suggesting that those with positive body image utilise a body-protective filter and demonstrate novel aspects of young women's body positivity.

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The concept of body image represents a person's feelings, thoughts, and attitudes towards their body, and has been conceptualised as multidimensional in nature, with both positive and negative elements (Cash, 2002; Curtis & Loomans, 2014; Gattario & Frisén, 2019; Piran, 2015; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Positive body image can therefore be defined as an overall positive evaluation of one's body that is not just the absence of negative body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Research on women's body image has largely focused on negative dimensions of this construct (Cash & Smolak, 2011) and has consistently suggested that there is a high prevalence of body dissatisfaction among women (Curtis & Loomans, 2014; Grogan, 2016; Piran,

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2015). This pathology-driven approach has established a detailed understanding of negative body image (Piran, 2015; Tylka, 2011), but fails to acknowledge how some women are able to establish and preserve positive feelings about their bodies (Cash, 2004).

Despite this distinction, the perspectives of people with positive body image have rarely been attended to in psychological research until recently. Understanding how girls and women in particular can develop and maintain a positive body image is crucial, given the immense pressure placed on women in Western cultures to conform to specific body ideals and the resulting high levels of body dissatisfaction and negative body image in this population (Grogan, 2016). A number of problematic health-related behaviour and outcomes have been associated with negative body image, both in terms of mental health (i.e. associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and eating disorder symptomology; Brechan & Kvalem, 2015; Calvete et al., 2016; Piran, 2015; Rosen, 2013; Stice & Shaw, 1994) and physical health (e.g. smoking and alcohol/drug use, inflammatory bowel disease; Becker et al., 2017; Howe et al., 2017; McDermott et al., 2015). Furthermore, studies exploring the efficacy of eating disorder prevention programmes point to body image, particularly promotion of positive body image, as a likely crucial ingredient to effective outcomes (Levine & Piran, 2004), but more research is needed to understand what facilitates positive body image. By exploring how some young women are able to establish and preserve positive feelings about their bodies, a better understanding can be established for what makes these women more resilient to social pressures related to their bodies, and will enhance prevention programmes, clinical interventions, and community initiatives that go beyond merely reducing negative body image, and actively promote body positivity.

The shift towards reflecting on positive body image has started occurring in quantitative research evaluating the relationship between positive body image and a variety of intra-individual factors. For instance, Swami et al. (2010) identified that in a sample of British female university students, body appreciation scores were positively correlated with a range of outcome measures including aspects of wellbeing, self-control, emotionality and sociability. These results are consistent with other quantitative research on positive body image, in which this construct has been associated with positive psychological factors such as lower rates of depression (Gillen, 2015) and higher self-esteem and proactive coping behaviour, even after controlling for shared variance with negative body image (Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Positive body image has also been associated with positive health behaviours such as increased use of sun protection and frequency cancer screening, and reduced alcohol consumption (Andrew et al., 2016; Gillen, 2015).

Qualitative research has also begun to explore some characteristics and experiences of young people with positive body image in a small number of studies. Frisén and Holmqvist (2010) conducted semi-structured interviews with adolescent girls and boys in Sweden who reported positive body image. Their participants conveyed generalised satisfaction towards their bodies, perceived regular exercise as important in promoting body appreciation, and reported supportive relationships with family and friends. In a further study, Holmqvist and Frisén (2012) interviewed female and male adolescents and they demonstrated a broad conceptualisation of beauty and were critical and thoughtful about information presented to them in the media.

Maor and Cwikel (2016) explored how American and Israeli mothers support their daughters in developing positive body image in interviews with four groups of women including mother-daughter pairs, women with diversity of religious orthodoxy, and women who self-identify as fat. Mothers were reported to use a range of strategies including filtering communication about body image, providing tools for criticism of negative body image messages, positive reinforcement, and focusing on taking pleasure in food. In an interview study of young Aboriginal women living in Canada, McHugh et al. (2014) had participants explore their personal meanings of body pride. The young women in the study expressed a sense of complete acceptance of their bodies and identity, a connectedness to their culture, engaging in healthy behaviours and having an appreciation for being indigenous.

Further qualitative research in the US by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) involved semi-structured interviews with female university students who self-identified as having a positive body image, and findings were utilised to propose a holistic model of positive body image. This model proposes that women with positive body image utilise a 'body-protective filter' with which they primarily reject negative information and accept positive information from their environment, which also aligns with Cash's (2002) model of correlates of body image, but little is known about the diversity of factors that may contribute to the body-protective filtering process. Developing an enhanced understanding of the ways in which some women are able to establish and utilise such a filter is crucial in effectively applying this knowledge to clinical interventions to promote body positivity. Additional research is needed to extend this knowledge and explore positive body image, particularly in light of the growth of highly visual social media platforms that now saturate young people's lives and have taken over from traditional forms of popular media like magazines in shaping the discourses around idealised bodies and lives (Locke et al., 2018).

