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An Exploration of Queer Women's Relationship with the Body and Physical Activity

Jade A. Bailey,

Supervisor: Dr. Eva Pila, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Kinesiology

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Abstract

Traditional physical activity contexts are male-dominated, cis-heteronormative, and perpetuate Western beauty standards. Research has identified that queer women experience the lowest rates of physical activity participation, compared to other LGBTQ+ groups. The present study investigated the relationship between queer women's ($N = 70$) body image, physical activity behaviour, and experiences. Participants completed one virtual focus group and four themes were identified: The Queer Women's Body is Political; (in)Visibility of Sexual and Gender Identity in Physical Activity; Hypervigilance to Maintain Safety and Reduce Perpetuating Gender-Based Violence; and Desire for Spaces that Foster Safety, Belonging, and Connection. Findings revealed that queer women's body image impacts participation in physical activity and highlighted the need for queer-friendly physical activity spaces. This research contributes to the development and implementation of physical activity programming designed to promote safety, belonging, and social connection, with the goal of enhancing queer women's enjoyment and continued engagement in physical activity.

Keywords

physical activity, body image, sexual minority, queer, women, minority stress

Summary for Lay Audience

This study will examine queer women's experiences with their bodies and physical activity more broadly. Preliminary research has identified unique barriers to physical activity participation experienced by the LGBTQ+ community, however, no work has been done to explore the influence of body image on the physical activity experiences of queer women. Traditional physical activity contexts endorse heteronormative ideals, and Western standards of beauty and are primarily occupied by heterosexual individuals. As such, those whose bodies and sexual and/or gender identities diverge from the dominant group may be more likely to disengage or avoid traditional physical activity contexts. In a series of focus groups, we wish to explore whether a unique relationship exists between queer women's perceptions of their bodies and how this influences their participation and overall experiences in physical activity. Given that little is known about this relationship, this study will use focus groups to foster community connectedness to ask queer women about their body image and how this influences their physical activity behaviour. A deeper understanding of this relationship will support the implementation of queer-inclusive physical activity programming and broadly promote positive physical activity experiences for queer women.

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Chapter 1

1 Introduction

Queer individuals experience pervasive sexism, discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, and exclusion, which serve as distinct stressors and barriers to engagement in physical activity (Brittain et al., 2006; Denison et al., 2021; Herrick & Duncan, 2018). The adversity that queer individuals experience as a consequence of societal oppression culminates in unique forms of stress, referred to as minority stress (Meyer, 2003), which have been understudied in the context of physical activity. Given that physical activity contexts have been structured to favour heterosexuality and cis-normativity, the sexual and gender-based stressors queer communities experience may limit regular and quality physical activity participation (Herrick et al., 2022; Voyles et al., 2023). Therefore, research efforts that aim to address physical activity participation disparities must investigate how queer individuals cope with minority stress.

Most existing research examining the nature and impact of minority stressors on physical activity behaviour and experiences among queer individuals has primarily focused on this population as a monolith. However, queer cisgender and transgender women, who are exposed to disproportionate discrimination on this basis of sexuality and gender, demonstrate the lowest levels of physical activity within the broader queer population (Herrick & Duncan, 2018). Researchers have posited that rates of physical inactivity may be disproportionately higher among queer women due to a greater appreciation for, and acceptance of a broader range of body shapes and sizes (Herrick & Duncan, 2018). Yet, no research has examined this idea, which elucidates a significant gap in the current literature.

There is robust evidence supporting a bidirectional relationship between physical activity and positive and negative body image (Sabiston et al., 2019). Among women, regular engagement in physical activity has been shown to enhance positive body image (e.g., body appreciation; Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016) and in turn, greater positive body image predicts both adaptive motives for and engagement in physical activity (Cox et al., 2019).

As such, current findings on the relationships between body image and physical activity would not support the hypothesis that queer women exhibit low rates of physical activity participation due to higher individual levels of body appreciation. Furthermore, this notion presumes that women primarily engage in physical activity for appearance and body-related reasons, and overlooks the influence of minority stressors and other potential reasons why queer women may choose to engage in or avoid physical activity.

While the differences observed between populations were small, several studies have demonstrated that queer (e.g., lesbian, bisexual) women report more positive body image and less concern with physical appearance than heterosexual women (Austin et al., 2004; Hadland et al., 2014; Morrison et al., 2004; Owens et al., 2002; Wagenbach, 2004). In contrast, Kozee and Tylka (2006) found that lesbian women reported similar levels of body shame and greater levels of body surveillance compared to heterosexual women. Scholars investigating body image among lesbian and bisexual women have acknowledged that survey-based methods designed to examine how queer women's body image differs from heterosexual women fails to capture within-group differences and may preclude a cohesive understanding of queer women's body image experiences (Alvy, 2013). Further, the consistent focus on difference between groups does not consider the role minority stressors and other relevant cultural factors may have on queer women's construction of their body image. Therefore, research that centers the voices and lived experiences of queer women may be better suited to developing a more nuanced understanding of the nature of these relationships.

1.1 Overview of Research Aims

As such, qualitative research is needed to provide a preliminary understanding of (i) how the experience of minority stressors (e.g., discrimination) influence queer women's body image and physical activity behaviour and experiences, (ii) how queer women's individual constructions of body image influence their physical activity behaviour and experiences, (iii) how their identities as queer women uniquely influence physical activity behaviour and experiences, and (iv) any experiences of support they have received in physical activity settings.

1.2 Positionality

To ensure I was able to ethically engage with marginalized communities, I began my journey in graduate school by studying feminist methods. Consequently, I have come to understand that visibility for marginalized communities comes with an inherent risk of harm to the participants (Holtby et al., 2015). In alignment with this understanding, I have committed to conducting this research with a critical and self-critical lens. I acknowledge the power I have as a researcher to (unintentionally) harm or exploit the community of women with whom I seek to work. To mitigate potential harm, I recognize that I have a responsibility to not merely represent the data I gather but to allow it to unfold together, not as researcher and object but rather as an individual within a community that assumes ethical responsibility for how I claim to know (Doucet, 2018). This embodies a paradigmatic shift from the positivist assumption that knowledge is something that can be extracted or acquired, to the understanding that knowledge creation is a dynamic and fluid process (Doucet, 2018). The goal of my research is to work with queer women to discover how intersecting marginalized identities uniquely impact one's body image and desire to engage (or not) in physical activity.

As I began to conceptualize this research project, I committed to integrating feminist academic discourse into the study rationale and design. Traditional sport, exercise, and physical activity contexts are both sexist and heterosexist in nature (Krane, 2001). Therefore, gender and sexuality are at the crux of understanding many psychological and sociocultural phenomena within this field. Making room for feminist critical analysis and interdisciplinary connections may move Kinesiology toward developing a more critical and inclusive approach to research (Reifsteck, 2014).

The first tension I experienced in designing this study was one of semantics. I had difficulty answering the fundamental question of whether I should use the term 'queer' versus non-heterosexual or sexual minority in my study title and subsequent writing. The use of either 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' seemed stable and confining, in direct opposition to central tenets of Queer Theory (Browne & Nash, 2010). Using the term non-heterosexual or sexual minority felt both outdated and like a positivist attempt to avoid criticism and uphold a sense of mastery over the correct use of language (Alcoff, 1991). Locating

myself within a Queer theoretical perspective, I resist the idea of confining participants to certain fixed identities in favour of examining a range of different ways people may define themselves (Krane, 2001). I endeavour to answer the call Browne and Nash (2010) put forth for scholars to communicate their understanding of 'queer' within their research. The word queer was historically used as a pejorative label of hate causing some individuals to reject (rightfully so) the use of this term. However, I am persuaded by the belief that the derogatory nature of 'queer' can be reclaimed, neutralized, and made positive by embracing the word as one of pride (Zosky & Alberts, 2016). The word queer represents a diverse community with a shared history of both experiencing and fighting back against discrimination. It is theoretically grounded in the idea of a fluid and ever-changing conceptualization of identity, and the larger sociopolitical notion that contests dominant discourse and assumptions of heterosexuality (Goldman, 1996; Jagose, 1996).

As such, throughout this report, I will use queer as an umbrella term to describe women who broadly align with a queer identity. In instances where I am citing specific empirical studies, I will use the language the authors selected (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, sexual minority) to ensure accuracy of reporting past findings and provide important context to the state of current literature.

Chapter 2

2 Review of Literature

This chapter focuses on an extensive review of literature in the areas of body image and physical activity. The first section focuses on a broad understanding of the construct of body image, the gendered experience of body image, the relationship between body image and sexual identity, and the relationship between body image and physical activity. In the latter section, I focus on the relationships between physical activity and gender and sexual identity.

2.1 Body Image

Body image is defined as a broad, multidimensional construct focused on aspects of how the body looks, performs, and/or functions (e.g., health, fitness, athletic skills, coordination; Cash, 2012). The appearance and functional experiences consist of (1) perceptual, (2) cognitive, (3) affective, and (4) behavioural dimensions (Cash et al., 2005; Vani et al., 2021). As described by researchers, the perceptual dimension of body image refers to the mental representations that an individual holds related to their own appearance and function (Cash, 2012; Vani et al., 2021). These mental representations are defined as the accuracy level between perceived and actual characteristics, as it relates to the body as a whole or specific body parts (e.g., legs, arms, torso; Cash & Smolak, 2011). The cognitive dimension of body image pertains to the thoughts, beliefs, and evaluations one has of their appearance and function, and is the most assessed dimension of body image (Vani et al., 2021). For example, cognitive body image includes dissatisfaction (or satisfaction) one has with their body's appearance and/or function. The affective dimension of body image describes the feelings and emotions that individuals experience in relation to their body's appearance and function. These feelings and emotions are commonly assessed as social physique anxiety and body-related self-conscious emotions (i.e., shame, guilt, embarrassment, pride, envy; Sabiston et al., 2020; Vani et al., 2021). Lastly, the behavioural dimension of body image represents an individual's decisions and actions informed by their perceptions, cognitions, and emotions related to their appearance and function. These actions often fall under three components, (1) appearance

fixing (e.g., behaviours to control appearance), (2) avoidance, and (3) positive rational acceptance (Vani et al., 2021).

The four dimensions of body image can be both positive and/or negative. Positive body image is defined as an overarching love and respect for the body (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). This is characterized by an appreciation for the body, acceptance of the body including aspects that do not align with idealized images, comfort and confidence in the body, an emphasis on the body's assets as opposed to imperfections, and an interpretation of incoming information in a body-protective manner whereby positive information is internalized and negative information is rejected or reframed (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). In relation to the four dimensions, positive body image may manifest through accurate perceptions of the body, positive thoughts, and beliefs such as satisfaction with the body, feelings of pride towards the body, and engagement in health-promoting and adaptive behaviours (Vani et al., 2021). In contrast, negative body image involves the pathological aspects of body image and can be expressed as inaccurate perceptions, negative thoughts, and beliefs about the body (e.g., body dissatisfaction), body-related shame and guilt, and maladaptive behaviours (e.g., caloric restriction, excessive exercise; Cash, 2012).

It is important to note that positive body image is distinct from negative body image. Positive body image is not on the same continuum as negative body image; high levels of negative body image do not suggest the absence of positive body image (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). For example, Tiggemann and McCourt (2013) examined relationships between positive body image (operationalized as body appreciation), body dissatisfaction, and Australian women's age. The findings demonstrated that as women's age increased, the strength of the inverse correlation between body appreciation and body dissatisfaction decreased. Additionally, positive body image was positively associated with age, whereas body dissatisfaction was unrelated to age. The authors concluded that body appreciation and body dissatisfaction are not mirror images of one another, as it is possible for women to simultaneously experience some level of body dissatisfaction but also appreciate and respect the body (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013).

In addition to the four evaluative dimensions, the construct of body image subsumes an investment component that captures the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional importance one places on their body's appearance (Cash, 2012). The extent to which one's appearance is central to one's sense of self defines how an individual sees, thinks, feels, and behaves toward their body (Cash et al., 2005). Body image investment is commonly assessed by measuring the beliefs and assumptions about the importance, meaning, and influence of body appearance in an individual's life (Cash et al., 2004). Those who tend to be more invested in their body's appearance may experience greater negative body image (e.g., body dissatisfaction) and be more preoccupied with what their body looks like (Cash, 2012). Moreover, highly body-invested individuals also tend to engage in maladaptive body image coping strategies (e.g., frequent body-checking and fixing, over-exercising; Engle, 2009).

Body image investment is closely related to the internalization of body ideals (Murnen & Smolak, 2009). Body ideals that dominate Western society are highly encouraged and socially sanctioned. The commonly maintained Westernized body ideals include thinness for women and muscularity for men. Although these body ideals are generally unattainable for most of the population, many individuals internalize these appearance ideals and compare their appearance, shape, and size to these widespread ideals. It has been well-documented that exposure and comparison to body ideals, as well as the internalization of these ideals, are associated with indices of negative body image (e.g., body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, drive for muscularity) and adverse health outcomes such as eating disorders and steroid use (Donovan et al., 2020; McComb & Mills, 2020, 2021; Paterna et al., 2021; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Taken together, there is value in better understanding the interrelation between the positive and negative dimensions of body image, body image investment, and body ideal internalization as they impact human psychosocial well-being.

The contemporary and multidimensional conceptualization of body image includes the concept of embodiment. Scholars have conceptualized the "experience of embodiment" as an important construct that is characterized by five related dimensions, reflected along a continuum from positive to negative: (1) body connection and comfort, (2) agency and

functionality, (3) experience and expression of desire, (4) attuned self-care, and (5) inhabiting the body as a subjective site, resisting objectification (Piran, 2016). Body connection and comfort address the quality of one's connection with their bodies, and their experiences of their bodies as either comfortable or problematic sites from which to engage with the world and includes dimensions of positive body image (e.g., body appreciation). Agency and functionality capture the sense of autonomy one feels they have over their physical body and how competent they perceive their bodies to be. Experience and expression of desire refers to one's ability or inability to accurately identify, name, and experience their desires in an unrestricted way. Attuned self-care reflects the level of attunement one has to their internal needs and cues as one engages with the external environment. Lastly, inhabiting the body as a subjective site, resisting objectification is characterized by one's capacity to protest, resist, and defy societal pressures to adopt an external gaze and alter the body to abide by appearance expectations (Piran, 2016).

Existing research indicates a tendency for the dimensions of the experience of embodiment to align on either the positive or negative side of the continuum and change over time in relation to one's social environment (Piran, 2016). The relationship between the different dimensions has led to research-based definitions of positive and negative embodiment. As such, the definition of positive embodiment is, "positive body connection and comfort, embodied agency and passion, and attuned self-care" whereas negative embodiment is defined as, "disrupted body connection and discomfort, restricted agency and passion, and self-neglect or harm" (Piran, 2017, p. 4). It is crucial to study this concept as the distinct experiences of embodiment denote different levels of well-being.