Young adults, in particular young women, are regular consumers of popular media that reflects idealised bodies (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009; Gattario & Frisén, 2019; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Jhaveri & Patki, 2016; Locke et al., 2018). Literature on body image has commonly applied quantitative methods to negative aspects of body image, and yet negative health behaviours and outcomes related to negative body image persist, particularly in young women (e.g. Becker et al., 2017; Brechan & Kvalem, 2015; Rosen, 2013). Further exploratory research on positive body image is essential in order to inform research into prevention interventions to promote and maintain positive body image in young people that could expand on past intervention research focused on ameliorating negative body image (e.g. Alleva et al., 2015; Eickman et al., 2018; Gattario & Frisén, 2019; Piran, 2015).

Surprisingly little qualitative research has focused on positive body image but past research has provided some foundational insights into how positive body image features in the lives of adolescents and young women (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Maor & Cwikel, 2016; McHugh et al., 2014; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Few qualitative studies have been published on body image in a New Zealand setting. Teevale's (2011) qualitative study with Pacific youth and their families in New Zealand revealed the ideal body was conceptualised based on being within the 'normal' weight range. Curtis and Looman's (2014) study with four young women

in New Zealand revealed that comments from family and friends with a positive intention could still lead to body dissatisfaction. Further research on positive aspects of mental health such as positive body image for young people potential to inform mental health promotion within New Zealand and provide information about how positive body image is experienced in cultures outside North America and Europe, which remain the most common locations of positive body image research (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Maor & Cwikel, 2016; McHugh et al., 2014; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

In summary, previous research has provided some foundational insights into how positive body image features in the lives of adolescents and young women (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Maor & Cwikel, 2016; McHugh et al., 2014; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Most of the existing qualitative research in this area has been conducted in North America or Europe, and there is a need for exploratory research on positive body image in other cultural contexts. There is a pressing need for research on issues relating to mental health in New Zealand because the country currently has the highest suicide rate among youth and young adults (age 15-24 years) of all 34 countries in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, n.d.). Facilitating positive body image has the potential to help reduce suicide rates and improve the mental health and wellbeing of young adults. There is also a particular need for in-depth understanding about how positive body image is experienced by young women during their early university years, where many have recently moved out of home for the first time and potentially experiencing new pressures around body image and eating based on their living situation (Gilbert & Meyer, 2004). The present study aims to explore the perspectives and experiences of young women living in New Zealand who self-report having positive body image during their time at university as a crucial juncture in life when body image concerns and concerns about eating commonly occur (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Using qualitative focus group methodology, we aimed to elicit rich and interactive data to inform psychological understanding of positive body image.

Method

Design

The present study used a mixed-methods design, involving a preliminary survey followed by focus groups to explore young female university students' conceptualisations of positive body image within a group setting. Ethics approval for the study was gained from the local university ethics committee (reference 14/115).

Survey measures

In a preliminary recruitment process used to identify focus group participants with positive body image, 139 female university students aged 18-30 years (mean 19.58 years) completed a demographic survey and a series of body image questionnaires. In the demographic survey, participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, job status, educational background, religion,

ethnicity and English proficiency, as well as provide a self-reported estimate of weight and height.

Participants were also asked to provide a self-report rating of positive body image by indicating their level of agreement with the statement "I have a positive body image" on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This rating was adopted from Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010). Those who indicated a 4 or 5 on this scale were considered to have a positive body image and invited to participate in a focus group. The other questionnaires were collected to provide further information about body image so those who participated in focus groups as a way of describing the sample and allowing potential insights into the primary qualitative data.

The Body Appreciation Scale (BAS; Avalos et al., 2005) assesses characteristics related to the experience of having a positive body image. The 13 items are answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Responses are averaged and a higher score reflects greater body appreciation. The internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent validity of the BAS have been established in samples of female university students in the US (Avalos et al., 2005), and internal consistency was excellent in the total present sample (alpha = 0.91).

The Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA; Mendelson, Mendelson, & White, 2000) is a 23-item scale designed to assess affective self-evaluation of the body. The BESAA consists of three subscales: BE-Appearance, BE-Weight, and BE-Attribution (thoughts attributed to others). Items are answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). A higher average reflects more positive feelings about one's body and appearance. The internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity of this measure have been supported in research with female university students (Mendelson et al., 2000), and internal consistency of the three subscales was acceptable in the total present sample (alpha = 0.88 for BE-Appearance, 0.89 for BE-Weight, and 0.79 for BE-Attribution).

The Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ; Heinberg et al., 1995) is a 14-item self-report measure that assesses the level of recognition and acceptance of cultural pressures related to the thin ideal. Items are answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The measure has two subscales: Awareness and Internalisation. A high score on the Awareness subscale represents knowledge of sociocultural appearance ideals, while high scores on the Internalisation subscale reflects the adoption of such ideals into one's belief system. The reliability and validity of this measure has been supported in several samples of female US university students (Heinberg et al., 1995), and internal consistency of the three subscales was acceptable in the total present sample (alpha = 0.72 for Awareness and 0.90 for Internalisation).

Participants

Nineteen female undergraduate students studying at University of Otago in New Zealand and were aged between 18 and 27 years old ($M = 19.61$ years) participated in focus groups. The majority of participants identified as New Zealand European (New Zealanders of European descent; $N = 13$, 76%), with one identifying as Tongan, one as

Table 1. Focus group semi-structured question schedule.

Questions in the planned order
1. What comes to mind when you hear the term "body image"? What about "positive body image"?
2. What kind of ideas do you think the media promote about women's body image?
3. What have you learnt from other people about your body and body image that you consider to be important?
4. Does the way you feel about your body on a given day change how you think about food and eating?
5. As you have grown older, do you think your feelings about your body have changed?
6. Are there any experiences that are memorable for you from any time in your life related to your body image?
7. What makes you feel good about your body?
8. If you had a friend who felt negatively about their body, what might you say to them?
9. What have you found the most interesting, important, or surprising thing we have talked about?

Chinese, and four as 'other' without further details. In terms of sexual orientation, participants across the sample identified as straight (93%), bisexual/pansexual (5%), or gay/lesbian (2%). The body mass index (BMI) of participants using self-reported height and weight was in the range 18.71-39.56 kg/m^2 (mean 23.25 kg/m^2, SD 4.99). This places the majority of participants in the 'normal' weight range, with some classified as 'overweight' or 'obese', and none in the 'underweight' range ($<$18.5 kg/m^2; World Health Organization, n.d.).

Focus group procedure

Five focus groups were held in a research room on campus with 3-5 young women per group and lasted 54–90 minutes. Young women who self-identified as having a positive body image in the survey study were invited to attend a focus group via email, with an attached information sheet and consent form. The information sheet highlighted the aim of the present study, what would be involved in participating, and details of data collection and storage. The same primary facilitator (first author) led all five focus groups. The focus groups consisted of two activity-oriented strategies and nine pre-planned open-ended questions (Table 1), in part derived from patterns of issues noted in previous research (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and checked by a second person for accuracy before analysis.

Focus groups were selected over individual interview because focus groups are a good way of generating rich discussions about experiences relating to socially determined issues such body image (Locke et al., 2018) and have been successfully applied in previous research on this topic (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012). We also included two activity-oriented strategies were used (Colucci, 2007). The first strategy was a free-listing approach (Bernard, 1995) for questions about the terms 'body image' and 'positive body image' (see Table 1). This was treated as a group brainstorm whereby the lead facilitator explored words and ideas generated from participants and listed these on the whiteboard (e.g. 'body image' and 'positive body image'). Participant's engaged with each other's ideas and collaboratively established a shared understanding of these concepts. The task also promoted rapport building and openness between participants within each of the focus groups. The second strategy involved the open discussion of media images brought in by participants following the elicitation method described by Katzew and Azzarito (2013). Participants were asked to collect items that they noticed from their usual media sources in the days

prior to the focus group that made them think about their body. Bringing these images was an optional task, and facilitators brought their own images to use in the event that there were no images brought by participants. They were invited to present and collaboratively discuss these images following the question about media and women's body image (Table 1).

Analytic approach

The analytic approach involved a combination of inferential statistical tests of group differences on surveys and thematic analysis of focus group data. Survey information was used both to identify young women who endorsed a positive body image, as well as gather quantitative information on the characteristics of this population as compared to that of the average young undergraduate woman. Furthermore, this data was used to quantitatively compare participants who self-reported positive body image and those who did not, as well as comparing participants who attended a focus group with those who were invited but did not attend a focus group. The qualitative component of the study involved a thematic analysis of focus group transcripts in accordance with the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). As noted within the distinctions described by Braun and Clarke (2006), a contextualist critical realist epistemology was applied in reflection of our research questions about how young women understand their experiences relating to body image, which provides a way of generating knowledge based on consideration of the context within which the research is conducted and basing findings on critical analysis of participants' explanations of their experience of reality. This shaped our collection of data about experiences in the focus groups and was actively reflected on, as described in the following sections. The thematic analysis was inductive (data-driven) and was aimed at providing a rich description of the whole dataset (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As per guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006) the analytic process began with the first author repeatedly listening to the audio-recordings to establish familiarity with the material. The transcripts were then read once again while generating ideas for coding. The initial codes were entered into a table with supporting quotes for each of the focus groups. As quotes were added from each focus group, codes were amended, merged, refined, and then compiled into a comprehensive table incorporating data from all five focus groups. The codes were used to develop themes and subthemes, which were then rechecked against the data to ensure their independence and relevance to the research questions. Each stage of this process was highly collaborative, with the second author providing supervision, review, and feedback.

The authors engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process (see Treharne & Riggs, 2015). The first author kept a reflexive journal where ideas were noted before and after focus groups and throughout the analysis and writing process. The first author is a New Zealand European woman who completed this research as part of her training to become a Registered Clinical Psychologist in Aotearoa/New Zealand. As such, she reflected on how her gender identity, ethnic and cultural origins, as well as her training in the pathology-driven field of clinical psychology. This reflexive process drove efforts to recruit a diverse sample, seek clarification from participants during

Table 2. Survey scores for participants invited or not invited to focus groups and of participants invited to attend a focus group who attended or did not attend.