2.1.1 Body Image in Women

Sociocultural theories of body image suggest that modern Western societies have emphasized thinness as a central aspect of beauty for women (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). Even as women continue to advance in terms of education and career, the effects of sexism remain a pervasive part of contemporary culture, with increasing sociocultural pressures for

women to focus their energy on achieving a largely unattainable ideal of beauty and thinness. To possess the characteristics of ideal feminine beauty a woman must be White, heterosexual, young, tall, toned but not excessively muscular, curvaceous, and simultaneously extremely thin (Levine & Smolak, 2002). However, this description does not fit most women within Western societies. When so much significance is placed on achieving the culturally prescribed standards for beauty, women unable to reach this goal may suffer negative psychosocial and behavioural consequences (e.g., body dissatisfaction, appearance-contingent self-worth, disordered eating, compulsive exercise; (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). Compared to men, a considerable body of evidence demonstrates that women consistently experience higher levels of body image dissatisfaction (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2006; Muth & Cash, 1997; Yean et al., 2013). Indeed, body image dissatisfaction is so common among women and girls in North America that it is considered normative, and the term “normative discontent” was coined to describe the pervasiveness of weight dissatisfaction reported in women (Rodin et al., 1984). It is well-established that body image dissatisfaction and thin-ideal internalization are robust risk factors for the development of disordered eating and/or eating disorders (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012; Tylka, 2004). As such, it is crucial to pay close attention to the salient role that gender has in body image development.

In addition to sociocultural theories, the high levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes among women in Western cultures have been explained by feminist frameworks. Broadly, feminist theories have posited that in a patriarchal culture, women experience sexism in the form of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative evaluations of individuals based on their gender or support unequal status of men and women (Linnebach, 2004). Within this system of oppression, women are subjected to various means of subordination including the objectification and degradation of their bodies (Bordo, 2004; Kilbourne, 1999; Wolf, 2013). Women are often defined as their bodies, and their bodies are treated as objects that exist for the sexual pleasure of men. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) states that because of cultural

objectification, women internalize this outsider's perspective and begin to monitor their own bodies, becoming preoccupied with their appearance. This phenomenon, known as self-objectification, can lead to body-related shame, body dissatisfaction, appearance anxiety, and negative self-evaluation, and is proposed to put women at risk for the development of eating disorders, depression, and/or sexual dysfunction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

To have a comprehensive understanding of body image, it is also important to consider the perceptions and experiences of women who develop a positive body image (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2015). This can provide valuable information regarding protective factors that may buffer women against societal pressures to attain the thin ideal and mitigate the harmful psychological and behavioural outcomes of self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Positive body image has been investigated thematically in qualitative studies (e.g., Bailey et al., 2015; McHugh et al., 2014; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), but is now most often operationalized as body appreciation (Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). In recent years there has been mounting evidence linking body appreciation to a wide range of positive psychological constructs and indicators of good health (e.g., Avalos et al., 2005; Dalley & Vidal, 2013; Swami et al., 2008; Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2013). In women, body appreciation has been shown to have a protective effect against self-objectification and thin-ideal internalization and is associated with intuitive eating and adaptive physical activity behaviour (Andrew et al., 2016; A. E. Cox et al., 2019; Halliwell, 2013).

There are other dimensions of positive body image in addition to body appreciation such as body acceptance and love, broadly conceptualizing beauty, and adaptive appearance investment. Body acceptance and love are characterized by expressing love and comfort toward the body, even if not satisfied with every aspect of it. Broadly conceptualizing beauty is the perception that a wide range of appearances are beautiful as well as finding beauty in features of the self that may not align with sociocultural appearance standards. Adaptive appearance investment is regularly engaging in appearance-related self-care via benign methods rather than engaging in appearance-altering methods that may be harmful to fit external standards of beauty (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). It is important that

future research examines how indices of positive and negative body image co-occur within women to enable a more nuanced and holistic understanding of this construct and the range of effects it has on health and well-being.

2.1.2 Minority Stress and Queer Body Image

Current research overwhelmingly demonstrates that both queer men and women are susceptible to heightened negative body image, body image investment, disordered eating behaviour, and eating disorders (Burke et al., 2020; (Burke et al., 2020; Calzo et al., 2017; Convertino et al., 2021; Croll et al., 2002; Diemer et al., 2018; Meneguzzo et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2004). Contemporary research in this field typically defines queer individuals as sexual and gender minorities (SGM). *Sexual minorities* is a broad term that refers to individuals who identify outside the boundaries of heterosexuality (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer). Gender minority is an umbrella term that encompasses anyone who is not cisgender (e.g., trans, gender-nonconforming, and/or non-binary). The increased level of risk for body image concerns and eating disorders among SGM groups has been conceptualized within theoretical frameworks that highlight the role of appearance pressures, and stress related to minority status and how they interact in different ways across identities captured within the queer umbrella (i.e., lesbian, gay; Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 1999). The pressure to achieve unrealistic appearance ideals, which varies across queer subcultures, may increase the vulnerability of specific queer subgroups to experiencing body image dissatisfaction (Tylka & Andorka, 2012; Yean et al., 2013). Furthermore, the minority stress model (I. H. Meyer, 2003) provides an additional explanatory framework for the health disparities observed among queer populations. Sexual and gender minority stress refers to the psychosocial stress that minority group members experience and internalize due to societal discrimination. These identity-based stressors include distal minority stress (e.g., instances of prejudice, verbal harassment, physical violence) and proximal minority stress (e.g., internalized homophobia, concealment; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012; Meyer, 2003). Research has shown that prolonged exposure to minority stressors are associated with harmful outcomes including negative body image and eating disorders (Panza et al., 2021; Wichstrøm, 2006; Williams et al., 2016; Wiseman & Moradi, 2010).

Across the study of body image, conceptualizing and defining queer populations has been a significant challenge for researchers. Existing work in this area is typically positioned within a heteronormative framework that homogenized queer individuals based on understandings of sexual orientation as behaviourally-defined and fixed (Galupo et al., 2014). Previous research has primarily focused on intergroup differences (e.g., gay or lesbian versus heterosexual) without considering intragroup variabilities that may have different implications for indices of body image. The umbrella terms *gay* and *lesbian* do not capture differences between subcultures (e.g., bear, twink, butch, femme, trans, cis) that have their own appearance standards. To illustrate, the gay “bear” subculture defines large, bulky, and bearded men as sexually desirable (Quidley-Rodriguez & De Santis, 2017). Whereas “twinks” are gay men that are typically young, thin, hairless, and effeminate (Lyons & Hosking, 2014). The extent to which individuals identify with conventionally masculine and feminine qualities may affect social treatment that in turn influences body image (Hawkins et al., 1983). Specifically, masculine traits may serve as a protective factor, and feminine traits a risk factor, for body image disturbance due to the higher social value of masculinity over femininity (Massey et al., 2021). For example, findings from a study by Richburg and Stewart (2022), revealed that masculine trait identification significantly predicted body appreciation and drive for muscularity regardless of actual gender identity among a sample of 643 cisgender, transgender, and non-binary SGM individuals. As illustrated by the different appearance standards within the gay male subculture, SGM individuals’ outward appearance and personality traits may not align with conventional gender ideals (Himmelstein & Puhl, 2019; Romito et al., 2021). Therefore, they may experience social pressure to perform masculinity/femininity since heteronormativity and cisnormativity encourage binary gender role conformity (Schroeder & Liben, 2021), which may influence their body image. These findings suggest differences in body image among SGM based on gender trait identifications and highlight the importance of continued research that adopts a more nuanced approach to examining intragroup variability.

Common measures of sexual orientation evaluate this variable along a single continuum with heterosexual and gay/lesbian identities located at opposite endpoints and bisexuality situated in the middle (Morrison, 2020). This one-dimensional type of measurement does

not capture the range of sexual orientations that fall between each end of the spectrum and has resulted in limited and variable information about body image in these populations (Savin-Williams, 2018). Further, individuals who experience attraction to people of multiple genders (i.e., queer, pansexual, bisexual, fluid) or identify as transgender have criticized traditional conceptualizations of sexual orientation that are based on dichotomous assumptions of sex/gender (Galupo et al., 2014). It is also crucial to acknowledge that sexual and gender minority individuals have other concurrent identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status) that converge to create unique body image experiences. Intersectionality has been defined as “the mutually constitutive relations among social identities (Shields, 2008, p. 301), and denotes the many ways in which these distinct identities intersect. In a previous qualitative study, Brennan et al., (2013) implemented an intersectional framework to explore body image among ethnoracialized gay and bisexual men. Their findings revealed a phenomenon of dual body oppression that was experienced among participants. For example, these men reported feeling immense pressure to meet the appearance standards of white gay culture while simultaneously acknowledging their bodies were either rendered invisible and therefore marginalized or fetishized and therefore objectified. As such, it is critical that future research adopts an intersectional approach that accounts for the variety of ways people may identify when exploring body image experiences among sexual and gender minority individuals.

The variance of appearance ideals within queer subcultures has been proposed to account for differences in body image indices between gay men and lesbian women relative to heterosexual men and women. For example, researchers posit that gay male culture promotes a particular body ideal, and that gay men who fail to achieve this ideal report greater dissatisfaction with their appearance (Morrison et al., 2004). In contrast, lesbian culture is presumed to be more accepting of bodies that diverge from Westernized ideals, which is suggested to buffer against thin-ideal internalization (Mason et al., 2018). However, data from a systematic review (Morrison, 2020) reveals that there is no consensus on how terms such as “gay and lesbian culture” should be operationalized or measured. The ambiguous and inconsistent operationalization of constructs are often

cited to explain why SGM persons are at an increased risk for negative body image cognitions and behaviours, elucidating a significant gap in the existing literature.

2.1.3 Queer Women's Body Image

Initial studies on queer women's body image confined them to fixed labels (e.g., lesbian, bisexual) and focused exclusively on comparing cisgender queer women to cisgender heterosexual women. Early body image research produced two competing theories to explain the unique embodied experiences of queer women. First, Dworkin (1989) proposed that lesbians and heterosexual women are at an equal risk of experiencing body dissatisfaction. She posited that, like heterosexual women, lesbians are socialized in a patriarchal and heteronormative society that perpetuates sexism and transmits powerful ideals of feminine beauty. In contrast, Brown (1989) suggested that lesbian women are more protected from body dissatisfaction compared to heterosexual women. He hypothesized that because lesbian women do not adhere to a heteronormative relationship structure, they are less likely to be influenced by oppressive contemporary appearance standards.

These two frameworks have been tested cross-sectionally, and both have received empirical support. A relatively small number of studies provide preliminary evidence that in comparison to heterosexual women, queer women are at a similar or slightly elevated risk of experiencing body shame, body surveillance, and disordered eating (e.g., (Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Mason et al., 2018, 2018; O'Flynn et al., 2023). However, several other studies consistently demonstrate greater endorsement of positive body image among queer women relative to heterosexual women (Austin et al., 2004; Carper et al., 2010; VanKim et al., 2016). Furthermore, additional findings indicate that queer women frequently report less body dissatisfaction, endorse larger ideal body shapes and sizes, are less concerned with physical appearance, and have broader conceptualizations of beauty standards than heterosexual women (Alvy, 2013; Austin et al., 2004; Hadland et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2002; Wagenbach, 2004). Limited within-group research has revealed that lesbian women express that their communities are more accepting of diverse bodies, place less emphasis on the importance of physical appearance, and encourage body acceptance (Beren et al., 1997; Henrichs-Beck & Szymanski, 2017; Myers et al.,

1999; Thompson et al., 1999). Taken together, it is evident that the understanding of queer women's body image remains equivocal.

The unclear state of knowledge of queer women's body image cognitions, emotions, perceptions, and behaviours may be a consequence of researchers primarily examining dimensions of body image within this population as relative to, or in comparison to cis-heterosexual women (Alvy, 2013; Markey & Markey, 2014; Moreno-Domínguez et al., 2019). This approach inherently limits an in-depth understanding of queer women's experiences by applying the dominant cis-sexist and heterosexist cultural paradigms to assess how queer women compare to cis-heterosexual women. Thus, current research will likely remain equivocal until queer women's body image experiences are studied in depth, and independently of direct comparisons of cis-heterosexual women's experiences. In doing so, researchers may be able to capture the nuance among a population of women that is highly diverse and heterogeneous.

Studies have found that when investigating the effects of gender and sexual orientation concurrently, gender is a more salient factor for most indices of body image than sexual orientation. Previous research has shown that regardless of women's sexual orientation, they report higher levels of body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and disordered eating compared to both cis-heterosexual and SGM men (Brand et al., 1992; Henrichs-Beck & Szymanski, 2017; Yean et al., 2013). This finding aligns with the robust body of research showing that women experience significantly more negative body image compared to men. As such, these findings suggest that variability in queer women's body image may be a function of gender expression (i.e., the extent to which a person exhibits societally endorsed masculine and feminine traits). This idea is crucial for scholars to consider as gender identity, gender expression, and gender trait identification are closely related, but not identical, and each uniquely influences body image among queer women.

Gender expression has been historically defined as the way in which one expresses their gender identity via their physical appearance in relation to the socio-culturally defined roles and embodiment of traditional masculinity or femininity (Ault & Brzuzy, 2009; Henrichs-Beck & Szymanski, 2017). Like gender expression, gender trait identification

captures the extent to which individuals identify with traditionally masculine and feminine roles, communication styles, emotional expressions, behaviours, and personality traits (Richburg & Stewart, 2022). However, almost all research examining queer women in isolation or in direct comparison to heterosexual women has categorized queer women as a homogenous group (e.g., lesbian, bisexual) thereby excluding the influence of the heterogeneity of sexual identity on body image outcomes. More recently, Henrichs-Beck and Szymanski (2017) investigated how dimensions of lesbian gender expression (i.e., butch, femme, androgynous) and body-gender identity incongruence were related to variability in lesbian body dissatisfaction. Their findings revealed that more masculine stereotypical traits were a unique negative predictor of body dissatisfaction. In contrast, higher feminine stereotypical traits, and greater body-gender incongruence were unique positive predictors of body dissatisfaction. These results highlight the importance of gender expression in examining how queer women think and feel about their bodies.

2.1.4 Tensions Surrounding the Queer Woman's Body in Contemporary Culture

An examination of queer women's history shows that communities of queer women always had norms for physical appearance. The ideals and norms of body image in queer women's subculture are different within this diverse group of women and from the mainstream heterosexual culture. As Rothblum (1994) notes, an important difference between these norms, is that while the dominant culture's norms are centered on how women can attract men, lesbian norms have served a dual purpose: to enable women who belong to this group to identify each other, and to provide a group identity that is distinct from women in the dominant culture. For queer women, physical appearance is often considered a socially and politically charged statement. During the 1960s and 1970s, many lesbian women adopted a detectable look, functioning as a rejection of patriarchal beauty standards and as a challenge to contemporary notions of femininity (Dworkin, 1989). Further, Krakauer and Rose (2002) argued that many lesbians opt for a more androgynous physical appearance after coming out to signal group membership.

Considering the argument that a queer identity acts as a buffer against mainstream images of the feminine ideal, it is necessary to examine how representations of queer women in

popular culture shape contemporary body and appearance ideals within queer subculture. The last decade has witnessed a significant expansion of representations of queer women in North American and European pop-culture, which is widely accepted as indicating progress in the queer rights movement fight for the acceptance of difference and social equality (Bristow & Wilson, 1993). However, the terms of visibility extended to queer women affirm ideals of cis-hetero-patriarchal, white femininity (McNicholas Smith & Tyler, 2017). This is evidenced on mainstream television dramas such as *Station 19* and *The Morning Show*, where characters depicting queer women are played by straight, white women who are visually indistinguishable from their heterosexual peers. In contrast, queer women whose bodies systematically differ from this ideal are virtually invisible in mainstream culture. For example, Roxane Gay, a queer Black woman, who co-wrote the lesbian storyline between two Black women in the Marvel comic, *Black Panther*, had her story removed from the blockbuster movie adaptation and was not invited to the premiere of the film (Meyer, 2020).