	Survey participants (N = 139)		Invited to a focus group (n = 44)	
	Not invited ($n = 95$)	Invited ($n = 44$)	Invited, did not attend ($n = 25$)	Invited, attended ($n = 19$)
Explicit body image rating: Mean (SD)	2.85 (0.78)	4.10 (0.23)	4.10 (0.20)	4.11 (0.27)
BAS positive body image: Mean (SD)	3.33 (0.62)	4.06 (0.39)	4.08 (0.45)	4.04 (0.29)
BE-Appearance: Mean (SD)	1.95 (0.70)	2.60 (0.55)	2.56 (0.52)	2.65 (0.59)
BE-Weight: Mean (SD)	1.72 (0.78)	2.64 (0.62)	2.67 (0.60)	2.63 (0.65)
BE-Attribution: Mean (SD)	1.65 (0.69)	2.08 (0.66)	2.06 (0.73)	2.11 (0.58)
SATAQ-Awareness: Mean (SD)	3.14 (0.58)	3.18 (0.57)	3.13 (0.52)	3.20 (0.62)
SATAQ-Internalisation: Mean (SD)	3.25 (0.94)	2.70 (0.90)	2.85 (0.91)	2.48 (0.88)

Note: BAS = Body Appreciation Scale; BE = body esteem subscales from the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults; SATAQ = Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Scale.

focus groups rather than making assumptions, consult with additional researchers from different backgrounds, as well as acknowledging existing experiences and beliefs of the primary researcher that were likely to have shaped the data as per the critical realist epistemology that was applied. The second author is a White-British male lecturer and was in a supervisory role overseeing steps taken throughout the data collection and analysis. There was complete agreement between the two authors about the coding of extracts to themes and subthemes but it was not possible to conduct inter-rater reliability because the coding was led by one author and checked by the other author in a collaborative fashion.

Results

Table 2provides comparisons between participants with self-reported positive body image (a rating of 4 or 5) who were invited to focus groups ($N = 44$) and those without self-reported positive body image, and were not invited to focus groups ($N = 95$). There were no significant differences between groups in terms of age ($t(137)=-.13$, $p=.90$), or BMI ($t(116)=.44$, $p=.66$). On average, participants invited to focus groups had significantly higher body appreciation scores ($t(125)=-8.50$, $p<.001$) than those who were not invited to focus groups. Body esteem scores were significantly higher for participants invited to focus groups relative on all three subscales: appearance ($t(106)=-5.89$, $p<.001$), weight ($t(136)=-6.90$, $p<.001$), and attribution ($t(136)=-3.45$, $p<.01$). These findings support the validity of using the single self-report question to identify young women with positive body image to take part in focus groups. There was no significant difference in participants' awareness of sociocultural ideals between groups ($t(136)=-.56$, $p=.73$), but internalisation scores were significantly lower for those invited to focus groups than for those not invited ($t(136)=-.35$, $p<.01$). There were no significant differences between groups in terms of sexual orientation ($\chi^2=1.17$, $p=.76$), year of university ($\chi^2=.14$, $p=.71$), religious affiliation ($\chi^2=.10$, $p=.75$), or ethnicity ($\chi^2=.66$, $p=.42$).

Similar statistical analyses were also conducted to compare characteristics of participants who attended focus groups ($N = 19$) with those who were invited to focus groups but did not attend ($N = 25$). There were no significant differences across these analyses in terms of demographic information or scores on measures of body image, suggesting that there was no systematic reason for not attending a focus group.

Four themes were developed from the thematic analysis of focus group transcripts, as detailed in the following sections. Ellipses are used to indicate brief pauses within quotes, and ellipses within square brackets are used to indicate where short sections of quotes have been removed for clarity without changing to apparent meaning. Other clarifications are given within square brackets.

Theme 1: Growing older and developing body positivity

Subtheme 1.1: Positive shift from adolescence to early adulthood. Fourteen participants across all five focus groups spoke to how growing out of adolescence had affected participants' feelings about their bodies. These discussions illustrated a general trend towards "*caring less*" about their appearance and prioritising "*more important*" roles and responsibilities. Participants described how during early adolescence they experienced concerns about what other people thought about their body and were sensitive to expectations of how they "*should*" look:

> "*When I was younger [I cared about appearance] more so than now, now I don't really care what people think I look like, it's their problem, not mine*"

Many of the young women reported that as they have grown older, they have come to understand how the idealistic representations of the female body within popular culture (e.g., very thin and/or tall) are not achievable.

> "*I think as I've gotten older […] I've come more to terms with like, I don't look a certain way, and it wouldn't matter how hard I worked on it, there are certain body types I'm just not going to be […] I'm happy with that*"

Some participants were able to anticipate future challenges to their body image, for instance "*having babies*" and "*gaining weight*". However, many participants hypothesised that their body-concerns would continue to diminish as they aged:

> "*I feel like as I go through life, I'll probably care about my body image less just because you just find more important things to care about […] I'm gonna be more concerned about my career or buying a house*"

Subtheme 1.2: The transition from school to university. In four focus groups there was a consensus that participants' feelings about their body changed after they started university. When describing the experience of high school, many participants reported a desire to conform and belong within their social group: "*high school's so cliquey, like you do just wanna fit in*" and "*you just wanna be like everyone else*".

Participants across all but one focus group made direct comparisons between high school and university, illustrating a shift away from peer conformity:

> "*coming to uni, there are more important things than judging people on the way they look or what they're wearing […] you're just like, whatever, I'm just gonna wear [tracksuit] pants to my lecture, no one cares*"

While there was agreement among focus group members that the transition to university had been positive for their own body image, there was also acknowledgement from two participants that this experience was not ubiquitous:

"*one of my friends, I think has the opposite experience […] I think coming to uni was a lot harder for her because now suddenly there's so many more people that she has to look good for […] she struggles with that a lot*"

Theme 2: Mindful engagement with media content

Subtheme 2.1: Awareness of media messages about the female body. All nineteen young women across focus groups made comments suggesting an awareness of the kinds of body ideals presented by the media. Participants reported "*thinness*" or "*skinniness*" as being conveyed as desirable within popular culture but an emerging emphasis on curves:

"*It's changed quite a lot in the past few years […] 10 years ago it was a very very skinny almost boyish figure that was ideal and now it's very curvaceous*"

However, other young women in three of these focus groups rejected their fellow participants' idea that this curvy ideal was positive. These participants highlighted that depictions of a more curvaceous "*ideal*" female body within Western culture remains non-inclusive of many women's body types:

"*there are really skinny people on video clips and you just sit there like, you are so skinny, that will never be me. And then there are the curvy people like Nicky Minaj and you're like, once again that will never be me*"

Ten participants across all five focus groups also emphasised the "*fitness ideal*" as a dominant aesthetic present on social media platforms such as Instagram (a popular photo-sharing application). The young women talked about the presence of fitness bloggers on social media and how they felt bombarded with "*before and after*" photographs of women engaging in various fitness regimes:

"*it's always popping up and you see it every day, constantly, a place to compare yourself to*"

Participants across several focus groups also highlighted the lack of distinction between thinness and health depicted in the media:

"*the idea of being thin and being healthy is like locked together as well […] but being thin and being healthy are two different things*"

Subtheme 2.2: Criticism of the media. Sixteen participants across all five focus groups made comments that were critical of messages conveyed by different media sources about the female body. Participants across three focus groups explicitly described themselves as "*critical*" or "*sceptical*" consumers of popular media, a stance that was echoed by fellow participants. Eight participants were attentive to and critical of the sexualised way in which women are often presented in popular media. Several of these young women brought along advertisements from fashion magazines in which they described women as "*objectified*" and commented that "*the media tries to turn women into sexual objects*".

In addition to participants demonstrating a sense of scepticism about the presentation of women in the media, seven participants across four focus groups generated sophisticated ideas about possible intentions behind these representations. They argued that media sources deliberately construct unrealistic representations of women

to make female viewers feel lacking and thus compelled to buy products they believe will make them more beautiful or closer to achieving these ideals. Many young women suggested that simply being aware of these intentions serve as protective for them when viewing women in the media:

> "*It comes down to marketing, like the way they kind of distort how you see something […] when you think deeper into it like critically […] you kind of see that you're being, like almost manipulated and it makes it easy to get past if you realise it's happening*"

Subtheme 2.3: Ideas and attitudes about different media sources. Ten participants across four focus groups considered how sources of media could be differentiated in terms of the ideas conveyed about women and their bodies. They pointed out that the strength of these messages is dependent on the type of media people "*choose*" to engage with. However, several participants pointed out that avoiding certain messages could be difficult because "*it's hard to avoid a lot of the time*".

In all five focus groups, participants held strong opinions about the content of social media platforms, which they said conveyed unhelpful messages about women's health and weight loss. Participants pointed out that the emergence of social media has provided easy marketing opportunities for companies promoting weight loss products through celebrities:

> "*Yeah social media totally kind of perpetuated its availability online and images of it everywhere. And people you follow are using it, you're like oh well that person uses it so it must be good*"

At the same time, participants felt that social media platforms were more positive than traditional media like television and magazines, in that they provided an opportunity for active engagement and challenging of media content. This demonstrated how participants' thoughts and attitudes towards various media sources actively shaped their behaviour, particularly their decision to engage with or avoid these forums:

> "*I don't do newspapers and I'm not listening to the radio, or watching TV at the moment … the media I'm focussing on, which is like my Facebook, my Tumblr, is more community-oriented. There's more of an opportunity for back and forth, for conversations*"

The idea that certain social media provided opportunity for challenging content was contrasted with more traditional media, where individuals were thought to more passively consume messages about women's bodies, without being able to publically express attitudes towards these ideas:

> "*TV a lot of the time, it's just pushing that message and you don't necessarily get to respond […]on like Facebook and Tumblr you can have at least the simulation of a conversation.*"

Theme 3: Participant understanding of body-related information

Subtheme 3.1: Functional conceptualisation of the body. Nine participants across four out of five focus groups drew on conceptualisations of their body in terms of its ability to function effectively. This seemed to enable them to feel positive about their bodies when they felt healthy or had successfully completed a physical task:

"*I definitely feel like when I accomplish something physically, when I learn a new dance move or something like that […] I feel good about myself because I can do it*"

With regards to the future and body image concerns, participants spoke about the deterioration of functioning through the breakdown of their health:

"*what I do worry about for the future is my ability to stay healthy, be able to get up and down stairs without my knees creeping with arthritis or something*"

Having an awareness of possible challenges to body functioning and health allowed participants to appreciate their body as it is, and to prioritise function over appearance:

"*I'm fit, I'm healthy, I'm not dying of anything, I'm in a pretty good space and I can run, I can play sport, I can swim, I can do things […] I feel like that's more important than having this immaculate ideal body type … as long as I'm healthy and it's doing the things it should be doing, I'm happy with that, that's good enough*"

Subtheme 3.2: Responding to negative thoughts and feelings about the body. While participants across the five focus groups generally demonstrated body positivity, they often also noted that they still occasionally experienced negative thoughts and feelings about their bodies. This typically occurred when making comparisons to women with "*ideal*" bodies presented in the media. Participants across three focus groups talked about coming to a "*good place*" or "*not having time*" for negativity towards their bodies Across all focus groups, thirteen participants made reflections and voiced responses to such thoughts and feelings. This process extended beyond a critical evaluation of media content, and illustrated an internal process whereby the young women refuted disparaging thoughts and feelings they had about themselves:

"*Sometimes of course I do think oh if I looked like this it would be different […] but I just think oh no I'm healthy, I'm happy most of the time, and it's good*"

Theme 4: the role of religious and cultural identities in shaping body image

In three focus groups, five participants shared how cultural and religious identities had played a role in shaping their body image, often describing ways in which their identities challenged their feelings about their bodies. Participants in these groups spoke about how Westernised beauty standards deviate considerably from that of their own culture. For instance, one young woman talked about her Pasifika heritage and highlighted the contrast between Western and Pasifika beauty standards:

"*when you see girls that perform in our cultural performances, the ladies look at her legs and they're supposed to be … the wider they are the more beautiful*"

This was in contrast with comments from a young Asian woman:

"*back home I was considered as chubby […] usually for Asians the average size is size 8 I think but once I came to New Zealand, people are telling me the average size here is size 12 or something*"

Four participants who had moved to Aotearoa/New Zealand from overseas commented on the attitudes and behaviours they had observed in contrast to their country of origin:

"*when I came here, it seemed like every time I heard someone speak it was like oh I want to lose 10kg [. . .] the more developed country it is, it seems more important to have that perfect body*"

In addition to comments about cultural differences with respect to body image challenges, these women and their co-participants spoke about the impact of religious ideas on their body experience. For instance, a participant who is Catholic highlighted the way that her religion encourages her to think holistically about herself:

"*there are other things that I rate more important in my life [. . .] I don't always see the body as just the physical skin. It's who you are completely [. . .] the body and the soul, and mind*"

Another participant commented on her observations of friends who is Muslim:

"*For me religion has had quite an impact 'coz I have a lot of Muslim friends [. . .] I never understood the hijab [. . .] they have this idea of being beautiful only for those who matter, like the reason they cover is that their beauty or their body doesn't need to be shown to those who are only going to judge them for no reason [. . .] that idea made me feel like I don't need to impress anyone else*"

Discussion

Findings from the present study contribute to the growing understanding of how young women at university who self-report having positive body image understand the way they process body-related information from media, peers, and other aspects of the environment. The four themes provide novel insights into positive body image and are discussed below with consideration of past research, and implications.

Participants in the present study reported an improvement in their body image from adolescence to early adulthood (theme 1). In particular, they described the transition from high school to university as having a positive impact on their feelings about their body . Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) noted that young women in their study also described negativity towards their bodies during adolescence that reduced with age and this was attributed to a variety of cognitive, affective, and behavioural factors. Results of a recent study by Gattario and Frisén (2019) also identified a similar positive shift with age. In their sample of young women and young men who had reported overcoming negative body image, this turning point had occurred around the age of 18 years, and often co-occurred with finding a new social context and sense of belonging that brought about feelings of agency and empowerment. Similarly, participants in our study attributed their increased body positivity to a change of peer group, one that is more supportive and embracing of authenticity and individuality, and a shift away from the peer pressure and conformity characteristic of high school and adolescence (theme 1). This is consistent with the idea of a supportive social network influencing body image, for instance Frisén and Holmqvist (2010) reported that acceptance and support from friends and family play a role in establishing positive body image in young people. These findings suggest that there is a positive shift in terms of body image that can occur in the transition to university, and that this may be a function of a change in peer group culture.