Through the erasure of transgender, butch, fat, and racialized queer women's subcultural appearance norms and body politics, popular culture prohibits queer women's historical commitments to anti-normativity. Indeed, it exemplifies 'homonormativity' by endorsing "a politics that does not contest heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them" (Duggan, 2002, p.179). As such, it is vital that we examine how queer women are resisting the broad social forces that, while crafted with liberal intentions, are disempowering queer women from defining their own culturally-derived constructions of body image.

2.1.5 The Relationship Between Body Image and Physical Activity

Within sport and exercise psychology, body image has been implicated as a relevant correlate, antecedent, and consequence of physical activity behaviour, whereby multiple dimensions of one's body image may be implicated in the engagement of sport and physical activity behaviour (Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009). Given high global levels of physical inactivity and the related negative physical and mental health consequences, understanding how psychological factors (e.g., body image) may be associated with physical activity or sport are of high importance. Based on a general pattern of results,

Sabiston et al., (2019) found that participation in physical activity was consistently and reliably related to less negative and more positive body image. Specifically, positive body image (e.g., body satisfaction) was regularly associated with greater participation in physical activity and sport (Sabiston et al., 2019). However, it was noted that physical activity frequently emerged as an appearance and/or weight-management strategy rather than a primary outcome variable (Sabiston et al., 2019), which precludes an understanding of positive and negative body image factors as predictors of physical activity and/or sport participation. Further, many of the previous studies examining these relationships were cross-sectional, assessed sex as a binary construct (e.g., male or female), and/or solely focused on appearance motives (e.g., weight loss) as a potential mechanism that underlies the relationship between indices of body image and physical activity behaviour (Vartanian et al., 2012). As such, the present research landscape includes several crucial limitations that warrant future research attention.

To garner a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between positive and negative body image and physical activity behaviour, it is important that researchers recognize the diverse value of physical activity that extends beyond a method to improve one's appearance and/or lose weight (Homan & Tylka, 2015). This narrow conceptualization of a complex and multifaceted relationship has resulted in ambiguous findings that have produced evidence that shows positive and negative body image almost equally facilitates or inhibits sport and/or physical activity participation (Sabiston et al., 2019). However, there is an emergent body of research (Ingledeew & Markland, 2008; Maltby & Day, 2001) demonstrating robust positive associations between health and function-related motives for physical activity, intrinsic (i.e., internally-derived) motivation, sustained physical activity behaviour, and improved body image (e.g., increased body appreciation, decreased body surveillance). Further, cross-sectional data reveals diversity in the strength and direction of the association between body image and physical activity behaviour in different samples (e.g., women, gender, and sexual minorities; Sabiston et al., 2019). Therefore, qualitative methods that examine a range of gender identities and sexual orientations must be implemented in future research to explore and describe the intragroup variability that may help explain the disproportionate and negative outcomes observed within these populations.

2.2 Physical Activity

Physical activity is defined as any bodily movement resulting in energy expenditure (Caspersen et al., 1985). This may include participation in organized and recreational sport, exercise that is structured, planned, repetitive, and intended to improve or maintain physical fitness, and any other activity of daily living that involves purposeful movement. Research indicates that participating in 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per week, in bouts of at least 10 minutes, can support physical health and psychological well-being (Tremblay et al., 2011). For example, individuals who consistently meet physical activity guidelines demonstrate improved cardiovascular health, reduced risk of depression, feelings of anxiety and stress, and improved cognitive functioning, self-esteem, and mood (Penedo & Dahn, 2005; Wankel & Berger, 1990; Warburton et al., 2006). Despite the myriad psychological and physical health-related benefits of physical activity, evidence demonstrates that adults are not regularly meeting the prescribed guidelines (Guthold et al., 2018).

2.2.1 Physical Activity Behaviour and Experiences Among Queer Populations

The chronic and pervasive stress that adults who identify as queer experience culminates in unique barriers (e.g., homophobia, transphobia, discrimination, and exclusion) associated with decreased engagement in health-promoting and sustaining behaviours, which may negatively impact physical health and psychological well-being (Brittain & Dinger, 2015; Cary et al., 2016; Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Garbers et al., 2015; Greenspan et al., 2019; Hargie et al., 2017). The adverse outcomes associated with sexual and gender minority stress include mental health conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety), enhanced sedentary behaviour, sport drop-out, insufficient engagement in physical activity, substance abuse, and self-harm (Cochran & Mays, 2007; Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Mereish & Poteat, 2015; Williams & Mann, 2017). Further, existing research indicates that queer adults experience disproportionately high rates of chronic physical health conditions (e.g., diabetes, cardiovascular disease, impaired mobility; Frost et al., 2015; Meyer & Frost, 2013), augmented by worsened social conditions (e.g., poverty, limited access and barriers to supportive healthcare; Hafeez et al., 2017; Redman, 2010).

Regular physical activity participation can support physical health and mental well-being (Penedo & Dahn, 2005; Wankel & Berger, 1990; Warburton et al., 2006), and may buffer the physiological effects of physical inactivity by limiting the development and progression of chronic disease (Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2009; Warburton et al., 2006). However, the continued discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization of sexual and gender minority individuals contribute to members of these communities engaging in insufficient levels of physical activity to maintain health. For example, in an international survey of sexual minority and heterosexual adults from English-speaking countries, researchers found that 80% of all respondents had experienced or witnessed homophobia in sport (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). Furthermore, Denison and Kitchen (2015) demonstrated that spectator stands followed by physical education classes were the locations where homophobia was most likely to occur. Similarly, research investigating inclusivity within sport in the European Union revealed that 90% of the 5,524 LGBTQ+ respondents considered homophobia and particularly transphobia to be current issues in sport (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021). Survey responses also indicated that there was a small tendency towards homophobic and transphobic language being witnessed more often in other physical activities (e.g., exercise) than sport (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021).

The pervasiveness of sexuality and gender-based discrimination towards queer persons across physical activity contexts complicates participation in regular, joyful, and embodied physical activity. In Canada, data show that only 53.8% of sexual minority-identified individuals are moderately physically active (Statistics Canada, 2015). A study comparing physical activity behaviours between LGBTQ+ and cis-heterosexual college students found that LGBTQ+ students engaged in 17% less aerobic and 42% less resistance exercise and were 2.2 times less likely to meet physical activity guidelines (Frederick et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that current physical activity paradigms and contexts may be insufficient, insensitive to the needs of, or ineffective at supporting diverse LGBTQ+ communities (Herrick & Duncan, 2018). As such, better understanding of the experiences of queer individuals within and across a multitude of physical activity contexts is warranted to help inform tailored physical activity interventions to support queer individuals.

2.2.2 The Intersections of Gender, Sexual Identity, and Physical Activity

To be a woman athlete, and by extension, a woman who engages in physical activity more broadly in contemporary society is to act in a manner considered contrary to traditional gender roles (Lenskyj, 1987). The complex systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, heterosexism) perpetuated by Western society function to intimidate women, and sexual and gender minorities, maintain social control, and preserve the current cultural paradigm (Lewis, 2018). Based upon the assumption that heterosexuality is the ‘default’ (i.e., compulsory heterosexuality) sexual orientation, heterosexism upholds the notion that women are innately attracted to men (Rich, 2002). Scholars argue that the socially constructed climate in sport and physical activity perpetuates and upholds sexist and heterosexist systems, consequently restricting the physical activity behaviour of queer and trans women (Gill et al., 2010; Herrick & Duncan, 2018). For example, Herrick and Duncan (2018) conducted a scoping review of the experiences of LGBTQ+ adults within physical activity contexts and found that sexual orientation affects engagement in physical activity differentially by gender. Specifically, their findings revealed that compared to other sexual minority groups (e.g., gay and trans men), queer and trans women exhibited the lowest levels of physical activity behaviour (Herrick & Duncan, 2018). As such, it is critical that future research adopts an intersectional and multilevel approach that examines factors related to gender, sexual identity, organizational and institutional cultural norms, and group support to better understand the physical activity behaviours and experiences of queer and trans women within physical activity contexts (Cunningham, 2012)

Much of the sexual prejudice experienced by queer cisgender women athletes reflects the stereotype of lesbians as masculine (Krane, 1997). To avoid being labelled and treated as lesbians, lesbian athletes must conceal their identity or risk additional prejudice and discrimination (Fusco, 1998; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane, 1997). For example, prevailing stereotypes of the predatory masculine lesbian often provide the foundation for sexual prejudice (Hekma, 1998; Kauer & Krane, 2006). As such, locker rooms have been identified as the most traumatic spaces for queer women and a particularly salient barrier

to participation (Jones & Brewster, 2017; Sykes, 2011). Furthermore, the failure of sport and physical education structures to recognize the multiplicity and complexity of gender and sexuality functions as another barrier to participation for queer and transgender women within these contexts (Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014). To illustrate, a qualitative analysis by Lucas-Carr and Krane (2011) of transgender athletes' experiences in sport showed that these athletes had to negotiate ways to “fit in” to traditional sport settings that are organized by gender and were viewed as outsiders as their gender identity did not match the institutionalized ways that sport has been traditionally organized. Further, institutionalized norms related to gender within sport influenced the female sprinter from South Africa, Caster Semenya. Staurowsky (2012) reported that based on her appearance, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) required her to undergo a sex test. Her dominant performance coupled with perceived masculine features and attire resulted in her woman-ness being questioned. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that cultural stereotypes and institutional norms and standards within physical activity contexts can shape the prevalence of sexism and heterosexism and the specific discrimination queer and trans women encounter (Cunningham, 2012).

Researchers have suggested that the dominant trend of decreased physical activity engagement among queer and transgender women may be grounded in a social norm emphasizing body acceptance (Herrick & Duncan, 2018). However, this idea presumes that queer and trans women may not be engaging in physical activity due to flexible appearance ideals and a subsequent decreased need to modify their bodies through sport and/or exercise. While previous research supports the notion that cisgender queer women may have better body image relative to cisgender heterosexual women, this suggestion overlooks the myriad of other reasons individuals engage in physical activity (e.g., increase muscular strength, improve mental health, social connection). To date, research demonstrates that cisgender queer women's bodies act as a barrier to sport participation via stigmatization when they do not comply with and/or perform hegemonic feminine body ideals (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Kolnes, 1995; Krane et al., 2004; Sisjord, 1997). As such, empirical evidence provides preliminary support for a relationship between culturally imposed body ideals and sport behaviour among cisgender queer women. Yet, this preponderance of research has focused exclusively on homonormative

representations of lesbian cisgender women in sporting contexts with a relative shortage of literature on the behaviour and experiences of queer transgender women as well as queer cisgender women who do not identify as lesbian in physical activity more broadly. Therefore, to achieve a deeper understanding of queer women's experiences in physical activity and how their body image experiences may influence their physical activity behaviour, we need to engage with adults who reflect the diversity represented within queer women's communities.

2.2.3 'Queering' of Sports: Community Resilience and The Sub-Cultural Influence on Sport Participation

Even though queer women report significant experiences of queer-phobia and negative stereotypes within sport that complicate participation (B. Cox & Thompson, 2001; Fynes & Fisher, 2016; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane et al., 2004), some continue to participate despite the adversity they experience. Just as the minority stress model describes how difficult social situations or unique stressors associated with being queer are associated with negative health consequences (Meyer, 2003). The model also outlines how the effects of queer minority stress can be mitigated by one's ability to survive and thrive when faced with adversity, defined as resilience (Meyer, 2015). Within the minority stress model, resilience is conceptualized as: (a) individual resilience and (b) community resilience (Meyer, 2015). Individual resilience refers to personal attributes that may enhance one's ability to cope with stress (e.g., self-compassion, body appreciation). Community resilience refers to the norms, values, role-models, social resources, and social supports available to a person to help them cope with stress.

In contrast to heterosexual women, queer women must learn to cope with "cultural victimization." As they navigate the challenges of living in a cis-heteronormative and patriarchal culture, queer women may cultivate a broader range of coping skills to manage the impact of adversity (Balsam, 2012). Two important facets of queer women's subculture is its orientation towards both a queer politics of supporting difference and enhancing community well-being (Bristow & Wilson, 1993). Importantly, research suggests that queer individuals cultivate and enhance community resilience by supporting other queer community members and collectively resisting sociopolitical adversity

(Gonzalez et al., 2021). As such, queer women's cultural practices may help explain sexuality-based resistance to heteronormativity in sport (Broad, 2001).

Since the mid-twentieth century, queer women have used sport as a location for community gathering, support, and social, political, and cultural resistance (Broad, 2001; Elling et al., 2003; Pitts, 1997). To illustrate, in the 1950s, when bars were being raided and lesbians were arrested frequently, lesbians were forced to create safe contexts to meet and interact (Faderman, 1991). Consequently, lesbians started participating in the softball environment as players, coaches, and spectators, and this location of interaction between queer women has persisted into the present day. Further sport contexts like rugby, are sites where traditional gender roles are inherently being challenged (Broad, 2001). As such, certain sport contexts may be ideal locations for queer women's cultural practice of political resistance by challenging dominant norms and celebrating difference.

In the contemporary context, the effects of earlier queer women carving out distinct space in certain sport environments (e.g., rugby) can be observed through increased embodiment. Findings from Voyles et al., (2023) revealed that in sports where body shape and size diversity is represented and strength and athleticism are emphasized, sexual minority women recalled feeling empowered and in-tune with their physical sensations. Through collective support and resilience, queer women have historically and continue to use sport to cultivate embodiment and provide safe locations for their communities.

2.3 Summary

Body image is a multi-faceted construct that encompasses both negative and positive dimensions (Cash, 2012). Due to sociocultural pressures and oppressive forces, women, and especially queer women may be more likely to experience body image disturbances and associated negative outcomes (Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Mason et al., 2018; Morrison et al., 2004; O'Flynn et al., 2023). The current scholarship on queer women's body image does not provide a consistent understanding of the various relationships between components of body image and relevant psychosocial and behavioural outcomes. This

may be due to quantitative findings that defined queer women to fixed identities and not capturing intra-group variability.

There is a robust bi-directional relationship between indices of body image and physical activity behaviour, emotions, and cognitions (Sabiston et al., 2019). Specifically, dimensions of positive body image have been associated with enhanced physical activity outcomes (Cox et al., 2019). Despite findings to suggest that queer women may have a generally better body image than heterosexual women, queer cisgender and transgender women exhibit low levels of physical activity behaviour. Notably, it has been posited that this may be due to a cultural norm emphasizing body acceptance (Herrick & Duncan, 2018). To date, there has been no research examining the influence queer women's construction of their body image has on their physical activity behaviour and experiences. Moreover, to achieve a more nuanced understanding of this relationship, it is important to both incorporate theoretical frameworks that conceptualize minority experiences and consider relevant subcultural influences.

2.4 Specific Research Objectives

The purpose of the present study was to explore adult queer cisgender and transgender women's construction of their body image, experiences of body-related discrimination and homonegativity, and how they may have interacted to influence past and current experiences within physical activity more broadly. Given the exploratory and novel nature of this work, no *a priori* hypotheses were identified.

Chapter 3

3 Method

3.1 Philosophical Orientation and Positionality

This study is situated within a constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Scwandt, 1997), designed to understand the meaning queer cisgender and transgender women attribute to their construction of body image and behaviour and experiences within physical activity. Positioned within a relativist ontology (Bhaskar, 1989), I believe that there is no single reality independent of the individual (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Scwandt, 1997). Reality exists in the form of multiple individual constructions about the world and is shaped by the environment and unique lived experience of each queer woman. Within a subjectivist epistemology, the knowledge generated from this research will be co-created among the interactions between myself and the participants, as well as between participants (Poucher et al., 2020). I acknowledge that I cannot enter this research as a 'blank slate,' and acknowledge my role as a reflexive instrument in all aspects of the research process. Knowledge is not an immutable, fixed object that someone possesses. Rather, it is created contextually and relationally and will evolve as contexts and relationships between communities and researchers change (Doucet, 2018). Therefore, I must move beyond a collection of stories as representation toward the entanglement of my subjectivity that manifests as action and engagement within this community (Doucet, 2018). As such, I approached this study with the understanding that I am not simply a third-party conduit through which knowledge is transferred from communities to the research literature. My positionality and privilege will influence what knowledge is generated and how it is communicated (Bourdieu, 1996), and I must surrender the desire for objectivity so I may engage critically with the research process.

I chose to locate this study within a queer theoretical perspective by resisting the idea of confining participants to certain fixed identities in favour of examining a range of different ways people may define themselves (Krane, 2001). This study endeavoured to answer the call Browne and Nash (2010) put forth for scholars to communicate their understanding of 'queer' within their research. Given the purpose of this research and the

onto-epistemological framework, the choice to use the term ‘queer’ was an intentional and critically evaluated decision informed by feminist and queer academic literature.

I do not approach this research claiming an objective eye; rather, my identity as a visible queer woman, former professional athlete and coach, and experience with an eating disorder impacted how and why this research was conducted. As a thin-identifying White woman living in a body that is not systematically discriminated against, I also hold a privileged position in examining queer cisgender and transgender women’s experiences related to their body image. Guided by the concept of ecological thinking “wherein researchers are responsive to, and responsible for, their participation in and accounting of unfolding worlds” (Doucet, 2018, p. 80), I approach this research as a ‘modest witness’ (Haraway, 1997) who is partial, political, intersectional, and humble (Doucet, 2018). As a feminist researcher, I believe that I have an epistemic responsibility to engage in ethical research that provides some benefit to the world. To benefit the world, research should result in the construction of knowledge that directly benefits the community from which it was derived (Wilson, 2001).

3.2 Participants

Adult, queer cisgender and transgender women were sampled purposefully through queer groups at Western University (e.g., Pride Western), queer community groups, varsity sports teams, fitness facilities, and physical activity clubs. To be eligible to participate, individuals must have been between the ages of 18-35 inclusive at the time of screening, identify their gender as a cisgender or transgender woman, identify their sexual orientation as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer, and fluently speak, read, and write in English. Individuals who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study. Recruitment flyers were distributed on social media pages including Instagram. Snowball sampling, a recruitment method that has been recognized as a strategy that may enable researchers to gain access to individuals who live outside of the boundaries of normative heterosexuality (Browne, 2005), was used to maximize recruitment efforts. Thus, I leveraged existing connections within both the queer and fitness communities to help disseminate the recruitment flyer both in print and via social media.

The planned sample size was estimated to range from 45-60 participants to allow for the identification of complex, nuanced issues, data richness, and optimize informational power (Guest et al., 2017; Hennink et al., 2019). Qualitative researchers often recruit a smaller sample of participants compared to quantitative researchers (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The concept of data saturation, defined as “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little to no change to the results” (Guest et al., 2017 p. 5), has become the gold standard by which sample sizes in focus group studies are determined (Guest et al., 2006; Guest & MacQueen, 2008). However, saturation can only be determined during or after data analysis (Guest et al., 2017). As such, existing research suggests that universal sample size recommendations for focus group studies are not useful given the concept of data saturation (Guest et al., 2016; Hennink et al., 2019). Rather, *a priori* sample size estimates should remain flexible by identifying a range and be determined by parameters including the purpose of the study, the type of themes, the number of defining demographic characteristics, and the specific informational power the study is aiming to achieve (Hennink et al., 2019).

3.3 Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board in the Fall of 2022 (Appendix A). The letter of information and consent was emailed to the prospective participant via Qualtrics to read and sign (Appendix B). Once the letter of information and consent was signed and received, a 10-minute one-on-one Zoom meeting was scheduled to ensure eligibility, discuss study details, and acquire verbal consent. Demographic data were collected at this time and included age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, country of origin, and their chosen pseudonym to be used during the focus group. If eligible, participants provided their availability and were invited to participate in a 90-minute focus group with four to seven other eligible individuals. Participants were emailed the focus group questions prior to the scheduled meeting to provide an opportunity to consider their answers beforehand.

The focus groups were facilitated by me as the lead researcher for this study. All 13 focus groups were audio- and video-recorded, conducted virtually on Zoom, transcribed verbatim, and lasted between 65-110 minutes. Before the focus groups began, I facilitated

one pilot focus group to gain experience facilitating. The audio and video recording was then analyzed by the research supervisor, who had previous experience conducting focus groups, which allowed for techniques and screening procedures to be altered accordingly based on her suggested revisions. Revisions included adjustments related to facilitation techniques, such as asking open-ended probing questions and modification of the debriefing document (Appendix C) to provide additional support materials and encourage the use of cameras during the screening calls and focus groups to confirm identity and ensure the safety of fellow participants as members of oppressed groups.

3.4 Data Collection

The specific method of inquiry I selected for this research project was focus groups, as this method is most aligned with the onto-epistemological position of this study. Listening to multiple voices reinforces the assertion that no singular reality exists (Bhaskar, 1989). It ensures knowledge was co-created not only between the participant and researcher but between participants as well (Poucher, 2020). Since the argument can be made that no purely queer research method exists per se, the link between this project's ontological and epistemological approaches and this specific technique of data gathering is through a "queering of methodologies" (Browne & Nash, 2010). Operating from the perspective of queer and standpoint epistemologies, the knowing individual is "redrawn as contingent, multiple, and unstable; constituted within historically, geographically and socially specific social relations" (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 4). Indeed, one of the central tenets of queer theory is its resistance to defining identity as fixed or absolute, instead, focusing on identity as an unstable characteristic (Krane, 2001). The researcher is 'queering' this method by placing sexuality as the principal focus of this study, through which the social and cultural phenomena that arise will be explained (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2005). As described by Browne and Nash (2010), "queer scholarship, then, in its contemporary form is anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge, and critique a host of taken-for-granted 'stabilities' in our social lives" (p. 7). The knowledge produced from these gendered and queer-centred narratives was used to question and contest dominant viewpoints of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality, and homosexuality held within the field of Kinesiology. Lastly, the

decision to utilize focus groups was influenced by the views of queer scholar Max Kirsch (2013), who argued for an emphasis on queer community rather than the individual. This supports the supposition that individual stories and experiences will be richer and deeper when disclosed in the context of a community that has a shared history of discrimination. The focus groups were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. As pseudonyms were used during the focus groups, all transcripts ensured the confidentiality of the participants was maintained. All participants were emailed a debriefing document upon completion of the focus group that included support resources. Participants were subsequently compensated with a \$35 CAD gift card of their choice for participation.

The type of method chosen in qualitative research often depends on the purpose of the study, which can be found in the main research question(s) (Maxwell, 2021). Guided by feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1992), the aim to discover insight into how queer women's body image influences their broader physical activity experiences requires the inclusion of women with multiple-marginalized identities as their lived experiences enable a more complete view of their realities (McCarl Nielsen, 1990). The primary method of data collection implemented by sport and exercise psychologists has been the individual interview (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). However, focus groups allow multiple viewpoints on a preselected topic in an open, free-exchange environment (Wilkinson, 1998). In the context of research grounded in feminist and queer theory, focus groups allow participants to explore issues in a safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes among people with whom they share common backgrounds (Whaley, 2001). Further, focus groups have been identified as a robust qualitative method of data collection to explore new areas or research questions, and are particularly useful for accessing the views of those who have been poorly served by traditional research (Wilkinson, 1998). As such, the current study selected a focus group method to explore the influence body image had on the broad physical activity experiences of queer women.

Throughout the data collection process, I engaged in reflexive journaling after each focus group to ensure reflection was a continuous process. Journal entries were made after focus groups where I recalled as much detail as possible. For example, these included my perception of my relationships with the participants and their responses, my elicited

emotions, the mood, and energy of the focus group and how this influenced the focus group. I also considered ideas about interpretations of the data, questions I had, and my facilitation skills. Last, I reflected on how the intersecting power dynamics from dual roles as a member of the queer community and as a person of privilege within the academy may have influenced the stories participants shared. A critical examination of how these identities may have converged to influence the responses was crucial to the rigorous analysis of the provided narratives.

3.4.1 Focus Group Guide

The focus group guide was designed to proceed logically from one topic to another and flow from the general to the specific (Wilkinson, 1998). Following guidelines from previous research, the initial questions were designed to be broad, and as the discussion continued, the questions became more specific and focused (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). The purpose of the discussion guide was to formulate open-ended and simple questions that enabled a framework for the researcher to ask probing questions throughout the focus group to elicit more in-depth responses. Examples of probing questions included, (a) "How did that experience affect you?" and (b) "Can you tell me more about that?" While I made a rigorous effort to not direct the discussion in a biased way, I recognized that existing research acknowledges a well-designed focus group guide should allow flexibility to pursue unanticipated yet relevant issues that may arise during the discussion (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008).

I began each focus group with an opening statement where I re-introduced myself, and reminded participants that resources were included in the letter of information and consent and would be provided again in the debriefing document emailed to all participants following the completion of the focus group. A brief reminder of the purpose of the study was provided and relevant terms were defined (e.g., physical activity, body image, queer) to ensure an adequate understanding of all language that was used. Participants were also reminded of the length of the discussion (60-90 minutes), that the discussion would be video, and audio recorded, and that while all participants were encouraged to answer each question, they were welcome to respond to only the questions they felt comfortable answering. They were reminded that all contributions were

valuable, that they were free to remain silent or exit the Zoom meeting at any time, and to respect the privacy of all participants by refraining from sharing what was discussed during the focus group with others. I then started the recording and opened with a question designed to provide participants with an opportunity to identify their chosen pseudonym used during the discussion and preferred pronouns, as well as provide a brief description of the participants' interest in participating in the study (see Appendix D). The question included, "To begin, we would like to learn a little bit about our focus group participants. If you are comfortable, please share your pseudonym, preferred pronouns, and your interest in participating in this focus group." Following this, I proceeded with the key questions, where more in-depth responses from the participants were elicited.

The key questions began with participants being asked to broadly describe their experiences regarding the inter-relatedness between body image, physical activity, and queer identity. For example, I asked, (a) "In what ways does your relationship with your body influence your participation in physical activity?" (b) "How does your queer identity influence your body image?" and (c) "How has your queer identity impacted your physical activity behaviour?" The remaining key questions asked participants to reflect on noteworthy body image experiences they had experienced throughout the course of their life (e.g., positive and/or negative), what type(s) of physical activity they engage in and why (or why not) they choose to participate, discrimination in physical activity spaces as queer women, experiences of support with respect to their bodies in physical activity and in physical activity generally, and what an ideal physical activity context would encompass to support queer women and their bodies. These questions were designed to answer the objective of the study and were influenced by three areas of research: reports consistently showing a significant bidirectional relationship between individual body image and physical activity behaviour, studies demonstrating equivocal findings on the nature of queer women's body image, and limited research exploring queer women's experiences of discrimination and support in physical activity contexts, and physical activity behaviour more broadly (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006; Herrick & Duncan, 2018.; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Morrison et al., 2004; Owens et al., 2002; Wagenbach, 2004). After each participant had answered a specific question, I summarized the main points that had been identified before moving on to the next

question (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). Finally, I asked a concluding question, to provide participants with the opportunity to add anything they felt was missing from the discussion and to answer any additional questions they had.

3.5 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used to analyze the focus group responses. Research examining queer women's body image and physical activity behaviour and experiences is sparse, and thematic analysis is flexible method that is exceptionally useful when examining under-researched areas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further, thematic analysis is used to "identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experiences, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297), which allowed the study to use a constructivist paradigm, and to focus on the identification of broad themes in the participants' unique lived experiences. When implementing RTA, I knew I must understand that analysis is not in the data, rather it is an active process (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Terry et al., 2017). Although Braun and Clarke (2019) provide a six-step approach to RTA, they emphasize that analysis is not linear and that movement back and forth between steps is needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the first step, I familiarized myself with the data by listening to the audio recordings and transcribing the focus groups verbatim. Subsequently, I read each focus group transcript to become more familiar with the data. I then re-read each focus group transcript and actively engaged by considering potential meanings and patterns while making reflective notes. Data familiarization helped me start to make sense of what was being said during the focus groups.

The second step involved generating codes, which are labels (semantic and latent, inductive and deductive) of a segment of raw data that is potentially relevant to the research question (Braun et al., 2016). Codes provide the building blocks of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and the foundation for theme development (Braun et al., 2016). Coding was both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (researcher and/or theory-driven) to align with Braun et al., (2022) assumption that the subjective and embedded process of

RTA makes pure induction impossible as “we bring with us all sorts of perspectives, theoretical and otherwise, to our meaning making” (p. 56). I started by working through one focus group at a time where I made semantic codes that focused on the explicit meaning of what a participant had said. When working through a focus group transcript, I examined the corresponding reflexive journal entry to provide additional context. As well, I made specific notes in the transcript document, and collaborated with a critical peer, who had also listened to audio-recordings and read transcripts, to generate initial codes. Conversations with the critical peer would be driven from these notes, and we would discuss our speculations, potential underpinning meanings, commonalities between focus groups, questions we both had, and ideas for me to look further into.

As I progressed through the focus groups, I felt like I had a better understanding of the process and began coding latently (researcher-drive, conceptual). I paid attention to how participants were communicating their experiences, as this is just as important as what is explicitly stated (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). For example, during transcription and in my reflexive journal entries I noted pauses sharing, vulnerable moments, realizations, and other non-verbal cues that I picked up. As I continued coding the focus groups, I moved back and forth between focus groups and noticed that by focus group five, coding became less frequent and more focused in relation to my research questions.

After reviewing my transcripts from the first round of coding, I realized a second round of coding was required to attend to my notes, simplify, and refine my codes. I was guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2013) suggestions that ‘good’ codes “capture the essence of what it is about that bit of data that interests you [...] and informative enough to capture what was in the data, and your analytic take on it” (p. 210). In this second round of coding, I set out to ask better questions of the data and attempted to embed myself within the data. My positionality as a visible queer woman, a former professional athlete and coach, and my experience recovering from an eating disorder ultimately influenced what interested me in the data. As such, I had a personally constructed understanding of the relationships between body image and experiences of discrimination on physical activity behavior among queer women. I approached coding by attending to queer women’s stories as a ‘consciously curious’ researcher who was open to hearing and reporting different

experiences than my own and make meaningful connections within the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This process helped me refine my initial codes, identify codes that were related to my research question, and delve deeper into what was being said. At this point, I felt I had a good grasp over the data and similar codes were being created across multiple transcripts.