Participants commented on different messages about women's bodies presented within the media (theme 2), ranging from the thin ideal to a contemporary take on this that participants referred to as "*the rise of the booty*", which is anchored on the thin ideal. Despite awareness of these ideals, the young women were able to establish and preserve a positive body image. Participant awareness of sociocultural messages about appearance was also supported by quantitative findings, with participants who endorsed positive body image reporting significantly lower internalisation of these messages on the SATAQ. This is in keeping with the theme regarding mindful engagement with media among the young women with positive body image. Overall, the means reported by our participants on the SATAQ and other questionnaires were similar to past research (Heinberg et al., 1995).

In the focus groups, young women described viewing media content with a "*grain of salt*" and speculated about the portrayal of women in the media. These findings are consistent with previous research, which has demonstrated that young people with positive body image process media content in a critical way (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). In the present study, participants also described an active process of selecting body-positive media (e.g., TV shows with empowering and diverse female characters), as well as social media platforms that they felt were more supportive, and allowed active engagement and critique of material (e.g., Tumblr). They contrasted this with more traditional media types such as television and magazines, where participants were "*passive consumers*". This demonstrates how participants remain aware of sociocultural appearance ideals, but resist internalising them. These findings are also in keeping with critical readings of social media profiles of celebrity athletes who capitalise on self-love and self-empowerment (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Participants had particular ways of understanding and cognitively responding to body-related information in their environment (theme 3), which provides further understanding of how young women are able to resist sociocultural ideas they observe in the media and their environment. Young women in the study conceptualised their bodies *functionally*, describing their bodies in terms of what they could do rather than how they looked. This is consistent with other studies of positive body image where adolescents have highlighted their athletic abilities (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010) and young women have reported appreciating their body's ability to carry out daily tasks and activities (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). In an intervention study by Alleva et al. (2015) it was shown that body functionality-informed intervention resulted in significant improvements in body image and reductions in self-objectification in young women. Similarly, Alleva et al. (2016) found that that manipulating the salience of body functionality (rather than body aesthetics) for young women can reduce the negative impact of viewing thin-ideal media images. Previous qualitative research has also suggested that many young people with positive body image report frequent exercise (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Correlations between exercise and positive feelings about the body among young women have also been reported (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006). This relationship between exercise and positive body image may be mediated by an increased opportunity to focus on the physical capabilities of the body and to become aware of the body's physical functions, rather than its aesthetic value.

Participants reported sometimes experiencing negative thoughts and feelings about their bodies, but described a process of evaluating, challenging, and ultimately dismissing these thoughts as untrue or unhelpful. This novel finding expands on previous studies that found similar indicators of body image evaluation albeit with less explicit detail. Holmqvist and Frisén (2012) reported that adolescents with positive body image demonstrate "*a different way of thinking about beauty and attractiveness*" (p. 391) and Gattario and Frisén (2019) found that young adults who developed positive body image after experiencing negative body image benefited from actively using strategies such as ignoring negative body-related information. Moreover, in their model of positive body image, Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) describe a filtering process whereby information that threatens positive body image is rejected. Participants in the present study acknowledged the presence of critical thoughts and feelings about their body (subtheme 3.2), but also a drew on a narrative in which they are able to discount this negativity by thinking about evidence to the contrary or letting go of the criticism. Our findings also are in keeping with Maor and Cwikel (2016) finding that mothers apply a similar form of filtering in communication with daughters and encourage critical thinking about media.

Participants who were religious or with non-Western ethnicities often referred to the way in which these identities shaped their body image (theme 4). This finding demonstrates how religion and culture can impact on how young women feel about their bodies. These impacts were both positive and negative. For example, participants who were raised in other countries regarded the lack of Western media as positive as it limited exposure to the thin ideal. In a study of US college women, Asian immigrants were found to have comparable body dissatisfaction and eating attitudes to White women, but were significantly more fearful of gaining weight (Sanders & Heiss, 1998). Some participants in the present study noted that religion was influential in shaping their positive body image. This is in contrast to qualitative findings that communication between mothers and daughters focuses on media and food without drawing on religious doctrine across women with diversity of orthodoxy (Maor & Cwikel, 2016). Others studies have suggested that the positive role of religion is due to a belief that people were purposefully created (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Exposure to religious stimuli alone can effectively bolster positive feelings about the body (Boyatzis et al., 2007). Thus, while religion may have role in body image, future research applying qualitative methods and mixed-methods designs may be useful in clarifying this relationship.