In the third step, I identified relevant data and quotes under the initial codes and captured higher-level patterns from participants accounts to develop themes, which are broader “patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organizing concept – a shared core idea” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). It is crucial to note that themes do not emerge from the data. Rather, RTA is an active process where themes are generated or developed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The process of theme development included organizing codes to identify potential themes (Braun et al., 2016), where coded data “differs from the units of analysis (your themes) which are (often) broader organizing concepts: (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). I had my list of codes typed out and I began clustering like codes and moved them around where I saw fit. Once codes were arranged in like clusters, I reviewed each cluster and moved codes again. I then started to develop tentative themes for each cluster. My research question acted as a guide for preliminary theme development, helping determine “what is, and what is not, relevant in terms of potential clusters of patterned meaning” (Terry et al., 2017, p. 35). Initial themes were generated based on my perceptions of broad patterns of meaning across codes. I developed six preliminary overarching themes: (1) the queer woman’s body is political, (2) hypervisibility and invisibility leading to the desire to escape, (3) the predatory lesbian, (4) lack of representation in the media, (5) physical activity spaces are unsafe for queer women, and (6) the desire for spaces for connection, belonging and reduced body surveillance and shame. This was an iterative and reflexive process which required me to immerse myself in the data.

In the fourth step, myself, alongside a mentor who acted as another critical peer, compared the initial codes to the developed themes, and their corresponding quotes, to ensure similarities and distinctions in participant narratives were holistically captured during theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The process of reviewing and

refining themes took place in two steps. First, the critical peer and I reviewed the data within the initial themes independently to ensure that data extracts fit together and formed a coherent pattern. Second, we assessed that themes were clear and distinct and actively reflected the meaningfulness of the data set. Furthermore, I re-read the entire data set to capture and code any missing data, and to ensure themes had moved to the interpretive level. My goal was to ensure that the themes would capture important ideas communicated in the data, as higher-level analysis moves “analytic narrative beyond simply summarizing and describing your themes to providing some kind of commentary on their implications and importance” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 198). An existing theme may be discarded if there is not enough data to support it, themes may be collapsed into one theme, or themes could be separated into two different themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While reviewing my analysis, I remained mindful that each theme needed to have a distinct centralizing concept, which would highlight the boundaries between themes. Further, I wanted to ensure that the themes told a coherent story that reflected my data set and answered my research question. As such, I decided to omit “lack of representation in the media” due to insufficient data. Additionally, I chose to combine “the predatory lesbian” and “physical activity spaces are unsafe for queer women” with the centralizing concept of hypervigilance, into one theme titled “hypervigilance to maintain safety and reduce perpetuating gender-based violence.” I felt that merging these themes helped to better catch a coherent story of the data.

In the fifth step, myself, and the supervising critical peer reviewed and refined the identified themes and corresponding data by further defining each theme. The themes were portrayed and described with the support of excerpts of verbal accounts from the participants. The goal was to build depth and detail through the analytic narrative (Braun et al., 2016). I felt that I could clearly define what the themes were and what they were not by the end of this stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Along with definitions, clear and concise names were given to each theme that accurately reflected the meaning and story of each theme. Finally, step six involved writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In highlighting supporting quotes to reflect the identified themes, I prioritized featuring the experiences of women with multiple marginalized identities to try and address issues of

inclusion and diversity in research. Steps two to six were completed collaboratively through an iterative back-and-forth process, and continuous consultation and discussion.

3.5.1 Ensuring Methodological Rigor

In alignment with my commitment to ontological relativism and epistemological subjectivism, I chose to reject reliability as an appropriate criterion for judging the rigor of qualitative research. Applying reliability criteria to qualitative research is incompatible with the belief that realities are subjective, multiple, changing, and context dependent. For example, a qualitative researcher seeking rich and personally meaningful information from people in focus groups does not ask the same questions, in precisely the same order, with the same non-verbal expressions or emotional tone, in repeated social contexts, with no change in their knowledge based on previous focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Instead of thinking in terms of inter-rater reliability, I chose to use ‘critical peers’ to enhance the rigor and quality of analysis. This entails a process of essential discourse among individuals, where researchers articulate their interpretations in connection with others who attentively listen and provide critical feedback. The role of the critical peer is “not to agree or achieve consensus but rather to encourage reflexivity by challenging each other’s construction of knowledge” (Cowan & Taylor, 2016, p. 508). In this study, I used critical peers to encourage my reflection upon, and exploration of, multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations of the patterns of shared meaning generated in relation to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2023). I acknowledge that, while there can be agreement among critical peers, such agreement does not mean that the truth has been found or that the research is replicable. In contrast to inter-rater reliability, I welcomed critical peers’ feedback as a resource for challenging and developing the interpretations I made as I endeavoured to construct a coherent narrative across the data.

3.6 Summary

I have positioned this study within a constructivist paradigm and oriented it with a realist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. Further, I located this research within a queer theoretical perspective. I used feminist research methodology and multiple feminist theories to guide each methodological decision. This research was impacted by my own

positionality as a queer woman. Consequently, I remained mindful throughout this process of the ways in which research can marginalize minority experience. During the data collection process, I first conducted brief Zoom calls with each participant to screen for eligibility and make initial connections. Then, I facilitated virtual focus groups with queer women from across Canada. I completed an iterative research and analytic process and developed four overarching themes that were generated from the data.

Chapter 4

4 Results

A total of 70 queer, women-identifying participants including 68 cisgender women and two transgender women were recruited for the final sample. Using reflexive thematic analysis, four themes were identified: (1) The Queer Woman's Body is Political; (2) (in)Visibility of Sexual and Gender Identity in Physical Activity; (3) Hypervigilance to Maintain Safety and Reduce Perpetuating Gender-Based Violence; and (4) Desire for Spaces that Foster Safety, Belonging, and Connection. Throughout the focus groups, participants described a range of experiences about the intersectional influence of their gender and sexual identity on their experiences with the body and physical activity behaviour. The experiences captured in the themes reveal notable tensions and highlight the complexity of queer women's relationships with their bodies and physical activity.

4.1 Theme 1: The Queer Woman's Body is Political

The discussions about how a queer identity influences body image and physical activity behaviour revealed the political nature of queer women's bodies. This showed up through a multitude of participant experiences that included institutional and/or systemic oppression, the objectification of participants' bodies, and their own acts of political resistance by challenging traditional cultural appearance norms. One participant, Clarice, a 20-year-old ciswoman from a rural area of Canada recalled an experience of institutional discrimination in her grade five school gym class:

My principal actually approached me and said, "hey, can you change in the bathroom instead?" Because it was such a thing that I didn't look like how a girl was supposed to look and dress that parents were calling the school and being like, "oh, we don't want a lesbian in the change room." So that was a really interesting experience for someone in the fifth grade.

This experience highlights the political nature of queer women's bodies as sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings. In this case, she was subjected to institutional regulation by an individual in a position of power as her body

was perceived to not be feminine enough and was not behaving in a socially and politically accepted manner.

Many participants expressed an understanding of how their marginalized identities create a heightened awareness around the body by challenging feminine appearance ideals.

Alex, a 21-year-old, white, cis-woman stated:

When it comes to queer identity, I think now we have to focus on our body and how it exists, especially in physical activity spaces. And maybe you don't fit the norms of what a female body or a woman-presenting body should look like, or maybe you don't fit in with the idea of what girls should do for exercise versus what boys should do for exercise. And I found that just limits the amount of participation.

This participant understood that the body is central to political and social control. Bodies that are deemed deviant in society are inherently political as they threaten power structures that seek to contain and control. In the context of physical activity, the awareness that her body may not be considered socially acceptable acted as a barrier to her decision to engage in physical activity. In other instances, a select number of participants chose to resist oppressive power structures that perpetuate only feminine appearance standards as socially acceptable. For example, Ivory, a 20-year-old East Asian transgender woman explained:

Honestly, I want to have bigger thighs than every man that I know. I love having big thighs, being able to squat and like destroy everything. I feel like trans women are expected to be so feminine and a lot of people who message me say they prefer trans women because trans women are sometimes more feminine than cis women, which I really do not fuck with because like, it's not a competition. First of all, I don't care what anyone else does, and second, that's such an expectation. I want to have the biggest thighs and I want to be able to crush your skull with it, is my vibe. So yeah, that's why I participate in physical activity. Also, it's

genderless weightlifting. It's not a gendered sport where I have to go to a women's section or men's section. I just go and squat, so it's awesome.

For Ivory, engaging in physical activity allowed her to resist the political demands of how bodies should behave by challenging not only the sexist beauty standards that all women face but also the cis-normative pressures that encourage trans individuals to conform to binary gendered appearance ideals.

There were also frequent discussions about queer women's experiences navigating the tension of simultaneously being immersed in heteronormative society and lesbian subculture, both of which have particular beauty ideals and appearance norms.

Participants spoke about how regardless of their queer identity, they are still women who are socialized in a heteronormative society that transmits powerful messages of ideal physical attractiveness. Nina, an 18-year-old white cis- woman spoke about how this bicultural experience can impact queer women:

I think that queer women often can perpetuate patriarchal standards for what bodies should look like. But at the same time, I think queer people and queer women especially, are often like radicalized groups and that kind of political identity definitely helps because I think there's more open-mindedness and appreciation of human difference.

This quote reflects an idea that many participants emphasized, which is that communities of queer women promote a culture of body acceptance, inclusion, and appreciation for diverse body shapes and sizes. Participants described a capacity to be liberated from societal ideals of feminine beauty as they adopt a political identity and decide to resist heteronormative beauty standards in favour of embracing their queer identity. This act of resistance had a profoundly positive effect on many participants' body image, which impacted physical activity experiences, “My queer identity has actually made me feel more attractive because I don't feel like I need to live up to normative ideals of what attractive is, and now I exercise for enjoyment, to feel good” (Charlie, 31-year-old white, cis-woman). To illustrate further, Sidney, a 22-year-old white, cisgender woman stated:

Embracing my queerness and being part of queer spaces has actually been a really healing thing for the way that I interact with my body and live in my body in a way that feels a lot more comfortable. And I feel like I'm just giving it permission to be what it is in a way that I haven't experienced before.

Collectively, these quotes demonstrate that embracing one's queer identity is a conscious act of political resistance as these women are actively challenging socially accepted heteronormative body ideals. In doing so, this defiance of cultural expectations may have an adaptive effect on individual body image and physical activity behaviour. However, participants also expressed that challenging the boundaries of the gender binary often resulted in a perceived lack of safety in cis-heterosexual physical activity environments and spaces dominated by men. The political nature of the body creates a false hierarchy that privileges bodies deemed socially acceptable. As such, marginalized bodies that transgress cultural, social, sexual, and/or political boundaries are placed at risk. For example, Jessie, a 25-year-old white, cis-women stated:

When I've done intramurals where there's bro culture, stuff like not shaving my legs makes me feel anxious about getting close to some of these guys and having them see that, and I don't care about that in most environments. But in very cis-het-normative spaces, the compounded queerphobia and sexism together make it feel unsafe to be around bros.

In discussing the barrier embracing one's queer identity may have on physical activity participation, many participants indicated the need for sporting leagues, organizations, and physical activity spaces more broadly to be created by communities of queer women with a political orientation that recognizes the need to address intersecting systems of oppression. Casey, a 26-year-old white, cisgender woman specified:

So I think we need to start with centring queer women and then create spaces where people feel safe. But there have to be clear guidelines and policies against discrimination or exclusion of any kind. There must be a politic defining the space. Like does your queer politic and your sports

mean that like you don't always keep score, is your space accessible and affordable, do you make it clear that all ability levels are welcome, is there a policy that says fat-phobia, racism, and trans/homophobia will not be tolerated. Politics must be included in the sports community, too, and not just have it be like, you're a queer woman, this is a queer-only space, you belong here and it will be safe and we will all get along.

To effectively address the safety issues preventing queer women from engaging in physical activity, organizations, leagues, and gyms must be created by and for queer women. Further, this quote highlights the need for anti-discrimination policies to ensure that queer women are protected from the consequences of living in bodies that threaten the dominant political power structure.

Participants described how their engagement with and relationship to physical activity changed as their individual body image transformed during the coming out process. It was often expressed that when participants no longer internalized the societal pressure to be thin, physical activity transformed from an endeavour to modify body shape and size to a pursuit of strength and well-being. This demonstrates the positive impact that can occur by challenging political systems that regulate the social and cultural value of bodies. To illustrate, Penny, a 31-year-old white cisgender woman recounted:

And since embracing my queerness and being part of the queer community and being in queer spaces, I have felt a lot more comfortable with my body just being what it is, and it hasn't needed to show up in a particular way. And exercise has become something that I do because it feels good and it's not for the purpose of shaping my body in a way that fits into societal beauty standards.

However, for select participants, accepting their queer identity facilitated a transformation from internalizing the feminine thin ideal to the masculine muscular ideal. This process revealed a tension between perceived liberation from the oppressive male gaze while simultaneously subscribing to cis-heterosexual patriarchal ideas of what

women are physically attracted to. For example, Lisa, a 24-year-old white cisgender woman recounted:

When I realized I was queer, it immediately switched from I am not skinny enough to I'm not strong enough, I don't have enough muscles to impress women.

This quote supports the well-established finding that sociocultural body ideals exist for both men and women and are deeply embedded within the fabric of modern Western culture. The process of detaching from societal feminine appearance standards does not relinquish women from the social conditioning individuals internalize that defines what bodies must look like in order to be considered attractive and desirable. However, despite remaining confined to cultural appearance ideals, many women expressed a profound relief from body image disturbance and more adaptive motives for physical activity. Rather than continuing to engage in physical activity to lose weight, driven by the belief that her body was inadequate, Emily, a 20-year-old white, cis-woman explained her shift in mentality:

Before I accepted the fact I was a lesbian, I was obsessed with losing weight and being thin and having this body that fit very heteronormative beauty standards and I did tons of cardio. After I accepted I was a lesbian, I no longer hated myself for my body. I embrace my body a lot more, I appreciate my broader shoulders and that I can gain muscle. I realized there are parts of my body that were considered unattractive from a male gaze that I think are more attractive from a female gaze. My idea of the perfect body that I should have or the perfect person I should be has definitely changed quite a bit. It's now about exercising to be stronger, more confident.

This quote demonstrates how powerful the politically inscribed hierarchies that determine which bodies are considered socially valued are. This participant was able to appreciate and accept her body in a way she was previously unable to as the masculine body is more valued in Western society and thus, more socially and politically acceptable.

4.2 Theme 2: (in)Visibility of Sexual and Gender Identity in Physical Activity

During the focus groups, participant responses highlighted the unique influence that their physical appearance and the visibility and expression of their queer identities had on their experiences with the body and physical activity. Specifically, women described that the extent to which they exhibited traditionally masculine or feminine traits, roles, appearance, and behaviours influenced how they were treated in society. Gendered expression and embodiment was described by participants as a salient factor that impacted their experiences in physical activity settings. Through illustrative examples, participants described the differences in experience between queer women of varying gender expressions. Laura, a 35-year-old white, bisexual, cis-gender woman succinctly communicated the privilege she held as a queer woman whose gender expression aligned with societal expectations:

I'm going to answer the second part of your question, which was if we haven't experienced discrimination related to sexuality or body in a physical activity context, why might that be? And I think my answer is simply that because my queerness is super invisible because of my current relationship context, and then I also carry a lot of privilege in many other parts of my identity as well.

In contrast, Sydney, a 24-year-old white, queer, cis-woman recounted the distinct experiences of her and her partner in a traditional gym setting:

I am a femme presenting woman and my partner is a more masculine presenting woman, and we go to the gym a lot together and being in a more male-dominated space is awkward already. But we will act like a couple, we are not pretending to be friends when we go to these spaces, we are always being a couple. I find in my experience there's been looks at me like how someone with my body type can be gay. And then also on the flip side, what is someone like that in reference to my girlfriend? Why would they look like that and be in this space? That has been really

hard for me, both being queer but having totally different experiences in these spaces. We were at the gym this morning and there was only one other guy in the weight room and the entire time he was staring at us. And it's very uncomfortable because you don't know if it's because we are women in the gym, or because we're queer, or because we look a certain way or are doing certain exercises.

This quote demonstrates how the degree to which queer women's outward appearance aligns with cultural feminine body ideals impacts their sense of safety and belonging in physical activity settings. In this instance, both the participant and her partner experienced a subtle form of discrimination and the objectification of their bodies. As a consequence of societal power dynamics that entitle men to stare at women's bodies, the invisible queer woman is made to feel as if her identity is invalid, whereas the visible queer woman is made to feel unwelcome in physical activity settings.

In reference to an experience where a man made a derogatory comment towards her body during a co-ed soccer game, Alice, a 32-year-old self-identified femme, cis-woman stated, "I didn't know if the discrimination I experienced in sport was because I'm queer or because of my body or because I'm a woman." Experiences of discrimination grounded in the objectification of queer women's bodies whose gender trait expression may render their queer identity invisible reveal the complexity of navigating the oppressive systems of both cis-sexism and heterosexism. For select participants, their gender trait expression varied, enabling them to understand the distinct experiences that occur in response to the visibility of one's queer identity. Casey, a 26-year-old white, cisgender lesbian articulated how her ability to present as either masculine or feminine in a given context impacted her experiences within co-ed sport:

Active settings are one of the places I'm more playful with my gender expression, so there are times when I will be quite femme presenting and there are times when I go and am way dykier. And it is actually quite stark sometimes to notice the difference in how I'm treated. When I go climbing and I look feminine it's gross how much guys think that they

can hit on you, or the benevolent sexism of being like, let me tell you how you should be doing this. Same with soccer, if I look more femme and a guy knocks me over, he will adjust me. When I'm femme-presenting, there is this level of benevolent sexism that feels safer than being dykier because it's so normal and there's like norms of where it will stop or when other people will intervene.

In this case, it was clear that while the invisibility of queer identity in physical activity increases the likelihood of sexual objectification and harassment from men, it was still favourable when compared to the lack of psychological and physical safety experienced when one's queer identity is visible. Regardless of how one embodies their queer identity, the effects of cis-heterosexual patriarchy upheld in physical activity force some queer women to choose which system of oppression they would rather be subject to.

For participants who were unable to modify their appearance and successfully pass for a specific binary gender, existing in a body that challenges traditional appearance expectations for women was identified as a barrier to participating in physical activity. Emily, a 20-year-old white transgender woman described the tension she felt around being proud of her queer identity while acknowledging the discomfort associated with being visibly queer in physical activity spaces:

I think it's just the desire to fit in with cishet people. Even though I am proud of my identity as a queer person, it's hard to go into spaces where it's like, I want to have fun and be physically active, but when I'm there I feel like I look weird. And I can tell people are looking at me strangely, which is uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it's not very nice to get otherved and get stared at but it is pretty common for trans people and queer people in general. It's normal to get looked at like you're a little weird, but when it is so clear that I am visibly not like the rest of you makes me not want to participate at all.

Olivia, a 23-year-old white, cisgender lesbian described a notable difference between the experiences of traditionally feminine versus visibly queer women:

As a femme lesbian, I don't experience some of the discrimination that my butch friends do. I find that they are often met with a hostile attitude from other men at the gym whereas I'm met with a flirty attitude from men at the gym. There is a clear assumption that I'm straight and there is one guy who works at the climbing gym, and he's always teasing me to try a climb that is impossible for me as a beginner, and he is doing it in a flirty way, and it is really irritating. So for me, it's annoying, but for my butch friends, I feel like it more seriously ruins or affects their experience. I know that my ex found it to be a very difficult thing to navigate as a butch lesbian, too. So, yeah, I feel like one's annoying and one's actually a safety issue.

The type of discrimination and objectification that participants experienced toward their bodies in physical activity was often based on how their gender expression and embodiment aligned with societal feminine body ideals. Women are accustomed to sexual objectification from men that the discrimination they experience is considered benign. However, visible queer women repeatedly emphasized feeling unsafe in physical activity settings due to other individuals' fear and judgement of what is different since their bodies transgress what is considered socially acceptable for women. Although cis-heterosexual women may share many of these experiences, identifying as queer adds another level of experience that render physical activity spaces even more inaccessible.

4.3 Theme 3: Hypervigilance to Maintain Safety and Reduce Perpetuating Gender-Based Violence

Heteronormative and patriarchal culture creates hostile environments for queer women, which generates a pervasive and continuous strain on this population. For example, queer women whose bodies appear in ways that are inconsistent with gender role expectations often feel pressure to conform to these expectations. As previously described through participant experiences, failure to comply with these pressures is often met with hostility, verbal harassment, violence, and rejection. To protect themselves from psychological and physical harm, queer women engage in heightened self-monitoring of their bodies, which

is a minority stressor known as hypervigilance. Within physical activity settings, the body is constantly being evaluated causing those whose bodies diverge from cultural expectations of femininity to vigilantly monitor how their bodies are being perceived.

This phenomenon was frequently discussed throughout the focus groups as participants indicated that traditional physical activity settings are heteronormative and male-dominated environments that are hostile towards queer women. As expected, this often resulted in them actively monitoring their appearance and their bodies. Sydney, a 24-year-old white, queer, cis-woman explained:

It's a hypervigilance of my body and my queerness intersecting together. Especially if I wear a pride hat or a pride shirt in these spaces that are so male-dominated and heteronormative that I feel like you're just putting a big target on your back. Like, hey, I'm the queer over here trying to do bench. It makes you so much more insecure about what you're trying to do.

Similarly, Nina an 18-year-old white, cisgender queer woman expressed how the heteronormative paradigm created an enhanced awareness of her body and prevented her from engaging in certain types of physical activity:

I've always wanted to try martial arts but I'm kind of afraid of grappling or being paired with the kind of guys that, like cis men, are really into martial arts. They're not really the kind of guys I want to roll around on a mat with. So I think there is a level of fear that this probably isn't going to be the most accepting environment for a woman who's queer and has a larger body. And I always worry about that with classes.

The idea that physical activity environments are not just unwelcoming towards queer women, but unsafe transcends individual themes and was one of the most commonly discussed barriers to physical activity engagement for queer women. Shell, a 31-year-old cisgender lesbian stated:

For queer women, there is the issue of being sexualized by men because of being queer. So, I am very nervous to be in gym spaces because of past experiences I've had being sexualized and the target of harassment. And if you're visibly queer, or you're actively trying to bulk up, or want to look like more masculine you're going to be recognizable as someone that doesn't fit the heteronormative ideal, which can be dangerous, so you must constantly monitor yourself and the people around you.

As a visible queer woman, her experiences of discrimination in physical activity contexts resulted in a great deal of vigilance to protect her safety.

Even participants who did not directly experience instances of queerphobia in physical activity still exercised vigilance within these spaces. Tylo, a 21-year-old Indigenous lesbian ciswoman explained:

I'm very hypervigilant when I'm at the gym or in the change room. Like no looking at women, put the blinders on just in case someone thinks I'm being a predatory lesbian, and I think that blocks queer women from active spaces.

Many participants also felt unwelcome within women's only physical activity spaces and expressed the idea that they did not belong anywhere. In recalling an interaction, she had with a friend, Claire, a 22-year-old Black lesbian ciswoman stated:

She told me that going to the gym with me would defeat the point of going to a women's only gym because I'm not straight and am attracted to women. And I was like, cool guess we're not doing that together then. I had never thought of that as being an issue before, but since she said it, I wonder how many other women think that. And if I go to the gym would I be making some of the other women there who might be straight uncomfortable? I would never want to do that, so does that just mean that I can't go to the gym anywhere?

A similar experience was recounted by Olivia (23-year-old white lesbian ciswoman):

I want to add one thing about the predatory lesbian because I have found that it has affected my ability to exercise without gay people. One time I invited a straight friend of mine to come rock climbing and I had been joking with her about how with all my friends, everything is one big web. And how the two people I usually go climbing with are going to start dating each other because they're flirting all the time. And she asked me to give them a heads-up that she wasn't gay, and I just thought that was really weird. And it made me feel very disappointed that she would think that we were looking at her like that just because we're gay.

Discussion surrounding the predatory lesbian stereotype occurred during every focus group and revealed a notable tension with respect to the body for queer women. Participants expressed overwhelming fears about being labelled a predatory lesbian. This fear was profoundly salient because participants were afraid of violating women in the same way that some cis-heterosexual men had done to them. These participants understood how harmful it can be when men feel entitled to comment on, stare at, and/or touch women's bodies without consent and did not want to be perceived as perpetuating this behaviour.

4.4 Theme 4: Desire for Spaces that Foster Safety, Belonging, and Connection

Participants described the desire and need for safe spaces, or environments that are explicitly intolerant of harassment, discrimination, or violence, where individuals belonging to minority groups can feel confident that they will not be exposed to harm. When asked what was needed for queer women to feel safe and welcome in physical activity spaces, participants expressed the need for queer women-only spaces, gender-neutral change rooms, and policies and regulations that prevented discrimination in any form. Although most participants shared negative experiences within traditional physical activity contexts, there were select women who had positive experiences within safe physical activity spaces. Physical activity environments that were created by queer women for queer women were described as safe havens of fun, liberation, and social

connection. Talia, a 20-year-old cisgender lesbian explained her experience doing burlesque at a queer-only night:

Dressing slutty and queer is so fun and being in the space where you know you're not going to get harassed was very impactful because I was like, okay, I'm going to wear literally whatever the fuck I want, I was pretty much topless and it was really good for feeling comfortable in my body, to be able to just exist in that space and look as queer and naked as possible.

Some participants recounted how queer women-only physical activity spaces were maintained through policies, the women operating the spaces, and the individuals occupying the spaces. Casey expressed how grateful she was for her queer women's soccer league:

The league that I'm part of has a whole guidebook for participation that's grounded in core values like "be antiracist, don't be fat phobic". And we're going to check in and make sure this intensity and pace of play works for everyone, and we'll finish with a check in. And so that was like an incredible space to join.

Participants that had grown up playing organized sports often intentionally sought out explicitly queer-friendly spaces that embraced diversity in both skill and body shape and size. Sidney, an ex-varsity athlete recalled her experience playing in a women's rugby league:

Playing rugby there is such a vast range of different types of people, different types of bodies. It's such a wonderful way to go about it because especially on the women's team, there's so many queer people too, where we push each other and are supportive of each other. Especially in terms of strength. Because your main goal is to just get someone down, right? Or run fast, get someone down. And being able to do that with a bunch of

empowered women and queer folks and non-binary people, it motivates you to just keep going back and keep doing it.

Among participants who were newer to engaging in regular physical activity, the social connection and sense of community belonging that was experienced in queer-friendly spaces were strongly connected to enjoyment and continued participation. For example, Olivia explained that:

Everyone who climbs is a lesbian and that has really impacted the kind of exercise I have chosen to do. The two people I go climbing with are two queer friends that I've really been trying to get closer to because I really like having a lesbian group around me. So this is a huge social decision for me, and I feel like once I made exercise a socializing thing instead of a workout thing, I started liking it more.

This idea was further reflected by Kiran:

I was not a very active person at the time. I didn't really want to be, but having that group, it definitely made me want to go there every week and exercise with these people because I just really liked being around them, and then I grew a love for the sport. So I think my queerness and having a queer group of people really helped me. And also I wasn't afraid of exercising in front of queer women the same way I was at a public gym.

Despite the overwhelming number of negative experiences that informed attitudes toward physical activity among participants, a number of women were able to talk about positive experiences. Safer, queer-friendly and/or queer women-only spaces can help to support positive engagement and experiences within physical activity.

4.5 Summary

The findings from this study culminated in four overarching distinct, but interrelated themes: (1) The Queer Woman's Body is Political; (2) (in)Visibility of Sexual and Gender Identity in Physical Activity; (3) Hypervigilance to Maintain Safety and Reduce

Perpetuating Gender-Based Violence; and (4) Desire for Spaces that Foster Safety, Belonging, and Connection. The themes were organized around the central concepts of body politics, visibility, hypervigilance, and social connection. I endeavoured to organize the themes into a coherent narrative to produce a clear story about the lived experiences shared by queer women during the focus groups. The first theme introduced how queer women's bodies are sites of social and political control. How they interpreted this social force was influenced by how they embodied traditional femininity. This context allowed me to move logically into the second theme, which further illustrated issues of visibility as they relate to how the body is treated and perceived. The interpretation of the stories about visibility revealed the central concept of hypervigilance and provided the necessary background information to proceed seamlessly into the third theme. Finally, the fourth theme provided crucial insights on how queer women were positively responding to, and overcoming, issues related to body politics, visibility, and hypervigilance.

Chapter 5

5 Discussion

This study explored adult queer cisgender and transgender women's body image, experiences of body-related discrimination and homonegativity, and how they may have interacted to influence current engagement and experiences with physical activity. Qualitative data from a series of focus groups led to the identification of four main themes: The Queer Women's Body is Political; (in)Visibility of Sexual and Gender Identity in Physical Activity; Hypervigilance to Maintain Safety and Reduce Perpetuating Gender-Based Violence; and Desire for Spaces that Foster Safety, Belonging, and Connection. Findings from this research elucidated the influence of queer identity on body image, and physical activity behaviour, as well as queer women's experiences of discrimination related to their sexuality and body in physical activity contexts. This research was the first in-depth exploration into the relationship between body image and physical activity among queer women and will extend preliminary evidence investigating the physical activity behaviour and experiences of the broader LGBTQ+ population.

A critical, and novel finding from this research was that women's queer identities and community involvement enhanced their positive body image and positively contributed toward their engagement in physical activity. This finding adds important context to previous research that speculated one of the main reasons why queer women engage in less physical activity, compared to heterosexual women, was because they endorsed more positive body image (e.g., greater appreciation for and acceptance of a diverse range of body shapes and sizes that do not align with cultural appearance ideals) and therefore were less likely to use physical activity as an appearance management strategy (Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Morrison et al., 2004; Morrison et al., 2020). This assertion was based on the predominant body of literature that has focused on direct quantitative comparisons of physical activity levels (Herrick & Duncan, 2018) and body image (Morrison et al., 2004; Morrison et al., 2020) between queer and heterosexual women, with no research available examining queer women's physical activity behaviour and body image experiences in depth. Additionally, the majority of existing data primarily investigated lesbian women in comparison to heterosexual women (Alvy, 2013; Markey & Markey,

2014; Moreno-Domínguez et al., 2019) along with a few studies exploring the experiences and outcomes of bisexual women in comparison to heterosexual women (Henn et al., 2019). This limited and often contradictory evidence suggested that non-heterosexual did not feel the same pressure to conform to the cultural appearance ideals that heterosexual women are expected to achieve. However, findings from this study reveal that the impact queer women's body image has on their physical activity behaviour is much more complex and nuanced.