There were two main strengths of the present study. Firstly, reflexivity was used to consider how the main researcher shaped the focus group research process. Reflexivity is a continuous process of actively reflecting on the role of the researcher and environmental context in which the research is occurring (see Treharne & Riggs, 2015). The main researcher kept a reflexive journal to note thoughts and ideas throughout the research project, considering how various characteristics and preconceptions contributed to making sense of the data whilst also ensuring the focus remained on the participants' perspectives and this was supported by discussions with the second author. This process benefited from the combination of the insider status of the first author as a young New Zealand European woman and the second author

as a White-British man providing supervision and guidance on reflexivity. Secondly, the use of several validated measures of positive body image allowed us to establish the validity of a single self-report question to elicit scores of positive body image to recruit women with self-reported positive body image, although future research could explore alternative ways of seeking involvement of women who experience body positivity.

It is also important to note the constraints of this study. The patterns of meaning generated in this study do not necessarily transfer to other settings (Treharne & Riggs, 2015). As such, they cannot be assumed to apply to women of other ages, religious identities, and ethnic groups, and in other educational institutions. That said, our findings are largely consistent with research conducted in the US (e.g., Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), suggesting that positive body image may be experienced in similar ways among female university students across Western cultures. Our themes also align with findings from past qualitative research on negative body image in New Zealand, including findings specific to young women from Pacific Island backgrounds living in New Zealand (Teevale, 2011). New Zealand society is predominated by Western culture but also has strong Māori indigenous culture and large communities with cultural backgrounds from Pacific Islands, Asia and other locations (Teevale, 2011). Future research could explore particular cultural and religious perspectives on body image in New Zealand in collaboration with members of various communities to expand on our findings and inform international understanding of positive body image. The analysis reported in this paper was led by the first author with supervisory support from the second author and future research could apply collaborative coding among researchers and community members to explore points of difference and add to the trustworthiness of findings.

Another limitation of the study is that young women only took part in focus groups on one occasion and this provides limited insight into patterns of change in positive body image they reported. Innovative methods of ongoing engagement of young women through means such as peer interviews or blogging could provide additional insights and act as community driven process of resistance. The focus groups started with a free-listing approach about positive body image that matched our exploratory design and the particular ideas shared in this task or the schedule open-ended questions shaped the discussions and findings, but this is appropriate method within an exploratory qualitative study (Bernard, 1995; Colucci, 2007; Katzew & Azzarito, 2013). In addition, the participants were asked to find media images about body image and bring these to the focus groups which may have led participants to seek out media specifically for the study and prompted them to search in ways that they would not typically do, but our approach provided useful prompts for discussion about media that were meaningful to the participants. Like other forms of media-elicitation (Katzew & Azzarito, 2013; Locke et al., 2018), it is possible that the latter exercise may have primed young women to consider media portrayal of women's bodies, potentially creating an unintended bias whereby young women are more likely to report an awareness of media content and presence of female body ideals. However, this allowed participants to make an informed decision about whether to attend a focus group having had some time to consider the request. Some young women may have felt

uncomfortable with the idea of discussing body image with others and this may have resulted in some choosing not to attend the focus groups. Future research could offer a choice of focus group or individual interview to overcome this, and it could be insightful to invite focus group participants to attend a follow-up individual interview to explore body-related concerns and positive body image in even more depth.

In addition, height and weight information was self-reported in the preliminary survey. This method has been criticised previously, as it has been reported that women tend to overestimate their height and underestimate their weight (Gorber et al., 2007). However, self-report of this information is common in body image research (e.g., Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010) and avoids the clinical gaze of anthropometric assessment. By gathering self-reported height and weight and finding that there was no significant difference in BMI between those who reported positive body image and those who did not, it can be noted that young women in the sample did not appear to experience body positivity as a result of being thin and thus more closely resembling sociocultural ideals.

The results of the present study have several potential applications. Our themes demonstrate that for many young women with positive body image, a critical approach to engaging with media content appears to be protective for their body image. This criticality not only appears to shape their thinking about media images, but also their behaviour as they select and avoid various media sources depending on the messages they convey about women and their bodies. Findings such as these should continue to inform policy relating to health education and prevention efforts for young women and girls. Specifically, this could include education on the negative impact of media content on women's body image and related health outcomes, and encourage a more critical analysis of media content with the aim of shaping healthy media engagement (Albertson et al., 2015; Bird et al., 2013; Burgess et al., 2006).

These findings may also be useful within clinical intervention, by expanding on previous research highlighting the use of a 'body-protective filter' (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). In particular, our findings expand on the cognitive process underlying young women's ways of engaging with body-related information, replicating similar findings in another Western setting (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). By better understanding young women who demonstrate positivity and appreciation towards their body, and then incorporating this understanding into their practice, mental health clinicians may be more effective in their treatment of those with negative body image and associated cognitive and behavioural outcomes, particularly for those with disordered attitudes and behaviour related to eating. In particular, research should further our ability to support young women to establish and effectively utilise a body-protective filter from a young age, before body image becomes problematic and a catalyst in a range of negative psychological outcomes. This will ideally serve to reduce the internalisation of negative information regarding the body and ideals that in turn affect girls and women's body image. By going beyond merely reducing negative feelings towards the body, and facilitating the development of a body-protective filter, interventions for negative body image and associated mental health issues may more effectively promote positive body image and bolster resilience with respect to challenges to body image.

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