The present findings also provide context in understanding the complexity of queer women's body image experience, which advances the previously oversimplified assumptions that queer women have better body image compared to heterosexual women (Morrison et al., 2020). In the present study, all participants spoke about having been profoundly dissatisfied with their bodies both historically and often currently. However, when asked to explain how their queer identity had influenced their body image, participants described that by accepting and embracing their queer identity, they often experienced a concurrent improvement in their relationship with their body. Specifically, participants articulated enhancement in dimensions of positive body image such as body appreciation, body acceptance, a broader conceptualization of beauty, and feelings and experiences of embodiment. Yet despite this enhancement in the positive dimension of body image, an overwhelming majority of participants expressed that they had not experienced a decrease in body dissatisfaction since accepting their queer identity. As such, these results align with contemporary conceptualizations of body image that posit that individuals can simultaneously hold both positive and negative perceptions of their bodies (Webb, Wood-Barcalow & Tylka, 2015). Further, these findings align with Dworkin's (1989) theory that queer women are just as likely to experience body dissatisfaction, as heterosexual women, and advance existing knowledge by providing preliminary insight into how a queer identity influences women's body image by enhancing dimensions of positive body image.

It is important to note that participants often articulated how belonging to community groups of queer women further enhanced their positive body image. This aligns with previous research demonstrating that queer women are both attracted to and more

accepting of a diverse range of body shapes and sizes (Alvy, 2013). Specifically, participants reported that the sense of community in queer-friendly fitness settings helped them feel more supported and less vigilant about their bodies, and in turn, promoted sustained engagement in physical activity. Many participants emphasized how significantly queer women-only spaces fostered greater body acceptance and reduce body surveillance and appearance monitoring. Discussions about how a queer identity influenced physical activity behaviour revealed that participants preferred to participate in safer, queer-friendly, or queer-only spaces such as queer sports leagues or rock-climbing gyms. However, this increased sense of body acceptance was threatened when they were removed from the safety of queer and queer-friendly spaces. Although some participants had access to queer-friendly physical activity settings, the majority did not and were instead forced to engage in activity alone, in a variety of unsafe spaces, or to avoid participation in physical activity altogether. These findings are consistent with previous research by Roper and Polasek (2006), who conducted one-on-one interviews with 14 active LGBTQ+ gym members to explore their experiences as members of a predominantly queer fitness facility in San Francisco. For these LGBTQ+ gym members, the fitness facility was a way to connect to the queer community. These findings highlight the importance of queer-only physical activity spaces for optimizing both body-related and physical activity experiences.

Another key finding from the present work highlighted how queer women often disengaged from physical activity due to discrimination, social exclusion, and negative body-related experiences. The first theme, the queer woman's body is political, acknowledges how pre-existing systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, cis-heterosexism) are perpetuated through physical activity to create experiences of discrimination toward participants' bodies. Therefore, when one's body, gender expression, and/or sexual identity do not fit within the gender binary or heterosexuality, their body becomes inherently political (Simone et al., 2023) All of the participants spoke to specific incidences of homo/queer-phobia directed towards their bodies within physical activity that rendered these contexts unsafe. In line with previous research, bullying and exclusion in physical activity based on sexual orientation is a long-standing phenomenon (Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Gill et al., 2016; Herrick & Duncan, 2018). These findings extend

previous work and speak to how dominant norms in physical activity privilege certain bodies over others, specifically those that adhere to white, thin, able-bodied, cis-heterosexuality (Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Sykes, 2009, 2011).

In line with previous research, participants indicated that regardless of gender expression, the cis-heteronormative and male-dominant nature of traditional physical activity spaces created the conditions for heightened body surveillance and appearance monitoring (Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Mason et al., 2018). This was described by participants as a key factor limiting participation in physical activity. Through the experiences of discrimination, participants reported being confronted with the political nature of their identity – and how the formation of their political identity centered on embracing human differences and resisting the cis-heterosexual cultural paradigm. To challenge these dominant norms, many participants called for physical activity spaces to adopt critical, systematic, and intersectional policies and practices to make physical activity spaces safe and inclusive for queer women with varying body sizes and gender expressions.

Another novel finding from this work emphasized queer women's fear of perpetuating toxic expressions of hegemonic masculinity against other women in physical activity contexts. In each focus group, participants discussed the fear of being labelled a "predatory lesbian", particularly by other women in gendered spaces such as women's only gyms and women's changerooms. The fear of being predatorial was discussed in the context of not wanting to make other women feel uncomfortable by playing out toxic hegemonic masculine norms, in cis-heterosexual dominant contexts. In this sample of queer women, fear of the label "predatory lesbian" was so profound because participants deeply understood how violating it feels to have others demonstrate entitlement toward commenting on, viewing, or touching their body, and they never wanted to perpetuate this onto other women. This harmful stereotype reinforces long-held homophobic assumptions that lesbians are dangerous and transgressive individuals who exist outside the boundaries of normal society (Wilts, 2009). Within physical activity, this stereotype serves as the basis for sexual discrimination and renders these spaces unsafe for queer women (Jones et al., 2017; Sykes, 2011).

In support of previous research, participants viewed change rooms and locker rooms as being particularly traumatic (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Fusco, 1998; Hargie et al., 2017; Herrick & Duncan, 2018) and repeatedly articulated that women's-only spaces are not inherently safe spaces for queer women. Specifically, participants' gender intersected with their sexual minority identities to allow them to operate as "outsiders within", with the ability "to see patterns that may be difficult for those immersed in the situation to see" (Collins, 1986, p. 36). Understanding the physical activity experiences of queer women enabled a perspective of proximity to (being "within" gendered identities) and distance from ("being outsiders" by virtue of sexual identities). For example, many participants described instances where their cisgender, heterosexual friends expressed discomfort with having queer and transgender women in physical activity spaces designated for women. This left participants feeling as though there were no safe spaces for them to engage in physical activity. Traditional non-gendered gyms and sports leagues exposed them to sexism and the risk of queer-phobia and women's-only spaces promoted a unique form of hypervigilance specific to not intruding on other women's bodies and sense of personal safety. These stories exposed a novel tension with regard to the intersections of body image, gender, and sexuality among queer women, and how they impact a sense of belongingness in physical activity spaces.

These findings highlight how insidious and prevalent microaggressions toward queer women are in contemporary Western society. Similar to racial microaggressions (e.g., assumptions of criminality), these experiences represent types of microaggressions that queer women face consistently such as endorsement of heteronormative or gender-conforming culture/behaviours (e.g., instances where individuals must hide their sexual orientation and/or gender expression to conform to the dominant culture) and assumptions of sexual pathology/abnormality (e.g., presumptive attitudes about sexual deviance; Nadal et al., 2016). Further, these findings indicate that queer women may be internalizing these microaggressions and subsequently viewing themselves as perpetrators. In the context of traditional physical activity, this may be causing them to feel isolated, unsafe, and unwelcome in these spaces, which may promote disengagement from physical activity. Failure to address these systemic microaggressions allows for their perpetuation and will continue to inhibit the enjoyment of and engagement in

physical activity among queer women. Existing research has qualitatively examined the ways in which sexual and gender minority individuals cope with and are resilient in reaction to microaggressions (Nadal, 2014; Nadal et al., 2014). As such, it is important that future research should quantitatively examine how effective certain coping mechanisms are in relation to microaggressions. To date, research has only investigated the negative outcomes of microaggressions on sexual and gender minority individuals broadly. Thus, specific investigations on the effects of microaggressions on queer women exclusively are warranted. Finally, steps must be taken to minimize microaggressions by addressing the individual, intersectional, interpersonal, and systemic factors that contribute to their multitude of negative implications.

Another key insight that resulted from this work was the distinct and differential experiences of queer women that varied as a result of gender and sexual identity expression. The second theme, (in)visibility of sexual and gender identity in physical activity, acknowledges the complexity of experience that emerges from the variety of ways participants define, understand, and express their gender and queer identity. All of the participants articulated how the intersection of their queer identity and individual gender expression impacted their body image and physical activity behaviour. Many participants spoke about how their treatment in physical activity contexts was related to how closely they aligned with cultural expectations of femininity. As such, one of the important findings of this study was that traditional physical activity spaces are unsafe for masculine-presenting (e.g., masculine, butch, androgynous, trans) queer women. This research highlighted how expressions of gender and sexual identity are inherently embodied (Simone et al., 2023), and offer novel insights into how expressions of gender and sexual identity impact engagement within physical activity contexts.

The results of this study extend previous research on queer women's body image by acknowledging the diversity of experience within this population based on gender expression in examining the relationship between body image and physical activity behaviour and experiences (Henrichs-Beck & Szymanski, 2017). Participants who self-identified as feminine indicated that while they frequently experienced cis-sexism at the gym or in sports leagues, their culturally-endorsed gender expression protected them

from experiences of queer-phobia. When gender expression aligns with societal expectations, sexual identity remains an aspect of the self that one can control public knowledge of. These discussions revealed a unique relationship between dimensions of body image and physical activity behaviour for masculine queer women. Participants who self-identified as masculine often described how the vigilant appearance monitoring they felt required to engage in for their safety in physical activity spaces was acting as a significant barrier to participation. This finding supports past research demonstrating a negative association between body surveillance and appearance monitoring with sustained physical activity behaviour (Donovan & Uhlmann, 2022). Furthermore, these findings indicate that the systems of oppression perpetuated by physical activity organizations may promote negative body image and inhibit the adaptive effects of positive body image on physical activity behaviour. Until the politically inscribed hierarchies that give power and value to bodies that meet rigid societal ideals are vigorously challenged, queer women will continue to experience body image disturbance that will inhibit physical activity engagement. As such, future research designed to develop an understanding of the factors underlying the fear and judgement of women's bodies that do not conform to feminine appearance standards is a necessary step toward dismantling the systems oppressing women's bodies and preventing sustained physical activity behaviour.

Overall, the present study led to several novel insights demonstrating how queer women's current physical activity behaviour was often strongly related to their body image and experiences of body, gender, and/or queer identity-related experiences of discrimination within these spaces. These findings provide depth and insight that meaningfully advance the knowledge of queer women's experiences with physical activity and the body and have important implications for practice.

5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

The present study has several limitations that warrant consideration. Recruitment for this study was completed on a first-come, first-serve basis, primarily via targeted promotions

on Instagram. As such, the sample may have been biased toward queer women who were using this social media platform frequently during the time of recruitment. Similarly, all focus groups were conducted virtually on Zoom, which while may have increased access to participants across North America and reduced participant barriers to participation, may have also reduced the capacity for organic interactions and social connections which can more readily occur in-person.

The women that expressed interest in participating in this study may differ systematically from the wider population of queer women. Though the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize findings to a broad population, it is important to consider that the study ad may have only reached a specific segment of queer women. For example, recruitment eligibility terminology referenced “cis-women” or “transwomen”, rather than using more inclusive language that could have captured a broader range of participants who were socialized as women, or femme-identifying. Future research should use more inclusive terminology to capture femme experiences more broadly.

Additionally, individuals may have seen the study advertisement and the associated payment and chosen to participate without considering the quality of their contributions. Participants were provided with the questions prior to the focus group, but some low-quality data remained in the sample. For example, participants may have read through the questions ahead of the focus group but did not meaningfully think about and engage with the topic. To address these limitations, future research should take steps to recruit community-based populations who reflect the diversity of queer cisgender and transgender women.

Additionally, a decision was made to only recruit participants aged 18 to 35 years old to maintain some generational homogeneity. Given that the LGBTQ rights social movement only began in the 1970s, there exists a large generational divide among LGBTQ+ communities, which is widened by the rapid pace of change associated with LGBTQ+ life and results in a discrepancy between the life of today’s LGBTQ+ youth and that of their elders when they were young (Russell & Bohan, 2005). Therefore, the results of this research may not apply to queer women over the age of 35 years old. It is possible that

older participants would have more solidified views on physical activity and body image that are informed by more extreme instances of discrimination. Future research should consider the experience of older generations of queer women to gain a more in-depth understanding of body image and physical activity behaviour across different age ranges. Additionally, the findings reflect the experiences of predominantly white and cisgender queer women. It is crucial that future research is designed to understand the lived experiences of queer and transgender women of colour for findings to capture the diverse range of queer women's experiences that may be impacted by distinct intersectional identities.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research has important theoretical and practical implications for researchers, stakeholders, queer community members, coaches, trainers, and business owners. First, these findings support central aspects of the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) and intersectionality (Collins, 2019). Both cisgender and transgender women who identify as queer experience unique forms of stress related to their gender and sexual identity within physical activity settings that promote disengagement. Further, these results demonstrate that the multiplicative forms of stigma, discrimination, and systemic oppression queer women experience based on gender, sexuality, and other minority identities in physical activity negatively impact body image by increasing the participant's body surveillance, appearance monitoring, and body-related shame. Therefore, the results of the current research support that experiences of minority stress adversely affect psychological and behavioural outcomes related to body image and physical activity behaviour and experience. In response to minority stress and body image disturbance, queer women may display increased intentions to avoid physical activity settings where experiences of discrimination often occur.

The results of the current study outlined institutional practices that community members, allies, physical activity organizations, businesses, and coaches could implement to make leagues and settings safe for queer cisgender and transgender women. These recommendations include clear, zero-tolerance anti-discrimination policies that are regularly discussed and enacted, gender-neutral change rooms and restrooms, nametags

that include pronouns, funding for community-driven organizations, reduced financial costs associated with participation for queer women, diverse and representative staff and members, pride flags displayed in buildings and fields, and designated spaces and leagues for only queer women. Regarding anti-discrimination policies, participants emphasized the importance of identifying what constitutes discrimination and what the consequences of discriminatory behaviour will be to effectively overcome dominant norms in physical activity (Cunningham, 2012; Herrick & Duncan, 2018).

Gender-neutral spaces to change were identified by participants as critical to overcoming safety issues in physical activity settings. It was articulated that changerooms were traumatic places for queer women and many spoke to how body surveillance and body-related shame were substantially increased in traditional gendered change and restrooms. Nametags, pride flags, and diverse staff were considered acts which signal to queer women that physical activity spaces are inclusive, socially conscious, and safe. Representation of diversity in body shape and size, gender expression, physical ability, and race are required to overcome the institutional factors excluding queer women from these settings. Another barrier to physical activity engagement identified by participants was the cost and ease of accessibility to physical activity settings. Queer women experience disproportionate socioeconomic stress compared to heterosexual women and participants called for funding to relieve financial burden (Badgett et al., 2021) Lastly, it is imperative that queer women are supported financially by stakeholders and organizations to form leagues and spaces designated only for individuals who identify as queer and as women. The findings from this study revealed that queer women may feel as though there is no safe space for them to engage in physical activity. As such, it is critical that money and space be provided to these women to overcome the significant stressors and obstacles experienced in traditional physical activity settings.

5.3 Conclusion

As a consequence of intersecting systems of oppression (i.e., cis-sexism, heterosexism), queer women are less likely to engage in health-promoting behaviours and are at a greater risk of experiencing mental health disturbance compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Meneguzzo et al., 2018). This may include adverse experiences in and

disengagement from physical activity as well as negative body image. This study highlights the negative influence of gender and sexuality-based discrimination on queer women's body image and physical activity behaviour. Queer women may be particularly vulnerable to the avoidance of physical activity associated with negative body image and minority stress. The relationship between body image and physical activity behaviour is especially important to study among queer women as women are more likely to experience negative body image and demonstrate lower rates of participation compared to both heterosexual and queer men. The present findings demonstrate that experiences of discrimination in physical activity may negatively impact dimensions of body image that are cited by queer women as barriers to sustained participation. Overall, this qualitative study contributes to and extends the growing evidence that minority stress and body image disturbance negatively impact physical activity behaviour and experiences.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Study Approval from the Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics



Date: 12 September 2022
To: Dr Eva Pila
Project ID: 120907
Study Title: A Qualitative Exploration of Queer Women's Relationship with the Body and Physical Activity
Short Title: Queer Women's Experiences with Body & Movement
Application Type: NMREB Initial Application
Review Type: Delegated
Full Board Reporting Date: October 7 2022
Date Approval Issued: 12/Sep/2022 14:50
REB Approval Expiry Date: 12/Sep/2023

Dear Dr Eva Pila

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Focus Group Guide-June2022	Focus Group(s) Guide		
Debriefing Document-2022	Debriefing document		
Recruitment Flyer	Recruitment Materials	12/Aug/2022	2
LOI-Aug22	Implied Consent/Assent	22/Aug/2022	3
Interview Screener-August 22	Other Data Collection Instruments	22/Aug/2022	3

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).

Appendix B: Letter of Information and Consent

Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title: A Qualitative Exploration of Queer Women's Relationship with the Body and Physical Activity

Researchers:

Jade Bailey, MA Student

Laura Hallward, PhD, Postdoctoral Fellow

Genevieve Bianchini, PhD Student

Eva Pila, PhD, (Principal Investigator)

1. Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted in the School of Kinesiology at Western University. This study is led by Jade Bailey for a Master's thesis project and supervised by Eva Pila.

2. Purpose of this Letter

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information in order to allow you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research.

3. Purpose of this Study

We are interested in trying to understand the relationship queer women have with their body image and how this influences their physical activity participation and physical activity experiences more broadly.

4. Inclusion Criteria

Participants will need to be women (cis-gender, transgender), who identify as queer, aged 18 to 35 years old with home Wifi, Zoom and video camera access and are fluent in English.

5. Exclusion Criteria

Participants will be excluded from the study if they do not meet the criteria listed above.

6. Study Procedures

After providing consent, the participant will provide their email address and then the researcher (Jade Bailey) will contact them to schedule a 10-minute Zoom screener. During the screening interview, we request that **the video camera is turned on**. If participants are unable to turn on camera, they will be ineligible to continue. Inclusion criteria will be assessed and demographic data including age, gender identity, country of residence, race, and ethnicity will be collected verbally. **Participants who are do not meet the inclusion criteria listed above in the Zoom screener will not be eligible to participate and will not be compensated.** Afterwards, the researcher will schedule the participant into a 1–2-hour focus group that will be conducted either virtually on Zoom or in person. If the focus group occurs virtually on Zoom, we request that participants keep video camera on for the duration of the study. If participants are unable to keep video camera on, they will be ineligible to participants and will not be compensated. The focus group will involve the participant answering questions about their body image and experiences with physical activity including how they have been shaped by their non-heterosexual identity. Participants will be sent the interview questions via email and will be asked to review the questions after the Zoom screener and before the focus group.

The focus group will be 1-2 hours long and ask questions about your body image, experiences in physical activity, how your sexual orientation has influenced your body image and physical activity experiences, your motivation to participate in physical activity, and any experiences of discrimination in physical activity contexts. During the Zoom screener interview, you will choose a pseudonym so that your data cannot be linked to you personally in reports of this study. After the focus group, you will be debriefed by the researcher and compensated for participating. Please note the focus groups will be audio and video-recorded. If participating virtually, video and audio recordings will take place. Once virtual focus groups have been transcribed all recordings will be deleted from Jade Bailey's OneDrive.

After all focus group study results are analyzed, you will be sent a copy of the aggregated study summary findings and have the opportunity to provide feedback. This opportunity is provided to participants to ensure that your contributions and experiences are appropriately interpreted by the researchers and adequately portrayed in the research product. This is optional for you to review.

7. Possible Risks and Harms

Participants may experience distress when recalling experiences related to their non-heterosexual identity and the impact it has had on shaping body image and physical activity experiences. You have the right to answer only questions you are comfortable answering and providing as much detail as you deem comfortable. If you do experience distress during the focus group discussion, you may stop at any time and choose to skip a question.

There are no right or wrong answers for any of the questions and everyone's opinions and own, unique experiences are very important to this study. We only ask that you answer truthfully. Following the completion of the study, you will be debriefed by the researcher and be provided with a debriefing form that includes a list of resources that can be accessed by phone, in-person, or online if you are still feeling distressed from participating in this study.

8. Possible Benefits

Participants will not directly benefit from participating in this study, but the knowledge gained from this study may help scientists better understand the intersections of body image and physical activity in marginalized populations.

9. Compensation

Participants will be compensated with a \$35 CAD e-gift card of choice. Participants will be compensated to the equivalent of Canadian dollars regardless of the country they are located in.

10. Voluntary Participation

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. To withdraw from the study, you can exit the (virtual) room at any point during the focus group or notify the researchers of your withdrawal after the focus group has completed. Please email Jade Bailey if you wish to withdraw your participation or data.

However, in the event you choose to withdraw from the focus group during or after the session, we cannot guarantee that comments made in the focus group session will be removed from researchers' notes as it is an active discussion, and we will be unable to reliably track who said each comment.

You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to this study.

11. Confidentiality

Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants, please keep the information about other participants confidential and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

You will choose a pseudonym before the focus group so that your responses are not linked to identity. If participating virtually, we ask that you change your Zoom name to your chosen pseudonym. If participating in-person, you will identify yourself by your chosen pseudonym and will only be addressed by this pseudonym for the duration of the focus group. Your pseudonym cannot be used to directly identify you by anyone outside of the research team. Your pseudonym will be linked to your name and email address on a password-protected master file that will only be accessible by the main research team. This master list will be used to link your identity to your pseudonym and will be kept separate from all other study data. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will need to provide your email and chosen pseudonym to remove your data. Your responses will be used for research purposes only. In reports of this study, quotes from your responses may be presented, but your personal information will not be presented alongside these quotes.

Your consent to participate will be collected through a secure online survey platform called Qualtrics. Qualtrics uses encryption technology and restricted access authorizations to protect all data collected. In addition, Western's Qualtrics server is in Ireland, where privacy standards are maintained under the European Union safe harbor framework. The data will then be exported from Qualtrics and securely stored on Western University's server. If the focus group happens over Zoom, it will be a private link and password protected with a waiting room, whereby only you (jade) can allow people to enter.

In line with current best practices in research, anonymous data from this study will be made available to other researchers in the future, however the data will contain no information that could be tracked back to individual participants. Open science initiatives allow for researchers from different universities to share their data upon completion of studies, in an effort to stimulate further use and exploration of existing data sets. Anonymized data will be uploaded to an online forum in the form of a computer software file after the removal of any potentially identifying information.

All electronic documents will be kept on a secure university network. The data will be kept for a period of 7 years in accordance with Western University policy.

Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

12. Contacts for Further Information

If you would like to receive any further information regarding this research or your participation in the study, you may contact Jade Bailey. You may also contact the principal investigator for this study.

For any questions regarding the conduct of the study, or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at Western University.

13. Publication

If the results of the study are published, only data will be used that does not identify you personally. If you would like to receive a copy of any potential study results, please contact Jade Bailey

14. Resources

Below are local and national resources that you may wish to access. These resources will be provided at the end of the study in the debriefing form as well.

- List of national and international eating disorder associations including their contact information: <https://eatingdisordersreview.com/eating-disorders/eating-disorders-associations/>
- Nedic.ca (National Eating Disorder Information Centre)
- List of national and international eating disorder helplines, advocacy groups, and online information: <https://www.worldeatingdisordersday.org/home/find-help/>
- List of LGBTQ22SI crisis supports, helplines, advocacy groups, and online information: <https://www.lifevoice.ca/crisis-supports/lgbtq-crisis-supports>
- **Call Reach Out** or web chat at <http://reachout247.ca/> with an information and referral specialist who can provide information, resources, and crisis support.
- **Canada:**

- *Crisis Services Canada*
 - Canadian Crisis Hotline
- USA
 - *Suicide and Crisis Lifetime*
- *Crisis Text Line*

You may print this form for your records.

Informed Consent

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate.

I understand that by clicking 'I agree' below, I am indicating my consent to participate.

- I agree
- I do not agree to participate. I will exit the survey now.

Appendix C: Debriefing Document

Debriefing

A Qualitative Exploration of Queer Women's Relationship with the Body and Physical Activity

Thank you for participating in our study!

This form will explain to you in more detail the purpose of this study and aspects of the study that was not explained to you before the study began. At the beginning of the study, we told you that we were interested in exploring queer women's construction of their body image and how this influenced physical activity experiences broadly. More specifically, we are interested in examining the unique barriers queer women face in traditional physical activity contexts as it relates to their body image. The purpose of this research is to inform the creation of inclusive and identity-sensitive physical activity spaces, resources, and educational materials.

National trends highlight that queer women continue to engage in less physical activity compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Understanding differences in aspects of queer women's construction of their body image and how this influences their relationship to physical activity may be one avenue by which to remedy these trends. More specifically, our findings may help us understand how to build an inclusive framework for physical activity that may be beneficial to improving queer women's relationship with their bodies and activity.

If participating in this study has caused you any distress or discomfort, please be aware that the researchers of this study are available to answer questions and discuss the purpose of the research further. Additionally, there are resources you may access below:

Resources:

- List of national and international eating disorder associations including their contact information: <https://eatingdisordersreview.com/eating-disorders/eating-disorders-associations/>

- Nedic.ca (National Eating Disorder Information Centre)
- List of national and international eating disorder helplines, advocacy groups, and online information: <https://www.worldeatingdisordersday.org/home/find-help/>
- List of LGBTQQ22SI crisis supports, helplines, advocacy groups, and online information: <https://www.lifevoice.ca/crisis-supports/lgbtq-crisis-supports>
- **Call Reach Out** or web chat at <http://reachout247.ca/> with an information and referral specialist who can provide information, resources, and crisis support.
- **Canada:**
 - *Crisis Services Canada*
 - *Canadian Crisis Hotline*
- **USA**
 - *Suicide and Crisis Lifetime*
- *Crisis Text Line*

Finally, we ask that you not talk about this study with others to ensure that prospective participants do not receive information that may influence their responses and the overall results.

We are here to answer any questions you may have about the study. Please feel free to contact:

Jade Bailey, Masters Student (Student Investigator)

Dr. Eva Pila (Principal Investigator)

Dr. Laura Hallward, Postdoctoral Fellow (Co-investigator)

Genevieve Bianchini, Masters Student (Co-Investigator)

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Human Research Ethics at Western University.

You may print this form for your records.

Thank you again for your time and participation—it is greatly appreciated!

Jade Bailey, Eva Pila, Laura Hallward, and Genevieve Bianchini

Appendix D: Focus Group Guide

Focus Group Guide

Hi all. Thank you for agreeing to participate. My name is Jade Bailey, I am a master's student in the psychological basis of Kinesiology at Western University, and I am one of the co-investigators on this study, I identify as a queer, cis-gender woman and my pronouns are she/her. My primary research focus is exploring the relationship queer women have with their body image and how this influences physical activity experiences. I would like to reiterate that the topics discussed during this focus group may be distressing. Resources were provided to you in the letter of information and consent and will be given again in the debriefing document you will receive upon completion.

As a reminder, our research team is trying to explore the relationship Queer women have with their body image and how this relationship influences physical activity experiences. Before we begin, I'd like to clarify our use of specific terms to ensure we are on the same page. While I recognize the word 'queer' was historically used as a pejorative label of hate causing some individuals to reject, rightfully so, the use of this term. However, I am persuaded by the belief that the derogatory nature of 'queer' can be reclaimed, neutralized, and made positive by embracing the word as one of pride. The word 'queer' not only represents a diverse community with a shared history of both experiencing and fighting back against discrimination. It is theoretically grounded in the idea of a fluid and ever-changing conceptualizations of identity and the larger sociopolitical notion that contests dominant discourse and assumptions of heterosexuality. When we refer to physical activity, this broadly includes physical activity in daily life such as household chores, walking when doing errands, physical education, structured exercise, lifestyle physical activity, organized sports participation, or anything else where you intentionally move your body. Body image broadly refers to how an individual sees their own body. This focus group should be between 60-90 minutes long. There are no right or wrong answers, and everyone's opinions and unique experiences are very important to this study. The questions in this focus group may bring up difficult thoughts, emotions, and memories. All questions will be posed to the group, and you are welcome to respond only

to the questions that you are comfortable with. No individual participant will be directly questioned or identified. If you want to stop participating in the discussion at any time, you are free to remain silent, or exit the (virtual) room at any time. As a focus group participants, we would like to remind everyone to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is discussed outside of this group setting. Do you have any questions?

I will now start the recording.

A reminder that as part of the participation in this study, we request that participants keep their video “on” throughout the duration of the focus group.

1. To begin, we would like to learn a little bit about our focus group participants. If you are comfortable, please share your pseudonym, preferred pronouns, and your interest in participating in this focus group.
2. In your experience, how are body image, physical activity, and queer identity related?
 - a. In what ways does your relationship with your body influence your participation in physical activity?
 - b. How does your queer identity influence your body image?
 - c. How has your queer identity impacted your physical activity behaviour?
3. Are there any noteworthy situations or experiences that affected your body image relationship over the course of your life? Either positive or negative?
4. Why do you choose to participate in certain types of physical activity? If you don't participate in physical activity, what influences this decision?
5. In what ways do queer women experience discrimination related to your sexuality or body in a physical activity context? Can you describe any experiences you have witnessed or experienced?
6. What are some factors that have supported your queerness and your body image in physical activity?
7. What would an ideal physical activity context look like to support you and other members of the Queer community?

We are nearing the end of the discussion now. Is there anything regarding the intersections of sexual identity, body image and physical activity that you would like to add?

- Do you have any questions about the discussion?

Probing questions:

- a) How did that experience affect you?
- b) What was that like?
- c) How did that feel?
- d) What thoughts stood out for you?
- e) Have you shared all that is relevant regarding this question/experience?
- f) Can you tell me more about that?

*Note that this focus group guide is semi-structured and may change depending on the participant's responses, but the questions here guide the areas and questions of interest.

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Jade Bailey

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2009-2019 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2020-2021 B.A. (Hons)

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2022-present M.A.

Honours and Awards: Canada Graduate Scholarship-Masters (CIHR)
2022-2020

Related Work Experience

Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2022-2023

Research Assistant
2019-2023

Publications:

Bailey, J. A., Huellemann, K. L., & Pila, E. (2022). "Dear past me, know that you are deserving of compassion and care": Self-compassionate writings of adolescent girls recalling weight-stigmatizing events in physical activity. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*.